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The Practices and Processes of Foreign Aid to Africa: A Kenyan Case Study

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Abstract

Kenya is used as a case study in this study of foreign-aid practices and processes. The qualitative research methodology employed involved face-to-face interviews with Kenyan residents who have direct knowledge of foreign aid and were willing to share their perceptions of its effectiveness in alleviating poverty. The main barriers identified included corruption, bureaucracy, and donor fatigue. The study examines the proposed ameliorative suggestions for foreign-aid processes recommended by bypass theory; that is, funding non-governmental organisations (NGOs) that operate directly in the field rather than giving funds to government agencies to avoid corruption. There are, however, problems with the engagement of NGOs in Africa. Bypass theory in practice neither allows citizens to hold their governments to account nor does it help find long-term solutions to alleviate poverty, which enhances the downward spiral toward chronic aid dependence.

Key words: poverty, corruption, foreign-aid fatigue and dependency, foreign-aid bureaucracy, bypass theory.

Introduction

There are those who argue that the international community has gradually enhanced its commitment to strengthen the unity of the human family and global norms (Barbour & Gorlick 2008, p. 534). For example, a range of inter-governmental and non-governmental organisations have been created to collectively tackle major economic and security threats (Hurd 2011, p. 2). It is also claimed that wealthy countries have expanded the



promotion of human rights beyond their territorial boundaries, helping the poorest countries to attain sustainable development through bilateral aid (Pratt 1999, p. 306). Kenya is a major recipient of such aid (McCormick & Schmitz 2011, p. 156). However, the assumption that wealthy countries are unreservedly willing to uplift the weakest in the chain is naïve. Dominant powers, many observers have also argued, do not operate in the economic interests of anyone but themselves. They are prepared to do whatever it takes to maintain the balance of power and reduce incentives for the weak players to engage in revolutionary behaviours. If they make concessions to poorer nations, it is for self-survival reasons (Griffiths & Sullivan 1997, p. 57).

Scholars such as Dambisa Moyo (cited in Kasbaoui & Nechad 2018, p. 133) notably suggest that the cycle of foreign aid into Africa does not lead to economic growth or the subsequent redistribution of wealth. Therefore, this paper asks, ‘how current foreign-aid practices and processes affect the effectiveness of aid in Kenya?’. Answering this question involves the triangulation of the original accounts of local citizens with material from primary and secondary sources to evaluate the extent to which the scheme has improved the health and wellbeing of indigenous Kenyans. A number of theories were used and tested, including ‘bypass theory’, which suggests that, while government-to-government aid remains significant in Africa, bypassing governments is more impactful at the grassroots level (Dietrich 2016, p. 67).

Literature Review

This literature review demonstrates the continued significance of foreign aid to Africa. While authors such as Sachs (2014) and Adedokun (2017, p. 184) argue that foreign aid is an important tool to alleviate poverty, Rajput (2019) argues that aid does not make any meaningful difference in the health and wellbeing of the intended beneficiaries because it is designed to protect donors’ interests. The following section outlines the controversial practices and processes of foreign aid.

Foreign-Aid Controversies

The debates around foreign aid to Africa have always been controversial (Snowdon 2009, p. 247). Moyo (2017) argues that foreign aid plunges the continent into perpetual poverty whereas Easterly (2003, p. 25) suggests that aid never reaches the poor who deserve it most, due to corruption. In the Kenyan context, corruption is a main facet of all parts of citizens’ daily lives.



It is experienced from the interactions between the average citizens, police, and public servants to elaborate networks linking state and commercial sectors (Harrington & Manji 2013, p. 4). Even more alarming, Grépin (2009 p. 75) argues that non-governmental organisations (NGOs) are also credited with the stink of corruption.

Ewing and Aldhous (1990, p. 595) suggested in 1990s that even high profile inter-governmental organisations such as the World Health Organisation (WHO) faced a funding crisis for their global HIV/AIDS programs because of donor fatigue. More recently, Grépin (2009, p. 75) argued that the rates of donor funding continued to fall below the levels required to sustain HIV programs as a direct result of donor fatigue. However, Inderfurth, Fabrycky, and Cohen (2005) argue that the level of engagement by the international community depends on media coverage of crises and the identity of the target population, with Western countries fully engaging only when individuals to be rescued are their own citizens. On the other hand, Wamboye, Adekola and Sergi (2014, p. 335) importantly claim that foreign aid to Africa has led to chronic dependence, which, Vorhölter (2012, p. 284) stipulates, has provided the West with an important tool to enhance patterns sculptured by colonialism.

Bureaucracy also fails the efforts of domestic and international institutions to dispense foreign aid equitably. The scheme's structures are designed in a way that beneficiaries have no power, with limited channels to provide feedback (Easterly 2002, p. 244). Additionally, the lack of direct connection between the donor and the implementing partners implies that the system spends a lot of money on the managers of intermediary grant (Indo Asian News Service 2018), on top of millions of dollars wasted in administration costs, including big salaries to senior executives (Pollack 2011, p. 600). Besides, Islam (2014, p. 193) argues that the lack of consultation practically means that beneficiaries are refused a space in the development processes, preventing them from securing any type of ownership. Even with these disparities, however, bypass theory postulates that funding NGOs to deliver relief services directly in the affected communities has ensured the survival of vulnerable people (Dietrich 2016, p. 67).

Bypass Theory

Bypass theory suggests that funding allocations to NGOs rather than to governments are more productive (Dietrich 2016, p. 67). However, the



literature that follows does not present an unambiguous confirmation of this theory because NGOs can also be corrupt (Grépin 2009 p. 75). Furthermore, its uniform installation deprives citizens of the ability to hold governments to account. In an interview with Al Jazeera (2018), Dambisa Moyo argued that, while Africans would like to hold their governments to account for the quality of services, they cannot do so when NGOs are delivering those outcomes. More dangerously, any form of aid to Africa leads to dependence (Moyo 2017). But Dietrich (2016, p. 67) insists that NGO-administered aid has improved living standards within the target populations in Kenya, at least in the short run.

African governments rely on NGOs to respond to complex crises such as the refugee burden. For example, the large inflow of Somali and South Sudanese refugees into Kenya in the 1990s forced the country to implement the encampment strategy, handing over the responsibility to United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) to screen and ensure their livelihood (Alix-Garcia et al. 2018, p. 67). NGOs mandated to help refugees are also required to cater for the social and economic needs of the host communities (Terada, Evans & Mwaniki 2017, p. 52). Similarly, faith-based organisations play a key role in bringing about positive changes in the Global South due to their holistic nature and their rootedness in the community (Moyer, Sinclair & Spaling 2012).

This literature does not deny the historic religious scandals. Missionary work is shown by Mofokeng (1988, p. 34) to have involved oppressions and abuse, with the Bible carrying colonisation as the vanguard of the exploitation of Africa. However, the contemporary work carried out by some faith-based organisations, including relief assistance to vulnerable populations in Kenya, must be acknowledged (Deacon 2012, p. 664). NGOs also provide preventive and remedial interventions to improve the welfare of street children, providing housing, food, clothing, and medical care (Kaime-Atterhög, Persson & Ahlberg 2017, p. 580). On a larger scale, Oxfam promotes gender equality and helps address social injustice for Kenyan women (Kukrety & Mohanty 2011, p. 273). Oxfam has also provided the vulnerable Kenyan communities with water supply and related technologies. By early 2016, around 100 water BluePumps had been installed in Turkana, with a robust design that can lift groundwater from a range of depths (Foster, McSorley & Willetts 2019).



Even with some seemingly long-term projects by NGOs in Africa, limited impacts are evident at the grassroots level due to structural and governance issues. Thus the practices and processes suggested by bypass theory can only work if they are complemented by longer term initiatives designed to boost domestic capacity, including structures, financial and trade systems, macro-economic management, appropriate policies, and political stability (Cai, Zheng, Hu, Pray & Shao 2019, p. 240). For example, empowering African governments to eradicate corruption would stimulate manufacturing development, generate more jobs and more income, and enlarge the middle class, which could lead to the improvement of overall governance, including a fairer redistribution of wealth (Mijiyawa 2017, p.33).

Methodology

The raw data in this research derive from the author's PhD data collection in Kenya in the period between November 2018 and February 2019. A qualitative research methodology involving face-to-face interviews was used to collect the data necessary to answer the main research question: 'How do the current foreign-aid practices and processes affect the scheme's effectiveness in Kenya?' This methodology was the most appropriate method to investigate the lived experiences of individuals as they were presented through feelings, ideas, perceptions, attitudes, and thoughts (cf. Öhman 2005, p. 273). Kenya as a major recipient of foreign aid (McCormick & Schmitz 2011, p. 156) provided all the opportunities to carry out an investigation on the barriers to the effectiveness of foreign aid from indigenous perspectives.

The participants in this research were average Kenyan residents and citizens in different social classes and backgrounds, Kenyan authorities, civil society activists, local staff working in local and international NGOs, expatriates, diplomats, senior security and military officers, high school and university students, religious leaders, and academics mainly in the field of global economics, political science, international relations, and security studies. The indigenous sample consisted of both adult men and women from different districts, tribes, religious, social, economic, and political backgrounds. The researcher conducted sixty-one interviews, four of which were not audio-recorded. Four interviews occurred in Brisbane; those participants were professionals who have administered foreign aid as beneficiaries or donors.



Purposive sampling method was initially used to match the sample adequately with the aims, objectives, and research questions. This sampling process involves a random selection of participants, but it is strategically carried out within the segment of a population believed to hold relevant information on the issues of interest (Guarte & Barrios 2006, p. 277). In this case, these were Kenyan nationals and Kenyan residents with direct knowledge about the foreign-aid scheme. As Campbell et al. (2020, p. 3) rightly put it, purposive sampling helped the research team to save time and other resources as it enabled the principal investigator to strategically select cases that will most likely have the merits to be included in the final sample. However, it was also vital to expand the pool of research participants, which was achieved using the snowballing technique. The technique involves a chain-referral process, which is set in motion by carefully selecting seed participants from the early stages of data collection (Beauchemin & González-Ferrer 2011, p. 105). With this technique, the researcher asks the seed participants to help recruit other contacts, who in turn put the researcher in touch with new potential participants, all within the population of interest (Geddes, Parker & Scott 2017, p. 347). This method helped the researcher to penetrate the diplomatic, political, and NGOs sectors in Kenya.

This research achieved data saturation; that is, the point at which no new information or themes were observed in the data (Guest, Bunce & Johnson 2006, p. 59) before the researcher completed his fieldwork in Kenya and returned to Australia. Reliability in qualitative research depends on the data adequacy, with the researcher finding a sound level of consistency across participants (Morse, Barrett, Mayan, Olson & Spiers 2002, p. 14).

Qualitative Results and Discussions

The barriers to foreign-aid effectiveness discussed here include a history and processes plagued with controversies - corruption, donor fatigue, dependency, and complex bureaucratic processes.

Views of Foreign Aid

Foreign aid to Africa is significant, but its effects are usually subject to controversial debates. As noted, Rajput (2019), Moyo (2017) and Easterly (2003, p.25) claim that foreign aid to Africa does not make any difference. Rajput goes further and argues that foreign aid is designed to protect the donor's interests. In contrast, Sachs (2014) and Adedokun (2017, p. 184)



argue that foreign aid is an important tool to alleviate poverty. Evidence from my sample does not entirely reject the suggestions of Easterly, Rajput or Moyo but it aligns more with Sachs and Adedokun's submission that the scheme remains critical for the survival of the most vulnerable populations. Interviewee (11) gives an example:

With the coming of US funding, lives improved. People are living longer, even if they are HIV-positive. At least they have the medicine. [...] I lost relatives to HIV [AIDS] for which I said [break] Up to date, I would say, if by then ARVs were available, so and so would be alive even up to now [...] (Interviewee 11, Female, NGO's frontline staff).

Interviewee (55), however, argues that foreign actors do not invest in Kenyan local NGOs out of the kindness of their hearts.

The UK and the US, for example, will not be investing in local Kenyan NGOs out of the kindness of their hearts. No [...]. They are trying to secure the region for their own vested interests [...] (Interviewee 55, Female, Lawyer).

Besides, Harrington and Manji (2013, p. 4) say that corruption is a feature of Kenyan daily life, which logically puts foreign-aid funds to Kenya at risk for embezzlement. Interviewee (11) can attest to this.

If we look at our news, the billions ...[are] being stolen and... that money is not [never] recovered, and more and more is still being stolen [...]. you steal good money so that even if you are convicted, you've done something (Interviewee 11, Female, NGO's frontline staff).

Similarly, Grépin's claims (2009, p. 75) that even some NGOs are corrupt have been confirmed by some in my sample, with Interviewee (45) stating that...

...You might be surprised to learn that someone who was living in the Kibera Slum suddenly relocates to Westlands [prestigious neighbourhood]. Where do they get so much money to relocate to Westlands while they were living in Kibera? And subsequently you



hear, ‘That is the person who was working with the white fellas.’ Most of those with leadership positions in NGOs have relocated. They now live in more prestigious suburbs (Interviewee 45, Female, Housekeeper).

Ewing and Aldhous (1990, p. 595) and Grépin (2009, p. 75) claim that donations have continued to decline over the recent decades due to donor fatigue. Through my sample such as Interviewee (40), the international community’s frustration is understandable.

If they say [name of NGO withheld] has been operating in Kenya for the last, maybe, 20-30 years, what can you show that, for the last 30 years, we have been working with [inaudible]? [...] (Interviewee 40, Female, Academic and civil society activist).

On the other hand, Inderfurth, Fabrycky, and Cohen (2005) argued that the level of engagement by the international community depends on media coverage of crises and the identity of the vulnerable population. According to Interviewee (48), an expatriate of European background, this is correct.

In the former Yugoslavia, then Europeans had a real ownership. It was happening in our backyard. And here, we are now kind of trying to implement ideas from our own experience and for us, the hardest part is to translate that, for example, into the African context (Interviewee 48, European Male, Colonel in the army and expatriate).

Wamboye, Adekola, and Sergi (2014, p. 335) suggest that foreign aid leads to dependence, and my sample agrees. Interviewee (9) has administered foreign aid locally for many years and yet he questions the effectiveness of the scheme.

[...] Since we gained independence in Africa, we are under foreign aid. Are we moving [forward] because of foreign aid? Are we given the right solutions? The good solutions because of foreign aid or it is just [that] we are given fishes [fish] without being taught how to fish? (Interviewee 9, Male, Colonel in the army).



Vorhölter (2012, p. 284) stipulates that the colonial structures and systems thrive in Africa today because the continent has not been able to wean itself off foreign aid, and Interviewee (40) attests to this:

Our colonial masters gave us independence, but they didn't let us go, say, 'Now you are independent.' They found other way to continue colonise [colonising] us through one channel, which is foreign aid (Interviewee 40, Female, Academic and civil society activist).

Easterly (2002, p. 244) writes that the foreign-aid scheme's structures are designed in a way that allows beneficiaries no power and therefore, they cannot hold NGOs to account for their misconduct. Evidence from the sample suggests this literature is correct, but Interviewee (41) adds that even host governments are often too scared to confront NGOs.

So, if they come in as saviours; and they are non-governmental organisations; they are implementors of foreign aid because the Government, in a way, has failed to manage those funds properly. So, there is a way in which the Government can say, 'Well, we better not criticise what NGOs are doing because, otherwise, we lose out on this complementary work that NGOs are doing' (Interviewee 41, Catholic priest and academic).

The suggestion, albeit from an anonymous journalistic source (Indo Asian News Service 2018), that the lack of direct connection between the donor and the implementing partners implies that governments rely on costly intermediary grant managers was also confirmed by my sample, with Interviewee (1) sharing his experience below:

Currently, donors have people that they call grant managers [...]. So, if I am having money from Australian Aid, then they will give this money to either DAI [Development Alternative, Inc.], you know [inaudible]. So, if [the] Australian Government wants to implement a program in Kenya, whichever, it doesn't matter, whether in health, whether in WASH [Water, Sanitation and Hygiene], whether in agriculture, whether in peace and security, whether in governance or whatever we do, that money will be given to some of these international companies,



they call them grant managers. Now these will then look for implementing partners [...] (Interviewee 1, Male, Economist, and civil society activist).

More alarmingly, Islam (2014, p. 193) suggests that the lack of consultation between NGOs and the beneficiaries practically means that the latter are refused a space in the development processes and ownership. Thus, NGOs' activities toward the community empowerment of vulnerable people have had a limited impact. Interviewee (25) agrees.

You see, the first thing I noticed, many humanitarian organisations do their plans and budget without consulting beneficiaries for them to understand what the community really needs [...]. Therefore, organisations often engage in activities for as long as five or six years, with no obvious, measurable outcomes (Interviewee 25, Male, foreign-aid beneficiary, and NGO's frontline staff).

The disparities outlined above render most foreign-aid initiatives redundant, even with the processes and practices suggested by bypass theory.

Bypass Theory Assessed

Thus far, bypass theory is plausible. However, the issue of corruption in Africa must be addressed for foreign aid to have meaningful impacts. Dietrich (2016, p. 67) maintains that government-to-government aid usually goes to waste due to corruption and failed systems at the domestic level. Interviewee (55) gives an example:

The National Youth Service ... recruit young people, and they train them in like basic livelihood projects, and they release them. They have a training college somewhere in the Rift Valley. As for the budget of the centre, the budget of this college had people [and] every person enrolled into that college eating two cows in a day (Interviewee 55, Female, Lawyer).

Interviewee (2) makes a similar point that even major government-sponsored projects such as infrastructure are often over-priced.



So, you have [an] infrastructure development that is overpriced [...] by the country itself because the people engaging in these contractual processes want kickbacks and so the kickback is put into the contract and then they make their money. So, the project continues, but we pay more than what the value of that infrastructure development (Interviewee 2, Male, Economist and civil society activist).

Speaking from the donor's perspectives, Interviewee (56) suggests that funding NGOs makes it possible to hold the relevant stakeholders to account, avoiding funds being captured in bad governance and corruption. The same cannot be done with a foreign government.

I would say the Western governments can hold those players accountable for where the money is being spent. It is very hard to hold a foreign government accountable for how they are spending your money (Interviewee 56, Male, Australian Government official).

Alix-Garcia et al. (2018, p. 67) suggest that Kenya wouldn't handle the refugee burden without help from the relevant NGOs, and Interviewee (49) agrees:

Refugees also come under our relief [program] because these are people who are coming to a country without anything, and they just need support [...] For refugees, it is always almost the same - food, clothing and, maybe, health (Interviewee 49, Female, NGO's staff, and former government official).

Indeed, the work of NGOs is all about survival. Without them, none of refugees' basic needs, for example, would be fully met, a situation that would lead to a chain of other adverse events. This is as Interviewee (25), a refugee beneficiary of foreign aid, attests:

If they get rid of it [foreign aid], people will perhaps afford some food, but not enough. Even if food affordability might be okay, I am not sure about affording clothes [...]. Failure to secure the basic needs would impede the quality of life and therefore, crimes would increase, crimes like robbery. You wouldn't live peacefully if you have a car and



everyone else around you is starving (Interviewee 25, Male, foreign-aid beneficiary, and NGO's frontline staff).

Terada, Evans, and Mwaniki (2017, p. 52) claim that services allocated to refugees historically created inequalities between refugees and the host communities in terms of physical infrastructure and socio - economic opportunities. Evidence from my sample suggests that they were correct because this was the case, and collaborations between donors, the Kenyan government and NGOs were needed to redesign the camps and services delivery models in a way that also benefitted the locals. Interviewee (36) explains how this was practically achieved:

There is always 10-15 percent of our budget [that] goes to the host community, which is the poorest of the poor. Yeah. So, in some instances, you may find that refugees do much better than the host community members. So, out of this concern, for the last few years, we have decided to also include, in our budget, the host community members who are desperate, who equally need support (Interviewee 36, Catholic priest, and NGO's executive).

Moyer, Sinclair, and Spaling's (2012) claims that faith-based organisations go an extra mile to attend to the needs of the hard-to-reach populations has been confirmed by my sample, with Interviewee (24) stating that ...

... JRS started working in Kenya, I think, early 1990s and mostly they have been working in livelihood, ah, education and psycho-social [areas]. [...] its slogan... may not be written, but 'JRS always goes where others do not go' (Interviewee 24, Male, NGO's frontline staff).

On a larger scale, NGOs have complemented the Kenyan Government's work in key areas. Kukrety and Mohanty (2011, p. 273) claim that NGOs such as Oxfam have helped the Kenyan Government to promote gender equality for decades, helping address social injustice and achieve economic leadership for women. My findings establish that Kukrety and Mohanty were correct, as Interviewee (11) attests:



There was this ‘girl child project’... That one targets those communities where the girl child is not recognised. The ones that still do circumcision for the females [genital mutilation]. The ones that still send girls [inaudible] to marry before even they are of age [...] Now the girl child has an opportunity to go to school and explore her potentials (Interviewee 11, Female, NGO’s frontline staff).

Foster, McSorley, and Willetts (2019) claim that Oxfam has helped the most vulnerable Kenyans with water supply and related technologies, and Interviewee’s (23) statement is supportive.

We walked long distances to look for water. Humans, cows, we accessed water from the same place. We drank [water] from the same place, the same time as cows, everything. Goats, sheep. We fetched the same water [...]. It had a lot of implications [...]. You know that drink brought diseases [...]. This is in the past though. We can now access cleaner water [...] (Interviewee 23, Male, Security guard and foreign-aid beneficiary).

Interviewees are largely in agreement with the fundamentals of bypass theory in that they see lives of poor Kenyans as having slightly improved through a range of short-term fixes, with no evidence of significant growth or community empowerment. However, heavy reliance on NGOs prevents Kenyan citizens from holding their government to account as part of a democratic need to push authorities to redistribute resources in an uncorrupted fashion, as Interviewee (42) attests.

[...] I am not going to my government to look for the necessary help I deserve because I am a taxpayer, because I am just a citizen, a member of the community. Instead, I am waiting for World Vision, IMF, ... Médecins Sans Frontières MSF, to come and help me deal with all these, you know, issues that I am having. No, it shouldn’t be that way in the first place [...] (Interviewee 42, Catholic priest and academic).

As Cai, Zheng, Hu, Pray and Shao (2019, p. 240) and Mijiyawa (2017, p.33) put it, a range of structural and historic issues must be solved for any form of foreign aid to Africa to have meaningful impact.



Conclusion

Both governments and NGOs suffer from corruption as can be evidenced through Kenyans' accounts where, in the case of NGOs for example, the high remunerations of expatriates, coupled with other adverse practices, amount to the misuse and wastage of funds. However, there is a general agreement that, if more aid is transmitted through NGOs, then the problem of aid wastage is lessened because it is easier for donors and beneficiaries to hold NGOs to account. But practices and processes suggested by bypass theory alone do not hold a key to African prospects for economic growth.

The theory only suggests short-term benefits, but allows overwhelming powers and wealth to private providers, with no evidence of community empowerment within the target populations. Even seemingly long-term projects carried out by NGOs in Africa have historically had limited impacts because of structural and governance issues at the domestic level. Thus, other solutions designed to lower the level of corruption, boost domestic capability at the levels of government, society and individual must be prioritised to move beyond an NGO-enabled survival mode within the most vulnerable populations in Africa.

Disclosure statement

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