Canadian Journal of Development Studies / Revue canadienne d'études du développement

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: www.tandfonline.com/journals/rcjd20

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To cite this article: Jörg Wiegratz & Sophia Price (2024) Donors and international aid in neoliberal Africa: taking stock of the 2010s, Canadian Journal of Development Studies / Revue canadienne d'études du développement, 45:4, 569-595, DOI: 10.1080/02255189.2024.2436150

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/02255189.2024.2436150

Published online: 24 Dec 2024.

CANADIAN JOURNAL OF DEVELOPMENT STUDIES
REVUE CANADIENNE D'ÉTUDES DU DÉVELOPPEMENT
2024, VOL. 45, NO. 4, 569–595
https://doi.org/10.1080/02255189.2024.2436150

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Donors and international aid in neoliberal Africa: taking stock of the 2010s

Jörg Wiegratz[a,b] and Sophia Price[c,d]

[a]School of Politics and International Studies, University of Leeds, Leeds, UK; [b]Department of Sociology, University of Johannesburg, Johannesburg, South Africa; [c]School of Social Sciences, Birkbeck, University of London, UK; [d]Institute of Pan-African Thought and Conversation (IPATC), University of Johannesburg, Johannesburg, South Africa

ABSTRACT
This article lays out the rationale for the special issue on Donors and International Aid in Neoliberal Africa in the 2010s. It gives an overview of some of the scholarly foci and debates since the millennium in order to set up the discussion of the different papers of the issue and their contributions to analysis and discussion.

RÉSUMÉ
Cet article présente la raison d'être du numéro spécial sur les bailleurs de fonds et l'aide internationale dans l'Afrique néolibérale des années 2010. Il donne un aperçu de certains des centres d'intérêt et des débats scientifiques depuis le millénaire afin de préparer la discussion des différents articles du numéro et de leurs contributions à l'analyse et à la discussion.

ARTICLE HISTORY
Received 4 November 2024
Accepted 20 November 2024

KEYWORDS
Neoliberalism; donors; international aid; Africa; political economy

This special issue contributes to debates about the politics and political economy of donors and international aid in Africa by offering a particular temporal and political analysis: post-2010 under neoliberalism. Our starting point is that neoliberalism intensified significantly during the 2000s in many African countries. Donors played a key role in embedding and institutionalising a particular neoliberal social order in these countries (Harrison 2004, 2010). Our focus in this issue is on what happened next – after the 2000s. How did the processes of change that gained ground from the 1990s to the 2000s continue after 2010? This was, after all, a period that saw donors promoting and deepening the hegemony of capitalism on the continent in several consequential ways: through shaping policies, creating reforms and programmes, and deploying substantial PR, fanfare, material resources, staff, ideology and academic research to back it up.

The contributions in this issue employ political economy analyses as well as broader social sciences perspectives to explore the changing dynamics and characteristics of aid, and to highlight the relation between aid and neoliberal reform in Africa, as well as the

CONTACT Jörg Wiegratz j.wiegratz@leeds.ac.uk

structures of power between aid donors and recipients. In doing so, the articles provide vital analyses of how the aid-induced changes of the 2000s played out in the 2010s. In short, the 2000s were times of liberalisation, privatisation, marketisation, de- and re-regulation, good governance, accountability programmes and so on. Across these realities, which reform areas and aims were emphasised and promoted by donors after 2010, and why? Contributors note, for example, the promotion of social contracts, indigenisation and local empowerment, stakeholder capitalism, transparency norms, democracy, social policy and shifts in how aid was politically underpinned and framed.

This volume explores these vital matters of continuity, discontinuity and change during the 2010s in aid relations, objectives and outcomes in Africa. Taken together, the contributions yield analyses that help us track and understand important aspects of the evolving political character of aid under neoliberalism from the 2010s to the present. Their political economy analyses of aid shed light on a set of conflicting and compatible relations, agendas, interests, powers, agencies and practices that are embodied in aid as relation, practice, discourse and paradigm, as well as the trajectories and repercussions of aid-induced changes under way in Africa.

Further, this volume aims to contribute to contemporary debates about aid relations in Africa. At the turn of the millennium and throughout the 2000s, scholarship on the political economy of aid was particularly animated and wide-ranging. For example, emergent literatures interrogated the role of institutions of global governance in shaping aid policies at the national, regional and international levels; the embedding of neoliberal capitalism through aid provision and conditionality; and the impact of donor policy on matters of the state via Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers, budget support and aid modalities as well as governance reforms. In the intervening period, critical political economy analyses have tended to ebb and flow. Some particular debates – especially the bigger, 'large-picture' ones – seem to have been reduced or fizzled out; one example is the conversations on aid and the embedding and reproduction of a particular capitalism (Harrison 2005a). Such discourses were elided despite the enduring significance of their central concerns, not least regarding: the character of capitalist transformation and development that aid advances; and aid relations as external intervention in domestic affairs.

Such analyses are integral, as the core themes related to aid have remained open to question into the mid-2020s, particularly in terms of (i) the relationship between donor intervention and national sovereignty/politics; (ii) the power dimension and effects of aid; (iii) aid-induced restructuring of the state, and of state-society and state-economy relations more generally; (iv) the governance of African agency (be it as politicians, bureaucrats, business actors, citizens, experts, etc.) and thus the political economy of aid and African agency; (v) the class and distributional repercussions of aid induced transformations, and thus the relation between aid and the politics of capitalist development in Africa (Harrison 2020).

Further, the temporal frame of this special issue allows an exploration of these themes within the context of the changing aid landscape since the turn of the millennium, and the 2010s in particular. We locate the aid dynamics in a broader analysis of the contemporary developments in the global political economy. The focus on the 2010s also reflects the analytical relevance of the enduring impact of the 2008 global financial crisis, the expansion, intensification and institutionalisation of capitalism on the continent in that decade, an evolving and expanding African agency, ongoing shifts in global power structures in the context of the crisis of Western imperialism (Bush 2024) and the rise of BRICS (Chen and Mullin 2024). Further, the twin crises of 2008 and the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020–2021 have wrought extensive alterations in the location, distribution and operation of power in the international system, the cementing and fracturing of processes of globalisation and the resultant pressures on aid spending. Moreover, the dynamics of imperialism and aid (including military aid) in Africa continues to be a theme that requires interrogation, particularly given the scale of the empirical phenomenon and impact that this continues to have on politics, economy and (under)-development (Nabudere 1977, 1980; Bracking and Harrison 2003; Shivji 2007; Duffield and Hewitt 2009; Amin 2015; Pigeaud and Sylla 2020; Kvangraven, Koddenbrock, and Sylla 2021; Serunkuma 2022, 2024; Mwangi and Maghanga 2023; Al-Bulushi 2024; Serumaga 2024; see also the set of Imperialism papers in ROAPE's issue 181).

That said, since the turn of the millennium a wide range of work has focused on the political economy of aid; research that – as Bermeo (2021) synthesises in a literature survey – examines the motivations for giving aid, the subnational allocation of aid, the two-way relationship between aid allocation and effectiveness, the political and economic impacts of foreign aid on recipients and the aid landscape. Bermeo (2021) argues that significant gaps remain and academic work in this area remains 'silo-ed'. Areas that she identifies as under-researched include the integration of aid allocation and aid effectiveness; the quantification of the political and economic effects of aid at the subnational and national levels; the bridge between micro-level project impacts and aggregated effects on development; and understanding the 'optimal design of aid architecture to address global issues such as climate change, food security and enduring poverty' and 'its ability to deliver desired results'. Bermeo's assessment arguably reflects a certain technocratic focus within political economy analyses, and corresponding frames that have dominated discussions about aid in Africa.

Against this background, this introductory paper will highlight some of the debates that shaped discussions about aid in the 2000s before charting the broad changes to the aid landscape since 2010. The analysis will then outline the contribution made by each of the articles in this special issue, which, altogether, seeks to: (i) advance contemporary political economy analyses of aid and (ii) contribute to the enduring vibrancy and relevance of critical debates about the role, shape, significance and politics of aid relations in Africa within the broader analysis of current developments in the global political economy.

Vibrancy of debates since the turn of the millennium

Bermeo (2021) states that foreign aid has only been a mainstream topic in 'political science IPE' since the turn of the millennium, having been more firmly in the realm of economics prior to that. She argues that in the past two decades, the study of foreign aid has become an 'important component of the international political economy field' (2021).

In assessing the scholarship on the political economy of aid to Africa, we also point to the importance of debates since the 2000s. However, we recognise that critical political economy debates about aid, particularly in relation to Africa, are longstanding, being rooted in the analysis of (neo-)colonialism, coloniality and power. Theorists of neo-colonialism and anti-colonial activists provided early political economy analyses of the cycles of credit and exploitation that were embedded through aid relations (for example, Nkrumah 1965; Rodney 1972). Hayter's (1973) analysis of aid as imperialism highlighted the power leveraged by international financial institutions (IFIs) through the provision of finance, while extensive political economy analyses provided critical insights into the use of aid to press neoliberal reform through conditionalities of the Washington Consensus, and the associated impacts this has had on the poorest and most marginalised. Such critiques helped to explain the calamitous reversal of economic conditions Africa suffered by the end of the twentieth century and its enduring peripheralisation within the global economic order – including the political economy of poverty, sub-ordination and foreign capital expansion/domination (Hoogvelt 2001, 175; Bush 2013).

By the 2000s, then, political economy scholarship had already provided critical assessments of aid relations in Africa, contextualised within the increasing focus on processes broadly termed 'globalisation', global governance and the structural inequalities evident at a global scale. Duffield (2001, 205), for example, argued that if globalisation had any meaning to the 'global borderlands', it was through the 'thickening' of international aid networks between 'metropolitan' and borderland areas rather than the financial, productive and technological developments within and between the core areas of the global economy.

Critical political economy scholarship brought attention to the dominant neoliberal ideological underpinnings of the post-Washington Consensus and associated reforms of development thinking and practice. Critics characterised the redirection of aid away from national governments and towards local ownership and management by a panoply of non-state actors and civil society as the reverse aid agenda (Hoogvelt 2001, 192). Debates emerged on the role of the World Bank as a dominant ideological force, identifying how its aid priorities came to occupy centre stage (Van Waeyenberge 2011, 49). This was manifest in the 'supernorms' of aid effectiveness and poverty alleviation (Taylor et al. 2023), which came to dominate the thinking and practice of aid and development in the 2000s onwards. In turn, these 'supernorms' were connected to a further set of norms focused on area such as results-based management and accountability, benchmarks, rankings, best practices, partnership, local ownership and participation, aid effectiveness, decentralisation, inclusion, NGOs/civil society, political conditionalities, integration into the trade regime, sustainable development and, ultimately, the creation of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and related interventions (for example, the Millennium villages programme).

Van Waeyenberge (2011, 51) points to how a set of norms emerged from the 'vigorous re-engagement' with the macro-economics of aid in the 1990s and the activism of the World Bank in seeking research to support performance-based aid allocations. The work of core neoliberal influencers Burnside and Dollar (2000) and Collier (1997) informed dominant thinking in the World Bank and broader global aid regimes, particularly the prioritisation of 'good governance' and associated political conditionalities (Van Waeyenberge 2011, 51; Harrison 2004; Gallagher 2011, 2014; Gruffydd Jones 2013). Dominant neoliberal frameworks on development and aid were reinforced by a range of key mainstream proponents such as Sachs, who highlighted the role of aid in providing external assistance to create the conditions for selfsustaining growth (Greig, Hulme, and Turner 2007, 156). Others highlighted the importance of capability and empowerment (Sen), the need for equity in global policies and the role of IFIs (Stiglitz) and the unique challenges faced by the 'bottom billion' (Collier). These dominant debates framed the MDGs- and subsequent Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)-orientated frameworks, underpinned by a significant collective normative commitment to poverty alleviation and aid effectiveness (see, for example, Gabay and Ilcan 2017).

Scholarship interrogated these topics and their connections to neoliberalisation processes and the politics of aid and intervention at the time (for example, Abrahamsen 2004; Crawford and Abdulai 2009; Fraser and Whitfield 2008; Harrison 2004, 2007; Hearn 2001, 2007; Manji and O'Coill 2002; Paloni and Zanardi 2005; Park and Vetterlein 2010; Van de Walle 1999; Vetterlein 2007, 2013; Whitfield 2009; Williams 2008; Young and Williams 2007). Notably, several of these topics – for example, donor-recipient relations, aid programmes, the IFIs, debt, dependency, neocolonialism, and neoliberalisation (its history, dynamics and outcomes) – continued to get scholarly coverage over the coming years, and, indeed, to this day (for example, Akolgo 2022, 2023; Croese and Kombe 2024; Dye 2020; Gabay 2012; Hickey 2023; Iddrisu, Ouma, and Yaro 2022; Koddenbrock 2024; Sending and Lie 2015; Swedlund 2017; Wiegratz 2016; Wiegratz, Martiniello, and Greco 2018; Wiegratz, Mujere, and Fontein 2024; Wilson 2014, 2015).

That said, debates about the form and level of aid to Africa at turn of the millennium were further shaped by contestations over declining levels of Official Development Assistance (ODA) at a global scale, as well as debt relief and forgiveness. Between 1990 and 2001 ODA had fallen from an average of 0.33 per cent of rich country Gross National Product (GNP) to 0.22 per cent (UNDP 2003 cited in Greig, Hulme, and Turner 2007, 153). A target of 0.7 per cent of Gross national income (GNI) had been agreed upon at the 1970 General Assembly Resolution, although only Norway, Sweden, Luxembourg and the Netherlands reached this point (Greig, Hulme, and Turner 2007, 150). In the 2000s, Clemens and Moss (2005, 1) point to 0.7 per cent becoming a 'cause célebre' for aid activists. At the same time, public debate and advocacy around debt (such as Jubilee 2000) highlighted the social impact on citizenries of having to repay loans taken out by past governments. Critical commentaries pointed to the injustice of denying basic services to the poor in order to repay debts from loans from which they had not benefitted (Greig, Hulme, and Turner 2007, 112). By locating debt within analyses of the development of contemporary capitalism and global economic governance, critical political economy analyses argued that sub-Saharan Africa's debt acted as a 'noose' that maintained the articulation of Africa to the global economic order (Hoogvelt 2001, 175). Even with international support for the highly indebted poor countries (HIPC) initiative, there was little change within global debt relations. Indeed, critical literatures highlighted that, as with aid conditionality, the selectivity of HIPC operated as a disciplinary force to secure neoliberalism on a global scale (Bond 2004, 153).

Taken together, the prevalent trends of the 2000s reflected the vibrancy of political economy debates and analyses of the aid regimes and aid relations in Africa. The role and agency of IFIs, the hegemony of neoliberal ideological frameworks and actors and the prioritisation of conditional neoliberal norms gave rise to a large body of critical research. Some scholars engaged with the World Bank on its own terms, arguing that its research was biased, based on poor theoretical and econometric practice and unrepresentative of broader research impact findings (Van Waeyenberge 2011, 54). The World Bank also came under attack for being excessively insular and unable to engage with critique (Van Waeyenberge 2011, 54). Others pointed to the technocratic nature of the MDGs as operating a new form of conditionality imposed by developed states.

More broadly, a range of debates actively engaged with the foundational underpinnings of aid provision. From within the neoliberal tradition, critics characterised foreign aid as 'hand-outs' rather than 'hand-ups' and advocated for 'trade not aid' and increased facilitation of private investment in place of ODA. Drawing on core neoliberal tenets, analysts such as Easterly (2002) argued that private investment incentives would counter the aid-financed investment fetish, which distorted poor economies and created reliance on aid. Racialised tropes of poor governance, corruption (particularly within Africa) and poverty buttressed such debates; and authors such as Moyo (2009) and Easterly (2002) argued that these tropes reinforced poverty.

By contrast, radical decolonial and Marxist critiques highlighted the ongoing operation of power dynamics between the Global North and Global South and the role of aid in structuring relations of dependence and generalising the expansion of contemporary forms of capitalism. Re-invigorated critiques of neocolonialism drew attention to the enduring dependence that Europe's aid relations created with Africa (for example, Nunn and Price 2004). Other Marxist critiques, such as Cammack (2004), pointed to the role of the World Bank and other IFIs in driving the 'systematic transformation of social relations and institutions' in Africa and other parts of the developing world, thereby generalising and facilitating proletarianisation and capitalist accumulation on a global scale (Cammack 2004, 189). Through the conditionalities attached to the provision of aid, Cammack argued that the entire 'aid community' was drawn into the global mobilisation of the productive labour of the poor, with World Bank logics infusing all forms of aid as a 'deliberate institutional imperialism' (2004, 191).

Others Marxist analyses offered alternative views of the relationship between aid, capitalist expansion and imperialism. In his analysis of the 'New Imperialism', for example, Harvey (2003, 124) highlighted how US aid was tied to the purchase of US goods and services. Through the analytical focus on accumulation by dispossession, Harvey (2003) argued that the conditionalities attached to aid either forced or incentivised socio-economic reform, while foreign lending provided a spatial fix to overaccumulation, which itself was linked to the generation and intensification of international competition (2003, 124). Through an analysis of a global-scale credit system, debt traps and peonage, Harvey (2003, 119) argued that poor countries were hooked into the system of capital circulation as 'sinks' for surplus capitals for which they were liable (118). Moreover, the provision of aid to governments to buy military equipment highlighted the increasing securitisation of development (Duffield 2001; Harvey 2003). Drawing on the analysis of the expansion of global financial accumulation and financialisaton, a wide-ranging critical literature on poverty finance emerged, particularly in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis (Bernards 2022).

Scholarship on financialisation and global capital accumulation has similarly intersected with feminist political economy analyses, particularly post-2008 (Rai and Waylen 2014; Hozić and True 2016). Critical feminist literature focused on gender mainstreaming in aid provision, highlighting technocracy and reliance on gendered stereotypes that reinforced rather than challenged inequalities (Cornwall et al. 2007). Authors such as Win, for example, identified the dominant framing of African women as 'perpetually poor, powerless and invariably pregnant' objects of aid in need of saving (2007). Feminist political economists argued that the narratives and practices of aid reinforced patriarchal structures and gendered inequalities, the prioritisation of economic growth over social development and the exclusions facing women in decision making related to aid regimes and programmes. These analyses highlighted the gendered underpinnings of the neoliberal development strategies advocated and enacted via key IFIs, such as the World Bank, and leading donors; they also emphasised the gendered discourses that framed development aid (Griffin 2009).

Such arguments intersected with discursive analysis. For one, Hoogvelt argued that the turn of the millennium was a period that gave rise to a body of post-modern literature that explored how the social relations within and between African countries and the global economy were shaped through the discourse of the new aid agenda (Hoogvelt 2001, 192). Authors such as Duffield (2001) countered Marxist critiques by arguing that the aid agenda no longer sought to incorporate Africa into the global political economy but instead 'serves as a policy management and containment of politically insecure territories on the edge of the global economy' (Hoogvelt 2001, 191). In *Decoding the Power of Aid*, Duffield pointed to the discursive practices and technologies of the power of privatisation and marketisation 'through which metropolitan states are learning how to govern anew' with the links between aid, privatisation and security as governmental rationality (2001, 204). Through an analysis of aid as governance at a distance, Duffield pointed to the introduction of the 'new public management' to the private-public networks of aid practice:

> While globalisation may have entailed a loosening of political control of the economy, in the social sphere at least, through the ability to breach professional enclaves in the name of accountability, transparency and quality, Northern states are centralising authority. Government increasingly occurs in new and indirect ways through technologies of performance auditing across private and non-state bodies. (2001, 213)

Within and between differing theoretical and methodological approaches, therefore, a wide range of scholarship at the turn of the millennium and during the 2000s focused on interrogating: the role of institutions of global governance in shaping aid policies at a national, regional and international level; the embedding of neoliberal capitalism through aid provision and conditionality; the impact of donor policy on aid modalities and governance reforms; and the gendered, racialised structures that aid relations to Africa reproduced and reinforced. The subsequent changes to the global aid landscape were significant. The following section will chart some of these changes before outlining the contribution of the articles in this special issue.

The changing aid landscape: the 2010s onwards

The twin crises of 2008 and the COVID-19 pandemic over a decade later wrought wide-ranging changes to the global political economy and associated aid relations. The 2008 financial crisis fundamentally altered the aid landscape, leading to a re-evaluation of funding priorities and strategies as donors redirected spending away from international priorities and towards national economies. Many donors downscaled their aid budgets, prioritising domestic economic recovery over international commitments. The World Bank put in place a set of ad hoc measures to protect core spending but was slow to provide funding to low-income countries (Van Waeyenberge 2011, 69). In 2009, disbursements to sub-Saharan Africa were down by USD 500 million, while allocations to middle-income countries expanded rapidly (Van Waeyenberge 2011, 69). This reduction affected various sectors in Africa, particularly health, education and infrastructure, which relied heavily on aid. But rather than shifting debates away from dominant neoliberal thinking, the reduction in aid spending reinforced its core logics. In the absence of aid provision, private investment was prioritised, and with it the development of financial innovations to blend public and private funding and de-risk the expansion of private investment (Bernards 2022).

The 2008 crisis catalysed commitments to the foundational principles of the post-Washington consensus: aid effectiveness, accountability and good governance (Lie 2024). Further, throughout the 2010s 'democracy promotion' and matters of elections (Johais 2024) as well as transparency norms (Oppong 2024) remained of great relevance to donors. Donors' interest in the politics of the 'social contract' also manifested (Williams 2024), as well as in social protection/social policy measures (Adésínà 2011, 2021; Ouma and Adésínà 2019; Surender 2023; Wolkenhauer 2024). Furthermore, the politics of aid and intervention was shaped by particular global-, regional- and local-level changes concerning issues of 'security' and 'national interest' and broader trends in the domestic politics of donor countries (Lazell 2024).

In a similar vein, the COVID-19 pandemic significantly impacted international aid expenditure to Africa, highlighting existing vulnerabilities and shifting funding priorities. As donor countries grappled with their own public health crises and economic downturns, many reduced or redirected aid. Sectors that suffered in the 2008 crisis were similarly hit by the reduction in funding, reinforcing the structural vulnerabilities already evident. While aid funding did accrue to health systems, this was often at the expense of other development spending and tended to be uneven. While some more radical policy prescriptions did emerge in the immediate wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, these were quickly stymied by the global economic downturn that accompanied the pandemic.

While the twin crises of finance and COVID-19 underscored the enduring 'aid fatigue' in the Global North, by 2008 Woods was already pointing to a 'silent revolution' in aid provisioning due to the rise in the number of donor states (cited in Gulrajani and Swiss 2019, 348). Gulrajani and Swiss note that many new donors were not members of the OECD's Development Assistance Committee (DAC) and argue that the emergent actors were driven by the search for legitimacy as advanced and influential states (2019, 348). By 2012 Eyben (2013, 78) was pointing to the loss of position enjoyed by DAC members in defining development and how to achieve it. Eyben argued that, by the middle of the 2000s, recipient countries were looking beyond the DAC for ideas and policy models, and that the rising powers at that time (China, Brazil and India) were becoming influential in shaping international development 'at a time when economic crisis has led to many long-standing donors cutting their aid budgets and taking less interest in development' (2013, 78–79).

In the context of a proliferation of donors and funds, and rising opportunities for knowledge sharing and specialisation, Gulrajani and Swiss (2019, 349) identified concerns that new donors would 'dilute standards' and fragment the global aid system.

Eyben (2013, 81) similarly noted that new donors did not ascribe to the 'panoply of DAC guidance on social, political and environmental matters' that was attractive to those who found these conditions unwelcome (Eyben 2013, 81). The 'silent revolution' in aid provision therefore gave rise to concerns about the fragmentation of the 'normative landscape' and the loss of traditional donor's 'monopoly on norms' (Taylor et al. 2023). In turn, this gave rise to debates about whether the 'rise of the South' could herald a move towards a more holistic vision of human progress and challenge the relations of dependence that have framed aid relations. Such arguments chime with the academic and political projects that address the global relations of exploitation and reveal the coloniality of global development and aid relations (see also Richey and Ponte 2015). A related discussion about the whiteness of development and the traditional/Northern aid sector has pushed for change in that regard (for example, Pailey 2020; Patel 2020).

From an internal African perspective, Iheduru (2024) points to the significant growth of Africapitalist philanthropic aid provision from the 2010s onwards, plugging gaps left by traditional donors and bringing with them an alternative set of 'solidaristic' priorities and development frameworks within the wider context of the rise of Africapitalism and wealthy domestic capitalists (Behuria 2022; Ouma 2019). Iheduru's analytical focus is part of a number of scholarly interventions on new philanthropic actors (such as the Gates, Dangote or Elumelu Foundations) and their agendas in social and other sectors (for example, regarding Gates: Bond, Pheko, and Lenferna 2023; Lambin 2023; Smith et al. 2022). Respective scholarship also interrogates the issue of celebrities, commerce, aid and the shifting politics of development (Budabin and Richey 2021; Richey and Ponte 2011). Analyses of partly new actors, actors' alliances and actors' issues also focus on aid and conservation (Mbaria and Ogada 2016), climate finance and action (Lopes 2024; Shawoo et al. 2022), refugees (Bhagat and Roderick 2020; De Simone 2022) and the diaspora (Pellerin and Mullings 2012; Zeleeza 2019).

The emergence of non-traditional donors has prompted questions about the power dynamics inherent to traditional donor–recipient relationships in Africa – a particularly salient issue as these new aid relations lack the official conditionality that typically structured aid from the DAC countries and the Bretton Woods institutions. These power dynamics have triggered debates about whether new flows of development finance offer alternatives to the traditional 'state rollback' form of neoliberalism and provide recipient countries greater leverage, bargaining power and autonomy, or whether they further entrench new forms of dependence (Harman and Williams 2014; Murray and Overton 2016; Mawdsley 2017). Furthermore, these discussions highlight how aid from both new and traditional donors is increasingly converging around investment in productive rather than social sectors. Chinese investment, in particular, has centred on infrastructure projects supported by cooperative relations between the state and private sectors (Scoones et al. 2016; Swedlund 2017), standing in contrast to the main aid priorities of traditional donors, which centred on social sectors within an officially declared ambition of 'poverty reduction'. Some scholars argue that these changing dynamics signal a shift away from poverty reduction as a central pillar in international aid discourse and practice, with Murray and Overton (2016), arguing that we are entering a phase of 'retroliberalism'. In our current decade, the COVID-19 pandemic reinforced donors' tendencies to pursue national interests, as well as their declining commitment to poverty reduction. Furthermore, the rise of new aid actors on the African continent, particularly Russia and China, has revived concerns about the dynamics of imperialism and great power rivalries and the respective impact on state-society relations. In West Africa in particular, the nexus between aid, securitisation and democratic 'backsliding' is becoming a central focus of political economy analyses.

In sum, since the 2000s, the aid landscape has been subject to change and contestation, and resultant substantial scholarly engagement. This special issue recognises that key critical discussions surrounding these changes are ongoing, particularly in relation to issues such as decolonisation, gender mainstreaming, land use, institutional reform and governance. It notes the importance of the rise of non-traditional donors, as well as changes in the type and sectoral focus of contemporary aid provision. While being cognisant of the current themes in contemporary debates, it seeks to address new and emergent issues in the political economy of African aid relations and to take stock, contribute and reinvigorate scholarly discussion.

Contributions of the papers in the special issue

One major aspect in the debates about aid since 2010 is how donors understand, relate with and try to officially shape politics in recipient countries in Africa, and what the effects of these interventions are. For example, interventions may aim to recalibrate the character, priorities and practices of the state as well as the grammar of state–citizen relations. Such reforming politics can be regarded as part of the second generation of neoliberal reform regarding the state: after the shrinking/rolling-back of the state (first reform generation), the reforms are now aimed at the nature of state action: matters of scope, capacity, practice, civil service, the functioning of institutions and public participation in policy monitoring, all within the larger undertaking of the institutionalising of a market society, as well as market/corporate rule (Harrison 2004, 2010; Peck 2013; Peck and Tickell 2002; Serumaga 2018).

Williams (2024) explores the World Bank's deployment of the concept of 'social contract' in its analysis and programming from the 2010s onwards. Williams situates this move of the Bank in the context of efforts to re-make recipient countries in Africa along liberal lines, both politically and economically. Accordingly, the Bank's policy concern is 'strengthening' the social contract. This use of the analytical vehicle of the 'social contract' by the Bank and others is part of development actors giving more explicit attention to the political aspects, dynamics and prerequisite of development. Thus, they are doing development in a way that is different to the 1990s–2000s, catering for and considering politics in the context of doing development, though in a very peculiar way. Accordingly, the concept acts as 'carrier of a series of liberal political developmental concerns'. The claim is that liberal forms of politics bring about better development outcomes.

Further, 'social contract' is the companion of the 'good governance' concept that rose to prominence in donors' analysis and programme work from the 1990s onwards (Harrison 2004). The deployment of these two concepts, Williams explains, are expressions of the Bank's (i) concern with politics and (ii) liberal take on how politics ought to be organised. Both enable the Bank to home in on reforming government and government–citizen relations – and locating and stating the role of the Bank in this reform process.

The Bank's social contract usage is thus about re-articulation and pursuing the liberal restructuring project in a context that, by the mid-2010s, was markedly different from the

1990s and 2000s: the Bank is facing a changing world (the rise of the South and non-Western donors) and searching for a renewed mission, significance and relevance as well as improved performance. The Bank is also searching for a concept that addresses some of the past criticism made against it (too prescriptive and blue-print thinking) and that allows it to reposition itself as a solutions and knowledge bank. The social contract move fits the bill. In some ways, it is conceptually and politically less (obviously) normative and more flexible. It allows the Bank to have a more open and subtle understanding of and approach to politics. There is another historical context: the rise of the 'social contract' period of the Bank happened in the aftermath of the 'Arab Spring' in the Middle East – a political crisis that was analysed by leading staff as a social contract crisis in some countries. Ever since, the concept has been widely used by the Bank and 'connected up to all kinds of more mainstream development issues', such as jobs, inflation or trade, as well as matters of elections, human rights and civil conflicts.

Notably, an effective social contract can mean powerful groups in society are catered to by government and that this bargain or deal, though not necessarily liberal or 'inclusive', stabilises the polity. Williams gives an account of the conceptual and political aspects of the social contract approach and remarks: 'Remaking the 'social contract' means intervening to shift the kinds of bargains that are made, and thus the kinds of development policies and practices implemented'. It is debatable whether this is altogether less normative (or political) than the previous era of SAPs and 'good governance'.

Further, using the new approach necessitates that the Bank moves away from one-size-fits-all and general prescriptions, to a certain analytical and political openness vis-à-vis an empirical reality that – given political particularities around 'bargains' in each country – offers 'different routes' to (in the Bank's sense desirable) policy change and development success. So, the new concept, while coming with operational challenges, allows the Bank to acknowledge and tolerate political particularities and reform path plurality, to some degree. Crucially, Williams explains that the Bank has used the concept to run social contract-oriented programmes, initiatives and tools (citizen report cards, community scorecards or social audit) to enable citizens and social groups to pressure state agencies (that is, public service providers) for particular outcomes – broadly, 'good governance' (for example, 'transparency and accountability'). This is to shape domestic bargaining between social groups or government and citizens, to influence matters of policy and state–society relations, discipline the state and encourage a particular way of thinking about and doing politics so as to ultimately sustain neoliberal economic policies. Williams maintains that the Bank's understanding of politics on which the social contract work sits – an emphasis on institutions, incentives and material interests – is limited and raises questions regarding the conceptual basis of the intervention (see also Harrison 2005b).

Lie (2024) examines the 2010s as the decade of 'the local', in which donors' aid reforms towards equal partnership with local actors were to bear fruits. He interrogates donors' policy agendas of *ownership* and *localisation*, which aim to alter problematic aid relations. These concepts seek to turn international development bottom-up and to counter the critique of aid being hierarchical, paternalistic, neocolonial and based on Western trusteeship. Both ownership and localisation were reform agendas that nominally aimed to make the aid system more effective and legitimate and thus bring about a 'new aid architecture'. Ownership became influential in the 2000s in the field of international development as part of the aid effectiveness agenda, and localisation in the 2010s in the domain of humanitarianism and efforts to decentralise humanitarian action by providing aid more directly through local actors. So, to what extent did donors cede control and power concerning policy, finance, programme formulation and project implementations?

Importantly, the top-down agenda to reform development sector's grammar of power – to achieve a 'bottom-up based local turn' – reflects 'the inherently hierarchical nature of development as a particular Western instrument and historical project of intervention'. Turning hierarchical aid relations bottom-up was a tall order from the start because it challenged the very ideational structures, material foundation and historical legacies of international aid and its organising conceptual binaries, discourses and power relations.

Lie argues that, by the 2020s, the bottom-up approaches to international aid had failed. Instead, ownership and partnership with local actors became akin to new aid conditionalities in the aid era of 'the local' in the sense that everything had to be framed as 'local' in rhetoric and discourse, irrespective of what was going on in practice. This gap between the talk and walk of international aid produced a veil that concealed sustained, hierarchical practices and thus the reproduction of asymmetrical aid relations that the 'local turn' aimed to dismantle. It is not that donor–recipient relations and aid practices have not changed at all. Rather, bottom-up development policies have produced a donor–recipient power relation and dynamic that reproduce existing aid asymmetries and donor power. The difference, however, is that these power relations take on a more indirect, tacit form of influence and power in what Lie calls developmentality, which 'highlights the ambiguities found in international development between policy and practice, between freedom and control, and between local ownership and donor conditionality, since donors seek to retain power and control despite their localisation-talk'.

Lie attributes the limited effect of the local-led, bottom-up development agenda to the particular power dynamics and relations that the bottom-up development agenda gave rise to; the liberal underpinnings of the agenda (and attendant technologies of power such as responsibilisation and self-governance); the neoliberal context that shapes the new system at implementation level (for example, donors' audit culture with its accountability and reporting regimes that legitimise new oversight and control mechanisms) and the politicisation of aid amidst wider geopolitical trends at the time. Lie notes while aid is always political, the newness of the politics of aid from the 2010s onwards – in the context of the securitisation of aid and more explicit merger of aid and foreign policy (in the context of the war on terror, etc., see also Lazell below) – 'is how aid is explicitly used for political purposes, and how this contributes to undermining local-led, bottom-up development and recipient ownership as per the ownership agenda'.

Finally, the 'local turn' of international aid was intertwined with a particular prescription of neoliberal policy reforms. The structural setup favoured a process that tended to result in 'freed' recipients implementing a policy that mimicked and was in line with the donor preference. Under bottom-up development, thus, recipient and donors arrive essentially at the same policy position. The process that brings this policy alignment about is different from the pre-bottom-up era. Notably, since the recipient now voluntarily makes the policy selection, to have ownership of it, they become responsible for choosing and implementing what is inherently the donor's choice (see also Lie 2015). This arrangement limits partnership friction, conceals power asymmetries and allows both parties to talk of 'ownership'.

Wolkenhauer's (2024) paper on the Social Cash Transfer (SCT) in Zambia analyses the dynamic between donor-driven evidence-based policymaking and the neoliberalisation of social policy. She argues that, despite reproducing some conventional pillars of neoliberalism, poverty-focused policy and programmes such as the SCT can rehabilitate the state in terms of (i) forging new epistemic connections and creating new spaces for deliberations with citizens, and (ii) opening up space for intra-state bottom-up learning. Any more transformative, developmental social policy 'after neoliberalism' – that is, a policy that overcomes 'the dominant approach of merely trying to make the state a more efficient implementer of more cost-effective policies' to manage extreme poverty – can build on and deepen these state-related dynamics, Wolkenhauer argues. She critiques cash transfers (CTs), explains how they can reproduce neoliberalism and notes that the 'spread of CTs in Africa ties in with the neoliberal turn to technocratic and undemocratic policymaking'. The case of the SCT in Zambia can be regarded as one such case of neoliberal social policy, 'due to its international, technocratic [, top-down] origin, its poverty focus, and its targeted design'. Wolkenhauer points to the larger context of CTs being embedded in the new poverty agenda (Mkandawire 2010): CTs – as part of social protection schemes – mostly target the income-poorest parts of the population, therefore reducing the most severe parts of poverty. As a result, they constitute a needs-based rather than rights-based poverty-focused intervention. Thus, 'while states are rehabilitated as the providers of basic social protection, their reconstitution is shaped by an ever more deeply engrained neoliberal common sense [regarding the social policy rationale]'.

Wolkenhauer provides an account of the IO-driven roll-out of SCTs in Africa, including Zambia: of the role of experts, study tours, trials, evidence, impact evaluation and scale-ups in cementing SCTs' standing as a cost-effective policy and programme rationale. SCT is thus an example of technical, scientific, reflective, cost-effectiveness focused, expert-led (thus foreign-influenced) policy and programme making in neoliberal Africa, in times of general austerity (lean state, limited resources). Importantly, she notes that, while donors predominantly funded CTs at the beginning, African states such as Zambia have (periodically) increased their provision of funds over the past decade. Specifically, Wolkenhauer argues that after the roll-back period of neoliberalisation (as in, the reduced state), running CT programmes became part of the roll-out phase (different state): the state 'reappeared' and had particular institutions, responsibilities and activities within the neoliberal order. Thus, the issue Wolkenhauer explores is: 'what kind of statehood is being reconstituted after retrenchment?' How does the Zambian SCT – and other neoliberal programmes of that kind – affect statehood?

Regarding her analysis of statehood effects, Wolkenhauer lays out how the roll-out of the SCT required gaining better knowledge of the citizenry; the result was the creation of a Management and Information System and gathering and updating information about beneficiary households over time, dealing with grievances cases and providing feedback to programme designers and managers. Public servants gained a lot of knowledge over time – also due their evaluation and monitoring work – about on-the-ground situations for citizens and how the intervention were faring. Wolkenhauer thus makes a broader argument:

> The SCT thereby served as an entry point to re-engage with the social questions faced by the most marginalised communities … the poor re-entered the awareness of the state … such

> heightened exchange and knowledge are key for a re-building of a state that engages with the views of its citizens.

Other support interventions were added on (school bursaries, food security aid) as staff had ever-more information and knowledge about on-the-ground needs of particular households and the inability of minimal cash payments to lift people over the poverty line: 'the SCT served as a gateway to building a more comprehensive support structure'. However, Wolkenhauer situates the programme within the ambivalences and limitations that the neoliberal context creates.

The second major insight that Wolkenhauer offers is about bottom-up policy learning and trial and error, and the resultant policy experimentation and adjustment within the state in the process of running the SCT. That is, she explores enhanced intra-state interactions, communication, learning and knowledge gaining, and subsequent programme adjustments in light of implementation particularities and challenges. The programme was widely discussed beyond the host ministry; and social policy matters – and the situation of recipient groups – thus entered the state agenda. Wolkenhauer argues that future social policy programmes under a rehabilitated (local) state will benefit from also relying on knowledge held at different state branches, information structures and evidence-based programme management including on-site experimentation and learning.

Oppong's (2024) contribution offers insight into the relationship between global transparency norms, actors such as donors, NGOs and government, and the politics of markets and foreign capital accumulation in lucrative sectors, particularly in Ghana's oil sector. Focusing on the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative (EITI), Oppong moves beyond the debate about global norm diffusion and the analytical narrative of a norm-diffusing Global North and a passively receiving Global South (norm-taking), and of donors as merely 'agents for the diffusion of global transparency norms'. Instead, Oppong looks for something else: how transparency norms and reforms play a role in neoliberal reforms in shaping, institutionalising and defending a particular form of stakeholder capitalism (and a pro-market regime) that aids the accumulation interest of Western capital linked to donor countries.

The political economy of liberal norms projects and aid is linked in Oppong's account to the political economy of markets and elite/class bargains (foreign vs. local capital, capital vs. labour, etc.) in the oil industry, and respective power relations and dynamics, as well as conflicts and negotiations – the politics that get obscured in the African agency within the passive norm-taker narrative. The processes related to the implementation of the EITI helped manage, tame and defeat demands for a larger value capture of national and local African actors linked to agendas of resource nationalism, nationalisation, public ownership and labour protection – challengers to neoliberalism and stakeholder capitalism.

> [T]he EITI's successes in this endeavour reflect a more structural dynamic that is tied to donors' parallel role as intermediaries of extractive governance norms and brokers of a distinctive form of stakeholder capitalism. This observation underlines changes in the global architecture for aiding the expansion of Western capital by forging expanded networks that preclude alternatives to neoliberalism.

Further, these norms about governing natural resources sectors – and the respective initiatives have shaped and energised neoliberal reform in the 2010s, tying together norm-conditionality-based lending and the penetration of global capital in the extractive sector. The ambiguities of these political economy characteristics and the operative dynamics of these norms' initiatives shape the expansion of foreign capital in times of critiques, resistance and countermovement against this expansion from factions of local classes.

This account thus sees 'transparency norms [and initiatives such as the EITI] as active tools of market and political power'. It sheds light on how the implementation of liberal governance and sector norms 'shapes the context of social bargains and institutions that sustain market regime'. Oppong singles out the EITI as a powerful tool of dominant foreign actors (IFIs and specific bilateral donors such as Norway, the US and Italy, as well as oil TNCs) that goes beyond the veil of transparency, anti-corruption, accountability, and public revenue management, into the realm of vested global political economy.

The EITI does this by driving contentious governance reforms in the extractive sector in the interest of these foreign actors and thereby 'shaping the contours of investments in the extractive sector, while de-emphasising critical areas' linked to agendas of local accumulation and labour. Thus, the EITI is a tool for the deep politics of capitalism in Africa – including matters of sovereignty, foreign interference, accumulation, distribution, class relations, foreign vs. domestic capital and the political economy of a lucrative sector. Importantly, the EITI was embedded and institutionalised in Ghana in a highly political process.

In this light, major donors can be seen as making the contours of African capitalism. Oppong explores the way that donors utilise vehicles such as the EITI 'to maintain their role as the brokers and guardians of stakeholder capitalism in the extractive sector . . . donor entanglements in Ghana's oil industry reflect a complex mix between commercial interests, diplomatic engagement, and governance norms'. Oppong thus identifies crucial changes in these entanglements, that is, regarding the politics of aid and capitalism in the 2010s:

> The first entailed support for collaborative initiatives with civil society and a redefinition of the conditionalities attached to aid programmes to make governance norms more explicit. The second aspect involved expansion in new frontiers of Western capital accumulation often characterised by visible deployment of consultants and state-backed companies.

Over the period of the 2010s, Oppong shows that the EITI has been effective in bringing about a distinct investor-friendly stakeholder capitalism in the oil industry. The EITI had significant powers in terms of nurturing a network of reform, impacting societal bargains and maintaining the industry's market-oriented character in way that enabled and legitimised sector participation and thus oil appropriation by Western companies that originated from the EITI advocate countries.

ETTI and similar governance instruments were thus something other than just 'reputational intermediaries that enable governments in developing countries to secure concessionary loans and grants'. Instead, 'the EITI has worked as a critical tool by which external donors and the domestic elites negotiate the terms and functioning of stakeholder capitalism in the oil industry'. African governments and activists can be active in the EITI networks and try to shape the terms of resource governance, but, to this point, Oppong argues, the EITI terrain has proven to be one wherein the neoliberal status quo is cemented not overhauled. Transparency norms turn out to be instruments of power and reform in favour of global capital and dominant countries. Oppong's findings regarding donors, reforms, TNCs and the shaping of a particular capitalism at the expense of accumulation interests of local actors echoes analyses regarding the oil sector in Uganda (Serunkuma and Serwajja 2024), mining in the Democratic Republic of Congo (Radley 2023) or agriculture in Tanzania and Uganda (Martiniello 2024).

The contribution of Iheduru (2024) draws attention to how Africapitalist philanthropy has disrupted the aid eco-system, by providing a 'high-profile indigenous alternative to activities dominated by foreign governments and business, international organisation and Western celebrities'. This, he argues, debunks the 'archaic view that large aid-giving only flows from richer to low and middle-income countries'. Through his analysis of Africapitalism and philanthropy of Africa's super-rich, Iheduru brings attention not only to the rise of new African aid actors but also to the intensification of polarisation between super wealthy African capitalist elites and the precariat. Drawing on the cases of five African billionaires, Iheduru details their role in creating and financing philanthropic foundations that provide development funding in Africa.

In outlining the processes of wealth accumulation, Iheduru sheds light on the complex relations between the state and super-rich elites in contemporary capitalist development in Africa. The trajectories of each of the High-Net-Worth Individuals (HNWIs) investigated reveal the opportunities for private wealth creation generated by the privatisation of state-owned assets, liberalisation and deregulation. In the cases of Motsepe, Elumelu and Dangote these opportunities were provided through the reform of mining, banking and financial services and industrial sectors, respectively. In the cases of Masiyiwa and Ibrahim, although their wealth was generated outside of Africa, reform of Africa's telecommunications sectors provided new and lucrative investment opportunities for both. In the case of South Africa, opportunities for wealth generation were accompanied by ANC policies to support the creation of a 'patriotic black bourgeoisie', which have come to be viewed within critiques of state capture, corruption and crony capitalism.

Iheduru highlights that the 2010s were particularly important in the rise of Africa's version of 'philanthro-capitalism', and notes that the term Africapitalism was first coined in 2010 by Elumelu, founder of the Elumelu Foundation. Between 2000 and 2013 the number of Africa's NHWIs grew by over 150 per cent, more than double the global rate. Iheduru argues that, in this period, HNWIs began to systematically envision African-owned corporations and entrepreneurs as positive central actors for Africa's development. This converged with a growing disenchantment with racialised and paternalistic foreign and Africa-based corporate philanthropy, the repercussions of the 2008 financial crisis and concerns about the reduction of traditional sources of aid from external donors.

The emergent Africapitalist philanthropy was markedly different from the traditional donor–recipient relations that had defined aid to Africa. Iheduru states that Africapitalist philanthropy emerged at 'a critical juncture when discontent with neoliberal reforms instigated Africa's academic and technocratic elite to embark on deconstruction of colonially imposed ideas of '"African development"'. The Pan-African identity and solidaristic narratives that frame Africapitalist aid provision contrasts with the dominant colonial and racialised aid and development discourse. Iheduru points to how Africapitalism emblematises movements to decolonise aid and development in Africa and how Africapitalists, through the creation of 'Africapitalist foundations', sought to integrate the 'profit motive with pan-African identity and position indigenous businesses as lead agents in national and regional economic development'. He argues that, while

Africapitalist philanthropists embraced the free market, they generally took critical positions towards wealth accumulation in Africa. They also framed the market logics of their version of philanthro-capitalism – particularly their 'catalytic investments ' – as compatible with or complementary to Africa's 'gifting culture' and 'identitarian development' interventions.

Iheduru outlines how funding provided by Africapitalist foundations often plug holes in funding for nascent small and medium scale private sector development, and how, through their agency, 'social wealth creation' has become a theme adopted by many large-scale businesses in Africa. His analysis of Africapitalist foundations also highlights the complex relationship between the state and the elite founders of these foundations. For example, he demonstrates the tendency for Africapitalists to rally around governments and Pan-Africanist regional integration organisations in times of critical needs, despite the often adversarial or froth relations between them and some of these African governments. Furthermore, Iheduru highlights how state-level distrust of CSOs and NGOs can limit Africapitalist engagement with such organisations, which in turn can weaken efforts at localisation and civil society participation, and undermine aid effectiveness.

While Iheduru points to how Africapitalists' patriotism and Pan-Africanism might demonstrate that 'profit and emotions (identity) are compatible motivations in capitalism', he concludes by pointing to the contradictions that might undermine the philanthropic projects. Notably, he suggests that the propagation of solidaristic social wealth-creation agendas by Africapitalists 'may help to solidify the overt, agenda-setting and discursive or ideational hegemonic power of Africa's billionaires, rather than fostering '"capitalism that is aligned with Africa's needs"'. Ultimately, by pushing 'market logic' as solutions to development challenges in Africa, Africapitalist philanthropy threatens to deepen neoliberal hegemony and the ideology of capitalist development rather than providing alternative solidaristic forms of 'needs based' capitalism.

Johais (2024) analyses an entrenched international practice that sustains donor–recipient relations in the neoliberal period: the emblematic form of democracy promotion called electoral assistance. Electoral assistance gained traction after the end of the Cold War and has been around throughout the entire liberal period. Thirty years later, African states have technologies, staff and institutions to run elections. Moreover, stand-alone, de jure independent electoral commissions are by now the norm in African countries (all but a very few countries have them). Yet, despite the significant increase in state capacity – and thus the original rationale being fulfilled – external assistance continues. Notably, it is at a level that makes Africa account for the largest share of electoral assistance to all world regions. Why?

Johais situates her analysis within the larger issue of continued external interventionism and aid dependence in Africa: 'The case of electoral assistance shows what happens when domains of international aid professionalise. … [T]his holds lessons about the longevity of aid infrastructures'. She attributes the survival of aid dependence in the election domain to dynamics of institutionalisation of the election profession on the continent and thus the synergy effect between decades-long assistance and the rise of a transnational profession.

Electoral assistance to build or reform electoral institutions gained momentum during the heyday of neoliberalism in the 1990s – in the context of aid conditionality of liberal peacebuilding of Western states and international organisations as well as national demands for democratisation. The practice survived deep into the era of now-institutionalised neoliberalism 'because it contributed to the institutionalisation of the transnational election profession on the continent'. The professionalisation process explains the aid continuity and intensity to this day, Johais argues. Aid is high because the election profession is so entrenched on the continent and has successfully reconfigured the aid rationale to that of helping to continuously improve election administration towards professional management. Thus, 'electoral assistance and the election profession are entangled in a symbiotic relationship'.

Key for the institutionalisation of the election profession were knowledge projects that involved the collaboration between electoral assistance organisations, international actors and national electoral authorities. Thanks to the outcomes and process of this knowledge production, 'election-related work gained the status of a profession and electoral administration was recognised as a professional task. Once achieved, this status has secured a continuous basis of legitimacy for electoral assistance because professionalisation entails a constant imperative of improvement'. National electoral authorities can thus articulate demands for assistance from external consultants and trainers to help in that regard.

Johais thus makes the argument for a self-reinforcing logic of professionalisation that might be applicable to other aid sectors. She traces the work it took to forge the global network, to institutionalise it in national contexts and to strengthen the authority of professionalism. These national agencies communicate their relevance and act as importers of global professional standards, models and methodologies, that, in turn, fuel the improvement imperative that justifies continued assistance, including in new fields of knowledge and training. Accordingly, knowledge projects in the aid sector were at the centre of a process that has intertwined foreign assistance and the new profession. Johais highlights the role of experts, concepts, standards and windows of opportunity (right people-place-time).

Together, these factors constructed election administration as a professional task that is not limited to an on–off period of intensive work in a particular period of time (the election) but involves continuous, year-round, ongoing, full-time work throughout the electoral cycle. As a professional occupation, election administration was redefined as set of successive management tasks that require investments in training, the latest technologies and specialist tasks. Therefore, the new 'electoral cycle' concept was crucial and timely: it secured the survival of electoral assistance in the 2000s when the national institutions were set up and officers were trained; 'it expanded the profession's remit thematically beyond electoral operations and temporally into a permanent occupation. As a process, the electoral cycle project had the internal function to unite practitioners as members of a community with shared interests'. In addition to national electoral authorities, the election profession anchored itself in professional associations on the continent.

By highlighting the role of knowledge production on the one hand, and of organisation on the other hand, Johais draws attention to the double structural effect of professionalisation: the 'self-enforcing dynamic of professional reproduction and the improvement imperative' help to explain the continued aid in the mid-2020s on matters that appeared 'resolved' according to the initial aid rationale. This, Johais writes, advances the understanding of aid dependency and supports our grasp on the provision of assistance beyond income-poor countries. A crucial question regarding African agency is what might alter the co-production of dependency that benefits donors, providers and recipients – that is, under what conditions and dynamics might the transnational network of election professionals provide ‘a form of social organisation that could initiate peer exchange that is independent from donor money’.

Lazell’s (2024) paper evaluates the evolving landscape of UK aid to Africa. Through a thematic analysis of nearly 30 key policy documents spanning from 2000 to 2020, Lazell traces a significant shift in the UK’s approach to aid, moving from a securitisation framework to what she terms the ‘nationalisation’ of aid by the end of the 2010s. Lazell’s analysis connects matters of African ODA, development policy generally, neoliberalism and the rise of nationalism and populism in donor countries in the West, understood with an analytical appreciation of the dynamics of capitalism – a focus that will likely remain a relevant line of inquiry in the remaining years of the 2020s. The study highlights the interplay between national politics, global (political-)economic trends and development paradigms.

The analysis begins by contextualising the UK’s aid policy within the broader political and economic landscape of the early twenty-first century. Lazell notes that the early 2000s saw a focus on global poverty reduction on Africa; the UK was a leading donor during this period. As the decade progressed, there was a gradual shift towards securitisation in aid policy. The core of Lazell’s argument lies in her analysis of the subsequent transition from securitisation to nationalisation. She contends that by the end of the 2010s, UK aid policy had undergone a transformation, prioritising national interests over global development goals. This shift, Lazell argues, reflects the rise of national populism not only in the UK but in several OECD countries. The nationalisation of aid, as Lazell describes it, is characterised by several key features with significant implications for Africa. There is a strong emphasis on the UK’s national interest in all ODA spending, moving away from the more globally-oriented approach of the previous decade. Aid is increasingly aligned with trade and investment opportunities for UK businesses in Africa, framing development assistance as a tool for commercial gain. The approach focuses on neoliberal development models that prioritise market-led growth in African countries, often at the expense of addressing underlying structural inequalities. Aid is also used as a form of soft power, enhancing the UK’s global influence in a post-Brexit context. There is a rhetorical shift that emphasises the benefits of aid to the UK public, reflecting and reinforcing nationalist sentiments.

More specifically, in the period of nationalised aid, aid spending and programmes need to be justified – in an explicit and public manner – to serve and protect national interests: ‘aid must be shown to be directly in the security, economic and strategic interests of the UK and be able to demonstrate value for money for the UK taxpayer in this regard’. Lazell explores the political context driving these changes. She situates the nationalisation of aid within the rise of nationalism, right-wing neoliberal populism and authoritarian neoliberalism (Bruff 2013; Kiely 2021; Saad-Filho 2021). The new aid rationale – and the corresponding reduction in aid resources in the UK in the past years (itself part of an influential anti-aid agenda) – reflects and feeds into the national populist sentiment. The impact of Brexit looms large in this analysis, as does the influence of nationalist politics in other OECD countries, notably the US under the Trump administration.

Further, nationalised aid continues to have political value for the UK government: to project soft power, claim 'global leadership' and international standing and construct and communicate to national and global audiences the brand narrative of 'Global Britain'. In an effort to reproduce power and authority globally, post-Brexit Britain was marketed since 2016 as a global leader in international development matters such as transparency, gender equality, governance, and stability through development.

Notably, in the government's narrative, Africa, according to the analysed documents, poses risks to UK national interests in terms of 'conflict and instability, terrorism, organised crime and migration'. Within the 2010s changes in risk perceptions took place: the migration narrative moved from migration being a problem for 'fragile states' in Africa and good-for-labour-markets in Europe, to a direct and major threat to UK interests. This shift gained pace in the second half of the 2010s in the context of higher refugee numbers in Europe and the Brexit campaign. Agencies like DFID responded to the shifting perception of risk and threat – for example, by altering the rationale and framing for the aid priority of poverty reduction:

> In the 2000s, the UK and other OECD donors … linked poverty to support for terrorism, and an increased risk of local conflict and instability … In the 2010s, poverty was understood to pose a direct and urgent risk to UK national interests, not least through migration and the instability and economic pressure it potentially triggered at home.

Further, Lazell explores neoliberalism and its relationship with UK aid policy towards Africa. She argues that the government's new aid-in-the-national-interest approach was underpinned by neoliberalism and ignored or misread the relationship between neoliberalism and insecurity in Africa, particularly for poor and marginalised populations. Lazell contends that the neoliberal development model retained under the new UK aid approach reproduces insecurity by prioritising capital accumulation.

So, what do contributions allow us to see and conclude then regarding donors, aid and Africa in the 2010s: first, traditional, Western or Western-dominated donors are still on the continent and keep a considerable portfolio of activities, deep into the twenty-first century. There are changes in the concepts they deploy (for example, social contract) and official aid agendas they pursue (for example, ownership and localisation). But the principle political-economic aims, the desired outcomes of these activities appear less subject to change, indeed, they have been relatively stable across almost the entire neoliberal reform period of nearly 40 years – aims of forging of a particular capitalist social order and political economy (for example, stakeholder capitalism that is welcoming to western capital) and the consequent lowering or removal of respective hindrances and obstacles. The pursuit of this agenda and the changes this brings regularly undermines, marginalises, decentres and defeats local agendas and agencies that are incompatible with or outright opposed to the agenda. This is the consistent character of donor operations, across time, space and domains/issue areas. The World Bank, for example, rarely faces conclusive defeat on an issue it gets involved in with a particular position and considerable interest. The path to victory (preferred outcomes) for the Bank and other donors has many routes and various timespans. Consider this sum up by Lavers (2024) of his study of the politics of damn building in Ethiopia under former President Zenawi:

> Ethiopia's 'developmental state' was explicitly framed by Meles Zenawi as an alternative to the neo-liberalism of the World Bank and IMF. Yet the irony is that the excesses of this state-led infrastructure boom exposed Ethiopia to a level of debt that has provided these actors with an opening to push for liberalisation and the dismantling of Ethiopia's state-led development model.

Gill's notion of 'disciplinary neoliberalism' (1995) looms large across such cases of donor power and operations. Again, key to note is that this particular external intervention that has the format and name of 'aid' reshapes 'the local' and thereby undermines and weakens the relevance and power of competitor frames, notions, interests and agencies (classes, social groups). We see this again in a recent study of the World Bank's urban development portfolio in Tanzania, particularly Dar es Salaam:

> The pragmatic and non-confrontational nature of these negotiation strategies [of donors and recipients concerning fund disbursement] is illustrated by highlighting the role of a transnational community of urban development professionals who contribute to embedding local support for policy reform from within. It is argued that while this community has been key to enabling the massive growth of the World Bank's urban lending portfolio in Tanzania, it has also contributed to *undermining* effective local government reform, thereby *reshaping* conventionally assumed pathways and understandings of urban agency and development (emphasis added). (Croese and Kombe 2024, 1)

As Williams (2024) reminds us:

> The liberal political project of the Bank, like all liberal politics projects, is about creating particular practices and excluding or undermining others, it is about supporting particular groups and trying to reduce the power of others, it is about disciplining and channelling 'politics' in ways that generate certain outcomes. And all this is based on a commitment to organising collective life in particular ways.

The World Bank and IMF had a significant 'return' to the centre of politics in several African countries in the past few years, in the context of a number of controversial debt and policy negotiations in the COVID period and ever since. The IFIs as instruments of continentwide adjustment were thus more visible to the public, once again. The mass uprising in Kenya provoked by the proposed implementation of IMF prescriptions (also known as Finance Bill 2024) in June and July 2024 marked the recent high point of public critique, protest and resistance against IFIs' policy conditionalities and impositions, IFI–government deal making, and the political economy of extraction, exploitation and inequality that results from that (Chukunzira 2024; Warah 2024). The uprising was thus an uprising against the system that has been structured historically by aid relations and donors, including IFIs. The politics of aid and system reproduction will likely continue to produce major conflicts and upheavals throughout the 2020s.

Acknowledgements

We thank Ray Bush, Okey C. Iheduru and Leo Zeilig as well as the editorial team at the *Canadian Journal of Development Studies* for their helpful comments on the text.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Notes on contributors

Jörg Wiegratz is a Lecturer in Political Economy of Global Development at the School of Politics and International Studies, the University of Leeds (UK) and a Senior Research Associate, Department of Sociology, University of Johannesburg (South Africa). He specialises in neoliberalism, fraud and anti-fraud measures, commercialisation and economic pressure and related aspects of moral and political economy, with a focus on Uganda and Kenya. He is a member of the editorial working group of Review of African Political Economy (ROAPE).

Sophia Price is Head of the School of Social Sciences and Professor of International Political Economy at Birkbeck College, University of London. She is a Senior Fellow of the Higher Education Academy, a Leverhulme Research Fellow and a Visiting Fellow at the University of Johannesburg. Her research interests cover feminist political economy, international trade and aid relations, particularly between Africa and the EU.

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