

Smart Aid for African Development

Written by Sharanya Ravichandran

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For over five decades, many types of aid have been flowing into sub-Saharan Africa, and yet there is a stagnation and even failure of significant development in the region. *Smart Aid for African Development*, edited by Richard Joseph and Alexandra Gillespie, contains essays from a collection of authors who attempt to address the reasons why aid does not seem to promote growth in Africa by explaining the constraints to aid as it is granted today, and elaborating on alternative approaches that could work much more effectively. The consensus among these different authors is that smart aid is targeted aid toward specific programs within each sector, such as building schools to promote literacy and building water wells to help in farming. They also agree that a lot of the problems that aid donors face are related to cohesion and coordination in policy-making, especially among the many organisations within a donor country that assist in giving aid to sub-Saharan Africa. Using tables and graphs, the authors very succinctly explain their cases regarding smart aid. They also advocate and disprove specific approaches for giving aid to Africa that will help the region in a concrete manner. Some examples include budget support (direct monetary transfers from the donor bank into the recipient bank) and using a multi-pronged approach to address not just one, but multiple problem areas of a state to bring the entire state up, not just parts of it. The authors' use of specific empirical case studies, such as Liberia and Tanzania, help shed light on states where reform and aid have both succeeded and failed. They also discuss both challenges and solutions to reviving economic, political and civil growth in sub-Saharan Africa.

The book is divided into sections, which helps the reader to coherently understand the train of thought of both the authors and the book as a whole. The book starts with explanations of the different methods that donors are currently using to deliver aid, and whether it does or does not help. It then moves to discussing various methods of aid that could be effectively implemented and its challenges within the recipient countries. The flow of thought from one chapter to the next, one section to the next, builds the reader's knowledge coherently on each previous chapter. In the end, the reader is left with a comprehensive analysis to the process of giving aid to Africa. The authors write on giving monetary assistance to a country to improve its economy while also addressing the growth and development of the government. Components include democratic ideals and good governance, discarding corruption, and reforming civil society to level the playing ground for all citizens. By exploring a variety of venues that all play a vital role in the flourishing of a state, the reader gets a complete picture rather than fragmented one; he/she understands that more than monetary assistance/Official Development Assistance goes into bringing up the countries in Africa, and that development is a multi-faceted process. The discussion on the important role of civil society groups is particularly interesting. The author of the chapter, Darren Kew, explains that the role of civil society is important in strengthening the relationship between the upper-class elites and the other citizens. This can encourage the establishment of political and social norms within a society, which fosters democratisation in that state. In turn, this can lead to a stronger government because of encouraged voter participation, and strengthen the state as a whole. Readers might not consider civil society and the relationship between the different classes of its citizens to be this fundamental to the success of a state. However, after reading this chapter, the reader learns that civil society can serve as a solid foundation for the government and economy of a state because it contributes to the growth of that state. In addition, the reader also learns that encouraging participation and the formation of norms and relationships within the smallest parts of a state (the society and communities) are just as, if not more, fundamentally important.

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Another chapter, 'Beyond the Political Economy of Corruption: The Kenyan Challenge' by Peter Anyang' Nyong'o, delves into the depths of corruption and why it is such a corrosive element in developing countries. The author takes the reader through the emergence of corruption from as early as colonial times, which sets the context and scene for the roots of this destructive element in society. He proceeds to address the presence of corruption through the decades and finally explains that even President Kibaki, the central seat of power in Kenya, has been involved in corruption and scams. He rounds out the chapter by addressing what can be done towards ridding a developing society of corruption, which does nothing but contribute to the regression and stagnation of the state, as opposed to growth. The author suggests that aid should not be broad when corruption is present; on the contrary, aid should be given with the aim of nurturing a positive political environment so that corruption can be weeded out. This chapter is well organised, and it provides context, history, and present-day details about a negative element of the states in sub-Saharan Africa that do not first come to mind when anyone talks about areas to address through aid. Though Western states want to encourage democratic governance in these states, they often fail to realise that scams and corruption play a big role in hindering this vital component of a successful state. To address an open government, corruption must first be expelled; this chapter admirably addresses just how pressing this problem has been both historically and in the present day.

One of the many comprehensive elements of the book is that it addresses many variants of the standard approaches that a country *could* take when addressing the issue of aid. It explains the benefits of using the resources that Western nations have at their disposal in innovative and different methods than the current ways that ultimately do not have the desired effect. The resources, such as money, food assistance, and technical assistance, are vast and potentially incredibly powerful in the context of aid. Instead of just giving away assistance or money, which is essentially what the Western states are now doing, they must think of innovative and different techniques in which to give this same aid, so that the benefits for the recipient country are exponentially increased. This book is truly a critical assessment to all the problems that sub-Saharan Africa is facing right now, and has traditionally faced for decades. In addition, as much as the book looks at the benefits of aid methods (both current and potential), it also addresses the flaws in giving aid. The book does not aim to simply laud giving aid to countries in sub-Saharan Africa; its authors and editors are not afraid to look at the negative side of each method and idea that they posit. Furthermore, this book does not aim to make sweeping generalisations on the subject; on the contrary, it addresses each issue specifically and attempts to get to the crux of each issue facing sub-Saharan Africa separately, to determine the causal factors of why the region is the way it is. The authors also do not necessarily advocate for more amounts of aid to be given. Instead, they recommend the current amount given to be given in a 'smart' manner (such as investing in sectors), thus enhancing the effect it can have on the recipients.

This book is useful, not only to individuals who have a comprehensive or advanced understanding of the nuances and methods of giving aid, but also to individuals who only have a basic understanding of the entire process. The way in which the book is organised, combined with its use of visuals such as graphs and tables, can help readers with varying backgrounds and knowledge on aid, to comprehend the further intricacies that go into giving aid to sub-Saharan Africa. The individual essays are engaging and easy to comprehend. The authors do not attempt to be pedantic about the issues they are discussing. The honesty in the book is refreshing, and it sheds a new light on the issues that sub-Saharan Africa is facing, which are greater than just economic and political problems. Most only see the big, obvious problems when they seek to examine why this region is not developing, but this book brings a fresh perspective to the many problems that exist under these umbrella problems, but are equally, if not more, important in contributing to the dire situation that sub-Saharan Africa faces in terms of development.

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