



Robtel Neajai Pailey

March 6th, 2025

## It is time for Africa to move beyond aid

Rather than likening aid suspension to the apocalypse, Africa should embrace it as a catalyst for 21<sup>st</sup>-century decolonisation and chart its own course to socio-economic development, writes Robtel Neajai Pailey.

When America's first convicted felon to serve in the White House announced a funding freeze of US humanitarian aid and 'development assistance' for 90 days, little did he know that he might have ignited an economic reckoning across Africa.

While concerns persist about the short-term implications of cutting off aid so quickly, Washington's directive has exposed the disingenuousness of an industry that lacks transparency, operates as a tool of neocolonial control, and breeds dependency.

The glaring contradictions inherent in Donald Trump's executive (dis)order appear to have galvanised people with largely divergent perspectives about the promise and pitfalls of aid. These include those **Nilima Gulrajani** calls aid radicals (who believe in abolishing an oppressively colonial aid system), aid reformists (who believe in improving and effectively managing aid) and aid realists (who fall somewhere in the middle).

## Aid is clearly strategic, rather than altruistic

Burkina Faso's revolutionary leader Thomas Sankara famously said: "he who feeds you, controls you." He was lifting the veil on a multi-billion-dollar industry whose modus operandi is to entrench geopolitical hierarchies of power and sustain global economic inequalities.

The international aid system was established after World War II to rebuild and reconstruct parts of Europe and Asia. It was never intended or designed to develop Africa or other parts of the colonised world.

Since then, aid has been wielded as a tool of soft power to advance the interests of foreign financiers (so-called 'donors') largely in the West and their proxies in international financial institutions.

The US Agency for International Development (USAID) was established by President John F. Kennedy in 1961 to fight the spread of communism, with one US diplomat recently admitting in a live broadcast that "US aid is not charity. It is a tool for advancing the interests of the United States". The new funding freeze disproportionately affects US companies, contractors and NGOs which absorb 31 per cent of financing after 12 per cent overhead/admin is skimmed off. The **lion's share of USAID financing**, 46 per cent, is channelled through multilateral implementing partners such as the UN and World Bank, with only 11 per cent going directly to foreign institutions, including governments, companies and NGOs.

## Seek ye first the economic kingdom

African countries have sobered to the reality that aid can never bring about structural transformation. When Ghana's first post-independence president Kwame Nkrumah admonished countries across the continent to "seek ye first the economic kingdom", he understood that political sovereignty without economic independence was useless.

Other African leaders followed in succession, championing self-reliance as a counterpoint to the burgeoning aid system.

Tanzania's Julius Nyerere adopted 'ujamaa' ('familyhood' in Swahili) as the bedrock of his economic and social policies between 1964 and 1985. He focussed on 'villagisation' to reverse colonial-era rural to urban migration and improve collective agriculture and communal ownership of land.

Kenneth Kaunda adopted 'Zambian humanism' as a basic needs approach to achieving socio-economic transformation. The goals of his development plans between 1964 and 1970 included balanced and inclusive growth, public sector development of economic and social infrastructure, and delinking from the settler-dominated countries of Southern Africa.

And Thomas Sankara attained astonishing development dividends during his very short time in office from 1983 to 1987. Under Sankara's stewardship, Burkina Faso reduced infant mortality and increased literacy rates through investments in health and education, respectively. The country also achieved food sufficiency by redistributing land to rural peasants, amongst other reforms.

Sankara eschewed aid, advocating instead for the cancellation of odious debts. He did so amidst IMF-backed structural adjustment policies from the 1980s onwards which gutted government bureaucracies across Africa and entrenched market logics into policymaking processes that intensified disparities between the poor and prosperous.

Nkrumah, Sankara, Kaunda, and Nyerere understood intuitively that Africa must develop on its own terms and with its own resources.

## Beyond aid

Although current African leaders generally lack the chutzpah of Sankara and the moral acuity of Nkrumah, some appear to have embraced their spirit of defiance. This was evident during February's African Union (AU) Summit in which heads of state strategized about alternatives to aid. Reparations for colonialism and transatlantic slavery featured prominently in deliberations. So too did debt restructuring and boosting intra-Africa trade, which accounts for just **18 per cent of overall trade on the continent**.

Having recognised Africa's unequal incorporation into global capitalism under unfavourable terms, leaders across the continent are challenging the structural inequities that create conditions for aid in the first place. Importantly missing from the discussions, however, are strategies for curbing corruption and adding value to basic commodities.

The African Development Bank has advocated for **an autonomous African credit rating agency** to counter biases upheld by 'Big Three' global agencies Standard & Poor's, Moody's and Fitch.

Nigeria has pushed for **changes to international tax treaties** that restrict the rights of 'Southern countries', with Africa in particular losing nearly £70 billion annually from illicit financial flows.

Calls for swift reforms within the **World Trade Organisation** and **UN** have reached fever pitch, with countries like Ethiopia and Egypt ditching Western dictates in favour of BRICS **membership**.

Many countries across Africa, and the wider 'Global South', are embracing a 'beyond aid' agenda which promotes significantly reducing dependence on aid over time while diversifying sources of revenue and financing. 'Beyond Aid' acknowledges that aid is not a viable development strategy, and the focus should instead be on inclusive economic growth that enables sovereignty.

Rather than espousing the abolition of aid, proponents of 'Beyond Aid' take a more measured approach to reform which could unlock Africa's capacity and autonomy to develop.

In Liberia, where foreign aid **accounts** for about 20 per cent of gross domestic product, changing dynamics within its imaginary 'special relationship' with the United States are turbocharging long-overdue reforms. Policymakers are now compelled to do what they should have been doing all along: slash the national budget to remove waste, improve revenue collection through taxation,

review and renegotiate concession agreements, invest in agriculture and food security, build infrastructure and explore renewable energy.

In response to the announcement of the US aid freeze, Liberia's Minister of Finance and Development Planning **responded emphatically**: "Liberia is a resilient country. We have survived the devastating 14-year civil war, the Ebola epidemic, and the COVID-19 pandemic...With strategic adjustments and collective effort, we will navigate these challenges and continue on our path to growth and stability."

Africa must and will survive beyond aid.

*Photo credit: UNAMID used with permission **CC BY-NC-ND 2.0***

### About the author

#### Robtel Neajai Pailey

Robtel Neajai Pailey is Assistant Professor in International Social and Public Policy at the LSE Department of Social Policy. She is also author of the award-winning monograph "Development, (Dual) Citizenship and Its Discontents in Africa: The Political Economy of Belonging to Liberia" (Cambridge University Press, 2021).

**Posted In:** Development | International Affairs | Politics



© LSE 2025

Bad Behavior has blocked 15987 access attempts in the last 7 days.