



Desk study on aid and democracy

Comoros

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January 2024

This study is part of a series of country-focused desk studies on aid and democracy prepared under the project [The state and statebuilding in the Global South](#). They are prepared under the guidance of Rachel M. Gisselquist as background to a broader research effort on aid, governance, and democracy promotion. The studies follow a common template and each draws on the research literature and selected cross-national sources to discuss regime type and timeline, findings from the literature on democracy/democratization, findings from the literature on aid and democracy/democratization, aid flows and sources, and specific aid examples. This study addresses the case of Comoros, from independence in 1975 and with focus on the post-Cold War period.

Key words: foreign aid, democratization, Comoros, statebuilding, development

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This study has been prepared within the 'Statebuilding and local legitimacy' component of the UNU-WIDER project [The state and statebuilding in the Global South – international and local interactions](#).

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<https://doi.org/10.35188/UNU-WIDER/QBBO7822>

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The Institute is funded through income from an endowment fund with additional contributions to its work programme from Finland and Sweden, as well as earmarked contributions for specific projects from a variety of donors.

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1 Regime type and timeline

Comoros currently ranks 144th out of the 179 countries in the Liberal Democracy Index (Papada et al. 2023). Having undergone ‘significant autocratization’ in the last ten years, the country is ranked in the bottom 20% of the democracy index in terms of rank order. The Regimes of the World (RoW) typology (Lührmann et al. 2018) qualifies Comoros as an ‘Electoral Autocracy’ which implies that multiparty elections for executive offices exist, but there are insufficient levels of fundamental requisites such as freedom of expression and association, free and fair elections. The country scores 0.28 on the electoral democracy index, which captures to which extent political leaders are elected under comprehensive voting rights in free and fair elections, and freedoms of association and expression are guaranteed. The table below summarizes how Comoros performs on the major democracy and freedom indices:

Table 1: Comoros’ performance in major democracy and freedom indices

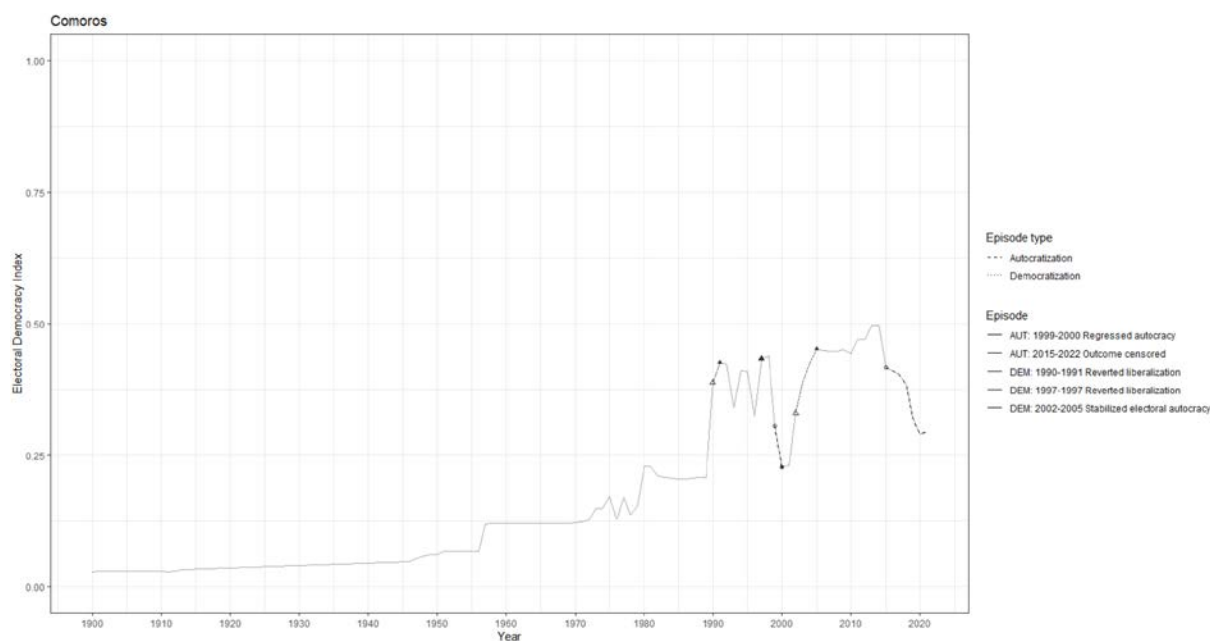
Country	Comoros
Liberal Democracy Index	0.12
Electoral Democracy Index	0.28
Regimes of the World Typology	Electoral Autocracy
Freedom House	Partly free

Source: author’s compilation based on the indices listed the first column.

V-Dem’s Episodes of Regime Transformation (ERT) dataset (Edgell et al. 2023) marks five main episodes in Comoros’ history of democracy, as illustrated in Figure 1. Each of the episodes is examined in greater detail below and contextualized in relation to the broader socio-political developments.

In 1974, three of the four islands making up Comoros voted in a referendum to gain independence from France. The leader of the independence movement, Ahmed Abdallah, declared independence in 1975 while France retained control of the fourth island, Mayotte (or Maoré), as a *collectivité territoriale*. Mayotte was later designated in 2001 as a *collectivité départementale* and in 2003 as a French overseas collectivity (*collectivité d’outre-mer*). Since independence, the country (i.e the three islands) was fraught with conflict. Comoros has experienced 21 coups attempts, four of which (1975, 1978, 1989, and 1995) were explicitly influenced by the French mercenary Bob Denard (Massey and Baker 2009). In light of this historical backdrop, the key episodes of Comoros’ democratization process are described below.

Figure 1: Episodes of regime transformation in Comoros



Source: author's construction based on ERT.

1990 to 1991 (V-Dem outcome: reverted liberalization)

In late 1989, the Abdallah regime in Comoros came to a violent end. Abdallah, who returned to power with the backing of Bob Denard, won a referendum on a constitutional amendment allowing him to run for a third six-year term. The government said he won around 92% of the votes, but there were widespread allegations of vote rigging (Henry 1989). Following the vote, Abdallah was assassinated, and Bob Denard was evacuated by the French forces (BBC Monitoring 2023). Denard's role in the assassination was subject to strong contention.

1997 to 1997 (V-Dem outcome: reverted liberalization)

In the light of another coup attempt in 1995, a secessionist movement rose in Anjouan, the country's second largest island. In a legal referendum, over 99% of citizens in Anjouan voted to secede from Comoros, but the government and the international community failed to recognize the vote (U.S. Department of State 1998). At the height of this crisis, President Taki passed away and was succeeded by interim President Tadjidine Ben Said Massoude (Hassan 2009).

The two time periods (1990–91 and 1997) are coded as 'reverted liberalization' in the ERT dataset to indicate that the episodes (a) never resulted in change from closed autocracy on the RoW measure, or (b) resulted in an electoral autocracy on the RoW measure but the political unit reverted to closed autocracy (Edgell et al. 2020).

1999 to 2000 (V-Dem outcome: regressed autocracy)

The 25th of April 1999 marked the success of the Antananarivo Peace Conference and agreement on the National Reconciliation Project. The agreement granted partial autonomy to the islands and a rotating presidency for the renamed federal Union of the Comoros. While Moheli, one of the three islands, signed in favour of the project, Anjouan deemed it unsatisfactory. Settlement efforts collapsed when Army Chief of Staff Colonel Azali Assoumani seized power in an armed coup that same month (Hassan 2009). In Nzwani the separatists won an election to the island assembly. They maintained their separatist position post winning, which led the Organisation of African Unity (OAU) to begin preparations for a military intervention. Subsequent negotiations produced the Fomboni accord in 2000 which

explicitly recognized that neither independence nor a renewed relationship with France were options. Instead, it established a *communauté comorienne* with accepted borders and confirmed the previously agreed federal structure (Baker 2009).

2002 to 2005 (V-Dem outcome: stabilized electoral autocracy outcome)

In 2002, President Azali Assoumani became the first elected president following the completion of the Fomboni Accords, in which the islands of Grande Comore, Anjouan, and Moheli reached an agreement whereby the presidency would rotate among the islands every five years (CIA Factbook 2023).

While the subsequent period was marked by relative calm, President Azali stepped down in 2006 following the end of his term. This presidential election had observers from South Africa, China, France, US, African Union, among others. Each island elected a new president and assembly, except in Anjouan, where Mohammed Bacar refused to step down and accept the election win of President Sambi for the Union presidency. The African Union first attempted to apply sanctions and naval blockade, before eventually seizing the island with boots on the ground through 'Operation Democracy' (Svensson 2008). Regional players such as Tanzania, Senegal, Libya, and Sudan actively assisted in this operation. Intriguingly, this event is not marked in the Episodes of Regime Transformation dataset.

2015 to 2022 (V-Dem outcome: censored)

Following the Presidential elections in 2011 where Ikililou Dhoinine came to power, the next parliamentary elections took place in 2015. Following a partial election re-run, Azali Assoumani came to power. The elections were viewed as a positive step towards the consolidation of democracy by the UN (Graham 2017). Following the election win, President Assoumani approved controversial revisions to the rotating presidency system that could see him potentially govern until 2029 (Louw-Vaudran 2019). The elections were marred by violence and the credibility of the entire electoral process was questioned by several actors including the African Union. His use of authoritarian methods to neutralize political rivals have also been widely documented (Massey 2020).

2 Findings from democracy literature

2.1 Origins of democracy/democratization

The four islands of Comoros have evolved differently vis-à-vis democratization. Mayotte was historically seen as most valuable, with the early French colonial administration mostly concentrated there. In 1961, the French authorities approved a self-governing constitution instituting a majoritarian legislative electoral system with single-member districts, and a parliamentary executive with an indirect election of the president. The subsequent year, the capital was shifted from Mayotte to Grand Comore, fuelling tensions and calls for separatism. In 1967, the French imposed a new constitution that instituted territorial representation in the colonial legislature and gave limited political autonomy to the islands in the form of each island electing its governor and own legislative council (Poupko 2017).

In the 1974 referendum, Mayotte voted against independence while the other three islands voted in favour of the independent Comorian state. Following several coups, many of which were orchestrated by a French mercenary, new constitutions were instituted in 1978 and later in 2001. The 2001 constitution introduced a rotating federal presidency, with a primary election first held on one island, followed by a general election between the top three candidates (Poupko 2017).

The breakdown of this rotating presidency model became apparent in 2008 with the intervention of the African Union forces. Furthermore, Comoros is still far from a consolidated democracy as the state suffers from poor governance and widespread corruption (Poupko 2017). While there exists 'formal autonomy' under the constitution for each of the islands, power remains highly centralized in the federal presidency, with the division of authority between the federal and island governments remaining unclear

in many areas (Baker 2009). Refer to Table 1 in Poupko (2017: 331) for a summary of the history of constitutional design in the country.

2.2 Stages of transition

Comoros is uniquely positioned in democracy literature owing to its status as an ‘island microstate’ or ‘small island state’. Rich (2008) argues that international aid, representative institutions, emigration opportunities, and political stability are correlated with levels of political contention in the case of Comoros. Sanches (2020) broadens this inquiry and poses the question why some African party systems within small island states (which share several characteristics including insularity, smallness, ethnic diversity, authoritarian past, economic vulnerability, and competitive elections) manage to stabilize while others remain fluid. She claims that stabilization is possible only if party elites are able to control the transitional phase and make the necessary institutional choices.

The number of parties who competed in Comoros’ first elections (22) stands out when compared to other small island states such as Seychelles (3) or Cabo Verde (2) (see Table 1 in Sanches 2020: 197). Extending Sanches’ argument, the fact that Comoros’ institutions and laws allow for representation of smaller parties, coupled with the choice for stronger presidents in a context with multiple competing parties, (partly) explains its political instability.

However, Sanches et al. (2022) interpret the same constraints in Comoros to reach a different conclusion. They argue that precisely because of this fragmented system where no single politician or party has been able to completely dominate Comorian politics, Comoros may potentially have avoided the worst excesses of authoritarian rule. However, they add that Comoros is particularly at a risk of democratic rollback, especially if individuals who are elected do not abide by the norms of inclusive government (Sanches et al. 2022).

As Baker (2009: 217) argues, the implementation of a federal arrangement and a rotating presidency aimed to theoretically generate more stability. However, these reforms failed ‘to address the almost intractable problem of both meeting the need for island cooperation to ensure viability, and the need to recognize island difference and freedom from domination by any other island’. This, in turn, has led to the generation of a weak national identity. As Walker (2000: 600) notes when speaking of the Comorian state: ‘[o]nly at its boundaries, its interface with the outside world, is the Comorian state real; from within all dissolves as the form reveals itself to have no content’.

2.3 Key actors (in addition to the internal Comorian political actors)

Regional actors

- South Africa—The country has been a key regional player in Comoros. Historically, the governing regime in the Comoros with French mercenary Bod Denard supported the apartheid system with arms to thwart the anti-apartheid national movement. From an economic angle, Comoros represents a large market for South African investments, especially in the spheres of tourism and infrastructure. The country also took a key role in coordinating the response of the African Union (Hassan 2009).
- Tanzania—Close historical, ethnic, and cultural ties exist between the various communities in Comoros islands and Tanzania. The Comorian independence movement is also said to have its roots in Tanzania as the National Liberation Movement of Comoros originated in Dar es Salaam in 1962. The country has also made a major commitment to supporting the African Union and Comorian policy (Massey and Baker 2009).
- African Union—The African Union’s naval and military intervention in the Comoros was quoted as a highly significant development for the multilateral body. It was largely deemed as a

'success' and notably differed from the more controversial interventions in Somalia and Sudan (Massey and Baker 2009).

International actors

- France—Being the former colonizer, the largest aid donor and considering Mayotte's status as an 'overseas departmental community' of France, its influence in the social, political, and economic affairs of Comoros has been crucial. France maintains that Mayotte's decision to remain part of France has complied with international legal principles and rules for decolonization (French Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs 2021). In addition to influencing local politics directly through the infamous mercenary Bob Denard (even though the official link between the French state and Denard remains to be uncovered), France has taken on the role of serving as the primary aid donor across the Comoros islands. It also provides naval assistance to protect the territorial waters. France also launched multiple military operations, including the current 'Operation Wuambushu' which aims to expel 'irregular' migrants (Hansrod, with RFI 2023).
- Other players like Iran, US, China, and Gulf actors have been gaining increasing prominence in Comorian politics as several leaders (most notable President Sambi) attempted to have an open-door approach to foreign policy. This is complemented by the provision of foreign aid by these actors.

2.4 Gaps in empirics and literature

- Limited literature on democratization in Comoros with a handful of historical studies.
- Given the number of attempted coups and the persistent state of political unease, it is difficult to ascertain moments of 'democratic transition'.
 - Additionally, the cascading effect of each political event influences future decisions. It is difficult to systematically study the nuanced evolution of Comorian politics without getting lost in the weeds.

3 Findings from aid and democracy literature

Foreign aid in Comoros cannot be detached from the wider objectives of donors. The country has experienced a long period of political and social instability and remains vulnerable to inter-island conflict, which has only increased its dependence on grants and foreign aid. In the first two decades following independence, Comoros turned to France and other Gulf donors for financial aid. While France emerged as the key bilateral donor in this phase and provided the bulk of the budgetary grants, the Comorian government was unable to complement the aid inflows with sufficient tax revenue mobilization. This consequently led to the persistent accumulation of foreign external payment arrears, leading to the collapse of aid inflows in the mid-1990s (Diaz-Sanchez et al. 2022).

Between 2002 and 2007 when the new constitution was adopted, the multilateral technical assistance mechanism was re-established. The IMF was even invited to monitor its economic and financial progress, but progress was thwarted owing to political tensions. Grants continued to fall and only began to recover around 2007.

From 2008 onwards, international support to Comoros gained momentum as development partners re-engaged through projects and budget support. Budget support from multilateral partners was conditional on adequate performance on fiscal management and domestic revenue targets. To donors, this guaranteed the continuation of structural reforms (Diaz-Sanchez et al. 2022).

Donors, particularly from the Gulf region, began investing heavily in aid programmes. Saudi Arabia, in particular, reportedly provided over \$60 million in one-off budget grants to pay government salaries and finance other expenses. The government also increased its revenues through the ‘economic citizenship programme’, which involved the sale of Comorian citizenship and passports (Diaz-Sanchez et al. 2022). However, the sale of citizenship is closely linked to the Arab states and aid funding. Kuwait and United Arab Emirates (UAE) have been heavily criticized for denying the Bidoon rightful citizenship. The two countries are now pledging large-scale aid to the Comoros Islands in exchange for the Bidoon being granted Comorian citizenship. If the Bidoon are granted citizenship, they could reportedly make up 20% of the population in Comoros (Mansour-Ille 2016). Other donors such as Saudi are pledging infrastructure aid to Comoros with a clear intent of expanding its network of allies against its Gulf rivals (Reuters 2018). Thus, while aid by the Middle Eastern donors may appear rather generous in Comoros, the political motivations and interests of the donors seem to overshadow any intended benefits.

If one looks at the traditional donors, Comoros is one of the 19 ‘priority destinations’ for French aid (AFD n.d.). The allocated aid, however, is used such that the strategic, political, military, and economic interests of the French state can be protected. The aid is often conditional and used to gain policy concessions, as exhibited in the 2019 deal where France pledged 50 million euros (\$161m) in development aid as part of a deal to tackle human trafficking and ease the repatriation of Comorans from Mayotte (Al Jazeera 2023).

Overall, foreign aid to Comoros seems to be largely driven to a great degree by geopolitical and economic interests of donors (whether ‘conventional’ or ‘emerging’).

3.1 Gaps in empirics and literature

- Very limited literature on role of aid, competing donor interests, and how foreign aid interacts with democracy outcomes in Comoros. Existing studies are largely descriptive or brief anecdotal snapshots at a given political juncture.
- Lack of systematic work on how aid projects by conventional and emerging donors co-exist (if at all). Do donors split sectors and exert influence on the Comorian government by selecting certain types of projects to fund?
- There also exists an empirical gap regarding what is the impact of ‘conditioning’ donor funding to gain concessions from the Comorian government.
- The exact mechanisms through which aid influences Comorian politics and elections is understudied.

4 Aid flows and sources

Since 2013, the General Planning Commission of Comoros tracks and analyses aid information from donors, ministries, and civil society organizations using its own ‘Development Assistance Database (DAD)’.¹ However, the [system](#) access is not publicly available.

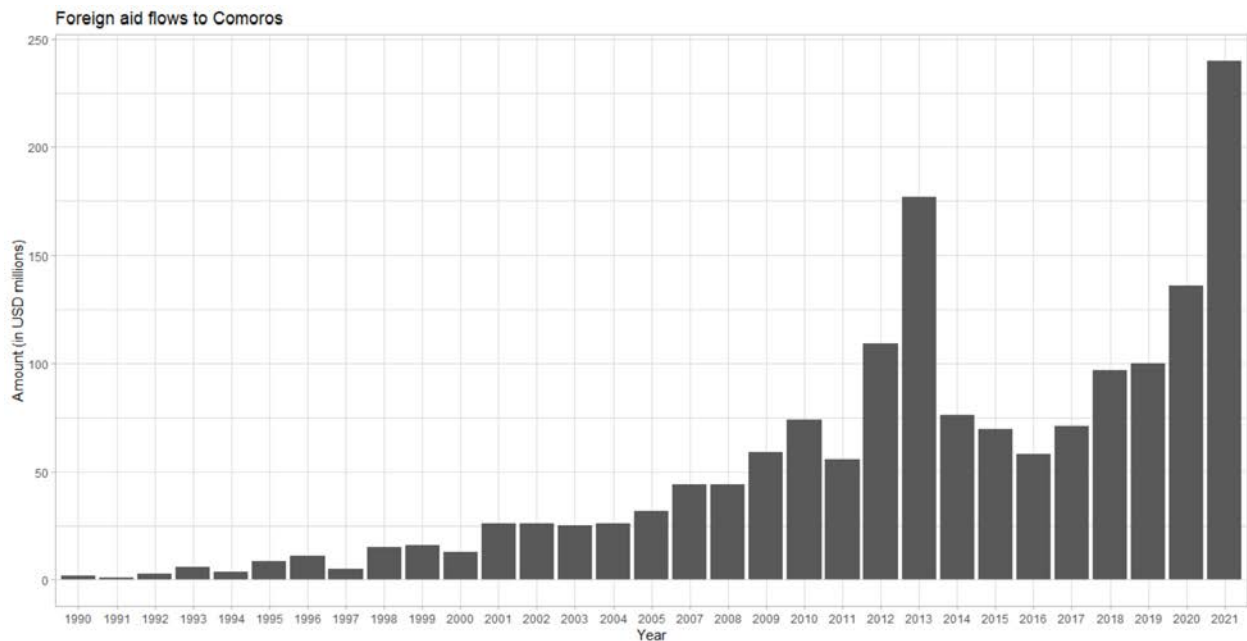
This section summarizes the main aid flow statistics from the OECD Creditor Reporting System (OECD-CRS) (OECD 2023). The CRS includes data on bilateral and multilateral aid (official development assistance [ODA]), aid from private sources, and some other resource flows to developing countries. The data are mainly reported by the 30 members of the OECD Development Assistance Committee

¹ See ‘Comoros Begins Tracking Foreign Aid Online’, <https://www.synisys.com/news/comoros-begins-tracking-foreign-aid-online/> (accessed 11 January 2024).

(DAC), some international organizations such as multilateral development banks and funds, and select non-DAC members (Atteridge et al. 2019).

In terms of total ODA flows, Comoros has received a total of USD\$1.6 billion between 1990 and 2021 (see Figure 5). The figures for the earlier years are likely under-estimated owing to reporting challenges. A spike is observed in 2013, followed by another spike in 2021.

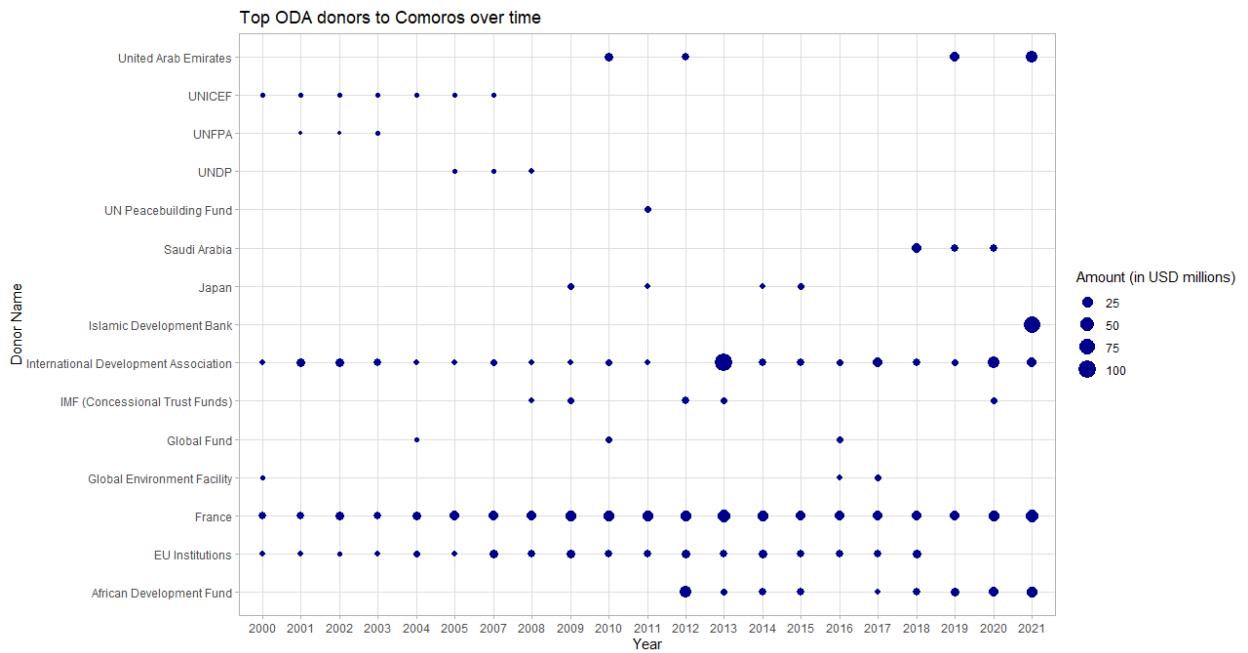
Figure 5: ODA funding volume to Comoros



Source: author's construction based on OECD-CRS.

In terms of funding volume by different donors (see Figure 6), France emerges as a consistently large donor. This is followed by the International Development Association (IDA)/World Bank and EU institutions. Other smaller donors include the UAE, Islamic Development Bank, Japan, Saudi Arabia, etc. The emergence of Islamic donors is interesting, given the religious composition of Comoros. When such donors entered Comoros and how their aid assistance co-exists with the typical western donors could warrant further research.

Figure 6: Top ODA donors to Comoros

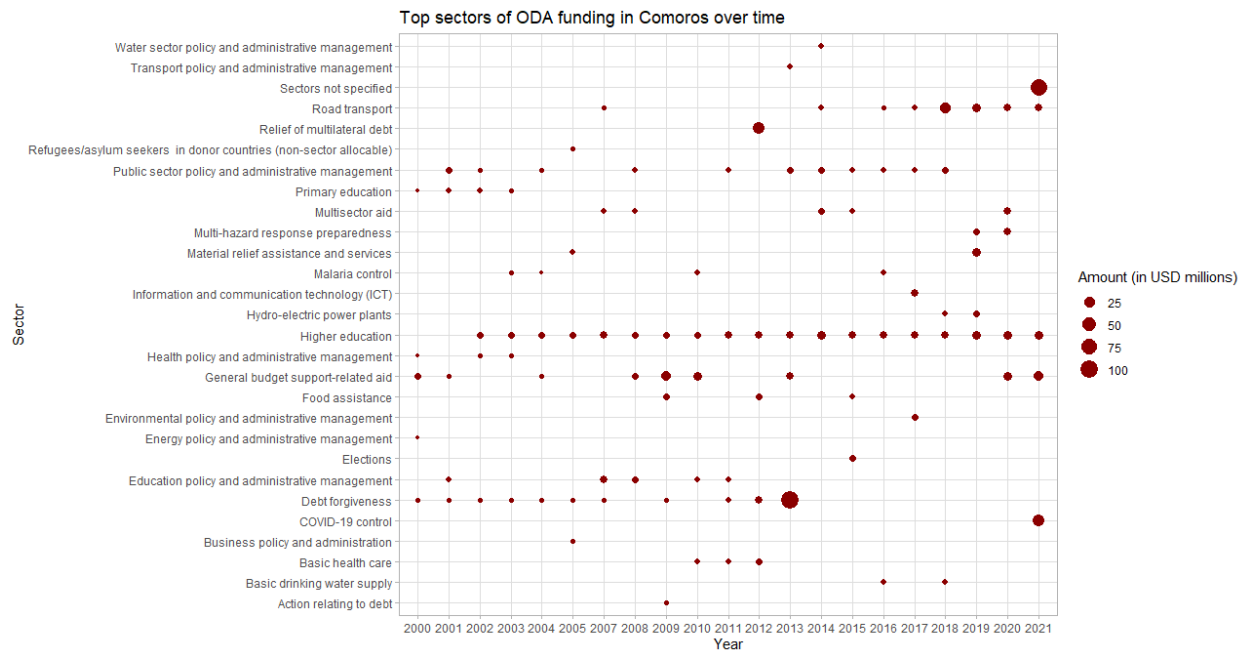


Source: author's construction based on OECD-CRS.

As for the top channels, the recipient/Comorian government overwhelmingly emerges as the main channel to implement aid projects. This connects neatly with research by Dietrich (2016) who finds that donors whose political economies emphasize a strong state in service provision—such as France, Germany, Japan—prioritize government channels. Considering France's substantial role as one of the primary contributors to Comoros, the utilization of government channels for aid distribution appears logical. Other prominent channels in Comoros include public sector institutions and donor governments. This is in line with expected donor behaviour to channel funding through their own aid institutions (such as USAID to funnel American aid, GIZ to funnel German aid, etc.)

In terms of sectoral split (see Figure 7), we see that investment in higher education is consistently prioritized by the DAC donors. Debt forgiveness was also a major component until 2013, with a big peak that same year. General budget support is also provided by donors periodically, although the scale varies. Public sector management emerges as another area of donor interest and funding.

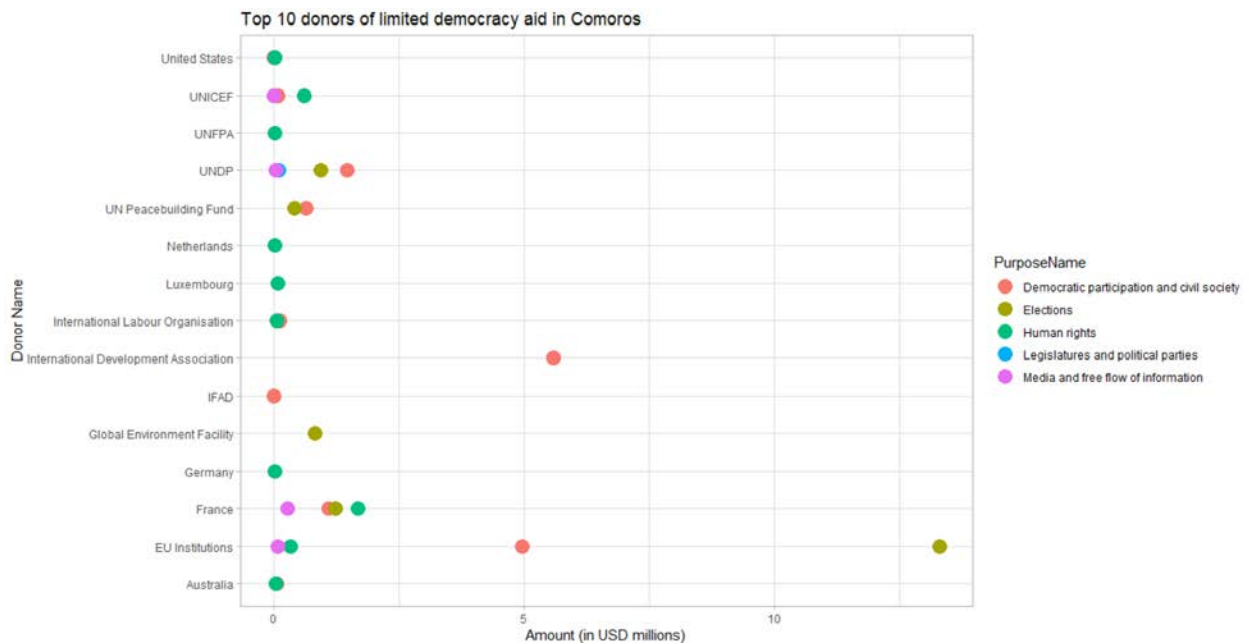
Figure 7: Top sectors of ODA funding to Comoros



Source: author's construction based on OECD-CRS.

When we specifically zoom into aggregated democracy aid (see Figure 8) within Comoros, notable patterns begin to emerge. The largest donor, France, prioritizes funding human rights projects, followed by projects on elections and civil society. EU institutions, on the other hand, lead the funding of election-related projects. IDA/World Bank and EU also heavily fund civil-society-related projects. Actors such as UNDP also fund civil society, but at a much smaller scale.

Figure 8: Top aggregate donors of democracy aid to Comoros



Source: author's construction based on OECD-CRS.

4.1 Gaps in empirics and literature

- Non-DAC donors are increasingly growing prominent in Comoros, but data on their funding volumes and channels are largely missing from traditional aid databases like OECD-CRS. The Comorian Development Assistance Database may track these data.
- How these ‘emerging donors’ vary in disbursing democracy aid in Comoros relative to ‘traditional donors’ remains an empirical question.
- Given France’s direct involvement in Comorian politics in the past, should we be considering other avenues of influence apart from aid, such as ‘military assistance’?

5 Specific examples of aid projects

There exists a large gap in literature on analysing ongoing aid projects, specifically those relating to statebuilding. This is compounded by the fact that the Comorian government’s commitment to financial assistance programmes by bilateral donors has been mixed. In 2015, IMF’s Rapid Credit Facility (RCF) provided disbursements to Comoros. However, this was withdrawn following a significant Saudi budget grant. For the same reason, a follow-up programme was dropped following the completion of a World Bank budget support programme in 2015. A six-month IMF Staff Monitored Program was also signed in November 2016, but the reviews could not be completed as the government unilaterally decided to suspend the programme (Diaz-Sanchez et al. 2022).

Donors such as the European Centre for Electoral Support (ECES 2023) and the International Foundation for Electoral Systems (2023) maintain their own records on election programming in Comoros, but the effects of such programmes are not analysed systematically in academic and policy literature.

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