

Book Review: Democratic Trajectories in Africa: Unravelling the Impact of Foreign Aid, edited by Danielle Resnick and Nicolas van de Walle

Despite impressive economic growth rates over the last decade, foreign aid still plays a significant role in Africa's political economies. This book asks when, why, and how foreign aid has facilitated, or hindered, democratization in sub-Saharan Africa. The authors use a combination of cross-country quantitative analyses and in-depth case studies of Benin, Ghana, Malawi, Mali, Mozambique, Tanzania, and Zambia based on recent interviews with donors, government officials, and civil society organizations. Researchers interested in the effects of foreign aid to the establishment and orchestration of democratic institutions will find this book useful in their studies, writes Jonathan R. Beloff.

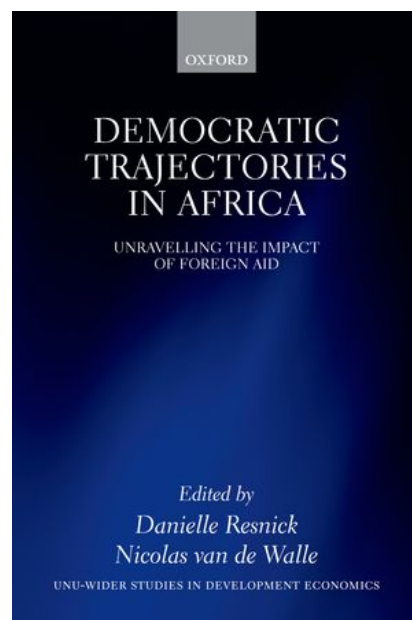
Democratic Trajectories in Africa: Unravelling the Impact of Foreign Aid. Edited by Danielle Resnick and Nicolas van de Walle. Oxford University Press. October 2013.

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Development scholars and public policy advisors who focus on the effectiveness of foreign aid often look towards Africa as the last main undeveloped region of the world. These researchers are often divided into two groups: those with a focus on how foreign aid affects democracy and governance in Africa – often political scientists – and those who examine economic growth and see it as the key indicator for overall African development – often developmental economists. The economists have often overshadowed the political scientists in mainstream development studies, with Paul Collins, Jeffrey Sachs and William Easterly being the most widely known developmental scholars. Even the book's editors note this scholarly divide: "Most notably, the democracy aid community appears to have been less engaged than development aid practitioners in emphasizing the sustainability and harmonization of its interventions" (p. 291).

However, studies of how Western powers spread democracy and other neoliberal beliefs have significantly increased over the last decade, taking into account events including former U.S. President George W. Bush's 'War on Terror' (2001-current) and the Iraq War (2003-2011). It has also continued under the Obama administration with the President's 2009 Ghana [speech for the promotion of good governance and democracy](#). So it is timely, then, that in *Democratic Trajectories in Africa*, [Danielle Resnick](#) and [Nicolas van de Walle](#) along with nine other authors examine the relationship between Western-originated foreign aid and African democracy.

The book is divided into two sections, with the chapters in the first section focusing on understanding an ideal form of democratic transitioning. Many non-scholars in universities and foreign ministries have begun to transition away from seeing democracy as a zero-sum mechanism that can instantly solve society's problems. The editors describe this recent shift in policy, noting that "initially, democracy aid focused predominantly on supporting elections before expanding to the reform of institutions such as legislatures and the judiciary. More recently, donors have increased their activities aimed at strengthening civil society" (p. 7). However, democratic success is often measured by relatively successful public elections even if dominated by a single political party. The book's authors instead write that for Africa to experience democracy, it must be in some form of multiple political parties that continually grow and develop in order to foster more political accountability. Another key aspect in democratic



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transformation is preventing the erosion of basic human rights and civil liberties. This includes governments having the capacity to hold free and fair elections.



A man casts his vote in Mali, November 2013. Credit: [Mission de l'ONU au Mali – UN Mission in Mali](#) CC BY-NC-SA 2.0

The United Nation's Millennium Development Goals and most Western-source foreign aid have focused its attention to the improvement of good governance and political accountability. The authors support foreign aid being utilized for this result, but it needs to be concentrated on making vertical, electoral accountability of political leaders, and more importantly, horizontal accountability. Most African governments have parliamentary and judicial bodies that are severely lacking the ability to provide checks and balances on what is typically a powerful executive branch. This creates ineffective branches of government and a lack of horizontal accountability, which originates from three problems: the first is that many parliamentary members lack personal interest in governance training. The high turnover rate of legislators makes it difficult for donor states to focus in on particular politicians. This is compounded with many Western states trying to avoid supporting particular political parties, because of possible claims of political interference. The final is the lack of time that donor nations are willing to provide training to parliamentary members. In addition to these stated problems is that Ministers of Finance and/or the executive leader often will not properly inform their parliaments of the amount, types or desires of foreign aid that is given to the country. This makes it difficult for legislators to be able to determine whether or not the foreign aid is being utilized correctly.

To illustrate these theories, the authors use the case studies of Benin, Ghana, Malawi, Mozambique, Tanzania, and Zambia. Each of these country's chapters contains the specific democratic history, relationship with Western donors, development of democratic institutions, and the problems that occur in seemingly successful foreign aid agreements. Africa scholars will find the qualitative and quantitative data and conclusions in these chapters especially useful, while new readers will be stimulated through the logical flow of each chapter.

Most importantly, none of the authors wrote that foreign aid is either fully positive or negative. The authors "recognize that while aid's effectiveness is often conditioned by a range of political factors, it often also generates, either intentionally or otherwise, new political dynamics and reinforces existing political practices and actors" (p.1-2). Identifying some of the negative effects of aid, the case studies cover its misuse, its lack of long term support

for proper governing institutions, and the instances of governments in Africa not working fully with NGOs in order to enhance living conditions for the public. The complexities of the effectiveness of foreign aid can be evidenced by looking to Mali: “foreign aid has done little to solve, and arguably has sometimes aggravated, some of the largest existing constraints on democratic consolidation, including the excessive dominance of the executive branches of government, as well as the growing socio-cultural cleavages between urban elites and the rest of the population” (p. 90). The role of China and other non-traditional donor nations to the construction of African democracies are also discussed in each chapter.

Although the authors clearly describe the trade-offs that occur with Western states providing foreign aid for democratic transitions, they do not properly examine the philosophical question of foreign aid as well as the neo-colonial concern of ‘White’ nations pushing for their style of governance in Africa. Some critics, such as [Dambisa Moyo](#), see foreign aid as a form of forcing African states to develop to a rigid set of U.S. or Western European ‘cookie-cutter’ guidelines.

Another weak aspect of the book is where the authors interpret rather polarizing case examples of Zimbabwe and Rwanda. Zimbabwe is a poster child for the necessity for democracy-oriented foreign aid for the improvement of human rights and civil liberties. On the other side of the spectrum is post-genocide Rwanda, which receives criticism for its lack of political speech through anti-genocide laws. However, Rwanda is widely recognised by public policy and development scholars for its good governance agenda through the Rwanda Governance Board and for its extremely low corruption rate, which is one of the lowest in Africa.

These critiques of the book should not deter development scholars from reading this book. Researchers interested in the effects of foreign aid to the establishment and orchestration of democratic institutions will find this book useful in their studies.

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