

Foreign Aid: Policies, Institutions and the Dependency Culture

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The Development State: Aid, Culture and Civil Society in Tanzania

by Maia Green

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The book under review is a significant contribution to the study of political economy and culture in contemporary Africa. The book seeks to understand the impact of international development interventions on culture, politics and society in Tanzania. Drawing on scholarly traditions of critical discourse and ethnographical analysis, the book draws heavily on the author's anthropological research of well over a decade and his work as a development consultant in Tanzania to interrogate contemporary development idioms, imageries, institutions and practices. It focuses on explaining how inordinate dependence on foreign aid impacts the ideology, policy and institutional choices of recipient states as well as the cultural orientations of the broad masses. Within a tightly packed 182 pages, it succeeds immensely in demonstrating how the institutionalization of participatory development methodologies were imaginatively exploited to serve the ulterior global capitalist agendas of reinforcing hierarchical distinctions in society and entrenching dependence relations between the development institutions of the global North and the targets of development interventions, namely, the aid recipient states and the under served rural communities in the global South. Similarly, it shows how asymmetrical encounters between relatively well-educated urban Tanzanians and aid agencies engendered illusionary possibilities of accessing resources from development projects that might promote individual improvements, represented by easy access to funding, well-paid self-employment, social mobility, and, ultimately, achieving the much-sought after metropolitan life-styles.

After a relatively long introductory section on the political, economic and social history of Tanzania, the book is divided into nine chapters. The first chapter discusses the defining features of the concept of a 'development state' and elaborates why both the state and society in Tanzania enthusiastically embraced different donor-supported development strategies, institutions, norms and values. Unlike other regions of the world, the book recounts, Africa's development history is but a catalogue of tried tested and failed development models that were promoted by various multilateral and aid donor agencies. In fact, the 2011 Economic Report of the of the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa had earlier listed nine distinct development strategies, some of them overlapping chronologically, that were designed, financially supported, and implemented under the direct supervision of the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund and Western aid agencies. These strategies, often overlapping, included: (i) commercialization through cash cropping from pre-independence up to 1979; (ii) community development, integrated rural development and participatory development (1955-1973), (iii) regional integration for industry and national self-sufficiency for food (1970-1979); (iv) basic human needs (1970-1979); (v)

regional integration, food first [both strategies in the same period?] (1973-1989); (vi) supply shifters in agriculture (1979); (vii) first-generation structural adjustment on demand management (1980-1984); (viii) second-generation structural adjustment on equity and growth; and (ix) sustainable development (1990 to the present). One is left slightly puzzled as to where the author of the work under review was when all these strategies were being tested, tried and debunked.

Chapter two discusses at length the contested meanings, practices and limitations of participatory approaches to planning and management of development interventions by multiple actors including donor agencies, central and local governments, inter-governmental agencies, civil society organizations, communities and individual citizens. However, what the author fails to explore adequately is the standard ritual of assigning the praises and blames in the international aid industry. Almost invariably, the original authors, financiers and promoters of a development strategy tend to exculpate themselves of any responsibility in the event of poor performance. Ordinarily, the entire blame is inordinately placed on the shoulders of the victims, who are blamed either for personal laziness, misguided leadership, systemic corruption, flagrant violation of human rights, or even of decayed institutions. Chapter three is wholly devoted to describing various development paradigms, policies and programs that were adopted and implemented in Tanzania from colonial times to the post-colonial period. It is argued that regardless of the paradigm, all development policy interventions simply served as tools to perpetuate relations of inequality and dependency between the West and the rest. In Chapter Four, the book discusses how participatory development methodologies were adopted, institutionalized and practiced in Tanzania in order to guide development processes at every level and with every development undertaking, ranging from sensitizing individuals to their responsibilities within the sustainability paradigm to participatory poverty assessment analysis at the national level. Chapters five and six discuss the role of civil society in promoting donor-inspired 'good governance' and accountability practices and in serving as expert development entrepreneurs in the rural and urban areas. The book concludes with two chapters on anti-witchcraft services and the middle class culture, thereby departing from earlier otherwise closely related issues. These two chapters, on anthropological debates about the categories of tradition and modernity, seem to be way out of context.

With the benefit of hindsight, the book's title, the 'Development State', sounds rather intellectually uncurious and extremely dicey to operationalize. In the first place, the title is almost everything but developmental. The notion of 'development states' presented in the reviewed book is unlike the authentic 'developmental states' – such as Japan in the 1950s to 1980s; South Korea and Taiwan in the 1960 to 1990s; and China since the 1980s – that were associated with fast economic growth, authoritarian allocation of investment and sectoral values, iron labour discipline, social transformation and extensive social repression in order to achieve effective capital accumulation. The notion of 'development states' presented in the reviewed book seems to be casually defined as those states which are materially and ideologically sustained by aid transfers to meet development budgets and whose institutional configurations are passively derived from developmental templates as well as policies and strategies distributed along with development assistance. Development states are, in this case, further defined by asymmetrical relationships with donor states of the global North that are presented as being able to determine the scale of government resources and national budgets. Above all, although not particularly predatory, these kinds of states display weak track records of economic and social development. These broad indicators of the chosen concept can hardly be generalized to explain neat and discernible patterns the behaviours and complexities of countries at the same level of development and aid dependency.

Secondly, another weak point of the book is its casualness at interrogating the quality of foreign aid that is expressly provided to improve the quality of life and social well-being of the

very poor in the global South. Although there are scattered reminders in the book about the asymmetrical nature of the international aid regime, the quality and socio-economic impact remain inadequately explored and explained. Incidentally, a recent study undertaken by the international NGO, Action Aid (2005), has shown that the official aid figures make the world's richest countries appear more generous than they really are! Much of the recorded OECD aid is largely swallowed by administrative costs, double accounting of debt relief, tied aid, donor aid that is allocated on the basis of geopolitical and commercial priorities and spending for refugees in donor countries. In total, the Action Aid study estimates that more than half of all aid fails to directly target the poor. It aptly calls these kinds of self-interest driven aid as 'phantom aid' – aid which is either poorly targeted, double counted as debt relief, overpriced and ineffective, tied to goods and services from the donor country, poorly coordinated with high transaction costs, too unpredictable to be useful to the recipient, spent on immigration in the donor country, and spent on excessive administrative costs. Moreover, these same studies demonstrably show how poorly targeted aid resources tend to stand in stark contrast to the 'reversal resource flows' – the flow of resources from poor countries to the rich world via mechanisms such as debt repayment, capital flight, unfair trade, and profit remittances. Who, then, is helping whom? The book remains conspicuously silent on the subject.

Thirdly, time and time again the book underscores the position that although one could legitimately argue that some aid resource transfers produced long-term positive developmental impacts – social services deliveries, institution strengthening, enhanced civic competence and/ or improvements in the quality of life – other development interventions which were provided purely out of the donor's commercial interests, national security interests, or even for the promotion of specific donor cultural values and ideological interests left behind unfortunate legacies of corrosive aid dependency, misguided policies, poorly grounded institutions of the state and society, and corrosively undermined the social capital of the citizenry. The negative legacies of aid resource transfers would have demanded a standalone chapter of its own in such a book.

Finally, although the book sought to explore the impact of foreign aid on culture, politics and society in Tanzania, it has failed to account for why such massive aid flows have made little dent on the chronic and gut-wrenching poverty of the rural masses. Nor did the book attempt to reflect seriously on what transformative institutional, policy and structural interventions would be necessary in order to achieve the donors' professed ultimate development objectives of growth, reduction of inequalities and poverty as well as the promotion of participatory democracy and sustainable development. These few blemishes notwithstanding, the work remains a very important contribution to the growing literature on foreign aid as an instrument of big power politics in the global South.

References

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