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Africa International:
Agency and interdependency in a changing world

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INTRODUCTION

"Africa International: agency and interdependency in a changing world" was a joint initiative of Chatham House and the British International Studies Association (BISA) Africa and the International Studies Working Group. The one-day workshop was funded by BISA, Chatham House and the Open University. It was held at the Royal Institute of International Affairs, London, Friday 9th October 2009, and attended by over 100 people drawn from areas of international and British policy-making, academia, non-governmental organisations, business and the private sector.

The workshop was organised into three thematic areas: economy; security; and politics and diplomacy. The workshop concluded with some cross-theme reflection on both the prospects and constraints on African agency in the international system, as well as on the opportunities and obstacles for scholarly work in International Studies to contribute to UK policy-making on Africa. The workshop had two principle aims:

- To explore analysis of African political agency in the international system and the ways in which African agency, both state and non-state, shapes a range of interdependent relationships between Africa, the UK, and other western powers.

- To bring together scholars working in the field of International Studies and UK-based policy makers in order to highlight the contributions that leading academic research in International Studies can make to our understandings of African agency in the international system and the key UK foreign policy concerns that are raised therein.

The following offers a summary of the arguments made by each of the speakers of the panel as well as issues raised by the audience.
AFRICA AND INTERNATIONAL ECONOMIC GOVERNANCE

States and society within sub-Saharan Africa have often been the object of, or at the receiving end of, international economic governance. The application of bilateral and multilateral aid to the continent in its changing guises, from structured conditional-based lending to good governance and partnership, is often claimed to limit the role of African agency in determining models of best practice or 'doing development'. However, international economic governance also involves complex financial and trading structures in a changing global political economy. Processes of negotiating trade agreements within the WTO and the growth of new aid agendas and state nationalism challenge the notion of Africa as a passive recipient, and make the case for increased interdependency between African states, and for political-economic space for their role in international economic governance.

African States and the WTO – Dr. Donna Lee (Birmingham University)

African states have a greater influence and potential role in the WTO than they do in any other international economic institution. African states have used this potential to take advantage of schemes within the WTO that enhance the role of poor countries. Regional organisations such as the African Union and the Southern African Development Community (SADC) have facilitated the involvement of African states, which now constitute a third of the WTO's membership and thus have become integral to influencing the process but not the substantive content of trade policy issues. This has particularly been the case in The Doha Round of trade negotiations.

African states have the following trade priorities:

- Increase market access
- Stabilise markets
- Facilitate development
- Reform decision-making to facilitate effective participation
- Provision of technical assistance and capacity-building

African states have pursued such strategies within the Doha Round through:

- The power of asymmetry
- Consensus in decision-making
• Presence
• Collective strategies and ideational leverage
• Co-ordination through SADC and the AU
• Increased civil society involvement
• Dispute settlement system (African states have thus far not used this mechanism, but are often third parties within it, and are thus able to use this position to engage in trade diplomacy with other states and voting blocs within the WTO).

The main weaknesses of African agency within Doha and the WTO have been:

• Low trade leverage
• African states tend to not be principle suppliers
• States have diverse interests and cross-border conflicts which can limit the power of collective decision-making
• Economic dependency on major trade partners

**Donors and states: aid and political practice – Dr Graham Harrison (University of Sheffield)**

Rethinking Africa’s role in the international system requires consideration of the role of aid and the question: what kind of image of Africa’s place in the world do we rely on when we think about aid? Responses to this question can be categorised as fitting into one of the following categories:

• Institutional analysis: the relationship between donors and the state
• Principal-agent models: the economic incentive of disincentives for reform
• The west and Africa: the politics and history of neo-colonialism and post-colonialism

These three approaches are based on dichotomies of ‘internal’ and ‘external’ processes and actors, and the role of partnership, imposition and intervention. There are a number of problems with this dichotomous approach:

• Aid relations have become increasingly institutionally embedded in the regulations and reform agendas within and between states. The
main examples of which can be seen as the Comprehensive Development Framework (CDF), Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSPs), and the Heavily Indebted Poor Countries Initiative (HIPC).

- Africa is only considered as receiving/following/reacting. This limits space for new ways of understanding forms of agency.

- It uncritically assumes the nature of African sovereignty. Nation-states exist, but sovereignty is claimed and constructed in interactions with other agencies.

Aid should be understood as political practice based on social relations. Theory needs to be built out of practice. The challenge is to identify such zones or realms of social and political practice. These realms of practice can be understood in regard to three concepts:

- Habit: the institutionalization and routine of aid practice
- Conduct: the way habits are valued. Whether habits are good/bad practice
- Repertoire: the materiality of the practice, i.e. the incentives/disincentives, the constraints/enablers.

Aid as social practice implies it is intrinsically transnational and is inclusive of African agency. Aid is co-authored and co-constituted, and is leading to a diversification of aid politics. Unorthodox and new aid agendas evoking a sense of nationalism are beginning to offer some challenges to neoliberal policies. These have not gone away but are not as dominant as it used to be.

**Discussion**

A number of issues were raised by members of the audience. Several contributions centred on the implications for African agency, including the extent to which aid practices such as donor harmonisation restrict African agency and what changes to practice would enhance agency. Others related to the role of non-state actors (the influence of unions in South Africa’s trade negotiations; the role of the private sector in aid processes; and non-state actors within aid bargaining) and the ultimate goals of trade and aid policy (what the logical conclusion of fair trade policy was, and whether aid policies should aim to make aid redundant in the long-term).
AFRICA, SECURITY, AND INTERVENTION

The global security agenda has altered dramatically since the end of the Cold War. Policymakers have begun to consider security from a much broader perspective than before. African agency has become increasingly significant as the West has encouraged Africa to develop its own capacity to respond to these broader security challenges, including the African Union's development of a new peace and security architecture for Africa. This new architecture needs to be considered against the backdrop of the new security demands of the UN's 'responsibility to protect' principle and contemporary transnational security threats.

The Responsibility to Protect and African International Society – Dr Paul D. Williams (George Washington University)

The ‘responsibility to protect' (R2P) principle is about responding to crimes against humanity, the central objective of which is prevention. It should be noted that this is not a new principle of international law but is new political practice. There are a number of controversies surrounding the R2P principle, especially with regard to how the UN should respond to crises and who determines when crimes against humanity are committed. Nevertheless, it is a principle that is supported by many African states.

However, what does it mean to say there is support for R2P? Six different positions can be considered, in a spectrum ranging from the 'hypocritical' to the 'extremely supportive'. These six positions help us to reveal the nuances of what is meant by African support for the R2P principle.

- **Hypocrites** – states that show rhetorical support but who through their activities actually undermine the principle (e.g. Rwanda).
- **Waverers** – states that are publicly committed to the idea but who have questions over the specifics of R2P (e.g. Morocco, Egypt, Algeria).
- **Instrumentalists** – those states that only act when it fits in with other foreign policy goals (e.g. states that failed to provide troops to the AU mission in Darfur).
- **Institutionalists** – those states that will actually help to build institutions to support the R2P principle (e.g. South Africa, Nigeria and Senegal).
• True believers – those states that provide practical action to support the R2P principle (e.g. Tanzania and Lesotho).

• Champions – those that actively seek to export the idea to others (e.g. Ghana).

These six levels of support are merely indicative and clearly the positions of states can change over time. However, a consideration of these differences in support for the R2P principle may help UK policymakers in their efforts to build international support across the African continent.

Solidarity Intervention: Emerging Trends in AU’s interventions in Africa Crises – Dr. Thomas Tieku (University of Toronto)

In contrast to the former Organisation of African Unity (OAU), the African Union (AU) has developed a new peace and security architecture. This has increased the prospects for African agency in the continent’s security. These new institutions were greeted with great fanfare by various academics and NGOs. However, how much has changed in practice?

The reality of a Pan-African peace infrastructure under the leadership of the AU is that the practice of intervention has not changed from the patterns of intervention established during the 1990s. The reason for this is the enduring nature of the norm of Pan-Africanist solidarity, which dates back to the era of decolonisation and the creation of the OAU. When we look at the emerging trends in AU interventions in Africa we find that decisions tend to be based on consensus, that there is a preference for soft tools, that criticism from outside Africa tends to undermine the AU, and that ultimately the success of any interventions rely on regional powers.

What are the academic and policy implications of this? First, we need to be more realistic about what we can expect the AU to be able to achieve. Second, we should reassess the value of Western criticism of despotic African leaders. Often it can lead to more support for these leaders within Africa. Third, we need to stress the importance of norms, in this case that of Pan-Africanism.
Transnational Security and African States – Dr. Cyril Obi (Nordiska Afrikainstitutet)

How has Africa responded to the changing nature of security threats witnessed since the end of the Cold War? In an increasingly interconnected world we are witnessing emerging security challenges that are transnational in nature.

The end of the Cold War gave space for African states and institutions to gain agency. The mainstream view of African states is that they are failing, that they are unable to police their own borders and that they therefore pose a threat to international security. However, there are examples of Africa taking a lead. For example, in 1999 the African Union (AU) adopted the Organisation of African Unity (OAU) Convention on the Prevention and Combating of Terrorism. Similarly, from 1993 the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) developed a plan to start to address emerging transnational threats. The AU itself has also made progress in institution building. The organisation has moved from a policy of non-intervention to one of non-indifference.

Despite these attempts at asserting African agency, it remains the case that when considering new security threats, the continent continues to be seen as a source of threat, rather than as offering potential solutions. This has been particularly evident since 9/11 and the declaration of the ‘global war on terror’. The policy response of the West has been to increase military aid and to tighten immigration policies. More direct policies include the creation of the United States Africa Command (AFRICOM) in 2007.

It is clear that at both the regional and continental level that the institutional responses to transnational security threats are patchy in their effectiveness at best. There is a clear ambivalence to Africa’s response. The West has adopted an approach based on forging military partnerships that fail to acknowledge the power asymmetries at play. African agency is compromised by both external involvement and the limits to state capacity. The key is to transform African states into developmental and democratic entities to enable them to deal with transnational security threats.

Discussion

Contributions from the audience addressed some of the specific lines of analysis offered by the speakers as well as broader questions for policy. On the former, questions were raised about the utility of the ‘six levels’ of
response to R2P and how useful these were. It was even suggested that all African states were in some sense ‘waverers’ on this issue. Others raised questions about the framing of the analysis and who was being asked to encourage support for R2P. On policy implications of the analysis offered, questions were posed about what alternatives there were if western states were to avoid public criticism of despotic African leaders; whether the focus on institution building misses the fact that Africa works in much more informal ways; and whether criticism of AFRICOM is overstated as the US has had command structures like this in every other part of the world for at least 40 years.
AFRICA POLITICS AND DIPLOMACY

2005 marked the year of Africa in British diplomacy. Africa was placed at the top of the development agenda within the G8. Indeed the continent had become the arena in which forms of good governance were practiced and prioritised, and it was engaged within new discussion frameworks such as the Commission for Africa. The ability to sustain interest in Africa, and the emergence of ‘new partners’ such as China within Africa have altered expectations of African agency and diplomatic efforts or willing to engage with it.

Britain ‘doing good’ in Africa: what opportunities for African agency? – Dr. Julia Gallagher (SOAS)

There is an uncontested assumption within British politics that Africa different from the rest of the world, and that there is a tendency to idealise the continent, and sanitise Britain’s own self-interest within it. Under the leadership of Tony Blair, Britain saw a policy shift away from ideal/ethical political transactions and national interests towards ‘doing good’ in sub-Saharan Africa. This approach to ‘doing good’ was consolidated within the Commission for Africa, the G8, and Gordon Brown’s ‘Marshall Plan for Africa.’ There is strong political consensus among British parties. Africa is seen as a ‘sacred space’ populated by the ‘virtuous poor’ at the mercy of good or bad leaders. This type of policy is rooted in moral ideas about ‘the good’ rather than the political, with more concern as to the good British state as opposed to the needs of Africa. This raises the following questions for African agency:

- What might a doing good approach mean for African actors and their ability to pursue their own agency? A stifling international consensus on what Africa needs to do, constrains choice and agency.

- What impact does viewing ‘Africa as poor’ have? Viewed in this way implies a disconnect between the elites and the poor in Africa, and the assumption that social contracts between rulers and ruled do not apply. The result of this is a diffusion of power that undermines sovereignty and re-enforces the perception that African states are not substantial states.

- What is the gap between this claustrophobic atmosphere and the reality?
Rejection of this approach and subsequent normalisation of political relations would be good. However, there is little room for optimism in Britain where ‘the sacred space’ is too important to let go of.

**African relations with China and other ‘rising powers’ – Dr. Giles Mohan (The Open University) and Dr. Marcus Power (University of Durham)**

Taking Angola as a case study, China’s bilateral initiatives in Africa continue to be important, despite the recession. Indeed, ‘rising powers’ such as Turkey and countries such as Japan have increasingly mimicked the Chinese model of engaging with Africa. These emerging donors have put competitive pressure on long-standing donors and, particularly in China’s case, led to less pressure on the question of governance and conditionality, with an increase in south-south solidarity. China’s involvement in Africa can be seen as a case of ‘rogue aid’, multi-polarity, or ‘peaceful assistance.’ Aid is bundled with investment grants and loans framed in an investment-oriented, non-ideological manner with the overall objective being access to resources. China claims to offer a transparent win-win situation of ‘you’ve got it, we want it.’

The US$3-10 billion loaned to Angola since 2004 is presented by China as free from conditionalities. However, 70% of all public enterprise contracts have to be given to Chinese companies. China’s role in developing Angola’s capacity was initially about oil, but has since come to encompass wider objectives such as poverty alleviation and infrastructure.

**Canada, the G8 and Africa: the rise and decline of a hegemonic project? – Prof. David Black (Dalhousie University)**

When thinking about Africa as space of moral politics it is important to consider the role of Canada as it illustrates hegemonic consensus-building and shows the difficulties of sustaining political interest. Applying Robert Cox’s analysis of the inter-subjective nature of behavioural expectation and common sense, Canada is well-situated to play a pivotal role in order-building and how Africa is integrated within the international system. In the role of ‘middle power,’ Canada engaged in more consensual politics under Chretien and this, within the G8, should be seen as doubly hegemonic in legitimating this dominant form of integration of Africa. Its weakness, however, has been
the relative ambivalence towards Africa in Canada, especially in the transition from Chretien to Harper’s leadership.

Despite a general ambivalence towards Africa, has anything really changed in Canada’s approach? On the one hand:

- Canada was the first G8 country to fulfil its commitment to the doubling of aid
- Canada continues to play an active role in Darfur and Northern Uganda.

On the other, however, in 2009:

- The Canadian government halved the number of core bilateral recipients in Africa
- Shifted towards a peace and security role.

The current Canadian government has adopted a US-style, conservative position that is sceptical of aid and multilateralism. Yet it needs to balance this position with the pursuit of other objectives such as gaining a seat on the UN Security Council, and thus engaging and rebuilding relations with African states.

What this summit-cycle of Canada’s engagement with Africa suggests is that it is structurally weak and socially strong.

**Discussion**

Discussion in this session ranged over a number of areas of Africa’s relations with donors. Questions were raised about whether the current positive reception of China was a short-term honeymoon; and whether western aid approaches, particularly budgetary support, were working. Other contributors focussed on the analytical approaches presented and questioned whether the ‘Coxian’ theoretical framework was adequate for analysing African agency.
AFRICA POLICY AND RESEARCH

Distinctions and methods to bridge the gap between policy-based and academic research have often been a key contention, especially in regards to the study of Africa and the International System. This issue becomes pertinent to the study of African agency in regards to i) how agency is understood within policy-making and academic research; ii) the agency of research being done in Africa, and how it is, or is not, distinct from wider agendas in international politics.

Policy-making and Academia: how they relate and how we might do better – David Frost (Director, Strategy and Policy Planning, FCO)

Differences between the policy and academic world are underpinned by environmental differences. Information and research in the policy world is driven by political action, imperfect information and the need for action compounded by time constraints. Research in academia is less driven by action, but has more time to explain. There are seven key features that underpin these differences:

- Speed of decision-making
- Need to act, not doing anything is not an option
- Oral culture of policy-making, have to break down what you are saying to a few points
- Levels of distraction: the ‘lighthouse effect’ of policy interest and African crises.
- Timing, e.g. state failure much bigger issue after 9/11
- Time pressure of analysis
- Policy-makers work within a political and financial environment

In relation to Africa specifically, there is a difficulty in that it is not a great issue of public interest; it is not necessarily beneficial to a diplomatic career as an area of strategic interest; and that Africa is marginalised in relation to other issues and regions in the world. However, despite considerable constraints within government, there is a need to develop a better communication between academics and policy makers.
Prof. David Anderson (University of Oxford)

General trends in research into Africa over the last thirty years indicate the following:

- Research capacity in the social sciences has declined markedly over the last 20 years, especially in the tertiary sector;
- Consultancy-led focus of independent research agenda in Africa diminishes African agency as it is funded and thus driven by external agendas;
- Research in Africa is done by Africans but at the behest of others.

Furthermore, the extent of evidence and research varies enormously between technical and non-technical sectors. All governments apply evidence-based policy selectively, often looking for the evidence that supports the policy. Research is not apolitical.

Africa has a ‘research surplus’ and a ‘training deficit’. There is a lack of tertiary programmes at the graduate level, especially in the public sector, with an increase in private research linked to donor interests. Institutes draw researchers out of the public sector and into the private, thus where you grow one area of research you shrink the other. Donor-driven research agendas undermine the principle of permission to dissent on the part of the researcher. It is easy to raise money for African research and publish on African issues, but has become too easy at the expense of quality control.

Discussion

Contributions from the audience focussed on the academic-policy relationship, and on the particular features of research in and on Africa. On the former, questions were asked about how far policy of the FCO is driven by public officials rather than civil servants and whether the gap between research and policy can continue. It questioned whether government sometimes ignored academic research on Africa and how research was conducted within the FCO when a crisis erupted. On the current state of research on and in Africa participants raised questions about how academics can disseminate research better; whether there was a decline in the quality of British research on Africa; and whether there was a ‘problem with the mindsets of African scholars’. It was also noted that South Africa stood apart somewhat from the characterisation of research in Africa and that there were real difficulties in measuring the impact of research on policy.
ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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The BISA Africa and International Studies Working Group was formally established in summer 2007. The Group aims to provide a forum in which to bring together a diverse range of scholars to discuss and debate substantive issues arising from different dimensions of ‘the international’ in Africa; theoretical and conceptual debates around Africa and International Studies; and debates about the pedagogy of International Studies in and of Africa.

Since its inception the group has engaged over 100 members from around the world. The group has established an active presence at the BISA and ISA annual conferences, and a regularly updated website that documents the broad interests of the group’s members, provides links to conferences and workshops on Africa, and offers a series of working papers on contemporary issues affecting the politics of Africa and the international system.

For further information about the working group, please contact Dr William Brown, at The Open University (w.brown@open.ac.uk)

Papers from the Africa International workshop are available on the Working Group’s website: www.open.ac.uk/socialsciences/bisa-africa

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