Rethinking Aid and Empowerment in Africa through the Case of Girls Be Strong

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Introduction

International aid has been given to African countries and has historically been a pillar of development across the globe. Governments, multilateral agencies, and nongovernmental organizations dedicate resources in terms of money, talent, and manpower towards managing poverty, illiteracy, health crises, and infrastructure shortages. However, there is a paradox: despite the common representation of aid as benevolent and transforming, most African nations continue to rely on external forces in their development policies. This leads to a grave question, does aid make people stronger, or is it a hidden agenda to create a dependency that destroys self-efficacy?

A growing literature criticizes the underlying premises of aid. Mkandawire (2024) argues that even in the Global South, underdevelopment is not just an interim problem that can be overcome with modernization, and the reason is mainly historical and economic colonization. According to Mkandawire et al. (2024), traditional aid arrangements recreate colonial power systems and thus increase donor dominance and recipient inertia. With these trends continuing into the twenty-first century, it is clear that, although they reinforce inequality, they actually trap it as a paradox. This study is qualitative in nature and does not aim to produce statistically generalizable findings; rather, it seeks to provide a theoretically grounded, illustrative case that contributes to discussions on aid dependency and empowerment.

The moral image of aid is also criticized. Emotional appeals in the form of media campaigns are often called poverty porn, which causes pity at the cost of dignity (Mahmoud et al., 2024; Shabbir et al., 2024). Such images define the attitudes of donors and shape those of beneficiaries into a continuum of inferiority and inactivity.

The paper has assumed a critical global awareness stance by emphasizing that there is a necessity to challenge the current structures that perpetuate global inequality. It claims that

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although the conventional aid framework sustains dependency, the empowerment-based framework, based on dignity, co-creation, and alliances, can build a sustainable future. Based on dependency theory and empowerment theory and the case study of Girls Be Strong (GBS), an initiative by the youth in Uganda, the paper will discuss how a shift in ways of assisting the youth towards partnership turns the aid paradigm. It further looks at how media portrayal, virtuous narration, and active participation of youth in media can transform the hierarchies in the global aid economy.

Structural Dynamics and the Problem of Aid Dependency

2.1 Historical Roots of Dependency

The theoretical background of aid dependency can be found in the dependency theory that opposed the modernization paradigms that prevailed in the mid-20th century. In post-World War II schools of development thought, modernization theorists viewed underdevelopment as a phase to be surmounted by means of Western-style industrialization and foreign aid. This view was reversed by dependency theorists, who were led by Frank (1966). Under this framework, the present-day tendencies of economic and political subordination in Africa can also be explained. Zimmerman (2007) builds on this by asserting that aid can develop into a control system by creating a dependency cycle that glues the country to fiscal policy, governance transformation, and even a social value system. Instead of promoting independence, the aid is likely to entrench its dependencies, whether material or ideological. Fundamentally, what can pass as benevolence structurally is a protraction of unequal power dynamics, a variant of soft imperialism, by virtue of aid dependency.

2.2 Contemporary Reflections of Dependency

Dependency in Africa can be seen not only in the economic system but also in political and social setups as well. As Mkandawire, Kayembe, and Katombosola (2024) say, the continental overreliance on foreign financing is termed an aid economy. The productivity of this model does not complement locally based productivity. It destroys policy priorities and undercuts accountability. The reliance on governments that rely on aid takes less account of the development of an internal revenue, and thus, the incentive to reach higher levels of safety and innovation in governance is less intense. Under conditions such as the budget of a state being majorly funded by donors, like in most states of sub-Saharan Africa, the outer demands restrict the inner choice.

The second problem, as reported by Mkandawire et al. (2024), is that aid corrupts accountability. Most governments are answerable to donors but not the citizens. This addiction lies beyond the economic, into the moral andpolitical soul of government. It also leads to a psychological addiction under which communities come to the assumption that they must be saved by someone outside.

These problems reveal why it is necessary to shift aid to partnership instead of charity. The change has to do away with the hierarchical relations of donors and recipients and create fair mechanisms that can improve strength and not dependency. Critical Global Awareness challenges us to begin to think of these structures as intended control systems, not as unlucky by-products, but as in need of a mindful reorientation.

Theoretical Frameworks: Dependency and Empowerment.

3.1 Dependency Theory

Latin American post-colonial theorists originally conceived dependence theory, which was later theorized by African writers. It opines that global capitalism institutionalizes inequality that separates the world into core and periphery. Frank et al.'s (1966) concept of the development of underdevelopment explains how peripheral states can never become developed because the existence of their economies can be described as being satellite to the industrialized states. This relationship is sustained through the imbalance of trade and dependency legitimizing ideologies. Nafiah (2024) goes much further with this criticism, addressing modern aid. She claims that foreign aid is more inclined to cause dependency since it is provided with the conditions of the donors, which interferes with the local decision-making. The so-called help is a dirty tool for extending dependence, especially when donors dictate the development agenda. Such imbalance sustains relations of giving and receiving, continuing the illusion of good.

The dependency theory has been used to interpret the perpetuation of colonial legacies in global development policies in Africa. Even participatory, as it is called, may replicate the top-down approaches in cases where local actors are not able to influence the design or implementation. The identification of this imbalance is critical towards shifting to the truly emancipatory cooperation where African agency becomes central.

3.2 Empowerment Theory and Alternative Models

The theory of empowerment dwells on agency, participation, and self-determination. It came about in the 1990s as a response to dependency thinking based upon community psychology

and participatory development studies. According to Zimmerman (1995), empowerment is an increase in the capacity of individuals to make judgments and exercise control over their lives. It consists of psychological empowerment (self-efficacy, self-confidence), organizational (capacity of collective action), and community empowerment (structural participation in decision-making).

Miyano (2021) applies those concepts to the development of Africa. He seeks authentic improvement by discarding externally determined agendas for locally determined plans. Empowerment is not simply a giving out of resources here but a giving out of power to be passed over from donor to community, planner to participant. It also fits the theory of social entrepreneurship and youth innovation, as the young individuals identify local needs, design solutions, and implement them.

Empowerment theory contrasts the hierarchical aid model by encouraging horizontal relationships with more emphasis on collaboration than on control. Here, a success is not one where a certain number of aid projects have been completed, but one where autonomy and resilience have been created. When extended to projects like Girls Be Strong, the theory of empowerment demonstrates the potential of participatory design and co-creation to disrupt dependency models and rejuvenate development through joint growth.

Case Study: Girls Be Strong (GBS) Project

4.1 Overview of GBS

Girls Be Strong (GBS) is a youth-driven project established by Korean school-going children that reflects the empowerment-based growth. It works in Uganda, where it provides vocational training to single mothers, learning sewing and design, and assists their children to get a school education through its Hope Hill program. The project has been developed over a period of over four years and has involved consistent cooperation, repeated visits, and prolonged involvement. GBS is an indication of movement to mutual learning and co-creation instead of traditional donor-recipient models.

Unlike most aid interventions, which think of African communities as passive recipients, GBS presents the locals as partners and collaborators. The initiative creates a self-reliance platform through skill development, income-generating opportunities, and education. Its young leadership also disrupts the traditional North-to-South structure and shows that the solidarity at the global level does not have to be vertical, but can be horizontal.

4.2 Education and Self-Reliance

GBS is based on a two-track model where both adult training in vocation and the education of children are included. Single mothers are introduced to a patterned sewing course where they acquire design, cutting, and tailoring skills in making something to sell. This is more in line with the theory of empowerment: rather than being provided with gifts, they are given abilities to earn and support their families. Simultaneously, their children are provided with educational support which generates an intergenerational approach, breaking poverty and dependency cycles.

According to Adewole (2022), skill-based empowerment is crucial in the attainment of Africa Agenda 2063's objective of inclusive development and sustainable livelihoods. GBS can thus be considered as a welfare program as well as a social entrepreneurship incubator. It reveals how empowerment can be achieved through the outsourcing of other parties without forced dependency. Through economic and educational self-reliance, GBS can fill the aid-empowerment gap, and this is an indication that co-designed interventions can bolster dignity and autonomy.

4.3 Ethical Partnership and Co-Creation

The hallmark of GBS is the reconceptualization of partnership in terms of its ethical form. Instead of viewing volunteers as saviors and Ugandan mothers as victims, the program operates on the principles of co-creation and is supported by equality and reciprocity. Through sharing knowledge and culture, volunteers and participants will together redefine development as a shared activity. Ethical issues of representation are also taken care of in this model since they reject the discourses of victimhood.

Ethical storytelling as a development practice emphasized by Mahmoud and Nang (2024) and Nafiah (2024) has the key place in empowerment. GBS presents the ingenuity, sturdiness, and initiative of actors and thus challenges the reductionist images of traditional aid media. By so doing, GBS does not only change the ways of livelihood but also puts to the test the symbolic frameworks conducive to dependency, an approach that would provide a model of youth-driven moral growth.

The Ethical and Media Issue in Aid

5.1 Poverty Porn and Its Impact

The media is a key factor in how the world views Africa and aid logic. Heartrending images used to raise Helf-Mitleo, the rhetoric of poverty porn, are not a new construct in humanitarian marketing. According to Shabbir et al. (2024), such images are designed in a specific way to maximize donations through emotional appeal. On the contrary, they make subjects passive by depriving them of agency and complexity.

Mahmoud and Nang (2024) build on this claim by showing that in addition to the disrespectful relayed message, the existence of these pictures erodes the nature of aid. The images make the recipients appear powerless, and this makes the people who watch the images and possibly the recipients themselves see that they have an innate sense of being unable to actively improve themselves. This washing away of autonomy is strengthening a dependency discourse. Additionally, poverty porn propagates the savior complex, on which the global aid market depends, and thus fixes the dominance and moral superiority of donors.

5.2 Media Representation Ethics: Ethical Alternatives

The only way of combating these dynamics is to alter the morality behind these narratives. Nafiah (2024) promotes ethical digital literacy and storytelling that preempts dignity, participation, and empowerment. The ethical aspect makes people human, and the community should be viewed as change agents and not figurative objects. The practices of the media based on communication and consensus are used to overcome the culture of dependency as it was founded

The intersection of these ethical values is in line with the idea of agency and co-creation proposed by the empowerment theory. It also mirrors the decolonizing communication tendencies in the world, where the voices of the Global South would demand their agency and will. In the case of programs such as GBS, this must include changing the image of suffering to a display of strength, changing the perception that the world has of Africa, and that the Africans have of themselves.

Youth Empowerment as a Pathway to Independence

6.1 Aligning Programs with Youth Needs

The core of sustainable development is youth empowerment. Mbugua, Kanyinga, and Mbatia (2024) further contend that participation-based, local, or youth-set empowerment programs tend to succeed in most cases and instances. Young people comprise the largest segment of the

population in most African settings, but they are sidelined when making decisions. The programs created without their participation run the risk of replicating the issue of dependency, telling the youth what they need but not what they want to accomplish.

The designs on empowerment also focus on co-design and constant communication. Programs that use youth as leaders, instead of beneficiaries, make them feel as if they own the program, a factor that enhances performance results. This model may be observed in the GBS model as Korean youth volunteers interact with the Ugandan youth in the creation of the partnerships of the cross-cultural collaboration on equal terms. Such models are based on the capacity of solidarity between the youth to move past the conventional donor-receiving relationships in creating shared innovation and learning.

6.2 Skill Development and Entrepreneurship

The major way of moving out of aid dependency and into sustainable livelihoods depends on skill development and entrepreneurship. Adewole (2022) asserts that social entrepreneurship can provide a way of realizing the socio-economic vision of Agenda 2063 in Africa, as it provides youth with the tools to build opportunities instead of waiting to receive them. On the same note, Geza, Ngidi, Slotow, and Mabhaudhi (2022) observe that when programs are done by youth and rooted locally, their involvement in agriculture and rural value chains generates innovation and self-reliance.

GBS reflects these lessons with the emphasis on capacity building rather than charity. Through sewing, designing, and creative enterprise, participants are able to gain not only income-generating abilities but also confidence and leadership. This is in line with the 3 dimensions of empowerment, which include psychological, organizational, and community-based, which are depicted by Zimmerman (1995). In this respect, empowerment exists in a circle: competence breeds confidence, confidence breeds agency, and independence breeds competence. By positioning youth and women as value suppliers, such projects as GBS disrupt the structural sources of dependency and embark on a new path of development in Africa.

Rethinking Development Paradigms

7.1 Critique of Western-Led Aid Models

Western-led assistance critique shows that the issue is not assistance but its construction. The analysis of the global economic systems presented highlights the reliance of wealth accumulation in the North and the South on extracting resources and exploiting labor. This

reasoning continues in the development assistance, where hierarchical relationships are frequently replicated by conditionalities and the dominance of donors.

According to Mkandawire et al. (2024), the aid economy replaces organic growth by financing repetitive spending instead of productive sectors. This establishes dependency cycles at the local level where innovation is hindered. Furthermore, the patterns of Western aid tend to implement forms of governance or cultural standards that do not correspond with the situation on the ground, which is a kind of epistemic colonialism. Unless these structural imbalances are addressed, any additional aid will only increase dependency as opposed to reducing it.

7.2 Participatory and Locally Driven Approaches

Conversely, the participatory and locally based strategies redefine development as a participatory process by being culturally relevant and agentic. Miyano (2021) proposes models that put local actors at the center and develop indigenous knowledge. These strategies also place the emphasis on capacity building instead of resource transfer by placing the communities as partners, not receivers.

When empowerment frames are integrated with participatory development, they yield more sustainable results since the vulnerability in terms of agency and ownership is restored. It is also aligned with the global ideals of decolonized development that aim at equalizing power relations between North and South. Within this context, projects like GBS can be of practical use as a good example of participatory development in practice, in which youth and the local community can co-design solutions that mirror collective aims as opposed to prescriptions.

Toward Sustainable Empowerment-Based Development

According to the above analysis, the empowerment-based model of development in a sustainable way has three strategies that are interdependent and alter one another: building of capacity, the change in the ethical narrative, and a reform in a structure.

First, capacity building involves investment in education, entrepreneurship, and technical skills, which helps in self-dependence. According to Adewole (2022) and Geza et al. (2022), skill development and social enterprise are necessary and significant to reduce the dependence on external support. The programs are no longer to be a temporary support; instead, the switch should be towards the system that will stimulate innovation and sustainability.

Second, symbolic structures of such dependency need to be deconstructed through narrative change. Nafiah (2024) also adds weight to dignity-based media behaviors that reflect

people in the reflective light of creative and potential forces. The development communication itself is an empowered space through redefining the expression of what might be described as a way of helping the poor, but rather as the growth partner.

Third, structural reform should involve reorganizing the aid relations of the international institutions and the donors. This entails the conversion of conditional funding to fair collaborations that embrace local decisions. The GBS case shows that empowerment, ethical storytelling, and collaborative practice can be synergetic: the participants are treated as the producers, the volunteers as the partners, and they all can learn together. By including this into the mainstream of the development process, then development will no longer be just a transaction but a mutual enabling process.

Conclusion

The structural imbalance of the donor and recipient country explains the systemic frailty of the global aid system as much as decades of development aid has been directed. The dependency theory exposes the reality that inequities are structuralized and not by feeling but by the fact that historical and economic power inequity perpetuates dependence. Also, ethical dimensions of assistance, photos of beneficiaries included, are prone to further reinforce these inequalities with agency denial and victimizing helplessness.

Nevertheless, the empowerment theory and programs such as Girls Be Strong present a good alternative. By way of its educative focus on the acquisition of skills and ethical collaboration, GBS transforms aid from a top-down activity of charity to a horizontal activity of co-creation. It shows that once development is harnessed based on dignity and participation, it can be used as an instrument of emancipation versus control.

The way ahead should finally design development to be seen as an empowerment, not as gifting those in power to those completely without it, but as a process respecting the local knowledge, creativity, and agency. As long as aid turns into partnership, then dependency will be replaced by dignity, and finally, the historical story of development in Africa will be written by the people to whom the whole history pertains.

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