

## **Book Review**

### **Rethinking United States-Africa Relations: US Engagement and the Development Question in Africa-Jonah I. Onuoha**

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#### **Introduction**

The essay “Rethinking United States-Africa Relations: US Engagement and the Development Question in Africa” by Prof. Jonah Onuoha was published in 2020 as a reproduction of a lecture with the same title he delivered to Course 27 Participants at the National Defence College in Abuja, Nigeria in 2019. In the essay, Onuoha discusses the question of whether US engagement with Africa rather enhanced development or underdevelopment on the continent. In order to do this, Onuoha traces the history of US-Africa relations to analyse thrusts and trends of this relationship and paints a prognosis of possible future scenarios.

#### **Why we must rethink US-Africa Relations**

Onuoha’s starting point is the assertion that US-Africa relations need to be rethought within the scholarly debate. There are three main reasons for this notion. Firstly, against the backdrop of US interference with global politics as in Iraq or Libya, African leaders increasingly lament about the patronizing character of this relationship. Secondly, US politics towards Africa is becoming increasingly militarized which accounts for the necessity of a profound cost-benefit analysis of the relationship. Thirdly, although economic considerations become more important, security and development seem to stay the main focus of US-Africa relations. Despite all the funds that are spent in the name of development, US engagement in Africa has failed to produce the expected development effects.

#### **Continuity and Change in US Policy towards Africa: Analysis of Trends**

To get to the bottom of these considerations, Onuoha traces the history of US-Africa relations back to their beginning, noting that low priority, incoherence and fragmentation are the overarching motives of US engagement with Africa. To explain this, Onuoha asserts that US policies towards Africa seem to be generally led by dynamics of US domestic politics. According to Onuoha, the US’ first commitment in Africa was the establishment of Liberia in 1847. Although, later, the US also sent a representative to the Berlin Conference of 1884/85 during which the first scramble for Africa was organized among the European nations, US

relations with Africa became institutionalized with the establishment of the African Bureau in 1958. All in all, Onuoha defines and characterizes three phases of the US' Africa-policy from the 1950s until today. The guiding definition of policy used by Onuoha (2020:14f) is “a consistent and persistent behavioural pattern of a sovereign state, international organizations and other entities”.

With the independences of the 1950s and 1960s Africa turned into a proxy battle ground of Cold War dynamics, the US' main interest being the containment of socialism, the protection of shipping lines and access to minerals. Therefore, this time period is understood as “Aggressive Phase” by Onuoha. Against the background of these power-soaked policies, the US were ready to tolerate autocratic regimes like Egypt, thereby falling short of achieving their goals in the realm of development.

With the end of the Cold War, the policy pattern of the US changed to the so-called politics of conditionality. Onuoha defines this as the “Conservative Phase” that is characterized by democratization and economic reform. African leaders were expected to democratize to receive foreign aid. However, Onuoha (2020:19) regards these US development efforts as “half hearted” and patronizing, tending towards “utter neglect” of the African continent due to the missing Cold War dynamics as a driving factor of US politics. Further, the fact that the political reforms of the second wave of democratization were unable to bring about peace in several cases like Ghana, Congo and Nigeria point towards the question whether democracy can keep its promises.

The terrorist attacks of 9/11 marked another turn in US-Africa relations. Onuoha calls this the “Realist Phase” as Africa now became an important partner within the scope of the “Global War on Terror”-doctrine which led to an increasing militarization of US-Africa relations under G.W. Bush with the African Command (AFRICOM) as its centerpiece. Apart from that, this phase is characterized by economic diplomacy as Africa became an increasingly important prospect source of US oil imports. Also under Obama, the focus of US-Africa relations continued to stay on security and strategic resources. Onuoha observes that this is a significant continuity with previous administrations. Under the Trump administration and its “America First”-policy, Africa remained to score low on the US priority list, safe for the security aspect and programs initiated by former governments.

### **US Engagement and the Development Question in Africa**

Based on this historically grounded analysis, Onuoha approaches the question whether the US have been able to engender socio-economic development in Africa. Generally, there are two main stands on the relationship between economic development and foreign aid. The first position is that foreign investment is necessary and sufficient for economic growth and development which is politically underpinned by Clintons “Trade not Aid”-doctrine and the African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA) as well as Obama’s “Power Africa Initiative”. However, Onuoha asserts that US aid towards Africa has proven to be too inconsequential in the last decades to bring about meaningful development. This leads to the second stance in literature which claims that external capital is generally not fit to engender socio-economic development as it facilitates corruption and dependency. Onuoha only partly agrees to this premise as he sees, after interrogating the resource curse theory, Africa’s lacking culture of productivity as the key source of development problems. Therefore, “industrialization is the pivot to Africa’s long-term development, not foreign aid” (Onuoha 2020:33).

With regards to possible future trends Onuoha notes a shift towards economic considerations within the changing geopolitical dynamics, most notably the resource war between the US and China. China has become an increasingly important and attractive partner for many African states due to its economically centred politics of non-interference. This dynamic is especially underpinned by the fact that US engagement has failed to bring about development in many African countries so that their leaders turn away to look for other partners. Against this backdrop, Onuoha paints two different scenarios: a new scramble for Africa in which China and the US compete for the best trade partnerships with African states bringing about meaningful development – or a devastating war for the African continent’s resources resembling Cold War dynamics.

### **Conclusion**

All in all, Onuoha’s book provides a rich overview of US-Africa relations through the last six decades linking the topic with the most important contemporary development theories. Further, it gives an impressive account and analysis of incoherence and hypocrisy in US relations towards Africa.

However, several ends remain loose. Firstly, the notion of “stick and carrot” vs. “carrot and stick” politics used in the analysis of trends in US engagement with Africa remains blurry.

Moreover, in the face of the vast activist civil society engagement it seems to be one-sided to conceptualize democratization as a mere carrot in the hands of US politicians. Secondly, Onuoha does not take the US-African experience of intercontinental slave trade into account when thinking about US-African relations and fails to give an exhaustive explanation why. Also, the Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPs) implemented by the World Bank seem to be an important vector in US policies towards Africa that remains unmentioned in the book. Thirdly, and lastly, Onuoha's comparison of Europe's – and especially Germany's – post-WWII development through the Marshall Plan with US development politics towards Africa appears far-fetched. The collective African experiences of slave trade, colonialism and the corresponding wide-ranging reorganization of African governance structures can only cursorily be compared with Germany's post-WWII situation.

On the basis of Onuoha's article, the author of this work agrees that, on the one hand, the US were not able to push forward development in many African countries with their patriarchal politics of conditionality and inconsistent policy patterns. However, some policies like Obama's "Power Africa Initiative" contributed to development by paving the way for achieving the Sustainable Development Goal 7 "Affordable and Clean Energy". On the other hand, US engagement in Africa can neither be considered responsible for problems of underdevelopment on the continent as Onuoha's critical investigation of the postcolonial state theory and resource curse theory show. Therefore, US engagement in Africa bears a significant development potential. If the US change their strategy to focus on economic cooperation and the establishment of an industrial landscape in Africa the relationship is likely to lead to prosperity for both partners. If the US, in contrast, refuse to go into a new age of development partnerships African leaders will focus on China and thus contribute to building the stage for a new resource war between the US and China in which the African continent is likely to get the short end of the stick.

## **References**

Onuoha, Jonah. 2020. *Rethinking United States-Africa Relations. US Engagement and the Development Question in Africa*. Great AP Express Publishers Ltd.: Nsukka.