African Agency: new directions in IR, perspectives from southern Africa

Executive Summary

African Agency: new directions in IR and perspectives from southern Africa was a two day seminar held at the Wallenberg Research Centre, Stellenbosch University as part of the British International Studies Association (BISA) Africa and International Studies Working Group’s seminar series on African Agency in International Politics. The seminar was sponsored by the ESRC and Stellenbosch University.

The purpose of the seminar was to engage with substantive and theoretical issues raised in earlier seminars and to consider a range of perspectives on African agency from the southern Africa region. The seminar brought together researchers from nine universities and research centres in Europe and South Africa. Issues covered included the role of South Africa in the region, regional institution building, the role of non-state actors in regionalism, trade and crime, the dynamics of Africa’s relations with China, and Africa’s negotiations with the European Union. The seminar also provided an opportunity for UK scholars to review and reflect on earlier seminars in the series.

This summary provides an overview of the key themes arising from the day’s discussion, followed by a more detailed breakdown of what was discussed in each session. For further information on the African Agency series, see page 8 of this summary.
Summary of themes

Analytical results

• Questions of African agency are closely tied to issues of country-leadership and the strength or otherwise of African regional and sub-regional institutions. Giving effect to an African voice in international politics relies in part on strengthening national and regional institutions and developing more effective, if more narrowly focussed leadership by pivotal states on the continent. However, considerable political and resource obstacles remain in both cases.

• At the same time, there are many ways in which African actors (state, non-state and extra-state) engage or disengage willfully with the international community and as a result have influence. Assessments of African agency must include these actors in analysis of regional integration, trade negotiations and in challengers and alternatives to states in the form of organised crime.

• Seizing the opportunity created by the rise of new powers on the continent – China, India and Brazil – will necessitate developing African actors’ ability to accurately assess the intentions and priorities of those parties and for states to articulate their own policy preferences and strategies. Even so, western actors remain important in aid and trade despite disillusionment with the relationship on both sides. Analysis of regional trade negotiations with the EU suggest that over-optimistic assessments of African agency at the international level should be treated with caution.

Conceptual and theoretical implications

• Assessments of African agency in international politics need to encompass the diversity of agencies at work – from states to NGOs, regional bodies and traditional authorities to organised crime. It also requires a sober assessment of how far one can speak of a collective African agency.

• Analysis of leadership and hegemony, as well as policy formation and negotiating strategies are all important to assessments of African agency.

• Questions about how we conceptualise agency need to be addressed further – is agency an exertion of power and influence, an ability to change structures or as something that is both reproductive and transformative of existing power relations.
Details of presentations

*African agency in international politics: scope, analysis and theory* William Brown (The Open University)

In a review of the ESRC seminar series on African Agency, Brown’s paper covered four main arenas of agency: multilateral forums; bi-lateral relations; intra-regional settings and sub-state and non-state areas of political agency. A series of analytical problems have begun to be addressed including: in relation to geopolitics, questions about the effects of shifts in polarity at the system level and the level of African collective action through the AU; in relation to forms of agency, the limitation on African state capacity and the dominance of leaders in foreign policy; and in relation to discourses, the extent to which policy framing, particularly securitisation, advances or limits African agency. Theoretical debates have fallen into two main groups: i) how to explain and understand African manoeuvring within the international system, and ii) how to conceptualise, characterise and explain different forms of agency.

*Theoretical reflections on African agency* Gilbert Khadiagala (Wits University)

Theories of agency inevitably raise the linked issues of institutions and leadership as well as considerations of opportunities and constraints open to African states. While there was some success in African leadership in the period 1998-2008, this era has now passed. Even then, constraints on African leadership were such that we should not talk of African hegemons. Now, institutional weakness in the AU and in sub-regional organisations mean that an African voice at the global level is even weaker. This is demonstrated in numerous issue areas – over UN Security Council reform, G20, trade and climate change. Lack of clear leadership is also evident in the AU’s ineffective role in the Libya crisis. The rise of new actors presents something of an opportunity for African states but so far Africa has been unable to give a clear sense of a collective position in its discussions with China. Stronger continental institutions are one response but also a need to build gradually and tactically with African leaders not over-extending themselves and having limited international ambitions on selective issues.

Discussion of Khadiagala’s paper included the following points:

- Even with more effective regional institutions the broader material constraints at the international level will limit African agency.
- Might it be possible to develop African leadership outside of institutions given that institutions are failing everywhere?
- Isn’t the picture less pessimistic than painted here with progress on other fronts such as development of the Africa stand-by force and the East African Community?
• Is there a parallel to draw with the EU – functional spillover from low level issue areas leading to consolidation and growth of institutions?

• Global grandstanding by African political leaders is also a reflection of an inability to tackle difficult domestic issues.

**Aid dependency as a limitation to national development policy? – Coordinating China and DAC donors in Rwanda**
Sven Grimm (Centre for Chinese Studies, Stellenbosch University)

Rwanda is a small aid dependent country dealing with 29 bilateral donors yet has been effective in leading the coordination of donors according to the country’s own development priorities. However, Rwanda has been much less effective in aligning non-DAC donors, especially China, to its aid coordination architecture. Agency vis a vis DAC donors has been enabled in part by using DAC policy declarations (Paris Declaration and the like) to further its ownership agenda but this holds little sway with China. Furthermore China is very resistant to increased openness in its aid programme and even denies the status of donor country, proclaiming equal, ‘eye-level’ interaction with Rwanda. Differences within Rwanda, between the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry for Economic Planning and Finance also limit Rwanda’s ability to bring China into the aid coordination structures. While China is reluctant to be coordinated and western donors are reluctant to sign off ownership, the Rwandan government, despite strong agency, is still not able to assert a clear strategy across all donors.

Discussion of Grimm’s paper included the following points:

• The sources of leverage open to Rwanda include its history of genocide and western policy rhetoric. In respect of China, whose interest is in resources, market potential and a discourse of ‘supporting Africa’, there is much less for Rwanda to work with.

• What is the significance of the ‘Asian Donors’ label increasingly used to distinguish China and India from western donors? Can awareness of this distinction give African governments an ability to play Asian off against western donors?

**African Agency in World Trade Undermined? The Case of Bilateral Relations with the European Union**
Stephen Hurt (Oxford Brookes University)

Against over-optimistic views of increasing African agency, and increasingly prevalent stories of African renewal, analysis of African trade relations with the EU show limited influence. Narratives of renewal focus on basic measures of GDP growth, role in world trade and south-south cooperation. However, analysis of HDI measures and FDI flows question this. If agency is defined as an ability to change material and ideational structures internationally, then African agency very limited. While Africa has exerted influence in
the WTO, trade agreements have increasingly moved to the bilateral level. With the EU, African relations have shifted from a high point of influence in the first Lomé Convention to a relationship defined by neoliberalism. Furthermore, Economic Partnership Agreements (EPAs) limit the ability of African states to define their own approach to regionalisation. Africa is weaker in the EPA negotiations, not least because the EU is a large aid donor and because Africa is dealing with the EU in small groups rather than the larger WTO grouping.

Discussion of Hurt’s paper included the following points:

- Is the portrayal of over-optimistic views of Africa a straw man and in fact most analysts are sober about the extent of African renewal?
- Isn’t the ability to say ‘no’, Africa’s obstinacy, an important, if limited, sign of effective agency?
- Is there a need to identify the different objections to EPAs on the continent – negotiations in different African regions have foundered on different issues?

**Region-building in Southern Africa** Chris Saunders & Dawn Nagar (Centre for Conflict Resolution, University of Cape Town)

By tracing the history of region-building in southern Africa it is possible to identify the efforts to define the southern Africa region and the obstacles to further regional integration as well as the extent to which limited regional integration is an obstacle to greater African agency. In the realm of peacekeeping there has been a shift from external, UN-based operations to attempts to build southern African capabilities in SADC as part of an African stand-by force. More generally, however, there have been limited spill-over effects from integration because of limited governance structures, capacity, human resources and funding. Strengthening core capacities of states is key to regionalisation. The example of energy cooperation through the southern African ‘power pool’ shows some of the limitations, with a SADC hydro scheme in the DRC rejected in favour of a project by an Australian MNC because it would be more beneficial to DRC than the SADC scheme. However, SADC could use market integration and the power pool more effectively to promote deeper integration.

**David vs. David vs. Goliath? Mapping South(ern) African civil society actors in the SADC-EU EPA negotiations** Ulrike Lorenz (Freie Universität, Berlin)

A focus on African agency in trade negotiations, looking in particular at the role of non-state actors, shows that in EPA negotiations with the EU there has been a significantly different experience to the wider multilateral negotiations. In EPA negotiations, trade unions, NGOs and research institutes have not replicated the ‘David vs Goliath’ pattern of WTO negotiations. For trade unions, there was a very limited
role and little EU-southern Africa connection among trade unions. For NGOs, there was a high profile ‘no to EPAs’ campaign by western-based global NGOs claiming to speak on behalf of Africa. However, these were criticised by some African governments who argued that saying ‘no to EPAs’ was not an option. Only four research institutes, two in Europe and two in southern Africa, had a role in EPA negotiations and were the most effective of the non-state actor groups but even here influence was limited. This diversity means there were several ‘Davids’ in the negotiations but only one Goliath.

Discussion of Saunders’ Nagar’s and Lorenz’s papers included the following points:

- Entry costs to negotiations are very high both in terms of finance and expertise.
- Is SADC a case of form over function, being built from the top by weak states?
- There are questions about who should belong to SADC, complicated further by the EPAs.
- Will emphasis on green energy and decline of coal change the balance of influence in the SADC power pool and drive new forms of regional integration?

**African traditional trans-border political entities and regional integration: The cases of Chewa Kingdom of Malawi, Mozambique and Zambia**

Happy Mickson Kayuni (University of the Western Cape)

Despite evidence of the importance of ethnic identities, particularly among those groups that are ‘partitioned’ between different national states, most regionalisation processes have been driven by and focussed at formal state level. The case of the Chewa group, which straddles the borders of Malawi, Mozambique and Zambia, shows that informal groupings could also have a role in regional integration. For our understanding of regionalism this case shows the importance of ‘bottom-up’ views of IR, the role of sociological and cultural groupings and the role of transborder linkages alongside formal state-to-state links. Although such traditional forms of authority do not necessarily arise in every African regional project, it does show the need to look at the interaction of the formal and informal in developing African regional forms of agency.

**The impact of organised crime on the state in Africa: the criminalisation of the state at local government level – A framework for measurement**

Derica Lambrechts (Stellenbosch University)

Organised crime in the Cape Flats area represents a challenge to formal state institutions and control in a context of weakened (but not ‘weak’ or ‘collapsed’) states. Here, functions not carried out by the formal state leave gaps that are filled by local ‘power grabbers’. Formal state responses range from confrontation to reluctant acceptance to collusion with organised crime. Evidence shows that South Africa is not only a home and host state to organise crime but also a transhipment state with drugs routes displaced from west
Africa increasing heading through the Cape area. Such trends will see growth of paternalistic, patron-client and violent relationships filling the gaps created by the weak formal state capacity.

Discussion of Kayuni’s and Lambrecht’s papers included the following points:

- How ‘African’ are the narratives about transborder traditional identities and organised crime? We can see evidence of both in Europe, North and South America.
- Might traditional authorities also potentially bring increasing conflict into regional projects, both with other traditional groupings and with the formal state?
- Despite emphasis on bottom-up views, don’t both papers still privilege the state, treating everything else (traditional groupings or organised crime) as a ‘problem’/’exception’?
- Do these cases show us important things about agency – agencies driving regionalism, making regional organisations more effective or showing transborder actors in addition to state-based agencies in international politics?

**African Agency and Western Policy** Tom Cargill (Africa Programme, Chatham House)

The policy world can be seen as a combination of actors: civil servants, politicians, journalists, business people and civil society actors including NGOs and diaspora groups. The financial crisis ended a ten-year period of political assertiveness and economic growth in Africa even if those achievements were exaggerated by the contrast with the dire period which preceded them. The crisis has been a hammer blow to any common understanding of development assistance with some states retreating from G8 commitments of 2005. All of the above challenge the identification of African states with western states although some ties remain strong. Intervention in Libya worsened relations between the EU and sub-Saharan Africa even more and there is little acknowledgement in Europe of the scale of anger and frustration in Africa at the NATO action. UK continues to exert disproportionate influence for its size but the change of government has seen an increase in focus on UK national interests, especially trade and like France and the USA, still lacks any coherent set of principles for its Africa policy.

**African Agency, China and African policies** Sven Grimm (Centre for Chinese Studies, Stellenbosch University)

China’s increased role in Africa appears in contrast to the disenchantment with western states and offers a big opportunity for African agency, providing, alongside India and Brazil, more choices for African policy makers. However, to take advantage of this means Africa needs to have an accurate assessment of China’s policy and intentions and how high Africa rates on China’s agenda. There is in fact very limited knowledge of China in Africa, and relatively little expertise on Africa in China. Some basic questions about China –
who are the actors who are important (individuals, firms, state enterprises and companies)? What are their agendas? – are not really understood on the African side. Developing an African perspective that can take advantage of this new actor doesn’t necessarily rely on being an African national but does mean asking the right kind of questions from an African point of view.

Discussion of Cargill’s and Grimm’s papers included the following points:

- What political influence has China had inside Africa, has it increased authoritarian tendencies?
- Has UK commitment to 0.7% target for ODA involved some slight of hand over budgets – transfer of projects from Ministry of Defence?
- Africa needs to be able to see the choices facing China – for instance China-Africa relations may be affected by third-party effects, especially China’s relations with the USA.

About the seminar series on African Agency in international politics

For further information and access to the full papers featured in this workshop, please visit http://www.open.ac.uk/socialsciences/bisa-africa/african-agency/

African Agency: Agency and Southern Africa was the fifth of a series of seminars on African Agency. The previous four seminars were on:

Emerging agents of change? Chatham House, 2nd February 2011
Peace, Conflict and Intervention University of Birmingham 7th April 2011
Transnational Security University of Kent 16th June 2011
African Agency: Implications for International Relations Theory City University 14th September 2011

If you would like further information on the series, please contact Sophie Harman sophie.harman@city.ac.uk or Will Brown w.brown@open.ac.uk