



International Journal of Multidisciplinary Research and Growth Evaluation



International Journal of Multidisciplinary Research and Growth Evaluation

ISSN: 2582-7138

Received: 05-11-2020; Accepted: 06-12-2020

www.allmultidisciplinaryjournal.com

Volume 1; Issue 5; November-December 2020; Page No. 707-714

From History to Responsibility: Rethinking Africa's Development Constraints

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.54660/IJMRGE.2020.1.5.707-714>

Abstract

Explanations based on colonial history and external dependency have always been the leading explanation on Africa's development constraints. Although these views are still critical to the comprehension of inherited disparities and initial institutional circumstances, they are becoming inadequate in describing modern variance in economic and governance results across African nations. This paper explains that the current problem of development in Africa is not as influenced by colonial legacies per se but rather by post-independence institutions, political incentives, and skewed state capacity. The paper will apply the political economy and institutional theory to understand the role of elite bargaining, incentive structures and institutional enforcement patterns in defining development trajectories. It demonstrates that different legacies of the past have played out differently over the continent since domestic political settlements precondition the way institutions play out. In the growth processes, there is no structural transformation, especially where the distribution of rents and temporary protection of coalitions are rewarded by political incentives.

On the other hand, where incentives are congruent with productivity, learning and consistency of the policy, developmental progress is made possible even in unfavourable historical conditions. Instead of the moral or retrospective understanding of responsibility, the paper presents the idea of responsibility as structural and forward-looking. Responsibility is perceived as the outcome of the positions of actors in both institutional and political setups and their ability to remodel incentives, enforcement modes, and priorities of governing. This reframing indicates that analytical interest is no longer focused on the past determinism but on the present day political decisions that reinforce or disrupt the constraints of development. Through the combination of both the institutional analysis and the political settlements theory, the paper can be added to the further discussion on the subject of African development and provide a theory on the way the governance reform, state capacity, and incentive realignment can contribute to the lasting and inclusive growth of the economy.

Keywords: African Development, Political Economy, Institutions, Responsibility, Governance

1. Introduction

The history of Africa has been long debated in the context of colonial history and its legacies in the way Africa should be developed. This scholarship has undertaken a leading role in illustrating how colonialism gave rise to extractive forms of economies, perversely modes of state formation, and entrenched African economies in unequal forms of global political and economic hierarchies (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018)^[33]; (Enns and Bersaglio, 2019)^[15]; (Bhambra, 2020)^[9]. These analyses have been very effective in disrupting reductionist accounts of African underdevelopment and in anticipating the structural violence that colonial and postcolonial orders are built on. Nevertheless, persisting in putting colonial explanations at the forefront of modern developmental discussion is dangerous as it may lead to analytic subjectivity towards a range of issues, especially when it is used to diminish the importance of post-independence political decisions, institutional structures, and governmental incentives in determining the current developmental patterns.

Even though colonial legacies form a significant component of the African historical situation, they are not enough to explain the vast divergence in African states development patterns since independence. The post-colonial paths of countries that have developed a similar colonial heritage have taken radically different directions in terms of economic development, state building and social provisions. This difference puts into perspective the historical determinism explanations and emphasises the role of domestic institutions and the governance structures in the mediation of the development outcomes. It is becoming evident in research on the topic of infrastructure provision, energy access, and the provision of public goods that institutional quality and political accountability are determinants of the development performance and often have a stronger impact than the inherited

colonial structures (Ahlborg *et al.*, 2015) ^[1]. Modern developmental predicaments, consequently, cannot be fully conceptualised without a long-term focus on the operating mechanisms of the post-independence institutions.

It is on this view that this paper proposes that the current development issues in Africa can be attributed more to post-independence institutional forces and political interests as opposed to the colonial past only. Even though the postcolonial states have inherited weak and outward looking institutional structures, their subsequent path has been based on the ways the institutions have been modified and reformed or strategically utilised as part of the domestic political settlements. In most instances, the political incentives that are geared towards elite survival, distribution of rents, and short-term stability have compromised long-term investment in state capacity and productive transformation. The dominance of the executive, the feeble legislative branch and inadequate accountability mechanisms have also been restricting policy coherence and reform to strengthen patterns of underdevelopment, which cannot be accounted for by colonial determinism only (Opalo, 2019) ^[35].

In line with this, the paper progresses three analytically motivated questions. First, it evaluates how far colonial legacies still determine the development outcomes of the African countries in the modern age. Second, it looks at how the institutions of post-independence regime and political incentive influences systematically economic performance and provision of services across African states. Third, it examines the implications of the proposal that a change in the explanatory focus to less historical causation and more contemporary political responsibility has had on development policy and reform. The conceptualisation of responsibility is based not on the attribute of moral responsibility as a moral imposition of blame on someone, but on the institutional and political ability to develop, establish, and maintain governance relations that can promote inclusive and sustainable development (Kagema, 2018) ^[25].

The input of this paper is two-fold. Theoretically, it redirects the African development arguments by inducting both historical consciousness and institutional and political economy analysis to leave behind the explanations that either emphasise a focus on the past or present agency to isolate them. Empirically and normatively, it emphasises the need to develop strategies that focus on the institutional quality, accountability and responsible leadership rather than intervention that is technocratic or externally led. By so doing, the paper serves to add to the scholarly discussions as well as the policy-oriented discussions regarding the future of Africa economically.

Accordingly, this paper will be organized in the following way. The second sub parts look through colonial legacies and outline their explanatory frontiers. This is then accompanied by introducing a theoretical framework revolving around institutions, agencies and political responsibilities. The methodological procedure is then described, and the analytical findings are presented. These findings are put into context in the discussion, and then policy implications are given and finally, concluding reflections.

2. Colonial Legacies and Their Limitations

The colonial rule produced strong, lasting impacts in African political economies. Colonial governments were focused on extraction, forming trade patterns, location of infrastructure, urbanisation, and state-making to benefit the interests of the

metropolis instead of instituting widespread economic change (Austin, 2015) ^[3]; (Robinson, 2019) ^[38]; (Tadei, 2020) ^[40]. Colonial policies have long-term consequences on inequality and growth, which are impacts that can be studied empirically as influences on land tenure systems, labour coercion, fiscal capacity, and spatial distribution of economic activity (Michalopoulos and Papaioannou, 2018) ^[30]; (Austin, 2015) ^[3]. These legacies put unequal terms of starting at independence and limiting early postcolonial development paths, which defined the institutional and political troubles that would arise in the post-independence period.

One of the keyways in which colonialism influenced development is in the form of path dependence through inherited institutions. In most cases, colonial states had built administrative systems that were not based on representation but on control, which required the application of indirect rules, ethnically stratified states, and feeble fiscal agreements with citizens (Robinson, 2019) ^[38]; (Berman and Lonsdale, 2017) ^[8]. These arrangements incorporated poor state capacity and politicised identity formations, which defined the post-independence politics. There is empirical evidence that the use of colonial policies escalated the role of ethnicity in political contest (Ali *et al.*, 2019) ^[2]; (Robinson, 2014) ^[37], which is part of the process of fragmented state-building. African states were therefore left with institutions that were ill-suited to handle inclusive development or long-term economic planning. A comparison of the British and French colonies demonstrates how the different forms of administration gave rise to different institutional legacies (Michalopoulos and Papaioannou, 2018) ^[30]; (Falola and Agbo, 2018) ^[17].

Although path dependence is a good explanation of how Africa first found itself after independence, it did not significantly explain the modern differences in development results. It is also becoming clear that the effect of colonial legacies declines with time as home-based political and economic decisions pile up. According to Maseland (2018) ^[28], colonial institutions did show significant impacts on previous institutional and economic performance, but these impacts have become lesser than the post-independence institutional change and governance performance. The same is shown by Ndulo (2019) ^[34], Opalo (2019) ^[35] who show that domestic political settlements, leadership decisions and reform paths, have played a major role in institutional performance, mitigating the deterministic impact of colonial heritage.

This point of view is supported by comparative evidence. Nations sharing significantly similar colonial experiences (such as the British or French colonialism) have taken different paths of development over the decades after independence. The degree of state capacity, urbanisation, and economic diversification cannot be attributed to the legacy of colonialism only. The evidence of African urbanisation shows that although colonial planning determined the early urban hierarchies, post-independent policy decisions concerning land regulation, investment in infrastructure, and governance played a decisive role in determining modern economic results of urban cities (De Satgé, 2018) ^[13]. These results highlight the constraints of the attribution of current developmental constraints to the colonial design.

The falling explanatory power of colonialism can be further demonstrated by quantitative and historical statistics as an independent variable. The systematic measures of colonial exposure by Ziltener, Kunzler and Walter (2017) ^[44] in Africa

and Asia vary greatly in terms of intensity, duration and form. Although these measures are associated with some end-run results, they do not absolutely explain the institutional quality, economic performance, or political stability that can be observed nowadays. In their turn, postcolonial paths start becoming mostly an aspect of domestic politics and the ability to reform, as well as the persistence of policies (Mulcahy, 2017) [31]; (Letsa and Wilfahrt, 2020) [27].

Institutions of the colonial past thus interrelate with those of post-independence in a complicated manner. The historical constraints defined the context under which African states have been functioning in, but they did not predetermine the development results in the long term. According to Michalopoulos and Papaioannou (2018) [30], the historical legacies with the strongest impact are those that get strengthened by existing institutional vulnerabilities and political incentives that reproduce extractive arrangements. In the case of state capacity, accountability, and inclusive governance being invested in by post-independence states, the colonial constraints have been found to be more flexible with a significant variation in developmental paths (Wucherpfennig, Hunziker, Cederman, 2016) [43]. Thus, the colonial legacies continue to provide the necessary though inadequate explanation of the Africa current development predicament. They assist in the explanation of inherited inequalities and early institutional weakness but fail to explain the high divergence that is apparent today among African nations. Analysing the constraints to development of Africa would then involve going beyond historical determinism to look at how post-independence institutions, political incentives and governance decisions have either reduced or enhanced colonial behemoths. It is this conceptualisation of responsibility as a structural and institutional phenomenon (instead of a moral judgement) that grounds itself on this analytical shift.

3. Theoretical Framework: Agency, Institutions and Responsibility

This theoretical framework incorporates the elements of agency, institutions, and responsibility to examine the results of African development. It relies on the political settlements theory and institutional analysis to discuss the influence of the domestic power structure on the governance and performance of development. In this context, agency may be defined as the ability of actors, especially the elites to sway institutional design, enforcement and policy outcomes. Institutions are conceptualized as persistent patterns of formal and informal rules and practices that organize behaviour and anticipations with time. The concept of responsibility is structured in such a way that it emphasizes the future imperative of actors to alter incentive structures and institutional organisations which recreate underdevelopment. Blended, the three dimensions shed light on the interactions among the elite bargaining, institutional persistence, and differentiated capacities to generate the outcomes of governance, and it has both constraints of the past and the potential of a transformative action (Buckwalter, 2017) [11]; (Tan, 2016) [41].

4. The Institutional Theory and Political Economy

African development limitations are placed on a political economy and institutional framework to situate it in this paper, which puts priority on the interaction of power,

incentive, and historically grounded institutional arrangements. Political economy underscores the importance of political systems in determining the economic performance in terms of resource allocation, rule enforcement and rent distribution. Institutions are not just understood as formal rules but as long-term patterns of formal and informal practices that organise overtime behaviour and expectations.

An important theory in this context is institutional path dependence, which describes the self-reinforcing nature of institutional choices, which makes it difficult to alter later choices. Institutional immobility is not, however, part of path dependence. Instead, it reflects the interdependence of institutions and developmental paths in which existing structures influence incentives and continuous political and economic processes feed on such structures in a gradual and continuous fashion. Since, according to Signé (2018) [39], institutions and development co-evolve, both institutional arrangement and development pressures can also restructure institutional rewards and capabilities. This is a dynamic perspective that is non-deterministic in the face of history. Additionally, political economy approaches also emphasise that institutions do not operate in the same nature on how they are entrenched in relations of power (Fosu, 2018) [24]. Instead of neutral processes, institutions are indicative of interests and trades of major political coalitions. This view is relevant in the African context since it is why similar formal institutions frequently deliver divergent results within countries, based on their conformity to current political accommodations and enforcement abilities.

5. Conceptualising “responsibility” as structural, not moral

In contrast to the accounts according to which the development challenges experienced in Africa can be explained by moral failure or the lack of good leaders, the present paper utilises a structural conception of responsibility. Responsibility is not perceived in terms of personal responsibility of bad things happening, but as a futuristic duty which comes about as a result of the placement of actors in the institutional and political frameworks. This strategy changes the paradigm of analysing the role of the actor and turns it to the change in the background circumstances that structurally produce underdevelopment. Based on the theory of responsibility of justice developed by Buckwalter (2017) [11], structural responsibility occurs in those instances when social processes and institutional structures generate unfair or inefficient results, regardless of the bad intentions. The actors are distributed with responsibility to participate in, enjoy, or be able to change such arrangements. Aspects of action are embedded socially, and their impacts are mediated by institutional settings and not individual decisions.

The development of Africa is applied to this conception to mean that it is in the restructuring of incentive systems and institutional arrangements that replicate low productivity, exclusion and rent-seeking. It is also capacity-sensitive and role-based: those actors who have more influence on the design, enforcement and distribution of resources have more responsibility to seek reform. This type of framing does not condemn morally but still maintains analytical clarity when it comes to the agency and duty.

6. Incentives, Elite Bargains, and State Capacity

Elite bargains and incentives structures are the most important factors within this structural framework that connects institutions and development outcomes. The analysis of political settlements underlines that the development paths of the ruling coalition are formed due to the allocation of rents and the conflict management as well as the political stability ensured by the ruling coalition (Behuria, Buur & Gray, 2017)^[7]; (Gray, 2019)^[20]. Institutions are more often perceived as a tool that helps to sustain political settlements, instead of being considered as independent restrictions of elite conduct.

These dynamics can be used to understand why economic growth in Africa has in many cases not been associated with structural transformation. Hickey (2019)^[22] demonstrates that in cases where a political settlement is oriented to the short-term distribution of rent and the maintenance of coalitions, growth may be achieved without the upgrading of productivity or industrial diversification or the development of widespread employments. Under these conditions, the state-business relationships are biased to closed and discretionary arrangements at the expense of the competitive and learning oriented industrial policy.

State capacity in such a case is not homogenous but dispersed. As states are heterogeneous institutional ensembles, Centeno, Kohli, and Yashar (2017)^[12] conceive the states as constituting effective and dysfunctional elements. This point of view suggests the existence of pockets of effectiveness as they serve the interests of the elites, although other regions of the state might continue to be clientelist or disjointed. This variability indicates that there is agency in constraint and that institutional change can be made after changing incentive structures.

7. Theoretical Framework

By combining these strands, the paper assumes an analytical model having four elements in terms of analysis. First, institutional path dependence is not considered to be a deterministic force, but rather a conditioning factor, which influences incentives without being inconsiderable of agency and change (Buckwalter, 2017)^[11]; (Tan, 2016)^[41]. Second, the political settlements are examined as the main process in terms of which the institutions are functioning, and the focus is made on the way the elite bargains are organising enforcement, rent distribution, and developmental priorities (Behuria *et al.*, 2017)^[7]; (Gray, 2019)^[20]. Third, it focuses on differentiated state capacity because not all sectors and agencies in the same state are equally effective (Centeno *et al.*, 2017)^[12]. Lastly, structural responsibility determines actors according to their position based on their roles and capabilities, who can intervene in institutional arrangements to change Africa and its developmental limitations (Buckwalter, 2017)^[11].

This paradigm allows the reorientation of history as fate of responsibility as institutional decisions of the past are important as they constitute current incentives and power relations but are not the actors of the system in the present but are agents with differentiated capacities and with the corresponding responsibility to change them.

8. Methodological Approach

8.1. Ontological and Epistemological Positioning.

The paper is based on an evolutionary-institutional and complexity-sensitive ontology, which does not understand

African development as a linear process, where single variables work independently, but as an emergent result of political, economic, and institutional systems interacting. In this view, institutions, power relationships and incentives are historically established and constitutive instead of exogenous constraints. This ontological view dismisses methodological individualism and assumptions based on equilibria in favour of systemic analysis that is sensitive to path dependence, feedback effects, and non-linearity (Gräbner-Radkowitsch, 2016)^[19].

The paper follows an interpretive and a mechanism approach to epistemology. Theoretical reasoning, comparative interpretation and critical interaction with the existing empirical research generate knowledge about development constraints as opposed to causal inference based on large-N statistical procedures. This orientation especially suits the analysis of such phenomena of political economy as elite bargaining, institutional inertia, and structural responsibility, which cannot be easily observed directly and cannot be condensed into measurable indicators (Gräbner-Radkowitsch, 2016)^[19]; (Kelsall, 2018)^[26].

9. Strategy of Analysis and Use of Secondary Literature.

The discussion will be based on a critical review of the existing secondary literature, which is extracted from political economy, development literature, and African political analysis. The secondary sources are not treated as a storehouse of truth, but rather as mechanisms of analysis wherein some repeated patterns, contradictions, and gaps in explanation are determined. It is a strategy that enables the paper to cross-viva-vie against several other studies and contexts, which makes its assertions plausible without depending on one empirical location.

This strategy is based on comparative reasoning. The paper shows how varying historical conditions can yield different results through different experiences of African development and different sectoral pathways based on institutional composition and political settlements. This method is consistent with research in political economy, in which the causal relationship is conjunctural and contingent and not universal or linear.

10. Mechanism Tracing, Case Illustrations

Empirical support is presented by a selective use of the cases, especially the industrial and technological sectors in Africa, which are well recorded in the literature. They are mechanism-tracing images and not comprehensive case-studies, indicating how institutional structures, political incentives and state-business relationships work in practice. This methodology is akin to the work of the political economy that applies area cases to understand larger structural processes without excessive generalisation of individual settings (Baker and Sovacool, 2017)^[4]. It is more concerned with the reproduction of development constraints by the institutional and political processes and not with policy success or failure in a vacuum.

11. Political Settlement and Feasibility of the Context

The methodological framework is also supported by the approach to political settlements, which focuses on the distribution of power and elite bargaining agreements that support the output of the institution. This approach preempts political feasibility and sensitivity to context as opposed to adopting a universal model of development or institutional

reform. The institutions are studied as aligned with the existing power relations, as opposed to idealised standards of governance (Kelsall, 2018) ^[26].

This view is also apparent in the way the responsibility is treated within the paper, and it is conceptualised as structurally situated and forward-looking. Responsibility is seen in connection with the role of actors in political settlements and the ability to change incentive structures, as opposed to moral judgment not based on political realities.

12. Limitations and Scope Conditions

These methodological choices have a few limitations. The use of secondary literature limits the chances of observing political negotiations and informal practices at the micro-level. The illustrative cases used can underestimate domestic differences and disagreements. Additionally, the article does not purport any statistical causal identification. Rather, it proceeds with theoretically supported plausibility arguments, which are in line with complex methodological approaches and institutionalism (Gräbner-Radkowitsch, 2016) ^[19]; (Kelsall, 2018) ^[26].

These limitations are admitted being inherent to the analytical role of the paper: to conceptualise the concept of the development constraints of Africa, as well as to give a sound framework in which further empirical research and policy analysis can be conducted.

13. Analytical Findings

Finding 1: Colonial legacies interpret the meaning of starting conditions as the explanation of contemporary divergence.

It is indeed true that colonial legacies can be viewed as the influence of the first-order conditions, but not how development is to be pursued in the current world, as the analysis confirms. The early political power structures, economic expropriation and institutional forms were shaped during the colonial rule with long shadows that cast a shadow over the postcolonial states. Nonetheless, the explanatory strength of such legacies, in the long run, fades away as the number of post-independence political decisions increases, as comparative research is showing increasingly (Michalopoulos and Papaioannou, 2017) ^[30]; (Hodge *et al.*, 2016) ^[23].

This dynamic is evident in comparative studies of the British colonies in the past. As demonstrated by Lee and Paine (2019), although British colonial institutions may impact the initial democratic paths, the impact of these institutions diminishes as national political incentives, elite politics, and institutional responses transform the results of governance. This is one of the reasons why nations that share many similarities in terms of their colonial legacies have markedly different degrees of political stability, economic performance, and state capacity many decades after gaining independence.

The historical accounts that explain the underdevelopment in Africa because of colonialism thus stand a risk of undermining modern-day causes of divergence. Although colonialism limited initial institutional decisions and economic organisations, it did not place African states on the same developmental pathways. According to Fisher (2018) ^[18], political agency after independence has been instrumental in recreating or undermining inherited structures. This relocates the responsibility out of historical determinism and into the accumulation of the effects of

political decision-making within inherited yet modifiable constraints. Legacies of colonialism are significant, but they work as conditioning elements, not as limiting determinants.

Finding 2: Political incentives give more priority to rent distribution as opposed to transformation.

One of the main conclusions of the analysis is that political incentives in most of the African states are designed in such a way that rent distribution and stability of regimes are more important than structural change of the economy. Political systems are not based on productivity improvement and industrial modernisation, but instead, they tend to compensate for the distribution of rents to major electoral districts as an instrument of elite group cohesion.

This interaction can be observed in land-intensive and resource-reliant sectors. Bennington *et al.* (2018) ^[6] illustrate the integration of natural resource rents in the politics of influence on stakeholders, which is entrenched in African politics, which favors short term extraction and distribution of the resources over long-term developmental investments. Political competition is addressed by rents to achieve elite support, usually at the cost of diversification and technological modernisation.

On the same note, land governance reforms depict the corrosive nature of political incentives on the achievement of transformative results. Narh *et al.* (2016) ^[32] demonstrate that the application of land reform is often a grey area because the official policy objectives are in the shadow of informal political arithmetic. Institutions governing land are selectively applied or distorted to maintain existing power relations, and productivity gains are hampered.

Such trends indicate that the problems of the development of Africa are not related so much to a shortage of policy ideas but to a misalignment of incentives. Growth policies that put a risk on the existing rent-distribution institutions are politically expensive, so it is more appealing to reform by small steps or symbolic reform than to initiate a wholesale change. The responsibility in this case is not abstract and diffuse, but it is within the political settlements that favour the maintenance of coalitions at the expense of the development results in the long term.

Finding 3: Institutional weakness is a source of low productivity as well as reform.

The analysis also concludes that productivity and reform initiatives are systematically derailed by institutional weaknesses, especially in enforcement, coordination and accountability. Weak institutions do not just fail to promote development; they deliberately choose to influence incentives that would be dis-incentivising investment, learning, and innovation.

According to McMillan and Headey (2014) ^[29], Africa has experienced slow structural transformation, which is a sign of the inadequacy of governance throughout the years, such as the fragmentation of bureaucracies, poor regulatory frameworks, and the inability to coordinate efforts within various areas of policy. These are the weak areas that make industrial, agricultural and infrastructural policies less effective despite well-stated policy objectives.

Institutional fragility does not happen by chance. As it is revealed by Itumo (2017) ^[24], poor economic institutions in Africa are frequently products of purposeful politics and not predetermined by the structure. Politically functional institutional mechanisms can be transparency-restricting and

enforcement-restricting as they allow the discretionary distribution of resources and protect elites against accountability.

Consequently, a reform effort often goes wrong during the implementation phase. The policies to improve productivity or value chain upgrades are watered down, applied selectively, or stolen by vested interests. It falls on responsibility as structurally mediated: institutional weakness is not in the form of a lack of capacity, but rather in the form of selective non-enforcement and non-coordination, where it poses a risk to prevailing power relations. The weakness of institutions, therefore, becomes self-perpetuating, and stagnation is perpetuated.

Finding 4: State capacity describes the unbalanced development results

Lastly, the article identifies state capacity as one of the explanatory factors of the uneven developmental results across Africa. The state capacity does not merely imply the capacity to collect revenues or to uphold order, but is the capacity to design, organise, and implement policies to reach developmental goals.

Centeno, Kohli and Yashar (2017)^[12] underscore the fact that states in the developing world are heterogeneous within themselves, that is, they have both areas of strength and areas of weakness. This point of view can be used to justify how certain states or sectors in Africa can be relatively successful, and others fail. Capacity is not evenly distributed among agencies and policy areas, and it is based on politics and not on technical aspects.

Brown (2018)^[10] builds on this observation by placing the African states in a global political economy that is described as a gatekeeper. Here, the state capacity is often geared towards external flows of aid, rents and trade as opposed to internal structural change. This strengthens lopsided development since states are more concerned with control over access points rather than the construction of broad-based productive capacity.

The resultant Impact is that there are large differences in the results of development not only between countries, but within countries as well. When the state capacity coincides with developmental goals, it is possible to make some progress even with negative historical circumstances. In cases where the capacity is strategically used to manage rent and political survival, the cause of stagnation should be the exercise of power and not capacity limitations.

13. Synthesis

Collectively, these results undermine explanations which identify the limiting factors on Africa's development as being rooted in colonial history or abstract institutional deficits. The beginnings of colonial legacies were based on the starting points, but the contemporary divergence is influenced by the political incentive, institutional design, and lack of evenness in state capacity. Development outcomes are a decision inherent in political settlements and not historical determinism.

Such reframing changes the focus of analysis to structure: to get at the constraints on development in Africa, it is necessary to analyse the interaction of incentives, institutions and capacities to reproduce or to disrupt the current pathways and how responsibility is distributed in those pathways.

14. Discussion

The interpretive discussion of the findings is based on prominent theories.

The results of the paper experience the long-standing controversies in development studies with the relative importance of past legacies and modern political-institutional processes. The structuralist and dependency-oriented explanations have convincingly recorded the way colonial extraction, institutional misalignment and incorporation inequity into the world economy determined the initial postcolonial trajectories of Africa. How Europe Underdeveloped Africa by Rodney still stands as one of the foundations of formulating colonialism as a process of systematic and historical importance (Rodney, 2018)^[37]. This diagnosis of history is not argued out in the current analysis. Instead, it perfects it through an analysis of historical causation and contemporary constraint.

The institutionalist scholarship is gaining more support on this distinction. As shown by Maseland (2018)^[28], colonial legacies had the most pronounced influence on initial post-independence outcomes; however, their explanatory value diminishes amid the accumulation of domestic political incentives, institutional adjustments, and elite policies. These results are in line with this point-of-view: colonialism predetermined initial positions; however, it fails to explain the long-term difference in development results among African states many decades after their independence.

The reasons why colonial explanations are still prevalent

Although this is increasing, colonial explanation is still predominant in academic and policy discourse. One of them is in their analytical clarity and moral power. Colonialism presents an interesting, exogenously determined explanation of underdevelopment which prefigures the historical injustice and world inequality. As Rodney (2018)^[37] highlighted, the exploitative regime by colonialists formed part of the insertion of Africa into the world economy, which renders it a lasting and an influential point of critique.

But the continued existence of colonial explanations too reveals political and epistemic interests of the present days. The division of underdevelopment as a colonial legacy can help to avoid the focus on the current governance structures by distancing the blame from institutional division and elite compromises. The weakness of colonial determinism is demonstrated by the Botswana and Nigeria comparison made by Duyile and Ojo (2019)^[14], which states that even though both nations have a relatively similar history of colonisation, they have markedly divergent development trajectories. The fact that colonial explanations continue to exist despite such differences indicates that they are not merely tools of analysis but also streamlining accounts which conceal the ongoing political choice and institutional accountability.

When the agencies and institutions are centred, what happens?

When the agencies and institutions are taken into the centre stage, the understanding of the limitations to development in Africa takes a new constitution. The outcomes of development are not put so much as residual effects of historical injustice, but the aggregate outcome of political choices within the institutional structures. This change does not reject structural constraints but only explains how these

constraints are mediated, reinforced, or changed by action. O'Reilly (2019)^[18] demonstrates the relationship between ideas, institutional design, and political agency and the nature of their interaction in determining the regional economic outcomes in East Africa, highlighting the nature of institutions as arenas of contention rather than inheritances. On the same note, Hanchey (2016)^[21] pushes a voice, agency, and responsibility narrative forward and questions the depiction of African states as sit-back and take it narratives. It is in this light that this paper will find the result is not merely a recap of tendencies of rent distribution, institutional inefficiency, or imbalanced state power; rather, it draws attention to the fact that these effects are actively reproduced via political settlements and incentive arrangements.

The centring agency re-occupies responsibility. Development failure is no longer viewed as something historically necessary, but it depends on the decisions made political and institutional environments, decisions that are constrained yet reconfigurable.

Theoretical implications to development studies

The argument is in favour of the shift towards a relational, institutional political economy of development as opposed to historical determinism. Colonial legacies can only be interpreted as background conditions which define opportunity structures, rather than adequate explanations of present-day results. This reconceptualisation carries significant implications for the issue of responsibility in development studies. Responsibility turns structural and prospective and is interested in changing incentive systems and institutional organisation, and elite bargains instead of retrospective blame.

The paper, combining comparative institutional analysis and agency-centred view, contributes to the academic literature aimed at balancing the structural critique with political responsibility. It implies that the development theory should be brought into closer contact with the politics of reform, coalition-building, and institutional change, as opposed to the historically based explanation that unintentionally masks the current-day agency.

Generally, the idea of centring agency and institutions does not undermine the historical fact of colonial exploitation. Rather, it places that history in a more generalised analysis of analysis with a view to recognising both constraint as well as possibility, a necessary redefining of an agenda of development studies that is focused not only on explaining the past of Africa, but on illuminating the circumstances in which the future of its developmental paths can be transformed.

15. Policy Implications

The results of this paper indicate that the developmental limitations facing Africa cannot be resolved using technocratic policy solutions. Narrowly targeted reforms based on technical capacity, best-practice policy templates or externally imposed governance standards are not likely to yield lasting change unless they are accompanied by fundamental institutional change. Good policy needs to interact with the politics of incentives and relations of power that dictate the practice of institutions and not to believe that better designs will always lead to better results.

One of the key conclusions is that there is a necessity to realign incentives in state institutions. The results of

development are determined by the presence or absence of political and bureaucratic incentives to reward productivity, learning and long-term investment, or short-term rent distribution and maintenance of coalitions. Discretionary interference can be minimised by policies that contribute to bureaucratic autonomy, especially in revenue administration, industrial policy and regulatory agencies, to promote more uniform implementation of a policy. Nonetheless, autonomy should be politically entrenched and secured as opposed to technocratic imposition.

Lastly, sustainable development must have a long-term commitment to state capacity and investment in human capital. Development of effective institutions is a long-term endeavour and requires service of professional civil services, credible enforcement systems, and sustained investment in education and skills. The development of human capital must then not be perceived as a social add-on, but as one of the main state capacities. Without such a long-term orientation, reform initiatives pose the threat of strengthening the existing institutional weaknesses instead of defeating them.

16. Conclusion

This paper has shown that the possible development constraints in Africa could not be explained as the deterministic effect of the colonial past, as opposed to the impact of post-independence institutions, political incentives, and lack of uniform state capacity. The research is a contribution to a political-economy approach that focuses on agency and responsibility because the authors refocus development failure as a structural and institutional phenomenon, not an inevitable event in history.

The essence of its contribution is that it causes a shift in analytical emphasis from discarding legacies and looking to the present-day incentive frameworks, political settlements, and governance decisions that determine development paths. By so doing, the paper highlights that the historical constraints are important not because they are fixed, but to the extent that they organise the institutional environments in which the current actors are exercising.

The subsequent research is to further elaborate this framework with sector-specific and comparative scientific research, which would explore the interactions of political settlement and institutional change in facilitating or hindering structural change across the African conditions.

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