

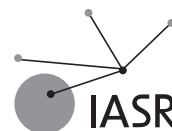


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Article

Do Colonial Legacy and Engagement with China Impact the Effectiveness of the European Aid in Promoting Democracy in African States?

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Abstract

Though promoting democracy in African states has been one of the key priorities of international assistance and a basis for aid conditionality, the impact of developmental aid on democratic reforms in African states is highly debated. This paper contributes to this debate by exploring the influence of the EU official development aid disbursement on democracy scores in African countries. The findings based on the correlation and regression analysis of the panel data for 33 Sub-Saharan African states with British and French colonial legacies in 2005–2022 demonstrate that higher disbursements of the EU developmental aid are associated with higher freedom scores, while the reduction in development assistance does not result in better performance in terms of democracy. Furthermore, countries with a French colonial legacy demonstrate lower democracy scores in contrast to those with a British colonial legacy. Finally, Chinese economic engagement in Africa has a positive association with democracy scores.

Keywords

Africa, EU, China, Colonial legacy, Developmental aid, Effectiveness

Introduction

The international literature suggests that democracy and good governance are crucial factors in supporting long-term economic growth (Rivera-Batiz, 2002) and human development (Gerring et al., 2012). Several studies demonstrated that good governance is one of the factors explaining the variance in economic performance among African countries (Beyene, 2022; Fayissa & Nsiah, 2013).

Due to the colonial legacies, many African countries lack governance capacity and lag in terms

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of democratic development. It is therefore not surprising that promoting democracy and good governance in Africa has become a priority both for multinational and Western bilateral donors providing foreign aid to African countries. Special attention to governance and democracy issues was implemented through direct support to the local democratization efforts and by including progress in strengthening democratic institutions and improving governance as conditionality for releasing foreign aid.

However, the effectiveness of Western aid in promoting democratization in Africa has been heavily debated. While some researchers argued that higher volumes of aid provided more incentives for democratic reforms (Kersting & Kilby, 2014; Blair et al., 2022) others claimed that strengthening governance and democratization have little to do with international aid (Knack, 2004) and pointed out to the cases when aid conditionality failed to promote democracy on the continent (Dipama & Dal, 2015). Furthermore, while some authors focused on aid modality (Gisselquist et al., 2021) and governance in recipient countries (Gafuri, 2022) as factors influencing the effectiveness of developmental aid in terms of promoting democracy, the impact of colonial legacy has not been explored in this regard. In addition, though some authors warned that higher engagement of China in Africa could diminish the efforts to promote democracy (Li, 2017), others argued that Chinese engagement could not be held accountable for the flaws in governance systems that emerged much before the rise of China in Africa (Taylor, 2007).

This paper aims to explore whether the EU aid disbursement promotes democracy in African countries and if economic engagement with China and colonial legacy (French vs. British) has a role in this process. It contributes to the current debate on the role of international assistance in promoting democracy in developing countries by exploring the association between the disbursements of developmental aid from the EU and democracy in African countries, factoring in the role of external powers (i.e., China), and colonial legacies. The paper uses the most recent data available and thus considers the latest developments, including the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The paper is structured as follows. First, a literature review explores whether this emphasis on democracy and governance has been effective or, in other words, whether direct support and conditionality of foreign aid have helped to strengthen democracy and governance in Africa. Second, based on the literature review, the research objective and the hypotheses are formulated. This section is followed by a description of the data and methods used for empirical analysis. The results section presents the outcomes of statistical analysis and modeling which are followed by discussion and conclusions.

Literature Review

The effectiveness of foreign aid in promoting democracy and good governance has gained significant attention in the research literature. However, the views on the issue vary significantly. While some authors claim that the donors allocate aid in response to democratization and recipient countries respond to incentives for democratic reforms (Kersting & Kilby, 2014), others suggest that the achievements in democratization of developing countries have little to do with foreign assistance (Knack, 2004).

A recent literature review by Gisselquist et al. (2021) on aid effectiveness in terms of democracy promotion, which was not limited to African countries, suggested that while the outcomes of studies examining the link between foreign aid and democracy are mixed with both positive and negative cases reviewed, the efforts aimed at supporting democratic institutions are more effective compared to developmental aid which often has democracy conditionality. Thus,

it was argued that aid modality had an impact on aid effectiveness in terms of democratization in recipient countries.

However, the view that developmental conditionality is less effective is not shared by all authors. For instance, Gafuri (2022) argued that “democracy assistance can be successful because it is coupled with political conditionality and monitoring mechanisms in the beneficiary countries” (Gafuri, 2022, p. 777). There is some evidence that the amount of foreign aid (in this case, the US aid) is associated with the extent of support for liberal democratic values, such as elections, in African countries (Blair et al., 2022). The presence of multiple donors supporting democratic efforts is another factor increasing the effectiveness of foreign aid as demonstrated by the case of Ghana (Ziaja, 2020). Larger technical assistance provided by international donors was claimed to be another important factor supporting political liberalization in Africa (Gibson et al., 2015).

On the contrary, other authors suggest that foreign aid has little if any impact on promoting democracy (Knack, 2004). Moreover, the effectiveness of the international efforts to promote democracy in Africa has been disappointing (Brown, 2005). In many cases, such as Zimbabwe and Ivory Coast, political conditionality failed to promote democracy (Dipama & Dal, 2015).

Some case studies highlight that donor support for democratization may have false prioritization which leads to unsatisfactory outcomes. Thus, a recent study of the EU’s support for democratization in Cameroon found that overemphasizing the importance of elections led to insufficient attention to building the capacity of civic institutions and reduced aid effectiveness (Pemunta, 2020). Other studies have also claimed that the EU political conditionality is narrowly focused on elections and thus does not account for the context in individual countries (Biondo, 2011). Furthermore, a rapid transition to a multi-party system may impede rather than support further democratization processes (Brown, 2005).

The narrow focus on democracy as an electoral process, and the emphasis on limiting the state power rather than strengthening public participation and control (Crawford, 2005) reduces the scope of actions supported and measures suggested to the recipient countries. For instance, the analysis of the EU democracy promotion efforts in Tunisia and Morocco has revealed the lack of substantive discussions and meaningful exchanges that could play a role in strengthening democracy in these North African countries (van Hüllen, 2019).

The researchers also point out that the emphasis on negative political conditionality leads to the fact that the pressure for democracy is used at the points in time when it is most difficult for dominant regimes to engage, while the opportunity to strengthen democratic institutions during stability periods is overlooked (Hackenesch, 2015). The case of Ethiopia is one of the examples when international donors withdrew from political reform debates and thus missed an opportunity to promote democratization (Brown & Fisher, 2020).

Another important aspect considered in the literature is the choice of a top-down versus bottom-up approach to developing democracy. In post-conflict contexts which are also common in Africa, bottom-up approaches tend to perform better compared to the efforts aimed at centralized, top-down developments (Reicheneder & Neureiter, 2024). Furthermore, some examples of successful international promotion of democracy in Africa (such as preserving presidential term limits in Senegal and Malawi) demonstrate the need for popular pro-democratic attitudes in the recipient countries (Leininger & Nowack, 2022). In other words, a democracy calls for public demand.

Noteworthy, some studies suggest that democracy aid is not driven only by the desire to spur economic and human development in the recipient countries. At least in some cases such aid demonstrates a response to political events, such as the dissolution of the USSR or the terrorist attack of 9/11 in the US (Scott & Carter, 2015). Some authors claim that foreign aid has become

not a tool for strengthening liberal democracy on an illiberal continent but a means for political, economic, and ideological domination in the post-colonial era (Fentahun, 2023). Since the political activities of Western countries are often driven by self-interest, it is not surprising that the effectiveness of democracy promotion is low (Crawford, 2005).

The importance of donors' political and economic interests rather than genuine democratic development is one of the reasons for the low efficiency of foreign aid (Brown, 2005). The research shows that the donors often compromised their principles and provided assistance to authoritarian regimes with low governance capacity. Thus, the uneven application of sanctions in the EU democracy promotion in Africa can be explained by the factors of donor interests and developmental performance. If these factors are present, the sanctions are not applied in cases of democracy violations (Del Biondo, 2015). Overall, the link between aid and democracy appears to be weaker for geopolitically important recipient countries (Kersting & Kilby, 2014).

The role of economic factors is also significant for the recipient countries. Thus, countries that are heavily dependent on international aid are likely to push harder for governance reforms to meet the relevant conditionality. However, this undermines the legitimacy of international aid which emphasizes partnership and reform ownership (Börzel & Hackenesch, 2013).

Another concern in this regard is related to the growing role of emerging donors in Africa, especially China, who do not apply political conditionality to the grants and loans they provide (Gore, 2013). Based on the data from AidData's Global Chinese Development Finance Dataset (Dreher et al., 2022), during 2000-2021 China committed to implementing 9348 development projects in Africa with the total commitment amount reaching 691.2 billion USD in constant 2021 prices. Noteworthy, during the same period the commitment of ODA from the EU institutions accounted for only 142.7 billion USD. Moreover, UNCTAD data suggests that in 2021 China became the fifth-largest country in terms of FDI stock in African states (UNCTAD, 2023).

Emerging donors such as China offer an alternative source of developmental finance and reduce the economic dependency of African countries on traditional donors from the West. Some research flagged that since the rise of China in Sub-Saharan Africa the democratization effects of OECD's support had diminished (Li, 2017). There is also some empirical evidence that Chinese aid undermines the public perceptions of governance in African countries and erodes trust in government (Atitianti & Asiamah, 2023; Mandon & Woldemichael, 2022). Though China cannot be blamed for the long-standing issues of poor governance and lack of democracy on the African continent (Taylor, 2007), the increasing role of emerging donors puts pressure on OECD countries to revise the current approaches to political conditionality.

Noteworthy, implementing the one-size-fits-all approach in political conditionality without accounting for the country's historical, political, institutional, and socio-economic contexts often leads to unsatisfactory results (Dipama & Dal, 2015). Even the studies that proved the effectiveness of democracy aid efforts often accounted for these contexts. For example, when measuring the association of the EU's democracy assistance with the V-Dem Electoral Index Gafuri (2022) controlled for the quality of public administration in the recipient countries. This factor proved to have a much more significant influence on the democracy electoral index (0.062) than the EU assistance to democracy per se (0.009). Strong commitment to reform on the part of the recipient country's leadership is another factor contributing to the success of foreign democracy and governance assistance (Diamond, 2008).

Overall, our review demonstrates that using foreign aid to promote democracy in African countries has not been always successful. While the importance of country context has been emphasized repeatedly, no studies reviewing the impact of colonial legacies on the effectiveness of developmental aid in terms of supporting democratization efforts have been found. The presence of alternative sources of foreign aid from China and other emerging donors who do

not use political conditionality makes the issue of development aid effectiveness in terms of supporting democracy and governance particularly challenging. Though some authors claim that the rise of China may reduce the effectiveness of aid for democracy, the existing evidence is insufficient.

This paper attempts to bridge the gaps found in the literature and provides empirical evidence on the effectiveness of the EU developmental aid in promoting democracy in African countries the role of colonial legacies and the engagement of China in this process.

Research Objective and Hypotheses

This paper aims to explore whether the EU aid disbursement promotes democracy in African countries and if economic engagement with China and the colonial legacy (French vs. British) has a role in the success or failure of the democratization efforts.

The paper contributes to the current debate on the role of international assistance in promoting democracy in developing countries by factoring in the role of external powers (i.e., China), and colonial legacies of African countries. Since the empirical results are based on the most recent data available, they also capture the latest developments, including the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Based on the literature review, the following hypotheses have been formulated for this study:

- H1. Larger disbursement of the development aid from the EU institutions is associated with higher democracy levels.
- H2. Greater economic engagement of China is associated with lower levels of democracy.
- H3. Colonial legacy has an impact on the institutional context in African states and therefore impacts democracy levels.

Methods and Data Sources

To test the hypotheses included in the study, the panel data for 33 Sub-Saharan African countries with French and British legacies covering 2005-2022 were used (the total number of observations is 594). This period was chosen since 2005 was the earliest year for which the data on outward Chinese FDI stock by country was publicly available.

To measure the level of democracy, aggregate freedom in the world (FIW) scores published by Freedom House were used.¹ For the disbursements of development aid from the EU institutions, the OECD data on the disbursement of official development assistance was used (OECD, 2024). Chinese engagement was measured based on the data on outward Chinese FDI stock in respective African countries.² GDP and GDP per capita were used as a control variable (the World Bank WDI data was used). Also, the estimations used the data on armed conflict in African countries published by Uppsala University (Shawn et al., 2024) and the classification of African countries in terms of mineral resources (resource-rich vs. resource-scarce) and geographical position (i.e., with access to sea vs. land-locked) offered by the African Development Bank (ADB, 2007). To account for a possible impact of the predominant religion on the FIW country score, a dummy variable highlighting the countries with predominantly Muslim populations was used. The descriptive statistics of the variables used are presented in Table 1 below.

As shown in Table 1, Sub-Saharan states vary significantly in terms of democracy scores with the lowest score in Somalia (1 point out of 100 in 2010-2012) and the highest score in Ghana (84 points in 2006-2015). Noteworthy, during 2005-2022 in most Sub-Saharan states the democracy

Table 1. Descriptive statistics

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation	Variance	Skewness	Kurtosis		
	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Std. Error	Statistic	Std. Error
Total_Freedom_Score	594	1.0	84.0	43.343	21.7924	474.907	-.017	.100	-.924	.200
EU_ODA_Disb	594	.00	361.93	82.5429	65.28228	4261.776	.963	.100	.873	.200
GDP	594	654	574184	28666	70101	4914207442	5.422	.100	30.678	.200
GDP_per_capita	594	223	19850	1899	2570	6605605	3.712	.100	16.916	.200
Chinese_FDI_stock	594	0	3523	386	612	375042	2.285	.100	5.129	.200
French_legacy	594	0	1	.55	.498	.248	-.183	.100	-1.973	.200
Armed_Conflict	594	0	1	.23	.421	.177	1.293	.100	-.328	.200
Muslim_dummy	594	0.00	1.00	.3636	.48145	.232	.568	.100	-1.683	.200
Land_locked_dummy	594	0.00	1.00	.3636	.48145	.232	.568	.100	-1.683	.200
Resource_rich_dummy	594	0.00	1.00	.4242	.49464	.245	.307	.100	-1.912	.200

Source: author calculations.

scores decreased. Some improvements during this period were noted only in 9 countries (Burkina Faso, Cote d'Ivoire, Guinea, Madagascar, Malawi, Mauritania, Sierra Leone, Togo, and Zimbabwe) out of 33 countries included in the sample. In other Sub-Saharan states included in the sample democracy scores did not change nor deteriorate with the sharpest decrease noted in Mali where the total freedom score dropped from 75 in 2005 to only 32 in 2022.

Given the high variance among the variables in terms of scale, a logarithmic transformation was performed before the regression analysis.

To identify the association between the independent variables (EU ODA disbursement, Chinese FDI stock, and country legacy) and the dependent variable (total FIW country score), correlation and regression analyses were conducted. To test the hypotheses, a fixed-effects model was utilized. To check for the possible impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on democracy score, an additional fixed-effects model for the pre-COVID data (i.e., 2005–2019) was estimated.

Results

The results of pairwise Pearson's correlations between the total FIW country score, on the one hand, and the disbursement of ODA from the EU institutions suggest that there is no association between these variables (Table 2). However, given that the disbursement of ODA from the EU institutions is significantly correlated with GDP per capita ($r=-0.394$) and the size of GDP ($r=0.222$), controlling for macroeconomic variables could yield a different result. For the same reason, Chinese FDI stock is positively correlated with ODA disbursements and the country's GDP. Noteworthy, in countries with French colonial legacy the stock of Chinese FDI appears to be lower than that in former British colonies.

Table 2. Total freedom score and selected indicators; pairwise pearson correlations

	Total_Freedom_Score	EU_ODA_Disb	Chinese_FDI_stock	GDP	GDP_per_capita	French_legacy	Armed_Conflict	Muslim_dummy	Land_locked_dummy	Resource_rich_dummy	COVID
Total_Freedom_Score	1	.007	.022	.044	-.204**	-.138**	-.298**	-.141**	.086*	-.325**	-.066
EU_ODA_Disb	.007	1	.202**	.222**	-.394**	-.123**	.498**	.279**	.162**	-.098*	.021
Chinese_FDI_stock	.022	.202**	1	.549**	-.018	-.330**	.221**	-.174**	.013	.070	.180**
GDP	.044	.222**	.549**	1	.039	-.242**	.279**	-.183**	-.180**	.223**	.049
GDP_per_capita	-.204**	-.394**	-.018	.039	1	.114**	-.187**	-.282**	-.120**	.341**	.003
French_legacy	-.138**	-.123**	-.330**	.114**	.114**	1	-.066	.184**	-.196**	.168**	.000
Armed_Conflict	-.298**	.498**	.221**	-.187**	-.187**	-.066	1	.196**	.121**	.043	.133**
Muslim_dummy	-.141**	.279**	-.174**	-.183**	-.282**	.184**	.196**	1	-.048	-.012	.000
Land_locked_dummy	.086*	.162**	.013	-.120**	-.120**	-.196**	.121**	-.048	1	-.267**	.000
Resource_rich_dummy	-.325**	-.098*	.070	.341**	.341**	.168**	.043	-.012	-.267**	1	.000
COVID	-.066	.021	.180**	.049	.003	.000	.133**	.000	.000	.000	1

* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed); ** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Source: author calculations.

Table 3. Determinants of total freedom country scores, fixed-effects regressions

Parameter	Model 1	Model 2
Intercept	30.817** (10.671)	30.634** (11.598)
log_EU_ODA	4.175** (1.263)	4.270** (1.316)
log_China_FDI	3.109*** (.338)	3.105*** (0.371)
log_GDP_cap	-1.213 (3.028)	-.657 (3.270)
log_GDP	3.693* (1.954)	3.433 (2.116)
Armed_Conflict	-17,384*** (2.004)	-17.923*** (2.274)
French_legacy	-3.646** (1.600)	-3.331** (1.578)
Muslim_dummy	-0.718 (1.747)	-.984 (1.953)
Land_locked_dummy	2.050 (1.629)	2.549 (1.810)
Resource_rich_dummy	-17,184*** (1.716)	-17.176*** (1.932)
Observations	594	495
R-squared	.381	.371
Number of countries	33	33

* Significant at $p = 0.01$; ** significant at $p = 0.05$; *** significant at $p = 0.01$.

Source: author calculations.

Noteworthy, the Pearson correlation has revealed a negative association between the French colonial legacy and the level of democracy in the country. Also, a negative correlation was found between the democracy score and the armed conflict variable (suggesting that the armed conflict decreases democracy), availability of natural resources (resource-rich countries have lower democracy scores, compared to resource-scarce states), and GDP per capita. Countries with predominantly Muslim populations tend to have lower democracy scores.

To test the hypotheses, two fixed-effects models (for 2005-2022 and for 2005-2019) were estimated (Table 3).

The regression coefficients (Table 3) suggest that both the disbursements from ODA and the amount of Chinese FDI stock are significant predictors of the total FIW country score. Notably, the association with both variables is positive. Thus, both higher ODA disbursement to Sub-Saharan states and higher FDI from China are associated with higher democracy scores. Finally, Sub-Saharan countries with a French legacy have lower levels of freedom compared to those with a British legacy: the variable of legacy is statistically significant in both models, but the association is negative.

Some of the control variables also proved significant predictors of democracy levels. Thus, armed conflict in the country and its richness in mineral resources are both negatively associated with the country's WIF scores. The country's predominant religion or geographical position is not a significant predictor of democracy scores when other parameters are controlled for.

Noteworthy, both models yielded very similar results in terms of model parameters and coefficients. Thus, the estimates suggest that the COVID-19 pandemic has not had a significant effect on the relationship between the EU ODA disbursement and the democracy level in Sub-Saharan Africa.

Discussion

The modeling results confirm the first hypothesis of this research: larger disbursement of development aid from the EU institutions is associated with higher democracy levels. This finding is in line with some findings of the previous research related to the effectiveness of the US aid (Blair et al., 2022) and the aid received from various official donors (Gafuri, 2022).

However, the association between the democracy levels and developmental aid disbursement may also mean that reducing the EU support as part of democracy conditionality may be ineffective in terms of promoting freedom in Africa. For instance, the application of democracy conditionality to Ethiopia in 2021 did not lead to any visible improvements in the country's FIW score: while in 2021 it equaled 22 points, by 2024 it dropped to 20 points. Similarly, the use of democratic aid conditionality and reduction of aid to Uganda, Zimbabwe, and Somalia in 2023 has not resulted in improvements in 2024 FIW scores in any of these countries. On the contrary, compared to 2023, in Uganda and Zimbabwe, the democracy scores further decreased (from 35 to 34 points in Uganda and from 28 to 27 points in Zimbabwe) whereas in Somalia the score remained very low (8 points in both years). Thus, reducing the aid for democracy-related reasons tends not to improve the state of democracy, while increasing the developmental support might yield positive results.

The fixed effects models found Chinese economic engagement in terms of FDI to be a significant variable predicting the level of democracy in Sub-Saharan Africa; moreover, the association between the Chinese FDI and country WIF scores is positive. Thus, the second hypothesis of this study is rejected: greater economic engagement with China is associated with higher levels of democracy. This finding challenges the earlier concerns put forward by Li (2017), Atitianti and Asiamah (2023), and Mandon and Woldemichael (2022) that the greater role of China in the African economy may undermine the efforts of Western countries to promote democracy on the continent: despite China does not use political conditionality, more democratic countries have larger stocks of Chinese FDI.

Noteworthy, the results demonstrate that the colonial legacy has an impact on the institutional context in African states and therefore impacts democracy levels. In particular, countries with French colonial legacies are less free compared to the former British colonies. This finding helps to explain the importance of the country context that was claimed highly relevant for determining the effectiveness of foreign assistance to democratization reforms in earlier studies (Dipama & Dal, 2015). Thus, the third hypothesis of the study was confirmed.

The fact that resource-rich countries demonstrate lower democracy scores reinforces the earlier findings that the dependence on natural resources deteriorates the quality of governance in Sub-Saharan states (Asiamah et al., 2022), and democratic transformations are more successful in resource-scarce countries (Jensen & Wantchekon, 2004). The negative impact of armed conflict on the level of freedom found in this paper also confirms some earlier research findings (Cheeseman et al., 2018).

Conclusion

For the last decades promoting democracy in African countries has been one of the core priorities of the EU development assistance. However, the effectiveness of this assistance has been highly debated in the literature.

The findings of this paper confirm that larger disbursements of the EU ODA are associated with higher freedom scores in recipient countries. Such association reflects both the application of

the EU aid conditionality that precludes supporting the countries with major flaws in democracy and the impact of the developmental aid on improving the levels of democracy. However, the positive association between the EU support, on the one hand, and the democracy scores, on the other, demonstrates that decreasing the volumes of aid would not lead to improvements in democracy in recipient countries.

Despite the broad concerns that the increasing economic engagement of China in Africa would undermine the efforts to improve democracy on the continent, our findings suggest that the impact of the Chinese factor is the opposite. Chinese FDI stock is positively associated with freedom scores in recipient states. Thus, though China does not formally apply political conditionality, economic investments from China factor in democracy levels.

At the same time, the role of colonial legacy in the success of democratic reforms has so far been underestimated: ex-French colonies demonstrate lower democracy scores, compared to ex-British colonies, and this factor should be accounted for when the development aid programs are designed and implemented.

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Notes

1. Freedom House. Aggregate Category and Subcategory Scores, 2003-2024 dataset. Available at: <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world#Data> (accessed on May 10, 2024).
2. Source: Statistical Bulletins of China's Outward Foreign Direct Investment for 2011-2022 published by China's MOFCOM. Available at: URL: <http://fec.mofcom.gov.cn/article/tjsj/> (accessed on May 10, 2024).

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