

Review of Dambisa Moyo's book *Dead Aid*

by [Jacob Williams](#) on 2025-03-03
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Moyo wants rich countries to stop giving aid money to African governments. She thinks it's failing to produce economic development and is in fact *inhibiting* economic development in Africa. One key mechanism for this is that the money enables corrupt governments to survive longer: they aren't accountable to their citizens (since their revenue doesn't come from those citizens) and they aren't effectively held accountable by donors either.

The focus on corruption is the basis of Moyo's response to two philosophical objections that seem important to me:

1. *Wouldn't stopping aid have horrific consequences, at least in the short term?* She doesn't seem to think so:

Would many more millions in Africa die from poverty and hunger? Probably not – the reality is that Africa's poverty-stricken don't see the aid flows anyway. Would there be more wars, more coups, more despots? Doubtful – without aid, you are taking away a big incentive for conflict. Would roads, schools and hospitals cease being built? Unlikely.¹

2. *If aid is really so bad, can't African countries just choose not to take it? Shouldn't they be the ones to decide?* Moyo doesn't think the recipient governments can be trusted on this:

For African leaders too there is no immediate incentive to abandon the aid model – apart, of course, from the obvious one that were they to do so their countries' economic position would quickly improve. To appreciate the economic prospects in a non-aid environment, however, requires a long-term and selfless vision, and not the myopia so many policymakers (at home and abroad) are afflicted with today.²

And she doesn't think the general population of Africa are in a position to effect change:

Ordinary people across Africa, the millions who bear the brunt of the economic catastrophe, have an incentive to change the aid regime of course. They would, if they could – who wouldn't? But they eke out their existence under a veiled (and often not so veiled) threat of intimidation, punishment and even death. In order to overturn the state aid-dependency, Africans need the gritty defiance of the unknown man who stood against the Chinese tanks in Tiananmen Square in June 1989. But such rebellion carries enormous risk, and when pitted against the omnipotent state, more likely than not, will fail.³

Moyo doesn't expect Western leaders to change the situation on their own, either, so ultimately she puts responsibility on the ordinary people of the West:

This leaves it to Western citizens. They have power, and could hold the key to reform. It was, after all, thanks to the 60,000 ordinary Americans who wrote to the US Congress laying out their desire for freer trade access for African countries that the AGOA was born.

It is this type of activism that is needed to help jump-start Africa's development agenda, and set it on the right track.⁴

Questions. This book was published in 2009, so one would hope that the intervening years have provided some data to help us judge its ideas. I'm totally unequipped to evaluate the book, but here are some things I wondered about while reading it.

1. One of Moyo's recommendations is for African countries to take out loans on the **international bond market**, and she praises **Ghana** and the **Gabonese Republic** for doing so in 2007. How has it worked out for them? ([Claude tells me](#) that "[m]any countries including Ghana ended up in debt distress despite following this approach", mentioning that "[b]y 2015, Ghana required an IMF bailout program".)
2. Moyo also wants African countries to develop their **local bond markets**. She talks about one initiative toward this, **GEMLOC**, and notes that "[t]he hope is for involvement of the World Bank Group to cease after ten years..."⁵ Did it? Did the program succeed in improving some countries' bond markets, and if so, did this have significant benefits for the people of those countries in general? ([Claude's answer](#) just reinforces my assumption that I'd have to spend a whole lot of time on this to form any firm opinions. Actually, I feel that way about all of these questions.)
3. Moyo wants African countries to receive more "**foreign direct investment**", and thinks one obstacle to this is **excessive/dysfunctional regulation**. She mentions **Uganda** as a positive example: "Uganda's economy grew by around 7 per cent between 1993 and 2002 when the country improved its regulatory climate."⁶ How has Uganda done since then? Have similar regulatory changes been tried elsewhere? ([Claude paints a relatively positive picture on this.](#))
4. Moyo lauds **China** for doing lots of direct investment in Africa. She also says "in nearly all African countries surveyed, more people view China's influence positively than make the same assessment of US influence."⁷ Does that hold true today? What factors specifically underlie public opinion on this? ([Claude says](#) this "has evolved significantly since Moyo's 2009 book" and also notes "regional variations are important - opinions vary considerably across different African countries based on their specific experiences with both powers." [Figure 3 of this Afrobarometer article](#) seems to show the US more favorable in most, though not all, of a selection of 18 African countries in 2019/2020, but also says there's a "high correlation [which] suggests that citizens' ratings of each country may have less to do with the specific actions or investments of each...but instead reflect an overall sense of whether external powers are generally contributing to the well-being of the respondent's country."⁸)
5. File this under *shocking if true*: "the Peruvian economist Hernando de Soto suggests that the value of savings among the poor of Asia, the Middle East and Africa is as much as forty times all the foreign aid received throughout the world since 1945."⁹ The idea is that **poor(?) people have capital but don't have banks to put it in**, or it's in a form (e.g. the land they live on) that's not sufficiently legally protected for them to put it to use in the financial system. How true is this, and how much progress has been made in improving access to banking? ([Claude says](#) there's been lots of progress in at least one area: "the percentage of adults in developing economies with a bank account increased from about 42% to 71%"—see [this World Bank page](#).)
6. On the subject of improving the poor's access to financial services, Moyo speaks very highly of **Grameen Bank** (which gives loans to the poor in a way that makes the whole community feel

incentivized to ensure repayment) and makes a brief positive mention of **microlending** service Kiva. How have these approaches held up? (Anecdotal, I vaguely remember Kiva being all the rage for a bit, and then seemingly falling out of favor?) (Claude gives the sort of inconclusive nuance you'd expect.)

7. In passing, Moyo throws a bit of shade on **PEPFAR** for the “strings attached.”¹⁰ Trump defunding this program has been the [subject of recent alarm in the EA community](#); see also [this report](#) that Scott Alexander linked to. How does Moyo feel about the potential loss of this program? (I came across a [snippet of an interview](#) where she says “the PEPFAR programs are unsustainable” but I don’t know whether that implies actual opposition to it.)
8. Does Moyo think there’s any room at all for **private charity** to help Africa? I get the impression from the book that she’s generally skeptical, but I might be wrong, and the book is explicitly not focused on private charity. She does briefly mention—sort-of-positively but with significant qualifications—the idea of doing aid in the form of sending money directly to a country’s inhabitants, which sounds closer to what a private charity like [GiveDirectly does](#); and she speaks positively of “conditional cash transfer programmes”¹¹. (A google search for “Dambisa Moyo charity” brings up [a 2024 article by her called “Twelve Questions for Philanthropists”](#). The title sounds antagonist but the content is just a list of decision points for philanthropists—it gives me very little idea of what she thinks they ought to do, but doesn’t at all give the impression that she thinks the effort is worthless.)

The **notes** I took on each chapter are available at <https://brokensandals.net/notes/2025/dead-aid/>.

A friend in my book club linked [an article by Will MacAskill regarding “aid sceptics”](#) like Moyo (though not this book in particular). MacAskill says the sceptics’ negative assessment of international aid’s effectiveness is a minority view, but also argues against giving up on private aid even if you accept that view. Basically the arguments are: (1) the sceptics’ criticism is focused on government aid rather than NGOs; (2) their criticism is focused on economic development interventions, while the effectiveness of health interventions is on much more solid ground; and (3) it doesn’t matter whether the *average* program is bad, since we can identify programs that are good. The paper’s conclusion resonates with me a lot:

In a world of such suffering, of such multitudinous and variegated forms, often caused by the actions and policies of us in rich countries, it would be a shocking and highly suspicious conclusion if there were simply nothing that the richest 3% of the world’s population could do with their resources in order to significantly make the world a better place.¹²

1. Dambisa Moyo, *Dead aid: why aid is not working and how there is a better way for Africa*, 1. American paperback ed (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2010), 144.
2. Ibid., 148.
3. Ibid., 149.
4. Ibid.
5. Ibid., 92.
6. Ibid., 101.
7. Ibid., 109.

8. Thomas P. Sheehy and Joseph Asunka, "Countering China on the Continent: A Look at African Views," accessed March 3, 2025, <https://www.afrobarometer.org/publication/countering-china-on-the-continent-a-look-at-african-views/>.
9. Moyo, *Dead aid*, 137.
10. Ibid., 7.
11. Ibid., 151.
12. William MacAskill, "Aid Scepticism and Effective Altruism," *Journal of Practical Ethics*, accessed February 17, 2025, <https://www.jpe.ox.ac.uk/papers/aid-scepticism-and-effective-altruism/>.