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Introduction: Crossing the Lines? Local actors' responses to developmental challenges in Africa

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- 1 Enduring colonial legacies continue to shape contemporary politics and policies in Africa. As former and new actors seek to expand economic and political influence in the continent, new forms of domination arise to accommodate neo- and post-colonial agendas. Development, an all-encompassing word that foresees linear pathways towards socially and politically engineered goals, has been used as normative justification for such endeavours (see Escobar, 2011; Ferguson, 1994). The underlying message being that those in the Global South need to modernize and come closer to the development standards of those in the Global North (Alemazung, 2010; Easterly, 2007; Ferguson, 2006; Rist, 2007).
- 2 The conception of one-size-fits-all programmes, such as the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), is just one of the factors that has been perceived as a form of neo-colonialism that is unfair to African countries (Durokifa & Ijeoma, 2018; Easterly, 2007). Not only do MDGs' design disregard the structural conditions of African states, but they also excluded local knowledge and stances, which means programmes as such are often doomed to fail from the start (Durokifa & Ijeoma, 2018; Easterly, 2007; Ferguson, 1994). The same holds for international institutions and foreign aid projects such as those of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) or the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD), which largely benefit the interests of the West and global enterprises rather than most African countries' needs (Amaizo, 2012, p. 132; Ferguson, 2006).
- 3 However, scholars also point out how important structural impediments such as "poverty and long-term economic crises, recent independence, a weak and often predatory state," clientelism, and "authoritarian legacies of administrative weakness" have undermined the prospects for development and democratization (Brown, 2005, p. 183). Faced with structural disadvantages, which in many ways are a legacy of

colonialism, and pressured to implement inadequate external agendas, African countries seem to be trapped in the negative tags of “hopeless continent,” “weak states,” “weak political institutions,” and “social and political conflict” (among those who criticize this negative view of Africa, see for example, Amaizo, 2012; Brown, 2012; Durokifa & Ijeoma, 2018; Easterly, 2007).

- 4 Countering African pessimism, scholars have argued for the recognition of Africa-centred development perspectives (Amaizo, 2012) and African agency in international politics (Brown, 2012; Chipaike & Knowledge, 2018; Lala, 2020). These studies go on to identify the several strategies African actors pursue in the international fora to attain their goals and find several loci of agency – national, regional, and international – encompassing a wide range of actors, from national governments to political elites, independent civil society movements, and ordinary African individuals (Brown, 2012; Chipaike & Knowledge, 2018; Lala, 2020).
- 5 The present special issue draws inspiration from these contributions and echoes Norman Long’s actor-based paradigm of development which combines “an actor-oriented with an historical-structural approach, thus bringing together a concern for the broad historical changes taking place in the regional system or in the national arena, with a careful documentation of the micro-histories and strategies of peasants, miners, and entrepreneurs” (Long, 1990, p. 14; see also Bayat, 2011). Long’s approach highlights human agency and “locates individuals in the specific life-worlds in which they manage their everyday affairs”:

individuals and social groups are, within the limits of their information and resources and the uncertainties they face, “knowledgeable” and “capable”; that is, they devise ways of solving “problematic situations,” and thus actively engage in constructing their own social worlds, even if this means being “active accomplices” to their own subordination. (Long, 1990, p. 14)
- 6 This special issue aims at going beyond the mere Manichaean critique between external intervention/interference and local grievances. It interconnects two arguments that point to, and question, the relevance of both structure and agency. The first argument is that the politics of development is shaped by power relations that are seeded in the colonial past and that are continuously reinvented in the present. The second argument is that African (state and non-state) political actors use the available room for manoeuvre – or simply tend to operate within received sociocultural frameworks – in order to resist, take advantage, change, and voice discontent towards the inequalities and imbalances generated by developmental projects, aid distribution, democratic pushes, or nature conservation programmes.
- 7 In connecting these arguments, our goal is to contribute to a rising discussing on how the global and the local intertwine in “everyday spheres of social life – environment, media, migration, development interventions, and resource utilisations” and are characterised by “attempts of co-habitation, resistance, innovation, and appropriation” (Alemu & Narh, 2013, p. 1). Indeed, while the scholarship on development has focused on how models of political and economic development flow from the North to the Global South, or even South-South (Gray & Gills, 2016), they have neglected the role of African agency and the mechanisms used by local actors to resist and cope with the challenges of development. In the following pages, the interplay between agency and structure is addressed in a sequential way. We summarize the key puzzles and findings of the collection of articles included in this special issue, which concludes with an

afterword assessing how African countries are handling the current COVID-19 pandemic and highlight local responses to this multidimensional challenge.

Crossing the lines? Multi-faceted agency and development challenges

- 8 This special issue invited contributions from all disciplines and encouraged the participation of Western but mainly African scholars. We asked our contributors to address the interdependence between agency and structure, to explore the importance of local actors and contexts in fields such as aid and development and policy implementation in different sectors (agriculture, resources, education, social security), *inter alia*. Cross-cutting all contributions, the overarching question is: How do different actors face/respond to the challenges of political and economic development?
- 9 The article by Kristie et al. examines gender and power relations in the agricultural sector in Ethiopia. Drawing on interviews conducted in Amhara and Oromia, the paper presents a case study on how power relations within Ethiopian families are pervaded by gender norms that are seeded in the colonial past and yet are reproduced in the present. Because men do not share their agricultural resources equally, women are forced to develop survival strategies, either individually or collectively, to manage the household's needs. By secretly stealing the harvest, though affected by farm gate selling, women are able to cope with everyday challenges. While some of the study respondents see this as "stealing," others see this practice as "creative" and "clever." This study points to an interesting interplay between structure and agency. On the one hand, it uncovers how agricultural policies reconstitute the coloniality of gender. On the other hand, it reveals that in spite of facing patriarchal and neo-colonial structures, women respond to this reality through various degrees of scheming and intrahousehold relations.
- 10 Narh's article follows and focuses on the impacts of agricultural intensification in Mumias (western Kenya) and how sugarcane farmers are reacting to the challenges they face with Mumias Sugar Company (MSC) on issues such as agricultural inputs, science, and infrastructure. The study draws on first-hand qualitative material, namely interviews conducted with both contract and ordinary farmers and officials of MSC in five cane farming sub-zones in and around Mumias, between October 2018 and January 2019. The data is illustrative of the domination of farmers by MSC, which sets the blueprints of agricultural intensification methods and supplies all capital inputs as well as ideas to develop cane farms. Despite facing structural difficulties, farmers are not passive or indifferent and display several resistance strategies, namely "refusal to sell cane to the company even though the company may have supplied the farmers with farm inputs, harvesting cane before they fully mature to sell off to a competitor firm, and refusal to even plant cane at all." This case study is crucial as it illuminates how farmers are trying to resist agricultural intensification programmes in Africa. Paradoxically, though, resistance has not originated more cooperative/collective forms of contestation. Narh's conclusions call attention to the need of incorporating local farmers' stances and views in the agricultural sector.
- 11 In the next paper, Botchwey discusses Ghana's school feeding programmes which were introduced in 2005 for primary school children. The former form a significant part of the country's social security system. In his paper, Botchwey argues that the school

feeding programmes were supposed to respond to the nutritional needs of the beneficiaries and improve their attendance, enrolment, educational attainment, and physical development. While using a qualitative research methodology, Botchwey collected the data used for this article by interviewing parents, teachers, caterers, farmers, and programme coordinators. The interviews reveal how decisions on which school to enrol children, as well as the inclusion and exclusion of schools and producers that qualify to participate in these programmes, have been deeply affected by political patronage and financial gain, and not by criteria such as poverty and low enrolment. The author concludes by arguing that while the involvement of local actors in developmental programmes needs more rigorous assessment and monitoring, it can also lead to positive outcomes defying existing assumptions. Also, the findings show that, in some instances, the programme has helped to increase children's enrolment, even though there appears to be pupils from non-participating schools being included in those that are in the school feeding programmes.

- 12 Lopes' contribution analyses the engagement of civil society organizations (CSOs) as a potential integrative part of collaborative governance education policies in Cabo Verde, against the mainstream view of CSOs as opposition groups separate from the state. It does so by tracing the country's education policies from a historical perspective, to then focus on the relatively recent National Education Plan. Lopes shows how the CSOs' quest to participate in the configuration of the state does not diminish the capacity to act on its own in spite of the risks of co-optation and serving of particular interests. Still, central to Lopes arguments is the fact that people succeeded in learning to read and write because of the social strategies implemented by non-state actors outside of the formal system of instruction regardless of particular agendas.
- 13 In the next paper, Noyoo analyses the whole notion of path dependence in Zambia by putting under the spotlight this country's over-reliance on copper production to bolster its development objectives. His main thesis is that the mining of copper was a colonial construct which continues to define the development imperatives of contemporary Zambia, despite various political administrations' call to diversify the country's economy since independence in 1964. Noyoo argues that Zambia needs an alternative development trajectory than the one which was inherited from its former colonial masters. To achieve this, he calls for the diversification of the economy through the value addition and beneficiation of extracted resources and by involving more indigenous actors from the private sector in the said endeavour. Noyoo further suggests that the government and the private sector should partner and invest, modernise, and invigorate the agricultural sector to wean the country off copper.
- 14 Chagunda follows with a paper that proffers a critique of Western development aid by noting that it should not be taken as a panacea for development in Malawi. He does this by tracing the evolution of development aid in Malawi from 1964, when the country became independent, to the present times. Chagunda relies on a historical analysis to arrive at some conclusions and recommendations. He argues that despite the reign of the first president of Malawi being undemocratic, the present policy-makers can draw some lessons from this era if the country's development is to be indigenously driven and sustainable. The founding president of Malawi, Hastings Kamuzu Banda, had ruled Malawi from 1964 to 1994. During this period, development was informed by the African philosophy of *umuntuism*, which encouraged human dignity and self-reliance.

- 15 Oliveira and Cravo investigate the development of Mozambique's social protection system, with a special focus on the cash transfer programs. The study analyses the interplay between international organizations, development aid agencies, national government and local agents in the field, in the process of design and delivery of social protection policies. In particular, the article examines the rise of cash transfers as a global public policy to fight poverty and the role of Mozambican domestic actors in (co)defining these policies and shaping their outcomes. The analysis highlights Mozambique's early adoption of cash transfer programs and the relevance of the national government in setting the agenda and taking control of its design and implementation. However, it also reveals considerable barriers to its widespread dissemination and impact, which have prevented the program from delivering expected results, even once international actors became more prominent. This study contributes to a better understanding of possible mismatches between different levels involved in decision- and policy-making, and remarks on the distinction between agreeing upon the design and goals of a social protection program and its actual implementation.
- 16 Making sense of "development" is a daunting task; the concept is as popular as problematic. Among other things, its neo-colonial baggage carries a two-fold effect: the prevalence of the interests of the West over those of African countries and the design of inadequate policies that often silence local actors' stances and voices. By zooming in on the diversity of actors involved in the "enterprise" of development, the goal of this special issue was to examine how local actors – from farmers to members of civil society to national governments, *inter alia* – respond to the challenges of development. In addressing this open-ended question, we aimed at moving beyond naïve and simplistic interpretations that could overstate the weight of "local agency" and overlook structural constraints. Otherwise, the studies herein shed deep and penetrating light into actors' strategies and responses against the background of the structural conditions they face.

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