GLOBAL CHALLENGES
Clube de Lisboa

BRIEF 3/2026
September

DESAFIOS GLOBAIS
PARA O DESENVOLVIMENTO

THE POLITICS OF MUTUAL BENEFIT: POWER AND THE STRUGGLE TO DEFINE DEVELOPMENT COOPERATION

MARTHA GETACHEW BEKELE

Contemporary development cooperation is increasingly justified through the language of 'mutual benefit.' This paper argues that the significance of this shift lies not simply in changing aid practices but in a wider political struggle over how development cooperation is justified and contested. The growing emphasis on strategic partnerships, shared prosperity, catalytic finance and investment leverage is better understood as revelation than rupture, reflecting the more explicit articulation of political and economic interests that have long shaped development cooperation.

The paper does not dispute that development cooperation can generate mutual benefit. Rather, it argues that whether particular forms of development cooperation can legitimately be described as mutually beneficial is an empirical and political question whose answer depends on the terms on which cooperation is negotiated and how benefits are defined and distributed. At the same time, African governments and institutions strategically deploy this language because it offers a politically useful vocabulary for rejecting paternalism, asserting equality and negotiating cooperation under conditions of shrinking aid and fiscal constraint.

Drawing on political economy, critical development theory and African political economy scholarship, the paper examines how contemporary development cooperation discourse increasingly displaces structural questions of power, extraction and developmental sovereignty with technical debates over financing instruments and financial volumes. It argues that the central analytical question is not whether aid is outdated and should give way to investment, but whether particular forms of development cooperation expand developmental sovereignty or reproduce structural dependence. The paper further argues that these competing understandings of development cooperation are negotiated through the politics of strategic agency, hegemonic consent and political refusal.

The paper concludes by proposing a political economy framework for evaluating competing claims of mutual benefit. Rather than asking whether development cooperation generates reciprocal gains, it evaluates cooperation according to whether it expands developmental sovereignty and enables greater domestic value retention.

CONTENTS:

INTRODUCTION

Contemporary development cooperation is increasingly framed as undergoing significant change. The unprecedented decline in official development assistance (ODA), the growing emphasis on catalytic finance, private capital mobilisation, de-risking and investment leverage and the prominence of "mutual benefit" partnerships as the organising language of cooperation are frequently presented as signalling a reconfiguration in the organisation and practice of development cooperation. Yet this paper argues that what appears to be transformation may be better understood as revelation. The issue may not be that development cooperation is entering a fundamentally new phase, but that political and economic logics previously presented through the language of solidarity are increasingly being articulated more openly. Aid was never detached from geopolitical interests, commercial returns, security concerns or the wider management of global order. As Kwame Nkrumah argued six decades ago, foreign assistance often functioned less as solidarity than as a "revolving credit" through which value returned through relations of dependence, profit and political influence (Nkrumah, 1965). The central analytical question in this case is whether contemporary shifts redistribute power by expanding policy space and state capacity for developmental sovereignty while enabling greater domestic retention of value or merely reorganise longstanding structures of external accumulation through a more acceptable language.

The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) reported that ODA by Development Assistance Committee (DAC) members and associates declined by 23.1 per cent between 2024 and 2025, the largest annual contraction on record and the second consecutive year of decline. The explanations offered include fiscal pressure, domestic political priorities, security concerns and competing geopolitical demands (OECD, 2026a). Rather than focusing solely on declining aid volumes, however, a more fundamental question is what kind of development cooperation is being normalised in its place.

At the centre of this discursive shift is the language of mutual benefit. Across the OECD Future of Development Co-operation conference in Paris and the Africa Forward Summit 2026 in Nairobi, both held on 11 and 12 May 2026, similar formulations dominated political discourse: partnerships of equals, investment rather than aid, catalytic finance, de-risking and strategic cooperation.

The language of mutual benefit is not itself new. Long before current geopolitical debates, the UN High-Level Panel on the Post-2015 Development Agenda argued that a renewed global partnership should be based on ''mutual respect and mutual benefit'' alongside solidarity and mutual accountability (United Nations, 2013). Within that framing, mutual benefit was understood as cooperation around shared global challenges, collective prosperity and reciprocal responsibilities rather than narrowly defined national advantage.

Neither are the political and ideological interests new. A substantial literature has demonstrated that bilateral development assistance has long reflected a combination of donor interests with political, commercial, security and strategic considerations shaping aid allocation alongside developmental objectives (Maizels and Nissanke, 1984; Berthélemy, 2006). Against this background, the contribution of this paper is not to establish that development cooperation has long been shaped by political and economic interests. Rather, it explains how such interests are increasingly legitimised through the language of mutual benefit and why competing claims of mutual benefit require political economy scrutiny that extends beyond reciprocal gains. Contemporary developments are often presented as pragmatic responses to fiscal constraints and geopolitical fragmentation, but they also echo this longer history. Truman's 1949 inaugural address framed development as the sharing of technical knowledge and capital investment for peace and prosperity, while explicitly claiming that 'the old imperialism – exploitation for foreign profit – has no place in our plans' (Truman, 1949). Ziai (2025), however, argues that this discourse emerged in response to concerns that socialist and anti-colonial revolutions could threaten Western access to raw materials, markets and investment opportunities. More recently, the ideological content of development cooperation has become more explicit. Explaining the United States' recent decision not to contribute to the seventeenth replenishment of the African Development Fund, the U.S. Treasury argued that the Fund had adopted 'a disproportionate focus on climate change, gender, and social issues' rather than economic growth, private sector development and poverty reduction (Miriri, 2026). These episodes suggest a greater willingness to articu-

Contemporary developments are often presented as pragmatic responses to fiscal constraints and geopolitical fragmentation, but they also echo this longer history.

late the political and ideological priorities underpinning development cooperation.

Neither is mutual benefit in itself inherently problematic. Reducing poverty, managing pandemics and addressing climate threats can generate broader shared gains through reduced migration pressures and systemic risk. What is contested is not reciprocity itself, but the asymmetry through which it is organised. While mutual benefit carries political appeal because it offers a more attractive language for discussing cooperation by distancing itself from ideas of charity and dependence that have long accompanied aid relationships, a shift in vocabulary alone does not necessarily alter underlying power relations. As the stronger partner continues to shape the terms of engagement, mutual benefit risks becoming a more acceptable language through which unequal arrangements continue.

As the stronger partner continues to shape the terms of engagement, mutual benefit risks becoming a more acceptable language through which unequal arrangements continue.

This paper distinguishes between *legitimate reciprocity*, where all parties derive benefits within relationships characterised by transparency and meaningful agency, and *asymmetrical partnerships*, where the language of mutual benefit obscures unequal bargaining power and allows one partner's strategic interests to shape development priorities disproportionately. When trade rules, debt servicing, illicit financial flows, investment protections and technological concentration remain structurally unequal and allow for external accumulation at the expense of domestic retention of value, the gains from mutual benefit are unlikely to be evenly distributed. Under such conditions, the language of partnership can conceal the reproduction of dependency.

The convergence of language across Paris and Nairobi should not be interpreted as evidence that African governments have simply internalised donor priorities. Strategic partnership, mutual benefit, investment leverage and catalytic finance also provide politically useful vocabularies through which African governments reject paternalistic aid relationships, attract investment, diversify partnerships and assert greater sovereignty within a changing geopolitical landscape. The Gramscian question therefore is how existing agency is exercised within a discursive framework whose dominant assumptions increasingly organise development itself.

The central question addressed in this paper is why the language of mutual benefit has acquired a different political meaning despite predating the current reconfiguration of development cooperation. Contemporary development cooperation reflects an important shift in the meaning attached to mutual benefit. Increasingly, the language has become associated with explicit national interest, economic security, migration management, strategic competition and commercial priorities.

After briefly outlining the theoretical framing, the paper proceeds in five parts:

- Section 1 begins by questioning what is actually changing in contemporary development cooperation, tracing the shift from aid decline towards the political language of mutual benefit and strategic partnership.

- Section 2 then moves beneath this apparent shift to examine the persistence of structural hierarchy, showing how structural hierarchies persist beneath new vocabularies of partnership and reciprocity.

- Section 3 draws on James Ferguson to explain how these unequal relations are translated into technical questions of management and administration rather than political questions of power and redistribution.

- Section 4 turns to Antonio Gramsci to analyse how such assumptions acquire legitimacy and become reproduced as *common sense* through the politics of consent.

- Section 5 turns to counter-hegemonic alternatives, drawing on Thandika Mkandawire, Samir Amin and Kwame Nkrumah to examine the politics of refusal and alternative understandings of developmental sovereignty.

The paper concludes by returning to its central argument, that contemporary changes in development cooperation may be better understood as revelation than rupture. While rupture is understood through Amin's (1987) concept of refusing to subordinate national development strategy to the imperatives of global accumulation, revelation is introduced here as an analytical concept referring to the increasingly explicit articulation of the political and economic interests that have long structured development cooperation. However, the paper does not imply that nothing has changed institutionally or financially. Rather, it distinguishes changes in instruments and institutional arrangements from a more fundamental rupture in the political economy of development cooperation.

Contemporary development cooperation therefore represents less a rupture than an adaptation of existing structures to new political conditions. The paper develops a political economy framework for evaluating contemporary claims of mutual benefit. Rather than assuming that mutual benefit is inherent to development cooperation, it argues that such claims should be assessed according to two political economy criteria developed from African political economy scholarship: developmental sovereignty and domestic value retention.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This paper is concerned specifically with development cooperation, understood as the political, institutional and financial relationships through which sovereign states and intergovernmental institutions organise international cooperation for development. While this intersects with development studies, which examines the theories and contested meanings of development (Lewis, 2019), and with what is often described as the development industry, referring to the wider institutional architecture of development practice comprising bilateral and multilateral agencies, NGOs, civil society organisations and other implementing actors (Powell and Seddon, 1997), these are not synonymous. Although they overlap in practice, the principal concern of this paper is the political economy of development cooperation.

This paper approaches development cooperation as a political economy question rather than a technical debate about aid effectiveness.

Accordingly, this paper approaches development cooperation as a political economy question rather than a technical debate about aid effectiveness. It is concerned less with whether aid works or whether it is desirable than with how development cooperation structures power, particularly how unequal arrangements are justified as mutually beneficial.

To examine this, the paper draws on four complementary theoretical lenses: Dependency Theory, James Ferguson's concept of the anti-politics machine, Antonio Gramsci's theory of hegemony and the work of Thandika Mkandawire, Samir Amin, Kwame Nkrumah and Sabelo J. Ndlovu-Gatsheni on developmental sovereignty, refusal and delinking. These frameworks allow the analysis to move from the structural foundations of dependency, through the depoliticisation of inequality and the production of consent, to the question of refusal and developmental alternatives.

These approaches are used together because no single framework is sufficient on its own. Dependency Theory provides a critical analytical lens for examining how unequal incorporation into the global economy shapes development possibilities depending on the institutional and political conditions under which they operate. While Dependency Theory explains the structural persistence of unequal relations, it does not fully explain how such relations become normalised. Ferguson's concept of the anti-politics machine helps explain how distributive conflicts become translated into technical issues of management but says less about why those technical framings become widely accepted, including by those disadvantaged by them. Gramsci addresses that problem through the politics of consent and the production of hegemony, illustrating how unequal arrangements acquire the status of common sense through intellectual and institutional processes. Gramsci also opens space for counter-hegemonic alternatives through the role of organic intellectuals and in the contestation of civil society as a structure of ''trenches'' (culture, media, education, and religion) that guard the bigger power structure centred on the state and capital. Finally, through the work of African scholars such as Mkandawire, Amin, Nkrumah and Ndlovu-Gatsheni, this paper draws on counter-hegemonic traditions that reject assumptions of African incapacity and challenge the problematisation underpinning contemporary development discourse. Rather than treating development as a question of attracting external resources, these perspectives shift attention towards developmental sovereignty and retaining value within African economies.

Such claims say little about whether cooperation expands developmental sovereignty or where the economic value generated through cooperation ultimately accumulates.

Building on these theoretical traditions, this paper proposes a political economy framework for evaluating contemporary development cooperation. Claims of mutual benefit are commonly justified by pointing to reciprocal gains for participating states. From a political economy perspective, however, the existence of gains on both sides is not sufficient to establish that an arrangement is developmentally transformative. Such claims say little about whether cooperation expands developmental sovereignty or where the economic value generated through cooperation ultimately accumulates. The framework therefore evaluates development cooperation against two related criteria.

The first criterion is *developmental sovereignty*. In this paper, developmental sovereignty refers to the capacity of states and regional institutions to define and pursue their own development priorities. It extends beyond formal sovereignty to encompass the institutional arrangements through which development choices are exercised in practice. Development cooperation contributes to developmental sovereignty where it expands policy space, strengthens state capability, works through rather than around national institutions and systems, aligns with nationally defined priorities, enables meaningful African participation in shaping the international rules governing development and reinforces African regional initiatives rather than bypassing them.

The second criterion is *domestic value retention*. Development cooperation should also be evaluated according to whether it reorganises the political economy of development in ways that reduce the structural leakages through which value leaves African economies. This includes haemorrhages such as profit repatriation, debt-service outflows, illicit financial flows, tax avoidance and import dependence. A political economy evaluation of development cooperation requires assessing the extent to which it enables a greater proportion of value generated within African economies to be retained and reinvested productively in support of long-term structural transformation.

These criteria shift the evaluation of development cooperation away from declarations of partnership or reciprocity towards the organisation of power and accumulation. The first asks who defines development priorities and through what institutional capability. The second asks whether cooperation reorganises accumulation in ways that retain value within African economies or continues to reproduce structural leakages for external capital accumulation.

1. FROM AID TO MUTUAL BENEFIT

What is taking place is the reorganisation of development cooperation around a more explicitly stated political logic beyond the contraction of development finance.

The shift in language from aid to mutual benefit is analytically significant because it makes the organising logic of development cooperation more explicit. From the political economy perspective developed here, this matters insofar as it reshapes the conditions under which African states exercise developmental sovereignty in pursuing their own development priorities.

Contemporary development cooperation is increasingly narrated through the language of decline. Falling aid volumes, changing financing instruments, tightening fiscal space in donor countries and the growing politicisation of ODA are frequently presented as evidence of a retreat from international solidarity. While these trends are significant, treating the current moment primarily as a crisis of declining aid risks obscuring a deeper reconfiguration. What is taking place is the reorganisation of development cooperation around a more explicitly stated political logic beyond the contraction of development finance.

This reorganisation is also evident in the restructuring of development cooperation institutions across several traditional donor countries. Australia, Canada, New Zealand and the United Kingdom have, in different ways, long integrated development agencies more closely with foreign affairs structures, while the recent dismantling of USAID represents a more far-reaching development.[1] Collectively, these changes point to a longer movement away from development cooperation as a relatively distinct policy field towards its closer alignment with geopolitical and commercial priorities (Mawdsley et al., 2018). These shifts matter because they create political space for reconsidering the purposes and justification of development cooperation itself. The OECD reported that ODA from DAC members and associates amounted to USD 174.3 billion in 2025, representing a 23.1 per cent decline from the previous year, the largest annual contraction on record and the second consecutive year of decline (OECD, 2026a). This has understandably intensified concern over shrinking fiscal commitments and the future of concessional finance, particularly for many sub-Saharan African countries where concessional finance continues to constitute a major share of international financial flows supporting social sectors such as health and education. In contexts

[1] A recent retrospective impact evaluation and forecasting analysis estimates that USAID-funded programmes prevented more than 91 million deaths between 2001 and 2021, around one-third among children. It further projects that the abrupt funding cuts announced in 2025, combined with the potential dismantling of the agency, could result in more than 14 million additional deaths by 2030, including 4.5 million among children younger than five years (Cavalcanti et al., 2025).

where foreign direct investment remains low and volatile, and high borrowing costs restrict access to alternative finance, sudden reductions in ODA are difficult to replace (OECD, 2025).

The legitimacy of cooperation is increasingly tied to visible national returns for donor countries. Across contemporary policy frameworks, development cooperation is increasingly framed less as redistribution and more as strategic partnership. Mutual benefit, catalytic finance, private capital mobilisation, de-risking and investment leverage have become central organising concepts. Rather than being justified through historical asymmetries in the global political economy and the enduring structural inequalities produced through unequal incorporation into global markets, development cooperation is increasingly defended through the language of reciprocal gain, including supply-chain security, migration management, geopolitical stability, access to critical minerals, Africa's role in the global energy transition and market expansion.

In practice, when development priorities are filtered through business-case logics and risk-return calculations, those most in need risk becoming structurally marginalised.

The European Union's Global Gateway strategy illustrates this transition clearly (European Commission, 2021). Framed as a €300 billion infrastructure initiative for digital, energy and transport connectivity, it presents investment as delivering mutual benefit while explicitly strengthening European competitiveness, supply-chain security and geopolitical positioning. Public resources are mobilised to leverage private capital while development cooperation becomes intricately linked to strategic economic interests. Partnership is articulated through the language of shared prosperity, but it is also embedded within broader questions of competitiveness and geopolitical influence.

The same tension is visible in debates around blended finance. Private capital is now routinely positioned as indispensable to development, particularly in infrastructure and climate finance. ODA is increasingly justified by its capacity to crowd in larger financial flows rather than by its direct redistributive role. Yet poverty reduction, post-conflict reconstruction and climate adaptation in fragile settings are rarely commercially viable in the short term. In practice, when development priorities are filtered through business-case logics and risk-return calculations, those most in need risk becoming structurally marginalised. Only countries that matter for migration control, mineral access or geopolitical competition would be prioritised over those where developmental need is greatest. The World Bank itself notes that fragile and conflict-affected contexts constitute nearly two-thirds of low-income countries, precisely where market-based logic performs least effectively (World Bank Group, 2026).[2] Under such conditions, development priorities risk becoming organised around strategic relevance rather than developmental need.

[2] See World Bank Group (2026), which notes that fragile and conflict-affected situations account for nearly two-thirds of low-income countries, where violent conflict, weak institutions and deep social fragilities significantly constrain development progress.

The move from aid to investment should not be understood as technical evolution alone. It reflects a struggle over the meaning of development itself. These arrangements are politically significant because they either expand developmental sovereignty by strengthening policy space and state capacity while enabling greater domestic retention of value or organise development around the requirements of external accumulation.

2. STRUCTURAL CONTINUITY

Whether contemporary development cooperation represents genuine transformation ultimately depends on whether it reorganises power and accumulation. Dependency Theory provides the analytical lens for examining whether contemporary arrangements expand developmental sovereignty while enabling greater domestic value retention or continue to reproduce external capital accumulation.

Section 1 identified what appears to be changing in development cooperation, but the more difficult question is what remains unchanged beneath that shift. The contemporary language of mutual benefit presents development cooperation as a departure from older donor-recipient hierarchies. Partnership, strategic alignment and investment-led cooperation are offered as evidence that development is moving beyond paternalism toward reciprocity. The significance of these changes lies in whether they alter the underlying structure of global economic relations or merely modernise the vocabulary through which *uneven development* is sustained. Dependency Theory remains essential because it shifts analysis away from the moral language of aid towards the political economy of power.

The significance of these changes lies in whether they alter the underlying structure of global economic relations or merely modernise the vocabulary through which *uneven development* is sustained.

Dependency Theory begins from the recognition that development and underdevelopment are not separate processes, but interconnected outcomes of a single global system. Following Theotonio Dos Santos' perspective of dependency, as discussed in Namkoong (1999), dependency is understood as "a situation in which the economy of certain countries is conditioned by the development and expansion of another economy to which the former is subjected. The relation of inter-dependency between two or more economies, and between these and world trade, assumes the form of dependency when some countries (the dominant ones) can expand and be self-sustaining, while other countries (the dependent ones) can do this only as a reflection of that expansion, which can have either a positive or negative effect on their immediate development" (Dos Santos, as cited in Namkoong, 1999, p. 124). This formulation shifts the analysis of development cooperation away from questions of benevolence and towards questions of structure and power. Development assistance does not operate outside the global economy, but within relations already shaped by asymmetrical production and unequal exchange. Wealth accumulation has historically been associated with colonial extraction and unequal exchange, supported by institutional arrangements that constrain developmental sovereignty across much of the Global South. However, capitalist development has proceeded unevenly, producing divergent developmental trajectories across countries, including the accumulation of surpluses by several newly industrialising economies. This broader understanding of uneven development qualifies deterministic interpretations of dependency while retaining its value as an analytical framework for examining concrete historical situations (Ghosh, 2019). Aid, debt, trade, foreign investment and policy conditionalities are examined here as interconnected mechanisms through which asymmetrical relations of power are reproduced and domestic value is externally appropriated rather than retained.

Applying this analytical lens to contemporary development cooperation directs attention to the political economy of aid itself, including the distribution of economic gains. Empirical evidence illustrates how development cooperation can generate measurable returns for donor economies. Mendez (2025) finds that U.S. foreign aid generated an average return of approximately US$8 in exports for every additional US$1 spent on aid across thirty-nine recipient countries. Similar patterns have been identified elsewhere. Martínez-Zarzoso (2019) finds that development aid exerts a robust positive effect on donor exports more generally, while a recent Dutch study estimates that each additional euro of development assistance is associated with approximately €2 in additional Dutch exports when goods and services are considered together (Martínez-Zarzoso, 2019; Martínez-Zarzoso and Lessing, 2025). This does not reduce all aid to export promotion, nor does it suggest that development cooperation is simply a commercial instrument. It does, however, challenge the persistent fiction of aid as politically neutral benevolence. It confirms what dependency scholars have long argued: development cooperation often functions within a wider architecture of accumulation, influence and strategic advantage rather than outside it. In this sense, Kwame Nkrumah's characterisation of aid as a revolving credit system remains strikingly relevant. The analytical question one must ask is if those benefits to donors are accompanied by greater domestic value retention within recipient economies or continue to reinforce external accumulation.

In the African context, contemporary debates on mutual benefit unfold against a longer history of externally imposed adjustment. Structural adjustment programmes (SAPs) of the 1980s and 1990s represented one of the clearest historical expressions of externally (mis) prescribed development. Liberalisation and cuts to spending on social sectors were presented as necessary reforms intended to improve efficiency but ended up eroding the developmental sovereignty of countries. For the continent, deindustrialisation was the consequence of policy regimes that subordinated structural transformation to market orthodoxy.

This critique was articulated by Adebayo Adedeji (1999), former Executive Secretary of the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa, who argued that structural adjustment programmes were built on a shallow understanding of African political economy and imposed a uniform model of liberalisation regardless of historical and institutional context. Their core logic was the deliberate shrinking of the developmental state through the withdrawal of public intervention from productive sectors in favour of privatisation. Markets were treated as inherently efficient, while the state was constructed primarily as a source of distortion and failure. This privileged private capital and market-led solutions as universal remedies, while paying little attention to market failures, unequal starting conditions or the historical role of state coordination in successful industrial transformation elsewhere. As Adedeji (1999) argued, SAPs assumed that reforms designed by the World Bank and the IMF could serve as a universal route to growth while disregarding the political, social and developmental realities of African states. Rather than enabling transformation, adjustment frequently weakened productive capacity, deepened vulnerability and narrowed policy space. Even the World Bank later acknowledged the limitations of this period, recognising that adjustment programmes often failed to account for social consequences and that many African countries experienced weak or negative developmental outcomes (Parfitt, 1990; Todaro and Smith, 2014). This history matters because the same institutional order that weakened developmental capacity now diagnoses weak state capacity as proof that external discipline, particularly through foreign private capital, remains necessary.

The state is expected less to plan transformation than to create an enabling environment for external investment. State weakness in this context becomes both the outcome of previous intervention and the justification for renewed intervention.

Contemporary development cooperation repeats this logic in a new form. African states are positioned as insufficiently capable of directing development and in need of frameworks that attract foreign private capital and manage investor risk, which ultimately shape policy priorities. In such a set-up of what Mkandawire (2001) calls the 'impossibility arguments', the state is expected less to plan transformation than to create an enabling environment for external investment. State weakness in this context becomes both the outcome of previous intervention and the justification for renewed intervention.

By increasingly organising development cooperation around de-risking and catalytic finance, ODA is justified less through redistribution and more through its ability to crowd in private capital. Catalytic finance, blended finance or private finance cannot be evaluated independently of the developmental purpose they serve. In sectors capable of generating commercial returns, private capital may be appropriate. Its expansion becomes more problematic when commercially oriented financing increasingly shapes areas whose principal returns are social, institutional or developmental rather than financial.

The contradiction, therefore, is that Africa continues to be framed as aid-dependent while far greater volumes of wealth leave the continent through illicit financial flows, profit repatriation, debt servicing, tax avoidance and unequal trade structures. If the challenge of sustainable development in lower-income countries is treated as a problem of scarcity rather than organised extraction, then the organising logic of development cooperation ceases to be about redistribution from retained values or historical correction and instead becomes a way of managing its consequences without changing the structures that reproduce them.

Africa continues to be framed as aid-dependent while far greater volumes of wealth leave the continent through illicit financial flows, profit repatriation, debt servicing, tax avoidance and unequal trade structures.

The contradiction is especially visible in climate finance. African countries, despite contributing least to historical and current emissions (IPCC, 2022), are increasingly encouraged to pursue climate action, including adaptation, through debt-generating instruments (Bekele and Miller, 2024; Bourguignon, 2025). Historical climate responsibility is displaced by the question of how to make adaptation bankable and how to construct a business case for climate adaptation projects. Viewed through the political economy framework proposed here, the architecture of climate finance should enable African economies to retain greater value while expanding their capacity to determine adaptation priorities. Currently, however, instead of asking who owes whom, the dominant concern becomes how to crowd in private investors. By ignoring the question of justice and prioritising investability, those least responsible for the climate crisis are required to finance their own survival through debt, de-risking arrangements and private capital mobilisation. Yet the crucial question is what qualifies as investible within contemporary development finance. This question is particularly pertinent in sub-Saharan Africa, which offers the highest rates of return on foreign investment compared to other regions yet continues to attract a disproportionately small share of global FDI. Moreover, the developmental impact of FDI has often been limited, suggesting that investment is not necessarily directed towards activities that strengthen domestic productive capacity or drive structural transformation (Adegboye and Okorie, 2023).

When structural inequalities in trade, debt, climate responsibility, asymmetrical financial power and net capital outflows from the continent remain unaddressed, the language of 'equals' can obscure rather than transform unequal relations. At the same time, African governments strategically deploy this language to reject paternalistic aid relationships, attract investment and assert a more reciprocal basis for international cooperation. Precisely because these vocabularies are politically effective, however, they also reinforce the boundaries of what counts as legitimate development thinking.

A political economy analysis of mutual benefit must begin by confronting the global architecture that permits continuous financial haemorrhage. Mutual benefit cannot simply be measured by the strategic gains secured by donors or the financial returns generated for private investors through blended finance and other de-risking arrangements. It must also require that value created within African economies is retained and that development cooperation expands rather than constrains developmental sovereignty.

Mutual benefit cannot simply be measured by the strategic gains secured by donors or the financial returns generated for private investors through blended finance and other de-risking arrangements. It must also require that value created within African economies is retained.

In this sense, contemporary shifts from solidarity to investment leverage do not necessarily represent the end of dependency but may instead reflect what Hickel (2020) describes as the system's continuing search for a fix for capitalism, adapting to its contradictions while leaving underlying structures largely intact. Beyond changes in language, the critical question is whether underlying relations of power also change.

Answering such questions also requires understanding how unequal arrangements become legible, because dependency survives through the ways structural inequality becomes technical and depoliticised.

3. THE ANTI-POLITICS OF DEVELOPMENT COOPERATION

James Ferguson's *The Anti-Politics Machine* helps explain how development discourse transforms political and historical problems into technical problems requiring expert management. From the political economy perspective developed in this paper, this process is significant because it reframes questions central to developmental sovereignty as technical questions of finance and institutional efficiency. Through his study of Lesotho, Ferguson (1990) shows how the World Bank, CIDA, FAO, USAID and other development institutions represented the country as poor and agriculturally stagnant, while obscuring its incorporation into the South African regional economy as a labour reserve for apartheid capitalism. Rather than analysing labour migration and structural subordination, development institutions treated Lesotho primarily as an isolated subsistence economy suffering from agricultural backwardness. Because the problematisation focused on poor agricultural practices rather than political economy, the solution centred on agricultural modernisation rather than structural transformation. This misdiagnosis was not accidental; it allowed intervention to proceed through bureaucratic programmes rather than through political confrontation with the structures producing dependency.

The contemporary discussion of development cooperation mirrors precisely the diagnostic move Ferguson identified in Lesotho. Instead of asking how Africa's subordinate position within the global economy is historically produced through debt dependence, unequal exchange, extractive investment regimes and global governance hierarchy, contemporary development discourse increasingly begins with questions of creditworthiness, sovereign risk and investability amid declining ODA. In this case, underdevelopment is interpreted less as a conse-

Structural questions of redistribution, extractivism and historical responsibility are displaced by managerial concerns around impact, efficiency, de-risking and catalytic finance.

quence of structural integration into an unequal system than as a problem of weak investor confidence, poor bankability, inadequate enabling environments, unfair creditworthiness assessments or insufficient private capital mobilisation. This misdiagnosis shifts attention toward improving Africa's attractiveness to capital rather than transforming the structures that make external capital so central in the first place. As in Ferguson's Lesotho, the way the problem is defined determines the solution. The contemporary development cooperation landscape reproduces this logic with remarkable consistency. Structural questions of redistribution, extractivism and historical responsibility are displaced by managerial concerns around impact, efficiency, de-risking and catalytic finance. Instead of asking how unequal trade regimes, debt servicing and capital flight reproduce poverty, the dominant question becomes how development finance can be made more effective within those conditions. From a political economy perspective, such problematisation expands or undermines developmental sovereignty depending on how it structures development cooperation.

This logic is now explicitly institutionalised in contemporary development cooperation discourse and frameworks. The OECD DAC Review process increasingly frames ODA in relation to its strategic and catalytic role within the wider development finance ecosystem. It emphasises how ODA can 'add value and catalyse other international and domestic development finance' and seeks to position aid within the 'totality of net development finance' in partner countries, with greater attention to strategic allocation and mobilisation of wider financing resources (OECD, 2026b). This framing increasingly shifts attention from aid as a redistributive or reparative[3] mechanism toward aid as a tool embedded within wider financing architectures. The Draft Compact on International Development Cooperation makes this shift even more explicit, stating that ODA should be used strategically to "unlock greater sums of finance" and describing a deliberate move from ODA as aid to ODA as "investment leverage for long-term development," alongside improving investability, reducing fiscal risks and crowding in private investment (OECD, 2026c). What is striking is the way redistribution is redefined through the language of leverage. In this sense, development cooperation is increasingly justified by its ability to make African economies legible and attractive to capital rather than by its contribution to developmental sovereignty or to retaining value for productive transformation.

Across policy documents and contemporary dialogues, this is not only a political shift but also an epistemic one. Terms such as results-based financing, cost-effectiveness, smart buys, catalytic fi-

[3] Development cooperation may increasingly assume reparative functions alongside redistributive ones as historical redress. Illustrative examples include Germany's financial package following its recognition of the genocide in Namibia, the International Court of Justice's 2025 Advisory Opinion on States' obligations in respect of climate change and the 2026 United Nations General Assembly resolution on reparatory justice for the trafficking and enslavement of Africans and people of African descent.

nance and de-risking are presented as rational improvements in development practice.[4] These categories often assume that poverty can be managed without confronting the structures that produce it. These assumptions are sustained through a consolidated expert community of development economists, OECD specialists, multilateral finance institutions and policy advisers who share common assumptions about what counts as pragmatic development cooperation.

This same logic is also visible in the growing narrative of Africa as a climate solutions leader (African Union, 2025). Framed through renewable energy potential, critical minerals, carbon sinks and green industrialisation, the continent is increasingly presented not primarily as a site of climate vulnerability, but as a provider of solutions to the global climate crisis. On the surface, this appears empowering. Yet as argued elsewhere (Bekele, 2026), this framing can shift attention away from climate debt and historical responsibility toward questions of bankability within the green transition. Communities facing displacement, extreme weather and livelihood disruption become inserted into financing structures that increasingly ask whether resilience itself can generate acceptable returns. Responsibility therefore shifts from questions of obligation and justice towards questions of financing and investability. This is beyond a shift in language; it also shifts responsibility itself because those least responsible for the crisis are expected to borrow or attract private capital while continuously exploring new financial instruments to survive a crisis they did not create.

Commercial finance may be appropriate where productive investments generate sustainable economic returns, while adaptation, public health and other sectors characterised by predominantly social returns continue to require grant-based and highly concessional finance.

This does not imply that private investment or blended finance are inherently inappropriate. Their developmental contribution depends on the purposes they serve and the institutional frameworks within which they operate. Commercial finance may be appropriate where productive investments generate sustainable economic returns, while adaptation, public health and other sectors characterised by predominantly social returns continue to require grant-based and highly concessional finance.

This helps explain the tension between the changing language of development cooperation and the enduring structures of power it seeks to manage. It offers solutions within the existing order while refusing to interrogate whether that order itself is organised around extraction. Rather than confronting questions of redistribution and solidarity, development cooperation becomes increasingly concerned with rendering asymmetry governable.

[4] Author's notes based on participation at the OECD Future of Development Cooperation conference in Paris (11–12 May 2026) recorded the repeated use of terms such as "investment leverage," "de-risking," "impact," "efficiency," "smart-buys" and "catalytic finance," while questions of redistribution, reparative justice and historical responsibility were largely absent from the dominant framing. At the same time, some participants raised concerns around power asymmetries, justice and the limits of mutual benefit framed primarily through donor returns. These observations are intended to illustrate recurring themes rather than constitute systematic empirical evidence.

4. HEGEMONY AND CONSENT

While Ferguson helps explain how development questions become depoliticised and translated into technical interventions, Gramsci's concept of hegemony and consent extends the analysis by explaining how particular understandings of development come to acquire the status of *common sense*.[5]

In *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, Gramsci (1971) shifts attention from domination based primarily on coercion to domination sustained through consent. Power is maintained not simply through force or formal institutional authority, but through the production of common sense, whereby historically specific interests gradually come to appear natural and universally beneficial. The most effective form of power is therefore not imposed obedience (coercion), but the active acceptance of a social order as inevitable. Intellectuals and non-state actors occupy an important role within this process because they help stabilise the assumptions through which people interpret political and economic reality.[6]

This is particularly relevant to contemporary development cooperation because the most significant transformation is ideological rather than simply one of financial volumes or modalities. The framework developed in this paper recognises that developmental sovereignty depends not only on institutional capability but also on the ideas through which development itself is understood. Gramsci therefore helps explain how particular understandings of development cooperation acquire legitimacy while narrowing the range of alternatives that appear politically possible. Certain assumptions increasingly come to structure development discourse across different actors and institutions, particularly around partnership, competitiveness, investment and market-based solutions. Once embedded as what Gramsci terms common sense, alternatives start appearing unrealistic, naïve, irresponsible or outside what 'serious people' say.

Hegemony does not operate through donor discourse alone. It also depends on the active participation of domestic political and institutional actors in reproducing particular understandings of development. African governments, regional institutions and technocratic elites increasingly employ the language of partnership, mutual benefit, investment and catalytic finance, often for understandable strategic reasons, including attracting capital, asserting equality and mov-

Hegemony does not operate through donor discourse alone. It also depends on the active participation of domestic political and institutional actors in reproducing particular understandings of development.

[5] Gramsci uses *common sense* to mean the uncritical and largely unconscious way of perceiving and understanding the world that has become accepted as 'common' in a particular historical epoch. He distinguishes this from *good sense*, which refers to a practical, though not necessarily rational or scientific, way of understanding social reality.

[6] Gramsci argues that dominant groups exercise hegemony through the 'spontaneous' consent of broader society while retaining coercive mechanisms when consent weakens. He further suggests that intellectuals perform important organisational functions in sustaining this process (Gramsci, 1971).

ing beyond paternalistic aid relationships. As argued elsewhere (Bekele, 2026), similar dynamics are evident in climate governance, where African institutions increasingly frame the continent as a provider of global climate solutions through narratives emphasising investment opportunities and carbon market potential. These discourses represent important attempts to strengthen African agency and bargaining power. At the same time, they may narrow debate around the forms of development that appear legitimate, reinforcing investment-led pathways while leaving broader questions of developmental sovereignty, value retention and structural transformation comparatively underexamined.

What makes this process hegemonic is not simply that donors promote particular forms of language, but that similar vocabularies increasingly emerge across institutions and actors that might otherwise be expected to articulate different priorities. A comparison between discussions on the Future of Development Cooperation in Paris and the final declaration emerging from the Africa Forward Summit in Nairobi (Government of Kenya, 2026a) illustrates this convergence clearly. Despite emerging from different political settings and constituencies, both repeatedly rely on ideas of partnership, shared prosperity, investment mobilisation, mutual benefit, risk-sharing and catalytic approaches to development finance. This overlap in language is not necessarily accidental. Gramsci's concept of hegemony suggests that dominant ideas become powerful when they come to appear as self-evident truths and widely accepted ways of understanding reality. The convergence of language across Paris and Nairobi matters less because the words are identical and more because the boundaries of what is considered reasonable development discourse increasingly appear shared. The same hegemonic process in development cooperation is also observed by Bond (2023) in climate governance. He argues that global and African elite forums, including the BRICS Summit, the First Africa Climate Summit, the G20 and the United Nations, despite their different political constituencies, increasingly converge around market-oriented narratives centred on carbon markets, investment opportunities, private finance and green growth, while marginalising climate justice and historical responsibility.

Hegemony becomes effective when particular assumptions become materially and intellectually embedded enough to appear rational. Under conditions of debt chokeholds and aid volatility constraining fiscal space, access to capital becomes politically urgent whereby governments increasingly speak the language recognised by creditors and investors because those terms increasingly govern access to resources. In this case, consent is produced not only through ideology, but also through material conditions.

The tension here is the coexistence of strategic action and hegemonic consent. African governments are strategically pursuing investment, partnership and equality because those are politically rational objectives under conditions of debt, fiscal constraints and aid decline. Yet those same material conditions also make investment-centred development appear as the only realistic horizon. Consent therefore does not necessarily emerge from false consciousness but from the convergence of strategic calculation and hegemonic common sense.

This tension is visible in the contemporary shift from the language of charity to that of partnership. As President William Ruto of the Government of Kenya stated during the Africa Forward Summit in May 2026, "What Africa requires is not charity, but investments; not extraction, but value creation; not dependency, but mutually beneficial partnerships capable of unlocking shared prosperity."[7] On the surface, such language represents an important rejection of paternalism and dependency and a strategic assertion of African agency within a changing international order. Yet it also illustrates how contemporary development discourse can become dehistoricised and depoliticised. During the 7th AU-EU Summit in November 2025, President Ruto similarly argued that ''[b]ecause our destinies are intertwined, we come as equals. Yes, we remember the past. But we are not prisoners of it. We are architects and builders of the future''[8]. The issue is not the aspiration for equality itself, but the way enduring asymmetries of power and the historical conditions through which they were produced risk receding from view. Ndlovu-Gatsheni's (2014) observation that dominant assumptions are reproduced not only through external power but also within postcolonial institutions and elites helps explain this tension. This should not be read as evidence that African governments lack agency or simply reproduce external agendas. Rather, under conditions of debt distress, constrained fiscal space and declining aid, investment, partnership and mutual benefit become politically rational and often necessary vocabularies through which governments seek resources and negotiate international cooperation. Precisely because these vocabularies are politically effective, however, they also risk narrowing the boundaries of what appears possible and legitimate within contemporary development thinking.

If African governments strategically deploy dominant vocabularies because they are politically useful under existing material constraints, then the question that follows is how African political thought has sought to contest those boundaries and reopen alternative understandings of development.

[7] Government of Kenya (2026b), Opening Statement by President William Ruto during the Africa Forward Summit 2026.

[8] Government of Kenya (2025). Statement by His Excellency William Ruto during the 7th AU – EU summit in November 2025 in Luanda, Angola.

5. THE POLITICS OF REFUSAL

Following the Gramscian logic, dominant ideas may acquire legitimacy and become accepted as *common sense*, but they never remain uncontested. Counter-hegemonic alternatives emerge through what he describes as *organic intellectuals*, actors who do not merely interpret reality but organise and articulate alternative understandings of social and political life. The struggle extends beyond policy disagreements and becomes a contest over who defines development and what assumptions are presented as universal truths. Through the framework proposed here, refusal becomes significant because it seeks simultaneously to facilitate developmental sovereignty and reorganise accumulation around greater domestic value retention. Political refusal in this sense begins as an intellectual and political challenge to ideas that have become normalised through repetition or institutional power. Rather than accepting dominant framings as neutral or inevitable, counter-hegemonic struggles expose their apolitical and ahistorical foundations.

Political refusal in this sense begins as an intellectual and political challenge to ideas that have become normalised through repetition or institutional power.

As the range of legitimate development thinking narrows, political refusal consists of reclaiming the power to define development and development cooperation through an Afrocentric political economy. Refusal, in this paper, must be interpreted not as rejection of development cooperation or disengagement from the global economy. Rather, it refers to the political capacity to determine the terms on which cooperation occurs and to expand the space for nationally and regionally defined development strategies. In the words of Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2014, p. 185), 'It is therefore not surprising that one of the long-term consequences of these types of colonial interventions has been to make some Africans simply capitulate to the idea that what they can only do as part of making history is to adapt to a present and a future made for them by others.' Read through the framework developed in this paper, Ndlovu-Gatsheni's argument suggests that refusal is less about rejecting cooperation than about reclaiming the authority to define development itself and organise cooperation in ways that shape relations of power and accumulation.

Political refusal did not begin as abstract opposition to external intervention. It was also expressed through attempts to construct alternative development frameworks. In searching for an African alternative to orthodox structural adjustment, the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (1989) argued that Africa's development crisis could not be addressed through policies focused narrowly on fiscal balances, monetary restraint and market liberalisation. Rather, adjustment had to be conceived together with structural transformation, productive capacity, domestic resource mobilisation and the human dimension of development. The African Alternative Framework to Structural Adjustment Programmes (AAF-SAP) therefore rejected the separation of adjustment from transformation and proposed an

African-centred framework grounded in long-term developmental objectives with policy directions, instruments, implementation strategies and monitoring.

An important indicator of development cooperation is whether it supports African initiatives aimed at strengthening sovereignty. These include the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) for regional integration, the Pan-African Payment and Settlement System (PAPSS) for financial sovereignty, the African Credit Rating Agency (AfCRA) and wider reforms through the Alliance of African Multilateral Financial Institutions (AAMFI) for financial governance, the African Medicines Agency (AMA) for health sovereignty and the Single African Air Transport Market (SAATM) for logistical connectivity. These initiatives can also be understood as institutional expressions of political refusal, contesting the assumption that Africa's development must continue to be organised primarily through externally defined frameworks.

Where financial outflows exceed inflows, the central issue is not resource availability but the political and institutional arrangements governing their organisation, retention and distribution.

Another important form of political refusal involves rejecting the narratives that legitimise interventions which progressively constrain African developmental agency. As Mkandawire (2001) argues, dominant representations of Africa as inherently weak and incapable of developmental transformation do not merely describe reality but actively shape the forms of intervention proposed in response. Such assumptions generate a discursive framework that becomes self-reinforcing, structuring both policy interventions and institutional practice. Policies associated with 'rolling back the state' weakened planning institutions and developmental capacity, after which the resulting institutional weakness became evidence of the state's supposed incapacity. This circularity argument establishes that intervention itself contributed to producing the conditions it later claimed to remedy, with institutional weakness subsequently serving as justification for further intervention. The significance of this argument extends beyond developmental-state debates. Contemporary discussions of mutual benefit, investment leverage and the mobilisation of external capital increasingly frame African development as a problem of financial scarcity. Yet where financial outflows exceed inflows, the central issue is not resource availability but the political and institutional arrangements governing their organisation, retention and distribution.

Another form of political refusal involves *delinking* from development strategies organised primarily around deeper integration into global markets. Contemporary proposals increasingly situate ODA within a wider financing ecosystem in which aid mobilises private investment while simultaneously promoting local value addition, regional value chains, beneficiation and economic sovereignty. Through Amin's framework, the central question is whether these priorities are ultimately organised around domestic productive transformation or around the requirements of attracting and integrating external capital. Amin (1987, p. 435), an organic intellectual, defines *delinking* as the 'refusal to submit national-development strategy to the imperatives of 'globalization'', organising economic choices around nationally determined priorities rather than the requirements of global capitalist accumulation. Elements of this logic are evident in efforts to expand policy autonomy, including the decommodification of AIDS medicines and water in South Africa (Bond, 2009), Zimbabwe's land reform, Burkina Faso's decision to sever ties with France, Ethiopia's construction of the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam without support from international financial institutions or traditional donor financing, and several African Union initiatives, including PAPSS, which enables intra-African trade in local currencies and reduces reliance on third-party currencies. Amin's framework therefore shifts attention away from attracting investment towards the political economy of accumulation itself: whether development is organised around domestic transformation or continues to reproduce structural leakages through external accumulation.

Another expression of political refusal lies in rejecting the problematisation of Africa's development as one of resource scarcity. Nkrumah (1965) challenged assumptions that underdevelopment reflected a simple shortage of resources or productive capacity. Across his work, Nkrumah identified a recurring pattern in which immense wealth coexisted with persistent underdevelopment because economic structures organised the gains from that wealth around external rather than domestic priorities. Attention shifts towards the organisation of economic relations and the question of where value accumulates and in whose interests. The significance of Nkrumah's argument extends well beyond the period in which he was writing six decades ago. Contemporary discussions surrounding mutually beneficial partnerships, investment leverage and catalytic finance similarly place considerable emphasis on mobilising additional resources and expanding investment opportunities. Through Nkrumah's lens, however, attention shifts towards a different concern. The issue lies in the economic relationships through which the gains arising from foreign capital are organised and distributed. Where domestic productive transformation remains limited and the wider organisation of economic activity continues to prioritise external accumulation, questions inevitably emerge regarding whether underlying structures have fundamentally changed.

Political refusal therefore extends beyond opposing particular financing instruments or external partnerships. It is expressed through rejecting dominant narratives while constructing institutions and political strategies that expand African developmental choice. Regional integration, sovereign financial institutions, pharmaceutical production, industrial policy and domestic value addition are significant because they strengthen the capacity of African states and regional institutions to define development priorities on their own terms.

CONCLUSION

This paper has argued that contemporary development cooperation is better understood as revelation than rupture. This does not mean that its institutions, instruments and financing modalities remain unchanged. It means that these changes have not necessarily transformed the underlying organisation of power and accumulation. Dependency Theory showed how development cooperation remains embedded within unequal global structures; Ferguson explained how those structures are translated into technical questions of management; Gramsci demonstrated how particular development assumptions acquire the authority of common sense; and African political economy traditions demonstrated how alternative futures depend on recovering the capacity to define development and organise accumulation around domestic priorities.

Reciprocal gains alone do not establish that a cooperation arrangement is developmentally transformative.

The paper's central contribution is therefore an evaluative framework for examining competing claims of mutual benefit. Reciprocal gains alone do not establish that a cooperation arrangement is developmentally transformative. The relevant questions are whether it expands developmental sovereignty by strengthening policy space and state capability and whether it enables domestic value retention organised around productive transformation and broad-based social needs. These criteria can distinguish legitimate reciprocity from arrangements that distribute limited benefits while leaving structural hierarchy intact. The politics of mutual benefit is, ultimately, the politics of deciding who has the authority to define development and organise development cooperation in ways that shape relations of power and accumulation.

REFERENCES

Adedeji, Adebayo (1999). Structural Adjustment Policies in Africa. *International Social Science Journal*, 51(162), 521–528. https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-2451.00223

Adegboye, Folasade B. and Okorie, Uchechukwu E. (2023). Fragility of FDI Flows in Sub-Saharan Africa Region: Does the Paradox Persist? *Future Business Journal*, 9(1), 8. https://doi.org/10.1186/s43093-023-00184-6

African Union (2025). *African Leaders Addis Ababa Declaration on Climate Change and Call to Action.* Available at: https://au.int/sites/default/files/documents/45674-doc-Climate_Change_Declaration.pdf

Amin, Samir (1987). A Note on the Concept of Delinking. *Review (Fernand Braudel Center), 10*(3), 435–444. http://www.jstor.org/stable/40241067

Bekele, Martha Getachew (2026). *Africa as a Climate Solutions Leader? Anti-Politics, Power and the Political Economy of Summit-Driven Climate Narratives.* Working paper. Committee for the Abolition of Illegitimate Debt (CADTM). Available at: 24319

Bekele, Martha Getachew and Miller, Alex (2024). *Concessional Loans for Africa's Climate Crisis: Whose Fiscal Effort?* Development Initiatives. Available at: https://devinit.org/files/documents/1500/concessional_loans_for_africas_climate_crisis_whose_fiscal_effort.pdf

Berthélemy, Jean-Claude (2006). Bilateral Donors' Interest versus Recipients' Development Motives in Aid Allocation: Do All Donors Behave the Same? *Review of Development Economics*, 10(2), 179–194. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9361.2006.00311.x

Bond, Patrick (2009). Amanzi Ngawethu (Water Is Ours): Health and Environmental Victories for South African Activists. *Links International Journal of Socialist Renewal.* Available at: https://links.org.au/amanzi-ngawethu-water-ours-health-and-environmental-victories-south-african-activists

Bond, Patrick (2023). How the BRICS+, Africa Climate Summit, G20 and UN prepare us for Planetary Arson: Elite Stretching Exercises to Warm up the Conference of Polluters 28. CADTM, 9 December. Available at: 22110

Bourguignon, François (2025). *Climate Finance: An Ill-Designed Instrument for Development and Environment Assistance.* Finance for Development Lab Policy Note 25. Available at: https://findevlab.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/05/FDL_Policy-Note_Climate-Finance_April-25.pdf

Cavalcanti, Daniella M., de Oliveira Ferreira de Sales, Lucas, da Silva, Andrea, et al. (2025). Evaluating the impact of two decades of USAID interventions and projecting the effects of defunding on mortality up to 2030: A retrospective impact evaluation and forecasting analysis. *The Lancet*, 406, 283–294. https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(25)01186-9

European Commission (2021). *The Global Gateway Strategy.* Available at: https://commission.europa.eu/topics/international-partnerships/global-gateway_en

Ferguson, James (1990). *The Anti-Politics Machine: "Development," Depoliticization, and Bureaucratic Power in Lesotho.* Cambridge University Press.

Ghosh, Baidyanath N. (2019). *Dependency Theory Revisited.* Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315187389

Government of Kenya (2025). Statement by His Excellency Hon. William Samoei Ruto, PhD, C.G.H., President of The Republic Of Kenya and Commander-in-Chief of the Defence Forces, during the 7th AU - EU Summit, November 25, 2025, Luanda, Angola. Available at: https://www.president.go.ke/wp-content/uploads/DURING-THE-7TH-AU-EU-SUMMIT.pdf

Government of Kenya (2026a). Africa Forward: Africa-France Partnership for Growth and Innovation Summit Declaration. Nairobi: Africa Forward Summit. Available at: https://www.president.go.ke/wp-content/uploads/FINAL-AFS-2026-NAIROBI-DECLARATION-12th-May-26.pdf

Government of Kenya (2026b). Opening Statement by His Excellency Hon. William Samoei Ruto, PhD, C.G.H., President of the Republic of Kenya and Commander-in-Chief of the Defence Forces, during the Africa Forward Summit 2026. President of Kenya speech archive. Available at: https://www.president.go.ke/wp-content/uploads/DURING-THE-AFRICA-FORWARD-SUMMIT-2026.pdf

Gramsci, Antonio (1971). *Selections from the Prison Notebooks.* Edited and translated by Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith. New York: International Publishers.

Hickel, Jason (2020). *Less is More: How Degrowth Will Save the World.* London: Penguin Random House.

Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) (2022). *Climate Change 2022: Impacts, Adaptation and Vulnerability. Contribution of Working Group II to the Sixth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change.* Cambridge University Press. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009325844

Lewis, David (2019). 'Big D' and 'little d': Two Types of Twenty-First Century Development? *Third World Quarterly,* 40(11), 1957–1975. https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2019.1630270

Maizels, Alfred and Nissanke, Machiko K. (1984). Motivations for Aid to Developing Countries. *World Development*, 12(9), 879–900. https://doi.org/10.1016/0305-750X(84)90046-9

Martínez-Zarzoso, Inmaculada (2019). Effects of Foreign Aid on Income through International Trade. *Politics and Governance*, 7(2), 29–52. https://doi.org/10.17645/pag.v7i2.1830

Martínez-Zarzoso, Inmaculada and Lessing, Johannes (2025). *Domestic Effects of Foreign Aid.* Version 1.0, University of Göttingen, June 24. Study commissioned by Cordaid, ONE Campaign and Oxfam Novib. Available at: https://www.cordaid.org/nl/wp-content/uploads/2025/06/Domestic-Effects-of-Foreign-Aid-Report.pdf

Mawdsley, Emma, Murray, Warwick E., Overton, John, Scheyvens, Regina and Banks, Glenn (2018). Exporting Stimulus and 'Shared Prosperity': Reinventing Foreign Aid for a Retroliberal Era. *Development Policy Review*, 36(S1), O25–O43. https://doi.org/10.1111/dpr.12282

Mendez, Laura (2025). U.S. Foreign Aid: Marketization, Social Responsibility, and Economic Returns. *Public Administration & Development*, 45(1), 43–55. https://doi.org/10.1002/pad.2075

Miriri, Duncan (2026). US Treasury has not Pledged Funds to AfDB's 2025 ADF Financing Round, Spokesman Says. *Reuters.* 2 February. Available at: https://www.reuters.com/sustainability/climate-energy/us-treasury-has-not-pledged-funds-afdbs-2025-adf-financing-round-spokesman-says-2026-02-02/

Mkandawire, Thandika (2001). Thinking about Developmental States in Africa. *Cambridge Journal of Economics*, 25(3), 289–313. https://doi.org/10.1093/cje/25.3.289

Namkoong, Young (1999). Dependency Theory: Concepts, Classifications and Criticisms. *International Area Review*, 2(1), 121–150. https://doi.org/10.1177/223386599900200106

Ndlovu-Gatsheni, Sabelo J. (2014). Global Coloniality and the Challenges of Creating African Futures. *The Strategic Review for Southern Africa*, 36(2), 181–202. https://doi.org/10.35293/srsa.v36i2.189

Nkrumah, Kwame (1965). *Neo-Colonialism: The Last Stage of Imperialism.* London: Thomas Nelson & Sons.

Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (2025). *Cuts in Official Development Assistance: OECD Projections for 2025 and the Near Term.* OECD Policy Brief, 26 June 2025. Paris: OECD. Available at: https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/2025/06/cuts-in-official-development-assistance_e161f0c5/full-report.html

Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (2026a). *A Historic Decline in Foreign Aid: Preliminary 2025 ODA Data.* Paris: OECD. Available at: https://www.oecd.org/en/data/insights/data-explainers/2026/04/a-historic-decline-in-foreign-aid-preliminary-2025-oda-data.html

Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (2026b). *Consultations on the DAC Review Process.* DCD/DAC/RD(2026)9/FINAL. Paris: OECD. Available at: https://one.oecd.org/document/DCD/DAC/RD(2026)9/FINAL/en/pdf

Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (2026c). *Draft Compact on International Development Cooperation*, Version 3, 26 March 2026. Paris: OECD.

Parfitt, Trevor W. (1990). Lies, Damned Lies and Statistics: The World Bank/ECA Structural Adjustment Controversy. *Review of African Political Economy*, 17(47), 128–141. Available at: https://www.jstor.org/stable/4006043

Powell, Mike and Seddon, David (1997). NGOs & the Development Industry. *Review of African Political Economy*, 24(71), 3–10. https://doi.org/10.1080/03056249708704235

Todaro, Michael P. and Smith, Stephen C. (2014). *Economic Development.* 12th ed. Trans-Atlantic Publications.

Truman, Harry S. (1949). *Inaugural address.* Harry S. Truman Presidential Library and Museum. Available at: https://www.trumanlibrary.gov/library/public-papers/19/inaugural-address

United Nations (2013). *A New Global Partnership: Eradicate Poverty and Transform Economies through Sustainable Development. Report of the High-Level Panel of Eminent Persons on the Post-2015 Development Agenda.* New York: United Nations. Available at: https://sdgs.un.org/sites/default/files/publications/8932013-05%20-%20HLP%20Report%20-%20A%20New%20Global%20Partnership.pdf

United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (1989). *African Alternative Framework to Structural Adjustment Programmes for Socio-Economic Recovery and Transformation (AAF-SAP).* E/ECA/CM.15/6/Rev.3. Addis Ababa: United Nations Economic Commission for Africa. Available at: https://repository.uneca.org/server/api/core/bitstreams/119d5929-57f9-478c-a477-00de36d20e84/content

World Bank Group (2026). *Fragile and Conflict-Affected Situations: Vulnerabilities.* World Bank. Available at: https://www.worldbank.org/en/research/publication/fragile-and-conflict-affected-situations-vulnerabilities

Ziai, Aram (2025). Partnership Instead of Colonialism? The Origins and Colonial Elements of Development Cooperation. In Ziai, Aram, Jha, Praveen and Lümmen, Jule (Eds.), *Global Partnerships and Neocolonialism* (pp. 47–69). Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-87005-7

NOTE

This paper was *first published in CATDM*, Belgium, July 2026.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Martha Getachew Bekele is co-founder of DevTransform – the Development Initiatives (DI) Africa hub. Her current focus is on reframing global cooperation and development and climate finance as tools for justice, not charity, in Africa's development. She worked with the Netherlands Development Organisation as a governance advisor, contributed to the first Participatory Poverty Assessment in Ethiopia as a research team leader in four regions, and before DI, she was the trade and development programme officer at CUTS Centre for International Trade, Economics & Environment, Nairobi office. She holds Master's degrees in Business Economics from Monash University, International Trade Policy and Trade Law from Lund University/TRAPCA, and Human Resource Economics from Addis Ababa University. She is a PhD Candidate, University of Johannesburg, South Africa.

BRIEF 3/2026

Title
The Politics of Mutual Benefit:
Power and the Struggle
to Define Development
Cooperation

Author
Martha Getachew Bekele

Date
September 2026

Text editing
Patrícia Magalhães Ferreira

Design
Rita Romeiras

Partnership

PLATAFORMA CRESCIMENTO SUSTENTÁVEL

UNIVERSIDADE AUTÓNOMA DE LISBOA

Project

DESAFIOS GLOBAIS PARA O DESENVOLVIMENTO

Cofinancing

CAMÕES INSTITUTO DA COOPERAÇÃO E DA LÍNGUA PORTUGAL
MINISTÉRIO DOS NEGÓCIOS ESTRANGEIROS

#clubedelisboa
#DGD
#desafiosglobaisdodesenvolvimento

GLOBAL CHALLENGES
Clube de Lisboa

The Club of Lisbon is an association with individual and collective members who share the vision of Lisbon as a global city and a hub for reflection, debate and action on relevant international issues, including sustainable development, globalisation and security, with particular attention to future challenges and to the role of Portugal in Europe and the world.

cl@clubelisboa.pt

www.clubelisboa.pt

FOLLOW US!

instagram.com/clubedelisboa

facebook.com/cluboflisbon

linkedin.com/company/clube-de-lisboa

youtube.com/clubedelisboa