Version révisée (2025).

How effective and transparent are Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and aid agencies in Africa?

In *The Missionary Position: NGOs and Development in Africa*, Firoze Manji and Carl O'Coill inquire into the work of NGOs in Africa, asserting that "*their work contributes marginally to the relief of poverty and undermines the struggle of the African people to emancipate themselves from economic, social, and political oppression.[1]*" Regardless of how bold this assertion is, it underscores the widespread criticism frequently leveled against the humanitarian aid sector in Africa.

Aid agencies like UNICEF and NGOs such as Amnesty International, Save the Children and OXFAM are actively engaged in efforts to alleviate poverty across the African continent and provide essential services, including healthcare and education. But are they transparent about their funding, effective in delivering meaningful aid, and respectful of African states' sovereignty? Rooted in their independence from governments and not-for-profit status, these entities' accountability is often misjudged or excused. Such observation is shared by the main beneficiaries of their services, as evidenced by a report from Freedom House (2019)[2] which demonstrates that 11 African countries have adopted "*legislation or policies that constrain(ed) Non-governmental organizations (NGOs)*".

It is therefore appropriate to critically examine the current activities of NGOs on the continent, considering their controversial historical interests and operating methods. Based on extensive research and documentation, the drifts and misdeeds of the international humanitarian system in terms of transparency and efficiency, can be divided into three categories: economic, political, and social shortcomings.

Economic setbacks

First and foremost, when dealing with the economic dimension, the main questions that arise are related to financing, funding, and partnerships. In 2008, William Easterly and Tobias Pfutze published an article that examines, through data processing, the expenditures and investments of aid agencies. In their introduction, the two economists identify the biggest problem plaguing the humanitarian enterprise, namely the lack of data on aid agency spending: "*Aid agencies are typically not transparent about their operating costs and about how they spend the aid money.*"[3] Indeed, the article later reveals that UNHCR, UNICEF, WFP, or IFAD[4] devote more than 66% of their aid to corrupt countries (*FreeHouse* criteria) and less than 30% to low-income countries. Staggering data follow: out of 37 examined aid agencies, the UNHCR, WFP, and IFAD were ranked 37th and 36th in terms of effectiveness with a transparency level oscillating between 5% and 26%…

---

[1] Manji, Firoze and Carl O'Coill. « The Missionary Position: NGOs and Development in Africa », *International Affairs (Royal Institute of International Affairs 1944-)*. 2002, vol.78 n° 3. p. 568.

[2] https://freedomhouse.org/report/special-report/2019/spread-anti-ngo-measures-africa-freedoms-under-threat

[3] Easterly, William et Tobias Pfutze. « Where Does the Money Go? Best and Worst Practices in Foreign Aid », *The Journal of Economic Perspectives*. 2008, vol.22 n° 2. p.30.

[4] All UN related agencies: United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund, World Food Programme, International Fund for Agricultural Development

Second, several reports have questioned and raised many doubts about the effectiveness of NGOs in achieving economic recovery and development in African states. According to the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD)[5] "*almost 60% of Africa's low-income countries are already in debt distress or at high risk of it*" and according to the World Bank "*Sub-Saharan Africa's economic growth dropped to 3.6% in 2022 from 4.1% in 2021 and is expected to dip to 3.1% in 2023.*" It is particularly interesting to look at the graph published by the World Bank in 2021[6], which indicates a stagnation of the GDP growth in the years 2000-2010, and a drastic decline between the 1970s (10% growth) and today (around 3-4%): both periods are known for having a significant deployment of NGOs, including those involved in economic aid…Of course, there is no doubt that this is a consequence relevant to national politics and international geopolitics, nevertheless, the role of NGOs in the economic field is substantial. Why these disappointing numbers? In a report by *France Info*[7]*, Alvar* Jones Sanchez denounces the bureaucratic qualities valued by many humanitarian NGOs over genuine engagement. As a member of the Red Cross in Casamance, in southern Senegal, he visited the projects carried out by international NGOs over the past five years: "*The failure rate was more than 70% in some localities, while a Spanish NGO reported a 90% failure rate.*" He adds that "*there is no reliable data on the success and failure of interventions*" which adds to the lack of transparency already reported.

Third, it is pertinent to examine a recent phenomenon known as the *business-NGO partnerships*. Mainly as a response to the climate change crisis, or other global challenges requiring international cooperation, many NGOS became techno-structures adopting a business model of action. At first glance, this cooperation seems beneficial and strategic as the knowledge and resources of each party are shared while being optimized. However, in 2003, Sylvie Brunel published "*Borders*", a book where she exposes the capitalist logic of today's NGOs and the *charity business* in Africa as a result of this new alliance. She deplores the selection of charismatic candidates with high qualifications (i.e. businessmen) at the expense of truly committed people, leading to "*a cynical management for the sole benefit of the technostructure: luxurious headquarters, exorbitant mission costs, rigged accounts, fanciful mission reports...*"[8]. Moreover, Brunel reveals that the presence of some NGOs weakens the state's economy, citing the example of the prices for commodities that become unaffordable for local populations because the volunteers settle and transpose a capitalistic model of high living standards. She further condemns the funding process of these organizations, which are increasingly dependent on government and business funding. Indeed, 75% of their financing today comes from public funds, "*which deprives them of any de facto autonomy in the choice of their interventions.*"[9]

"*It can be inferred that the economic development theory is used as a neo-colonial tool in which political and economic ambitions of the West are implemented in African states using foreign aid (...) thus unequal relationship perpetuates physical and institution control by the*

[5] https://unctad.org/press-material/africas-economic-growth-decelerates-sharply
[6] https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.MKTP.KD.ZG?locations=ZG
[7]https://www.francetvinfo.fr/monde/afrique/senegal/comment-evaluer-l-efficacite-de-laide-au-developpement-en-afrique_3402457.html
[8] https://www.herodote.net/Les_derives_du_charity_business_-article-109.php
[9]https://www.herodote.net/Les_derives_du_charity_business_-article-109.php

West on the African state's development."[10] As Stéphanie Itimi points out, economic failures originate or are perpetuated in the political failures of states, but also of NGOs, which brings me to discuss political deficits.

Political ubiquity

A retrospective analysis of the emergence and purpose of NGOs reveals their role as a governmental instrument to serve post-colonial interests under the guise of development. In the 1960s, the African continent emancipated itself from the Western hegemony and had to face the challenges exacerbated by its newly acquired independence. Among other necessities, guaranteeing basic human rights (food, education, healthcare) was rapidly considered a priority. Consequently, the 20th century was marked by the rapid proliferation of humanitarian organizations in Africa, a phenomenon largely initiated by Western nations. Indeed, according to the International Council of Voluntary Agencies' (ICVA) "Repertory of Africa's NGOs", the number of NGOs implemented in Africa exceeded 3,000 in 1968! In this context, it is important to stress the strong correlation between the country of origin of the NGO and its geographical sector of activity. Poppy Cullen, Steve McCorriston, and Andrew Thompson explain the "*importance of colonial ties in countries in which international NGOs were active. French, British and Portuguese NGOs mostly targeted their own (former) colonies.*"[11] To conclude this historical parentheses, one must nuance this statement by adding that "*African NGOs had a far larger presence in the post-war development landscape than hitherto recognized (...), it was not therefore just the post-colonial crises of the 1960s that brought humanitarian NGOs to Africa.*"[12]

To this day, NGOs are means of conveying a state's *dessein* and position themselves as intermediaries in the bilateral relations between Africa and an industrialized country. Fully neutral NGOs are almost nonexistent and, as mentioned previously, they have morphed into hierarchical and bureaucratic entities. Hence, within the NGO *milieu*, the social, political, and economic agendas of donors exert a considerable influence on the interventions of these organizations.[13] This perspective on NGOs as a political instrument of government is exemplified by the Malian junta's decision in 2022 to prohibit all activities on its territory by French NGOs. Rather than serving the cause of social justice, NGOs are regarded as political assets and deterrents. This is a major issue as nudging from governments or businesses "*has caused a mutual lack of trust between the aid sector and local communities, who perceive humanitarian aid as corrupt and driven by external agendas.*"[14] A direct example of this is the Sino-African relationship, which has become a real tool of interest to Beijing, through the

---

[10] Iᴛᴍɪ,Stephanie. *Is Foreign Aid a facilitator of Neo-Colonialism in Africa?* [s.l.]. University of London. 2018.p.6.

[11] Cᴜʟʟᴇɴ, Poppy, Steve McCᴏʀʀɪsᴛᴏɴ, et Andrew Tʜᴏᴍᴘsᴏɴ. « The "Big Survey": Decolonisation, Development and the First Wave of NGO Expansion in Africa After 1945 », *The International History Review*. 4th of July 2022, vol.44 n° 4. p. 731

[12] Cᴜʟʟᴇɴ, Poppy, Steve McCᴏʀʀɪsᴛᴏɴ, et Andrew Tʜᴏᴍᴘsᴏɴ. « The "Big Survey": Decolonisation, Development and the First Wave of NGO Expansion in Africa After 1945 », *The International History Review*. 4th of July 2022, vol.44 n° 4. p. 742

[13] Pᴀᴛᴇʟ, Neha. *Aiding Neocolonialism? Moroccan NGOs, International Actors, and Questions of Autonomy in Human Rights Advocacy*, SIT Digital Collections. [s.l.]. SIT Graduate Institute. 2017.p.30.

[14] https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/investigation/2020/06/12/Congo-aid-corruption-abuse-DFID-DRC-UN-NGOs

"debt trap diplomacy"[15] of Chinese NGOs and the emergence of the GONGO[16] terminology. In "*Going Out' or Staying In? The Expansion of Chinese NGOs in Africa,*" the authors use case studies of Malawi and Ethiopia, where Chinese NGOs are active, to conclude that "*much of China's overseas development assistance (ODA) is directed at nations where China has a substantial stake in the natural resources sector, most notably in Africa. Chinese NGOs have a limited role in actually promoting long-term development projects independent of Chinese commercial interests.*"[17] Through this example, one perceives an imperialist logic and will to interfere in the African continent by means of using NGOs. Economic powers do dictate the political direction of African states through aid.

Furthermore, because NGOs are reliant on politically committed donors for funding, this creates a trap of dependency depriving them of full autonomy. "*The majority of NGO funding comes from international bilateral donors and contributes to dependency structures that reinforce the power structures between the wealthier countries and the countries that are less-developed.*"[18] Katherine Kilcoyne also exposes how French NGOs deployed in Africa (Action Contre la Faim (ACF), Médecins du Monde (MDM), or Solidarités International) are funded by France or the European Commission, thereby creating a system of relationships with the state and powerful institutions. Among the largest NGO funders for Africa are USAID, DFID, and ECHO[19], which have consequent political agendas that NGOs cannot disregard in order to suit their bilateral donors. This vicious circle of dependence leads to the creation of "*briefcase NGOs*": unregistered entities that lack any discernible track record and frequently make only one or two appearances (such as a press conference or a public protest) before evaporating.[20] These fraudulent NGOs only seek to obtain money from donors, without having any form of humanitarian program, while showing support for an ideology or policy. In 2021, the Ugandese government suspended five NGOs for alleged forgery and embezzlement. These include Agape Sanctuary, which "*accumulated Shs32 billion through illegal award of fake contracts to construction companies to build schools, churches and houses for pastors,*"[21]and the Democratic Governance Facility (DGF), which operated without government approval and thus interfered with Uganda's sovereignty. The case of the DGF is crucial because it displays the involvement of foreign actors in the modalities of corruption and their interference in the name of welfare. The same situation occurred in Tanzania or Kenya, where 500 NGOs were dissolved in 2019 due to political controversies. Given the above, it is not surprising that NGOs are perceived as a means of spreading political corruption and profit through tacit interference…

---

[15] China intentionally excessively lends money to low-income indebted states that cannot later repay Chinese debt, in HIMMER, M., & ROD, Z. *Chinese debt trap diplomacy: reality or myth?* Journal of the Indian Ocean Region, 18(3), 2022, p.250–272.

[16] Government Sponsored Non-Governmental Organizations.

[17] YJ HSU, Jennifer , Timothy HILDEBRANDT, et Reza HASMATH. *Going Out' or Staying In? The Expansion of Chinese NGOs in Africa.* University of Oxford. 2016.

[18] KILCOYNE, Katharine. « Neo-Colonial Actors?: Analyzing French NGOs in Francophone West Africa », *Honors Theses*. January 1st 2021, p.34.

[19] The United States Agency for International Development, the British Department for International Development, and the European Commission's Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations department.

[20]https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2021/07/fake-civil-society-the-rise-of-pro-government-ngos-in-nigeria?lang=en

[21] ABET, Tonny. « Uganda: Govt Blacklists NGOs Over Fraud », *The Monitor*. June 9th 2021. https://allafrica.com/stories/202106090634.html

Social misconducts

In the first place, the presence of NGOs mostly provides employment for elites with university degrees, crowding out government-provided services. Dean Karlan and Christopher Udry studied the arrival of NGOs in Uganda, which had the effect of *"resources shifted away from existing institutions and into the new NGO, leaving villagers worse off than they were before."[22]* In addition, some NGOs are adopting a "participatory development" approach with the objective of incorporating local communities into the administrative and decision-making processes. Nonetheless, this *"political decision-making move from local government to the NGO could lead villagers to participate less in government,"[23]* and governments might potentially discontinue their social policies due to many hired-aways of government workers. In Uganda, it is the case for 39% of the healthcare workers, which led to *"the villagers receiv(ing) care from any health worker declin(ing) by 22.9 percent. Strikingly, these villages also experienced an increase in infant mortality after NGO entry."[24]* Because NGOs arrive with the perspective of gaining the upper hand in an African country's public policy, governments are often reluctant to accept their presence for fear of interference, creating a *negotiating gap*: dialogues are neither fluid nor transparent due to mutual mistrust, resulting in aid not being allocated or delivered effectively.NGOs have considerable repercussions in the social field, especially when it comes to local populations. The biggest charge that can be leveled against NGOs is the separation and distance they create between the staff of the organizations, the local elites, and the populations in need.

In the second place, NGOs tend to convey a destructive image of Africa, often exaggerated, in order to justify their actions. For instance, MSF projects an image of an "Africa of crises", a *"presentation of the 'worst' that legitimizes its action: the more serious the crisis, the more justified MSF's (re)action is. (...). Financed essentially by the private sector (donations), it is obliged to display the misfortune, to 'prove' that the crisis is one and that it requires a response."[25]* The same vocabulary and paradox can be encountered within *Caritas* or *Oxfam*. This further exacerbates the existing divide between the local beneficiaries and NGO personnel by establishing a hierarchical relationship. Known as the white savior complex, in which Caucasian individuals are perceived to be saving persons of color, this attitude is harmful to the effectiveness of humanitarian aid: 1) it fosters a cognitive bias, in both Western and African cultures, that African individuals can not be self-sufficient and need assistance; 2) it engenders an abusive sentiment of omnipotence of action of any given Western state or NGO; and 3) it implements a distinct, culturally specific model of healthcare, social reconstruction and leadership that is enforced upon countries that possess a divergent *modus operandi*.

In the third place, NGO' micro-bodies are also subject to serious corruption crises directly related to the local populations. In 2020, the NGO *BarakaCity* was dissolved for having links and sympathies with the radical Islamist movement. In 2007, the French NGO

---

[22] https://insight.kellogg.northwestern.edu/article/international-aid-development-ngos-crowding-out-government
[23] *ibid.*
[24] *ibid.*
[25] http://www.iteco.be/revue-antipodes/medias/article/l-afrique-dans-les-periodiques-des

L'Arche de Noé was indicted because some of its members had tried to kidnap minors in order to make them orphans in exchange for large sums of money. Of course, cases of sexual and psychological abuse are not unknown and are, sadly, very common in this sector. In 2018, the UNHCR revealed the "Sex-for-food scandal" with more than 40 aid organizations *"whose workers (were) alleged to be in sexually exploitative relationships with refugee children."*[26] Besides, Oxfam employees have been accused of rape during humanitarian missions in South Sudan, of sexual abuse in Liberia, and of using prostitutes in Chad. Helen Evans, former director of internal prevention at Oxfam, denounces a *"culture of sexual abuse within some offices,"*[27] that can be readily transposed to the terrain of action. Last but not least, in 2020, a 70-page review on NGOs' actions in Congo was published, denouncing a vast network of corruption. Among other allegations, local NGOs were forced to provide kickbacks up to 10% and suppliers were expected *"to provide kickbacks to staff of NGOs and UN agencies of 10 to 30 % of the contract value."*[28]

Conclusion and nuances

In fine, I have explored the significant limitations and contentious issues within the humanitarian aid industry through economic, political, and sociological lenses. A lack of transparency, particularly regarding financial expenditures, and the limited effectiveness of humanitarian programs highlight the dysfunctionality of the NGO model because it is one of the largest unregulated industries in the world. A critical analysis of this nature would be remiss without considering solutions for the aforementioned dysfunctions. Cooperation in the humanitarian sector seems to be the key to avoiding service duplication and destructive competitiveness. Shareable complex, rich, and source reliable reports would already make a big difference in evaluating the actions of NGOs by identifying areas of improvement and determining where and when to concentrate their efforts. Such a data bank will boost economically viable projects. As Nancy Qian states *"organizations that have some sway, like the World Bank, need to encourage the collection of data on a large scale in poor countries."*[29] Additionally, the NGO industry would benefit from a common normative structure. No universal charter, modality, agenda, or agreement specific to its field frames obligations and moral principles of humanitarian action (apart from the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement)...

Nevertheless, one ought to be mindful of the necessity to refine and nuance these observations. Indeed, NGOs have provided the African continent with unprecedented recovery and flourishing in every domain. They are *"important contributors to African countries' GDP. They create jobs, create awareness of fatal diseases such as HIV/AIDS, contribute to food security, put up infrastructure such as roads, and are involved in various*

[26] https://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/entry/un-sex-for-food-scandal-aid-organisations_uk_5b0cf386e4b0fdb2aa5626 6b

[27] https://www.revue-internationale.com/2020/12/ong-feu-critiques/

[28] https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/investigation/2020/06/12/Congo-aid-corruption-abuse-DFID-DRC-UN-NG Os

[29] https://insight.kellogg.northwestern.edu/article/international-aid-development-ngos-crowding-out-government

public activities such as bolstering education."[30] Additionally, the actions of NGOs and aid companies are undermined by African countries and beneficiaries themselves. A recurrent phenomenon in many African countries is the establishment of pro-government NGOs, a trend that has been observed in Nigeria since the ascension to power of President Muhammadu Buhari. Furthermore, the trafficking of humanitarian donations, goods, and services remains prevalent throughout the continent as well as the abduction of NGO personnel. This situation poses significant challenges to the operational capacity of NGOs, hindering their ability to function safely and implement viable programs across the African continent.

To conclude, Kang and Chivanga's article summarizes with subtlety and clarity the ambivalences of NGOs and aid companies that certainly are "*catalysts of development*" and form good partnerships with the governments, but have been noticed practicing the following malpractices: misuse of funds, harboring sour relationships between fellow NGOs and the government, pursuing political and antagonizing goals, and being vehicles of capitalism and imperialism by their funders.[31]

---

[30]MUROTE KANG'ETHE, Simon. « Exploring the Benefits and Gaps Inherent in the Non-Governmental Organisation (NGO) in Their Quest to Effectuate Poverty Reduction-Examples from African Countries ».Journal of human ecology (Delhi, India), October 2015, p.133

[31] MUROTE KANG'ETHE, Simon. « Exploring the Benefits and Gaps Inherent in the Non-Governmental Organisation (NGO) in Their Quest to Effectuate Poverty Reduction-Examples from African Countries ».Journal of human ecology (Delhi, India), October 2015, p.134-138