

Is Unconditional Foreign Aid Necessarily Harmful? China's Foreign Aid and Human Rights in Africa

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Abstract

This article evaluates how China's foreign aid affects human rights in Africa. Using the fixed effects model to analyze a data set on China's aid from 2000 to 2013, this research finds: (1) in the African recipient states China's aid exhibits virtually no negative and statistically significant impact on physical integrity rights, (2) it does not discourage conditional aid inflows, and (3) it fails to offset the positive human rights effects of conditional aid. The findings are robust to various econometric estimators, alternative model specifications, and multiple human rights measures. Overall, China's aid shows no sign of systemically weakening basic human rights protection in Africa.

Attaching political conditionality to foreign aid is a well-established global practice among core countries in the world system. From a rationalistic perspective, political scientists and economists both justify the imposition of such conditionality and stress its significance.¹ However, this practice has been largely rejected by the emerging donors that are the semi-periphery and periphery states. Using the language of the World Society theory,² these new donors are not socialized to accept the universal legitimacy of giving conditional aid, which reduces aid policy compatibility and likely fosters heterogeneity in aid effectiveness. Then, is unconditional aid necessarily harmful in reality? I seek to answer this question by looking into the basic human rights (i.e., government respect for physical integrity rights) effects of Chinese aid to Africa.

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