

Who Benefits from the Paris Declaration: A Perspective from African Civil Society

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Long before donor conditionality and democracy assistance programs, African civil society has been at the center of economic and political development on the continent. In the 1950s and 1960s African intellectuals, students, labor unions, and church groups played a central role in national independence movements. Repressed throughout the Cold War often with the active support of Western and Soviet leaders, these forces re-emerged in the 1990s as the driving force behind the collapse of authoritarian one-party rule. The resilience and vibrancy of African civil society has inspired hope and optimism among scholars and development policy-makers alike, however, current attempts to harmonize aid programs undermine the role of civil society in the continent's development processes.

In the 1990s, the triumph of neo-liberal democracy and the withdrawal of Cold-War alliance financial support paved the way for the implementation of SAPs across the continent, which stripped weak states of their limited capacity and in many cases reinforced clientelistic networks. As a result, corrupt and inefficient African states lost credibility in the eyes of their Western counterparts. International donors sought new avenues to influence political and economic development and increasingly looked towards civil society and non-governmental organizations. The result has been a proliferation of democracy-assistance programs.

Whereas international aid flows were formerly provided directly to sovereign governments, during the 1990s aid increasingly targeted individual organizations and specific project support. This fragmentation of aid has led to duplication of efforts and lost revenue in transaction costs due to the myriad of local recipients. Accordingly, the 2005 Paris Declaration was intended to improve aid effectiveness by streamlining aid flows. However, the shift from project to program-based support, which involves pooling donor resources into direct budget support, has been criticized by civil society organizations as a failure to recognize their role in local ownership and accountability. The paper seeks to investigate the tension between the state, civil society, and international donors in Africa. How are African governments reacting to the evolution in international aid agenda? What strategies are employed by civil society to reclaim ownership in the aid process?