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Foreign Aid, Commodity Linkages and African Development

John Abbam Nyarko[1*]

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ABSTRACT

Foreign aid is a paradoxical development tool, especially in sub-Saharan Africa. This article examines the underlying factors shaping foreign aid, highlighting how strategic donor interests often conflict with the developmental needs of recipient states. Using a structured comparative case study of four sub-Saharan African states: Botswana, Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana and Namibia, I argue that foreign aid to specific states reflects the connectedness of the supported sectors to natural resources and commodity markets or supply chains critical to donor economies' interests. I argue that aid to African states focuses on agriculture, economic development, education and health, as these are the critical areas for Africa. However, donor interests are strongest in African economies, where raw materials are easily accessible to donor states' markets. In Côte d'Ivoire, donor interests are strongest where agricultural aid is linked to cocoa and cashew production, foreign investment, international trade, and supply chains. Aid to the education and health sectors is influenced by humanitarian reasons, strong, effective institutions, governance, and local ownership of programmes, which strongly influence donor interests. Humanitarian justifications are critical as they provide diplomatic and commercial benefits to donors. I conclude that understanding international relations helps explain foreign aid, and that dependence on commodities is the most significant factor influencing donor interests in providing aid to Africa.

INTRODUCTION

Foreign aid, which includes financial assistance, technical support, and other non-financial forms such as food and military equipment, supports socioeconomic development, especially in recipient states. Aid is broadly categorised as grants or subsidised loans. Although post-war foreign assistance initially focused on rebuilding Europe through the Marshall Plan, development assistance increasingly targeted newly independent and developing countries from the 1950s, especially from the 1960s onwards (Hussain, 2014; Kharas, 2014). Global foreign aid, especially official development assistance, peaked in 1992 at a value of $68 billion from the 1960s and declined to less than $55 billion in 1997; however, with the calls for greater debt relief and the global pandemic, foreign aid accelerated, reaching $174.3 billion in 2025 (Radelet, 2006; OECD, 2026).

The scholarly debates over why donor states give foreign aid are not new. Maizels and Nissanke (1984) offered the foundational interpretation, testing a "recipient need" model "against a donor interest" model and finding that bilateral aid consistently favoured donor interest in terms of political/security reasons, trade and investment and humanitarian concerns rather than only for development, while multilateral aid tracked recipient need more closely. Subsequent scholarship, most comprehensively Lancaster's (2007) comparative study of five donor states-Denmark, France, Germany, Japan and the United States-chiefly settled on a synthesis: aid simultaneously serves diplomatic, developmental, humanitarian, commercial and cultural purposes, with the balance among them shaped by donor states' domestic politics, not by any single logic. Foreign aid serves both donor interests and recipient needs. However, the visibility of donor interests varies according to the degree of commodity dependency linking the aid sector to donor markets or supply chains.

Existing scholarship explains that foreign aid combines donor interests and recipient needs; this article advances that literature by proposing that the visibility of donor interests varies with the degree of commodity dependency linking the recipient's aid sector to the donor's markets or supply chains. This article asks: under what conditions does foreign aid more visibly reflect donor interests rather than recipient-development priorities? More specifically, does the degree of commodity dependency linking a recipient's aid sector to donor markets or supply chains help explain variation in the donor-interest content of aid across African cases? This question motivates the paper's case selection.

Scholars have long debated the interests of foreign aid. These debates have focused on aid rationales, how aid affects development, and whose interests aid serves. Chenery and Strout (1966) argue that developing economies face two fundamental constraints: a saving gap and a foreign-exchange gap; as such, domestic savings are insufficient to finance the investments needed for growth, while insufficient foreign exchange hinders countries from importing the machinery and technology needed to accelerate development. Thus, foreign aid fills these gaps and supports investment and economic

[1] Department 0f History & Diplomacy, University of Cape Coast, Ghana
[*] Corresponding author's email: nimdehene@gmail.com

development; this two-gap model has significantly shaped the theoretical foundations and debates on aid-effectiveness literature. However, Bauer (1972) challenges this assumption, arguing that transferring resources from donor-rich countries to recipient-poor countries does not automatically produce development; instead, aid strengthens inefficient states, expands bureaucracies, weakens market incentives, encourages political dependencies, and enables recipient governments to pursue poor economic policies.

Additionally, scholars such as Friedman (1958), Easterly (2006) and Lancaster (2007) have criticised aid as politics. To these scholars, aid has always pursued donors' interests: diplomacy, security, commercial interests, humanitarian relief, and development. Domestic politics, bureaucratic interests, public opinion, diplomacy, and the international system shape aid (Alesina & Dollar, 2000). Aid of a bilateral nature reflects political and strategic trade and investment opportunities, while multilateral aid tracks recipients' needs (Maizels & Nissanke, 1984); however, aid is more effective where recipient countries implement sound and prudent economic policies alongside strong institutions (Burnside & Dollar, 2000), yet Hansen and Tarp (2001) challenged such a simplistic claim. They argued that the degree to which aid promotes growth is complex. Such a challenge was accentuated by Easterly (2006) and Sachs (2005), who posit that aid fails when donors and recipients have different incentives, projects are poorly coordinated, governments are not accountable and external resources sustain ineffective institutions, as well as extreme poverty creating a "poverty trap" in which developing countries lack the resources needed to invest in infrastructure, health, education and productive capacity. Foreign aid, especially to the African subregion, is detrimental because donor states compete to offer assistance in the African aid market. Fragmented donor aid complicates efforts to establish a positive correlation between foreign aid and economic development. Donor fragmentation hinders aid effectiveness, particularly in aid disbursement methods and recipient states' institutional environments (Djankov, Montalvo & Reynal-Querol, 2006).

Donor aid is simultaneously an instrument of strategic interest and a mechanism for genuine development impact, and these motivations are structurally complementary rather than mutually exclusive. To advance this position, this paper critically examines the motivations for giving aid, drawing on liberal and realist theories to argue that donor states' provision of foreign aid to recipient states is not premised solely on promoting donor states' national interests but also encompasses other interests. To illustrate these arguments, this study employed four different case studies focusing on agriculture, education, economic development, and health. According to realist theory in international relations, foreign aid is a policy tool that emerged after 1945 to influence states' political judgments in a bipolar power struggle (Hattori, 2001). Liberal internationalism treats aid as a set of measures designed pragmatically to promote recipient states' socioeconomic and political development (Opeskin, 1996; Riddell, 1999).

The analysis nevertheless distinguishes donor motivation from aid outcomes: evidence that a programme benefited recipients demonstrates developmental effect, but does not by itself establish why the donor initially provided that aid. This question motivates the paper's case selection. Rather than assuming that sector type alone determines the balance between donor interest and recipient benefit, this paper argues that donor interest becomes visible in proportion to how directly a sector intersects with a commodity, market, or resource that the donor state's own economy depends on. Aid to a sector tied to a globally traded commodity – as in agricultural aid to a major cocoa and cashew exporter – should demonstrate donor interest operating through concrete supply-chain and market-access mechanisms; aid to a sector with no such dependency, even one central to a state's broader economic strategy, should approximate the liberal model more closely, with donor interest receding as recipient governance capacity increases. Consequently, the four country-sector cases examined in this study are not representative of African aid broadly; instead, they constitute a structured comparison across a continuum of commodity dependency, specifically selected to evaluate the relative explanatory power of realist and liberal frameworks.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Theoretical Framework: Realism, Liberalism and Commodity Dependency

In this article, commodity dependency refers to a relationship in which the donor's markets, firms or supply chain depend materially on commodities produced or exported by the recipient country. The concept concerns the donor's economic relationship with the recipient's commodity sector, rather than the recipient's general dependence on foreign aid or commodities. Aid to a sector with no such dependency, even one central to a state's broader economic strategy, should more closely approximate the liberal model, with donor interest receding as recipient governance capacity increases. The four cases that follow test this claim across a spectrum of commodity dependency and governance-driven aid relationships in which it is explicit and structural. The unit of analysis is the donor-supported sectoral aid relationship within each country; thus, the cases are not countries considered in their entirety, but four country-sector combinations: Botswana's economic-development aid, Ivory Coast's agricultural aid, Ghana's educational aid and Namibia's health aid. The study uses a structured, theory-building comparison. Each case is examined using the same analytical questions concerning recipient need, donor interest, commodity or market linkage, aid design and developmental effect. Case selection also reflects variation in recipient governance capacity, from Botswana's comparatively strong institutions to Côte

d'Ivoire's more contested post-conflict governance environment, allowing the analysis to distinguish commodity dependency from governance quality as competing explanations.

Furthermore, national interest refers to a sovereign state's goals and ambitions, whether economic, sociocultural, military, or otherwise. Within international relations, national interest is assumed to comprise the pursuit of power, security, and wealth. National interests are not static; therefore, a state's interests are shaped through social interaction and are amendable and changeable (Finnemore, 2009; Glanville, 2005). Additionally, the 'state-as-actor' abstraction is deliberate for analytical purposes, necessary to move beyond the recognition that societies are composed of individuals with varying opinions, preferences, knowledge, and degrees of power.

Realism as an IR theory gained relevance and momentum during World War II (WWII), when it sought to explain how and why war is prevalent in the international system. Realism views the state as the principal actor in international relations (Antunes & Camisão, 2017). From this perspective, states operate in a competitive international environment, pursuing policies aimed at protecting national sovereignty and survival, power, security and wealth. Foreign aid therefore builds alliances, rewards political cooperation, and advances strategic commercial objectives. A limitation of this perspective is that it views states as unified actors and underestimates the significance of domestic institutions, social groups, citizens, and non-state institutions. National leaders' calculations do not solely determine international outcomes because domestic resistance, public opinion, social movements, and institutional change also shape international relations. Liberalism, by contrast, highlights the role of institutions, economic interdependence, international norms, and cooperation in limiting state power, placing greater emphasis on human rights, self-determination, free trade, democracy, and individual welfare (Meiser, 2017; Deudney & Ikenberry, 1999). Within this framework, foreign aid is a practical instrument for promoting socioeconomic development while strengthening cooperation between states. These two approaches therefore spotlight different aspects of foreign assistance. Realism explains why donors use aid to pursue influence, security, and commercial access. In contrast, liberalism argues that aid can support human welfare, institutional development, and international cooperation.

Foreign Aid Motivation & Effects

Foreign aid has predominantly been used to secure political support and strengthen international partnerships. During the Cold War, major powers used aid as part of their wider competition for influence in developing countries. Contemporary donors provide aid to maintain diplomatic relationships, encourage political reforms, support security objectives, promote trade, or preserve relationships with former colonies and strategic partners (Asongu & Nwachukwu, 2016; Alesina & Dollar, 2000). Donor governments also condition aid on governance-related behaviour: governments that demonstrate institutional reliability and developmental commitment receive support, while poorly governed or authoritarian states receive limited emergency or humanitarian assistance. Donors also suspend or redirect aid in response to military coups, election violations, corruption or human-rights abuses (Zimmerman, 2007; Hyde & Boulding, 2008; Yiew & Lau, 2018).

Moreover, donor states provide foreign aid to recipient states, encouraging them to adopt good governance. Well-governed states are better positioned to receive developmental aid, such as economic infrastructure. In contrast, poorly governed states typically receive aid only as emergency relief (Bermeo, 2011). In addition to the above reasons that serve as motivation for the grants of foreign aid to recipient states by donor states, donor states give aid as a form of responding to the governance structures and characteristics of recipient states, as such governance structures and characteristics determine the overall allocations of aid by donor states or the distribution of diverse forms of aid in response to governance problems, anti-democratic behaviours in those states, and corruption (Wright & Winters, 2010).

The effect of foreign aid in Africa remains contested. One strand of scholarship argues that aid supports socioeconomic development, including education, health, and institutional development. Effective aid management expands resources available to governments and households, strengthens human capital, and supports programmes that would otherwise be unaffordable (Gomane, Morrissey, Mosley & Verschoor, 2003; Baldé, 2011; Okada & Samreth, 2012; Asongu & Jellal, 2013; Asongu & Tchamyou, 2019). A contrasting body of scholarship argues that aid weakens incentives for domestic resource mobilisation, expands unproductive public expenditure, encourages dependency and shields governments from accountability. Aid produces administrative burdens when numerous donors impose different procedures, reporting requirements, funding cycles and policy priorities on recipient governments (Booné, 1996; Pedersen, 1996; Mosley, Hudson, & Horrell, 1992; Asongu & Tchamyou, 2019).

The challenge goes beyond aid volume to how it is organised. Donor fragmentation increases transaction costs, diverts officials' attention from domestic priorities, encourages competition among agencies and makes it cumbersome to assign responsibilities for programme outcomes, especially where weak governance, conflicts and dependence on natural resources exist (Moyo, 2009; Bermeo, 2016; Asongu & Nwachukwu, 2016; Resnick, 2018). The evidence therefore does not support a simple conclusion that aid is either beneficial or detrimental; its effects vary depending on institutional quality, sectoral focus, recipient ownership, donor coordination, and the extent to which aid is tied to broader political and economic interests.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Case Study 1: Foreign Aid and Education in Ghana

Ghana, the eighth-largest economy on the African continent, with a GDP of $118 billion as of April 2026, has used foreign aid to strengthen state institutions and improve governance efficiency and effectiveness (Bräutigam & Knack, 2004; Inusah, 2026). Aid from the United Kingdom, for instance, aligns with the UK government's strategic objective of shifting its development partnership with Ghana beyond traditional aid modalities toward trade and investment ties. The UK's aid to Ghana provides critical and, importantly, effective responses to Ghana's developmental needs. Over 20 years of foreign aid to Ghana, totalling about £2.8 billion, has helped Ghana transition from a relatively poor state to one of the wealthiest in the West African subregion, despite considerable development challenges (ICAI, 2018).

Foreign aid from the United Kingdom to Ghana primarily aims to help the state overcome economic and governance challenges, reduce its reliance on traditional aid, and support Ghana's development efforts. The United Kingdom's aid to Ghana has focused particularly on social sector programmes targeting the poorest and most vulnerable (ICAI, 2018). According to the ICAI, the educational sector is a priority because Ghana's oil discovery has created a need for the UK government to support the country's future development (ICAI, 2018). For the United Kingdom, education is a high-impact way to improve livelihoods, strengthen citizenship, and support long-term development; aid in this sector accordingly aims to improve access for school-going children, improve teaching quality, and support reforms that make the system work better (DFID, 2018; UK Government, 2023). Aid in the educational sector has focused on the incremental access to schooling for the girl-child through interventions such as Girls-Participatory Approaches to Student Success (GPASS) of 2011-2021; transforming teacher education and learning via The Transforming Teacher Education and Learning (T-TEL) of 2015-2018, and reducing the share of children who are out of school through Complementary Basic Education of 2012-2018 and Education Beyond Aid (EBA) of 2018-2022 (ICAI, 2018).

The relevance of foreign aid from the United Kingdom to the state of Ghana cannot be underestimated, as between 2013 and 2018, aid in the health sector amounted to £12.4 million and directly benefited approximately 1.31 million people who accessed health services from community health service facilities; people receiving outpatient and community health care related to mental health stood at 110,216 in 2018, and aid flows amounted to £10 million and £30.1 million was spent on the Livelihood Empowerment Against Poverty Programme (2012-2017), benefitting 832,802 individuals (ICAI, 2018). Additionally, due to foreign aid interventions from the United Kingdom to Ghana, approximately £28 million was spent on the Complementary Basic Education (CBE) program from 2012 to 2018, benefiting approximately 200,000 children from remote communities who entered and re-entered formal schooling (ICAI, 2018).

Ghana's case illustrates the intermediate position identified in the theoretical framework. UK aid here targets institutional capacity and the welfare of the most vulnerable, with no comparable supply-chain or market-access rationale to the Ivory Coast case; Ghana is not a source of a commodity the UK economy depends on in the way cocoa and cashew bind the United States and the European Union to the Ivory Coast. Where donor interest is visible, it operates through the diplomatic value of a stable, long-term partner rather than through commodity dependency, positioning this case closer to the liberal pole of the spectrum than the realist one.

Case Study 2: Foreign Aid and Economic Development in Botswana

This aid reflects the broader UK aid strategy of assisting the most vulnerable and tackling extreme poverty (UK House of Lords Select Committee on International Relations and Defence, 2020). Botswana provides an important example of how effective governance and domestic policy ownership shape the developmental effects of foreign aid. Botswana graduated from the United Nations Least Developed Country category in 1994, after experiencing sustained economic progress and a significant decline in aid dependence between 1970 and 1994. This transition is associated with political stability, relatively strong public institutions, prudent economic management and the state's capacity to direct external resources towards national development priorities (Rakner, 1996; Calleja & Prizzon, 2019; Izobo, 2020). Rather than remaining structurally dependent on external assistance, Botswana utilised aid within a broader development strategy that gradually strengthened its institutional and economic self-reliance. These conditions suggest that aid contributed most effectively where recipient authorities retained substantial ownership over development planning and resource allocation. Botswana's economic growth and development would have been challenging without foreign aid, even with strong institutions to carry out its development agenda and government policies (Karahan, 2020).

Foreign aid to Botswana, especially from the EU, reflects the view that Botswana is a partner in inclusive growth rather than simply a recipient of aid; aid accordingly seeks to diversify the economy, create jobs, strengthen skills, and advance trade and private-sector development. The aid aims to wean Botswana off its long dependence on a narrow set of sectors, and Botswana's own National Development Plan aligns with EU goals focused on economic diversification, job creation, and relevant reforms. To the EU, aid provided to Botswana is therefore not just financial but strategic, sustaining the country's employment and competitiveness (EEAS, 2023; European Commission, 2025). Botswana's relationship with its donors has contributed to its economic development, as this relationship has allowed the Botswanan government

to encourage individual state donors to focus on specific government priorities, thereby avoiding duplication of efforts and projects (Kerapeletswe, Isaken, Slob, & Jerve, 2008). The Botswanan government places a high focus on rural development and self-sufficiency in relation to donor aid; therefore, it has greater collective ownership of how donor aid is used and its outcomes. Foreign aid helped Botswana achieve its desired results more quickly. In 1998, the World Bank declared it an upper-middle-income country, leading donors to reduce and eventually eliminate their assistance to Botswana (Izobo, 2020).

Between 2014 and 2020, the planned allocation for Botswana declined from €73 million to €33 million. Currently, few donors remain in Botswana, including the EU, Germany, and Japan, which focus on supporting economic development through initiatives such as increased competitiveness and diversification. However, between 2012 and 2019, Botswana's total aid reached $692.66 million. Despite declining funding, the remaining aid to Botswana aims to support inclusive and sustainable growth and skills for jobs (Calleja & Prizzon, 2019; Global Economy, 2021). Botswana most directly tests the boundary of the commodity-dependency claim. Despite the country's diamond wealth, no evidence here connects donor aid allocation to a documented reliance on Botswana's diamond exports; instead, aid volumes tracked governance quality and receded as the state demonstrated institutional capacity and self-sufficiency. This absence of a commodity linkage, combined with the state's rapid graduation from aid dependency, makes Botswana the clearest instance in this study of aid approximating the liberal model, with realist explanations carrying comparatively little weight.

Case Study 3: Foreign Aid and Agriculture in the Ivory Coast

Agriculture remains central to the economic development of West African economies, supporting employment and income for a rapidly growing population. The sector contributes more than 10% of GDP in most West African countries and is therefore important to sub-regional economic development (Djokoto, Srofenyoh & Gidiglo, 2014; Olofin, Aiyegbusi, Arawomo & Olofin, 2017). However, despite these contributions, agriculture continues to face significant constraints, particularly limited financial capital, inadequate education, and limited government support through subsidies (Shuaibu & Nchake, 2021). Access to finance remains the most significant constraint confronting farmers and agribusinesses. Commercial banks, a major source of agricultural lending, often view agriculture as risky because of unpredictable weather conditions and production uncertainties (Mexmonov, 2020).

Although agricultural investment is financed through personal savings, family and friends, and cooperative societies, foreign direct investment has become an increasingly important source of capital for agribusiness in the subregion. Watts and Scales (2020) argue that social impact investment improves agricultural productivity, strengthens agribusiness activities and contributes to poverty reduction. The importance of agricultural investment has also attracted international institutions such as the Food and Agriculture Organisation, the World Bank, and the European Union.

However, investment from national governments and domestic financial institutions remains inadequate relative to the sector's needs. Because the private sector is an important engine of economic growth, foreign investment in agribusiness has become necessary to expand productive capacity, reduce poverty, and stimulate economic activity across the subregion (Gohou & Soumaré, 2012; Donaubauer, Meyer & Nunnenkamp, 2016). The developmental conditions of many West African economies therefore make continued FDI important for economic expansion, poverty reduction and improved human development. Existing evidence associates FDI with improved welfare and declining poverty levels (Gohou & Soumaré, 2012; Sabir, Rafique & Abbas, 2019).

Côte d'Ivoire provides an important example because agriculture has historically been a major source of employment, government revenue and foreign exchange while also supporting national food security. Since independence, the country has pursued large-scale development of food production, export crops and agribusiness. State-owned agricultural enterprises were established to increase domestic food production, generate foreign exchange and increase tax revenues, provide incomes for farmers and intermediaries, reduce dependence on manufactured imports, and promote the processing of locally produced raw materials. Agriculture remains significant to the Ivorian economy. The sector generates approximately two-fifths of its total export earnings and three-tenths of government tax revenues (Paul-Alfred, 2020). Nevertheless, the expansion of major export crops has not removed the sector's structural weaknesses. These include limited technology transfer, extensive production practices, low mechanisation, limited public and private investment and weak agricultural financing systems. The country's dependence on agricultural exports also leaves the economy very vulnerable to external shocks (Gabas & Ribier, 2015; Paul-Alfred, 2020).

One important form of agribusiness in Côte d'Ivoire is contract farming. Companies rely on this arrangement for several reasons, including securing a dependable supply of agricultural products, lowering labour and supervision costs and avoiding the direct acquisition of land in areas where available land is already occupied, cultivated or subject to land reforms and compensation requirements. Contract farming provides a way to involve local producers in commercial agricultural production (Burnod *et al.*, 2012). Ivorian agribusiness is strongly oriented towards export commodities, particularly cocoa and cashew nuts (Tessmann, 2020). Côte d'Ivoire became the world's leading exporter of raw cashew nuts

by 2015 after ranking second in 2011. By 2015, cashew production had reached an estimated 700,000 tonnes while cocoa exceeded 1.1 million tonnes, making the country a major global producer of both commodities (Tessmann, 2020; Marcopolis, 2021). Foreign investment plays a substantial role in this agricultural economy. Major foreign and foreign-supported companies operating in the sector include Olam Group, Cargill West Africa and Nestlé (Marcopolis, 2021).

However, the relationship between FDI and agricultural development is not exclusively positive. Assa (2018), in examining changes in forest areas across 38 sub-Saharan African countries, found that FDI produced a significant negative effect on forest area. The effect became stronger where governance was weak, although better governance was associated with improved forest protection. Infrastructure also emerged as an important determinant of FDI because it facilitates investment and lowers transaction costs. Financial development influences foreign investment through its effects on resource allocation, transaction costs, liquidity and enforcement of financial contracts. Weak controls over corruption and poor enforcement of the rule of law consequently intensify the environmental effects associated with FDI (Bokpin, 2017; Assa, 2018; Lokonon & Mounirou, 2019; Adedoyin *et al.*, 2022). Despite this negative relationship, it is not uniform: Adedoyin and colleagues (2022) argue that FDI initially reduces ecological pressure but contributes to greater degradation after a threshold is reached. The evidence therefore demonstrates that the developmental effects of FDI in Côte d'Ivoire are conditional.

The scale of foreign commercial participation in Côte d'Ivoire's agricultural sector illustrates the importance of international investment. Olam Group engages approximately two million farmers, employees and service providers. It secures cocoa, coffee, cotton, cashew and rubber from more than 125,000 partner farming families. SIFCA, Côte d'Ivoire's first private company, employs more than 28,000 people and operates across the production chains for oil palm, natural rubber and sugar. SDTM-CI, meanwhile, accounts for about three-quarters of the country's rice market (Marcopolis, 2021). These activities demonstrate how foreign aid and private investment have become integrated into agricultural production, processing and distribution. Foreign aid has also contributed to agricultural development, with agricultural assistance nearly doubling from approximately US$4 billion in the mid-2000s to slightly over US$8 billion in 2010. Since 2010, aid has risen sharply, showing that aid is not simply a direct source of financing but a mechanism for attracting and leveraging other forms of investment. Donor countries have increasingly emphasised the simultaneous mobilisation of domestic resources, expansion of international trade and promotion of FDI rather than allowing aid to create long-term dependency (Umbadda & Elgizouli, 2013).

The United States, a major donor of aid to Côte d'Ivoire, has maintained its commercial interests in Ivorian agricultural production since the 1960s, particularly in the cocoa sector. However, such economic relations have been strengthened following the introduction of the African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA) in May 2000; as such, between 2000 and 2016, Ivorian exports to the United States increased from US$384 million to US$1.163 billion and by 2025, exports reached approximately US$2 billion (Lu, 2018). Since AGOA's inception, imports from the United States totalled US$6.52 billion (2000-2025). Exports to the United States totalled US$24.8 billion over the same period (United States Census Bureau, 2026). This relationship matters because cocoa is central to the Ivorian economy and the United States is a major cocoa-consuming market. In 2016, the United States imported approximately US$384 million worth of cocoa beans from Côte d'Ivoire. Preferential trade arrangements therefore benefit both sides by facilitating access to the American market and reducing additional import costs (Lu, 2018). In 2017, Côte d'Ivoire also secured US$525 million in compacts from the United States Millennium Challenge Corporation to support economic growth and poverty reduction.

Other international institutions have similarly contributed to the country's agricultural development. Since 1984, the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) has supported 12 projects in the country with total financing of US$171.2 million, benefiting about 600,000 households. Its interventions include loans and programmes intended to strengthen food security among poor rural households, improve farmers' organisations and expand the marketing of agricultural products. Support has also focused on rural finance, technological development and transfer and rural infrastructure through collaborations with the Ministry of Agriculture's Directorate for Programming (IFAD, 2022). The Ivorian case therefore demonstrates that agriculture remains an important area through which foreign aid and FDI interact with national development, where aid should be understood not simply as instruments for stimulating agricultural growth, but as a mechanism through which development objectives, commercial interests and donor and recipient states' interests intersect, reinforcing commodity dependence, environmental pressure and foreign commercial influence.

Beyond private sector investment, government aid sustains the Ivorian agricultural sector. The European Union has also provided substantial aid to Ivoirian agriculture, contributing over €1 billion through the IFAD-administered EU Food Facility. This support responded to food shortages following the 2010-2011 post-election conflicts and focused on both food staples and export commodities, including cocoa and cashew (Unifeed, 2012; Touré, 2017). In 2012 alone, over 800 farmers received training in seed quality and crop cultivation techniques, demonstrating the tangible developmental impact of structured aid intervention in conflict-affected contexts. Importantly, this case illustrates the liberal internationalist argument at its most concrete: aid directed at agricultural

rehabilitation after conflict serves the genuine welfare of recipient populations while simultaneously securing the food chain supply, specifically cocoa and cashew, upon which European markets depend. Thus, donor interests and developmental impact are not competing motivations but mutually reinforcing ones. This case anchors the commodity-dependent end of the spectrum examined in this study, in direct contrast to the governance-driven dynamics observed in Botswana.

Case Study 4: Foreign Aid and Health in Namibia

Population health is a key foundation for national development because a healthy populace is better positioned to contribute to economic and social progress. However, in many African countries, persistent infectious diseases have placed considerable pressure on national health systems and constrained development outcomes. HIV/AIDS has been particularly significant because of its widespread prevalence across the continent and the substantial resources required for prevention, diagnosis, treatment and long-term care. The scale of the challenge has made external assistance an important component of HIV/AIDS interventions, particularly where domestic resources have been insufficient to meet existing needs. Morrison (2018) observes that efforts to sustain HIV/AIDS programmes have been complicated by inadequate political commitment and increasing competition among development priorities for limited governmental and donor resources.

Namibia provides an important example of the relationship between foreign assistance and health-sector development. The country has experienced a substantial HIV burden, making HIV prevention and treatment a major area of development cooperation between Namibia and the United States. Through USAID, the United States has supported interventions directed toward prevention, testing, treatment, and care, with resources targeted at populations and communities where the health burden is particularly pronounced (USAID, 2022). This assistance is largely humanitarian, as donor-funded programmes have sought to strengthen interventions that can demonstrably reduce HIV transmission and improve the welfare of affected communities. US Embassy Windhoek (2026), for instance, identifies evidence-based prevention efforts, including behavioural, biomedical and structural approaches, as important components of the United States' support for HIV-related interventions in Namibia.

The broader contributions of international assistance to HIV/AIDS control in Africa can be observed in the expansion of treatment and the reduction in HIV-related mortality. During the 1980s and 1990s, the limited availability and affordability of effective treatment contributed to severe demographic and developmental consequences in countries experiencing generalised epidemics. The subsequent expansion of externally financed HIV programmes enabled larger numbers of people to access antiretroviral therapy. It helped prevent further deterioration in life expectancy and development indicators (Morrison, 2018). Foreign assistance therefore became an important mechanism through which governments and development partners could expand health infrastructure, treatment coverage and prevention programmes.

Despite these advances, significant gaps remain. Morrison (2018) notes that more than 15 million people living with HIV were not receiving treatment, while approximately 1.8 million new infections were occurring annually. The burden was particularly pronounced among younger people and socially marginalised populations. These circumstances demonstrated that increasing access to treatment alone was insufficient; effective HIV control also required interventions directed towards groups facing socioeconomic and legal vulnerabilities. In southern and eastern Africa, the United States had committed more than US$80 billion to HIV prevention and treatment since 2004, contributing substantially to the development of public health infrastructure and progress towards the UNAIDS 90-90-90 targets (Morrison, 2018). This contribution is particularly significant given the declining participation of several other major donors. By this period, the United States accounted for approximately three-quarters of donor commitments to HIV/AIDS programmes.

The decline in international financing further increased the importance of countries such as Namibia in examining the consequences of external health assistance. Between 2012 and 2017, international support for HIV/AIDS programmes fell by approximately US$3 billion, while eight of fourteen major donors reduced their contributions in 2017 (Morrison, 2018). At the same time, African governments did not fully offset the reduction in external financing through increased domestic expenditure, creating a difficult environment for sustaining HIV prevention and treatment programmes and underscoring the continuing importance of foreign assistance for countries with substantial health needs. Namibia's experience illustrates some of the development effects associated with health-related aid. Between 2012 and 2019, the country received approximately US$1.6 billion in foreign aid (World Bank, 2022). Namandje (2015), examining government expenditure on health, general medical services, and public health between 1990 and 2013, found an association between increased foreign health assistance and improvements in several health indicators. These included infant mortality, under-five mortality and life expectancy. The relationship was particularly notable for infant mortality: a 1% increase in health aid was associated with a 0.03% reduction in infant mortality. Similarly, a 1% increase in foreign health assistance corresponded with a 0.53% increase in life expectancy. These findings show that external resources have contributed not only to disease-specific interventions but also to broader improvements in population health.

The severity of Namibia's HIV epidemic helps explain the importance of this external support. USAID (2022) reported an HIV prevalence rate of approximately 13.1%

among adults, representing a considerable public health challenge for a country with a population of about 2.1 million. The burden was also unevenly distributed geographically, with parts of northern, north-eastern and central Namibia recording substantially higher prevalence. HIV transmission has primarily occurred through heterosexual contact and mother-to-child transmission. Young people have also constituted an important population in the epidemic; in 2009, people between 15 and 24 years accounted for approximately 40% of new infections. The epidemic also produced significant social consequences, including the loss of parental care for thousands of children (USAID, 2022). The interventions supported through this cooperation have been multidimensional. They have included efforts to improve public attitudes towards persons living with HIV/AIDS, strengthen the capacity of healthcare providers and incorporate nutritional assessment and counselling into HIV-related services.

Particular attention has been given to children, pregnant women and breastfeeding women. Prevention programmes have also prompted safer sexual behaviour among young people, including delaying sexual activity, reducing multiple sexual partnerships and encouraging consistent and correct condom use (USAID, 2022). The significance of these programmes lies in their attempt to address HIV/AIDS not merely as a medical condition but as a social and behavioural challenge requiring interventions at individual, community and institutional levels. USAID-supported programmes extend beyond medical treatment. According to USAID (2022), approximately 75,000 orphans and vulnerable children have benefited from interventions involving vocational training, healthcare, education and psychosocial assistance. More than 500 faith-based organisations have also received small grants for community-based initiatives. In addition, United States assistance to Namibia's Ministry of Health and Social Services and the National Tuberculosis Control Programme has focused on improving access to quality healthcare and strengthening institutional capacity. Such interventions contributed to Namibia's attainment of the World Health Organisation's target of a 70% tuberculosis case-detection rate and an 85% treatment-success rate (USAID, 2022).

The Namibian case, however, demonstrates that foreign aid cannot be understood solely in humanitarian terms. While the recipient country benefits through improved health outcomes, stronger institutions, and expanded access to essential services, the donor also gains economic and strategic advantages. Namibia's political stability, relatively developed infrastructure and modern telecommunications environment make it an attractive setting for international commercial activity. Wilson (2018) argues that American assistance creates opportunities for United States business by facilitating access to new consumers, suppliers and markets. Private organisations involved in USAID-supported programmes therefore contribute to the expansion of American commercial interests while simultaneously implementing developmental interventions. As such, between 1992 and 2025, a period of over two decades, the United States' trade with Namibia totalled over US$4.43 billion while imports to the US from Namibia totalled approximately US$4.96 billion, demonstrating that donors are more likely to invest in markets that supply their domestic needs (US Census Bureau, 2026). This pattern positions Namibia, like Ghana, at an intermediate point on the study's spectrum: aid is organised chiefly around humanitarian objectives, but it coexists with a secondary, market-access form of donor benefit rather than the direct commodity dependency documented in the Ivory Coast case.

CONCLUSION

This paper has examined whether foreign aid operates principally as a tool for advancing donor priorities or as a substantive vehicle for fostering development. Comparative evidence across Ghana, Botswana, Côte d'Ivoire, and Namibia suggests this binary is flawed and limited. Aid is not consistently one or the other; rather, donor visibility scales with how directly a sector intersects with a commodity or market the donor economy depends on, rather than with the sector's general economic importance to the recipient state. This pattern is clearest at the two poles of the comparison. In Côte d'Ivoire, where agricultural aid coincides with cocoa and cashew supply chains that European and American markets rely on, donor interest and developmental impact operate as mutually reinforcing rather than competing motivations (Lu, 2018).

In Botswana, by contrast, its diamond dependence does not automatically establish the specific form of commodity dependency examined here because the evidence must demonstrate that the donor's aid allocation was directly connected to donor dependence or Botswana's diamond supply chain. The Botswana case therefore served as a boundary case in which aid appears to have been shaped more directly by governance quality, institutional capacity and self-sufficiency than by documented donor reliance on the aid sector's commodity supply chain (Izobo, 2020; Rakner, 1996). Ghana and Namibia occupy intermediate positions: aid in both cases is organised predominantly around institutional capacity-building and humanitarian need, but each carries a secondary, less structural form of donor benefit – diplomatic partnership in Ghana's case, market access and goodwill in Namibia's (Wilson, 2018) – that falls well short of Côte d'Ivoire's direct resource dependency.

This finding refines, rather than reconciles, the realist and liberal perspectives on aid. Where existing scholarship has largely converged on the view that aid serves donor and recipient interests simultaneously (Lancaster, 2007), this paper identifies a specific, testable condition under which one logic dominates the other: commodity dependency, not sector type, determines how visibly donor self-interest shapes aid allocation. Botswana's case is theoretically significant because it establishes the boundary condition:

it shows what happens when no such dependency exists. With strong recipient governance, aid allocation can approximate the liberal model with minimal realist residue.

These findings carry two limitations that point toward future research. First, the analysis relies on four cases and cannot establish the commodity-dependency relationship as a general law; a larger comparative sample, including non-Western donors whose economic dependencies differ from those of traditional Western donors, would test whether the pattern holds more broadly. Second, donor-side evidence in this study comes primarily from programme documentation and secondary reporting rather than internal donor deliberations; future work incorporating aid agency strategy documents or legislative debates over aid allocation would strengthen the causal claim that commodity dependency drives donor behaviour, rather than merely correlating with it. Even with these limitations, the comparison offered furthers the debate over foreign aid's motivations from the general question of whether donor interest exists, which the literature has already answered, towards the more precise question of when and how visibly it operates. Conclusively, the paper shows that foreign aid is neither inherently transformative nor detrimental; its effectiveness is mediated by power dynamics, institutions, and interests; therefore, recognising this complexity is crucial to confronting the realities that underpin aid efficiency and effective, equitable development strategies.

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