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## **Foreign Aid in Dangerous Places**

The donors and Mali's democracy

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### **Abstract**

Mali long seemed a model, low-income democracy. Yet, in a few short weeks in early 2012, more than half of the territory came under the military control of an Islamist secessionist movement, and a military coup deposed the democratically-elected government in the capital. Given the substantial amount of foreign aid received by the democratic regime in the years before these events, this paper asks whether or not foreign aid could have done more to prevent the present outcomes. The paper concludes that it is very difficult to make such an assessment. On the one hand, aid can be credited for helping strengthen key elements of vertical accountability that are necessary for democracy. On the other hand, aid was not very successful at reducing several of the underlying, structural constraints that were to prove the country's undoing in 2012.

Keywords: Mali, democracy, foreign aid, military coup, inequality

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## 1 Introduction

In October 2011, a group of well-armed soldiers returning from participating in Libya's civil war created the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA). Since the MNLA appeared to be just the latest in a series of Tuareg groups with the quixotic ambition to create a homeland state in the Sahara, it received little attention, either in Bamako or in western capitals. Mali had faced Tuareg rebellions with regularity since independence, including most recently in 2007-09, but they ended each time relatively easily through a combination of military might and negotiated concessions (Emerson 2011; Gutelius 2007; Seely 2001). Yet, in the first few months of 2012, the MNLA, in alliance with Al Qaeda of the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and a new Islamic fundamentalist militia, Ansar Dine, handily defeated the Malian army in several key battles and gained military control of northern Mali, a region comprising close to two-thirds of the Malian territory. These military defeats and the perceived general complacency in Bamako angered some Malian junior officers, who organized a coup against President Amadou Toumani Touré on 22 March 2012. The military junta was nonetheless not able to prevent the MNLA and its Islamist partners from completing their victory. At the time of writing, the outcomes of these events is unclear and Mali's economic and political prospects seem decidedly uncertain (Mann 2012; Yabi 2012).

Prior to these events, though, Mali had been widely viewed as a relatively successful case of democracy in a low-income country. In March 1991, the military regime of Moussa Traoré was overturned following extensive public protests, and a new democratic constitution was promulgated in early 1992 (Vengroff 1993; Smith 2001; Wing 2008). Since then and until April 2012, the country had undergone regular elections, and at least one president, Alpha Konaré, peacefully left office after serving two terms. The last civilian president, Amadou Toumani Touré, had always promised to do the same, and elections to pick his successor had been planned for April 2012. Moreover, political and civil rights were generally respected in the country. Malians were said to be justifiably proud of their culture of tolerance and pluralism.

In addition, western donors in the country generally praised the democratically-elected government and its developmental programmes. Among the poorest countries in the world, both in terms of income and in terms of human development indicators, it consistently received aid levels amounting to around 12-15 per cent of its GNI, which accounted for more than 50 per cent of the government's annual budget. In many respects, the country represented a fairly successful example of the evolving international aid regime. The donor community has long viewed Mali as a test case for aid reform, and chose it for a seminal study of aid ownership and reform in the mid-1990s (OECD 1999). More recently, at least on paper, Mali's government had been a willing partner to most of the donor initiatives to make aid more effective, from specific recommendations of the 2005 Paris Declaration, to the implementation of several Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSPs) (Bergamaschi 2009), and the establishment of ministerial structures charged with the co-ordination of aid. A large volume of aid in recent years was associated with the rapid progress on various objectives of the Millennium Development campaign, notably in health and education, as well as healthy economic growth, and a stable electoral democracy that had undergone a successful alternation in power.

There were even further indications that the country was widely viewed by the donors as a successful and stable low-income democracy. The World Bank's 2007 Country Strategy paper argued 'Mali's political structure promotes stable, democratic institutions. There is a strong tradition of consensus in Malian politics and the country is considered one of the most politically and socially stable countries in Africa' (IDA and IFC 2007: 9). The 123 page report does not include the word 'Tuareg'; though it does refer once (p. 44) to the 'recurring crisis in the northern region of Kidal',<sup>1</sup> it argues that the crisis is being addressed and represents a 'limited risk for (its)... program'. Similar sanguine assessments can be found in most donor documents on the country in recent years, suggesting that Malian democracy was stable. Even as late as May 2012, the USAID website still praised the country as 'one of the most enlightened democracies in Africa'.<sup>2</sup>

In retrospect, to what extent should the current debacle have been anticipated? On the one hand, most observers were sanguine about the prospects of Mali's Third Republic (e.g. Bingen et al. 2000; Smith 2001; Wing 2008). On the other hand, academic analyses of the Tuareg grievances did occasionally suggest that the government in Bamako was failing to address grievances in the north (for instance, Scheele 2009). Plenty of other signs of potential problems could, and were, identified, ranging from low political participation rates, notably in elections, to extensive official corruption. In recent years, Bamako had been identified by international police sources as an increasingly important transit station in international drug trading, with the implication of substantial high-level complicities in the government (*Africa Confidential* 2009).

In addition, critics suggested that the large volume of aid had not prevented Mali from remaining among the poorest countries of the world, with a largely abysmal record of human development, despite recent progress under the aegis of the MDG campaign, as well as sharp and probably increasing socio-economic inequalities. A plethora of poorly co-ordinated donor driven decision and policy-making mechanisms dominate and in some cases have largely replaced domestic government institutions. The resulting symptoms of *aid dependence* included the fact that the state's capacity to design and implement development policy remained woefully low (Bergamaschi 2009; Dante et al. 2003).<sup>3</sup>

Observers have sometimes argued the donors rewarded Mali for its democratization in the 1990s with substantial increases in aid. I argue that the reality is more complicated, and the 'democracy dividend' was in fact deeply ambiguous. This paper further argues that aid's impact on democratic consolidation is similarly complex. The stability of democracy in Mali since 1991 has perhaps been aided by the large increase in the volume of aid that has characterized the post-Monterrey period in the last decade.<sup>4</sup>

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1 The area around Kidal, the biggest town in north eastern Mali, had been the site of Tuareg rebellions in the past.

2 See <http://www.usaid.gov/ml/en/director.html>

3 Mali is often described as the poster child for contemporary aid dependence in Africa; for instance, in the *London Guardian*: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/global-development/poverty-matters/2011/feb/17/mali-end-aid-dependence>.

4 The Monterrey Consensus emerged from a meeting in 2002 of international financial organizations. Among other observations, the Consensus stated that donor countries should be committed to allocating 0.7 per cent of their gross national income to aid in order to help the least developed countries to meet the MDGs.

Mali's impressive increases in literacy and health statistics may in part be credited to aid. On the other hand, the reasons for the country's excellent economic performance since 1995, which has contributed to democratic stability, probably have more to do with the devaluation of the CFA franc in 1994 and the rise in gold exports around the same time. Similarly, aid can probably claim some of the credit for the emergence of a lively civil society in Bamako and a public discourse of tolerance and pluralism. At the same time, foreign aid has done little to solve, and arguably has sometimes aggravated, some of the largest existing constraints on democratic consolidation, including the excessive dominance of the executive branch—and in particular of the presidency—over the other branches of government, as well as the growing socio-cultural cleavage between urban elites and the rest of the population.

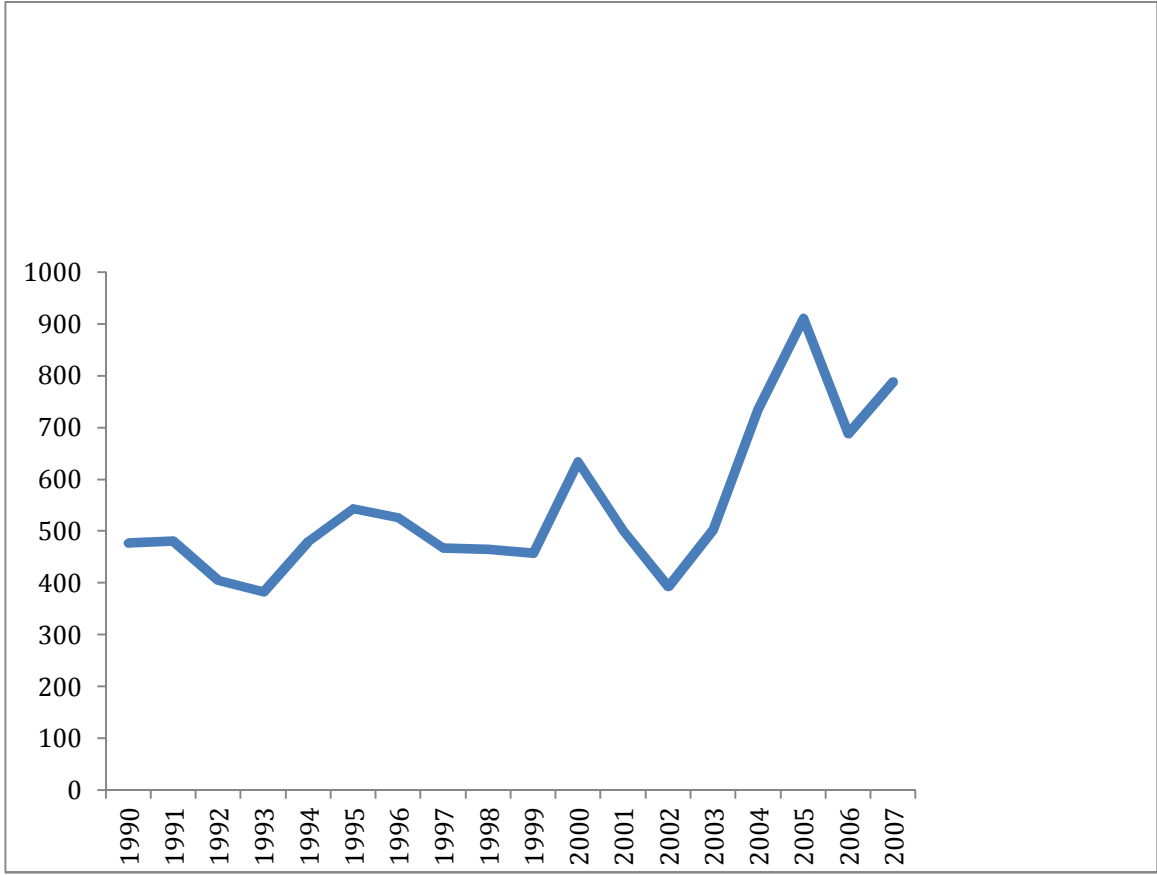
Moreover, with the benefit of hindsight, the growing crisis of governance in northern Mali, where an area the size of California was increasingly abandoned by the state and its donors, constitutes a policy failure of significant proportions given the dramatic ramifications since early 2012. Could the current catastrophe have been averted? While the underlying causes of the breakdown of national unity are complex and multifaceted, the government and the donors failed to reduce the marginality of northern populations or to increase the capacity of the Malian state to bring law and order as well as development to the northern regions.

In order to elaborate on these arguments in greater detail, the paper is organized in the following manner. The next section examines the aid record in Mali since 1991 and questions whether the country benefitted from a democracy dividend. Section 3 focuses on the positive impact of foreign aid on democracy in Mali. The paper then proceeds to highlight two different aid properties that have had a negative effect on democracy. In Section 4, I look at the negative impact of specific aid modalities on national sovereignty and institutions of accountability. Section 5 subsequently examines the poor record of aid in addressing several structural and longstanding threats to democratic consolidation in Mali. Section 6 summarizes and concludes.

## **2 The evolution of aid to Mali: a democracy dividend?**

Mali has long been one of the more aid dependent countries in the world. Several different periods in the history of aid to Mali can be identified between 1970 and today. The first substantial increase in total ODA occurred in response to the Sahel drought of 1972-74, which focused donor attention on ecological and related economic difficulties striking the entire southern edge of the Sahara Desert. The donor response led to a tripling of aid between 1972 and 1975 (in constant 2000 US\$ terms). Although attention subsequently waxed and waned in roughly a repeated three-year cycle, the upward trend in total aid continued until 1991, when aid commitments peaked at US\$480 million. Total ODA then entered a decade long period of declining and stagnant totals, except for a temporary burst in 1995-96, to bottom out at US\$392 million in 2002. Mali then received a steadily increasing amount of foreign aid during most of the first decade of the millennium, even if the last couple years suggest more or less stagnant totals in disbursements. In 2006-09, total net ODA commitments amounted to an average of 12.8 per cent of GNI, or the equivalent of current US\$75.60 dollars per Malian.

Figure 1: Aid disbursements to Mali, 1990-2007 (millions of constant 2000 US\$)



Source: Author’s illustration based on Aiddata.org.

Compared to other sub-Saharan African (SSA) countries, Mali has tended to receive more aid, both in per capita terms, and as a share of its economy. In sheer volume of aid, the evolution of ODA to Mali suggests longitudinal patterns that are typical of the region. Aid underwent a substantial increase in response to the difficulties of the 1970s, which were particularly acute in the Sahel. The ‘lost decade’ of the 1980s was characterized by growing aid levels as the donors sought to respond to growing economic crisis in the region and leverage some policy reform. However, the 1990s witnessed a malaise in aid during the early and mid-1990s before the MDG campaign substantially increased political support and aid totals during the first decade of the 2000s. Following the financial crash and global recession of 2008, the ability and willingness of the western donors to continue these increases is in doubt.

Mali’s growth rate needs to be taken into account when looking at the relative macro-economic weight of aid. Despite an average annual economic growth rate of 1.7 per cent from 1985-94, which was considerably slower than the country’s population growth, performance subsequently improved substantially, with annual growth of 5.8 per cent between 1995-2005.<sup>5</sup> The recent faster rate of economic growth appears linked to economic policy reforms in the 1980s and early 1990s, including the devaluation of the CFA Franc in 1994 and increased gold exports since the late 1990s (Coulibaly and Diarra 2008). Growth also has been spurred by remittances from abroad, which have

<sup>5</sup> Calculated from the World Development Indicators: <http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/all>

been increasing rapidly, and totalled some US\$305 million in 2008 (Gubert et al. 2009: 3). Foreign direct investment, notably in the growing mining sector, also has been rising quickly, to approximately 7-8 per cent of GDP (IMF 2011). This healthy economic growth over the course of the last 15 years should however be balanced by the continued rapid population growth, equivalent to 2.4 per cent a year, such that the country remains one of the world's poorest with a per capita GNI of US\$680 as of 2009.

Rapid economic growth helps to explain why substantial aid increases over the course of the last decade have not led to an increase in aid as a proportion of GNI. In macro-economic terms, Mali has become somewhat less dependent on aid today compared to the 1980s, when aid amounted to close to one-third of GNI. Still, the pattern of aid dependency is fairly well-established. Currently, there are about 42 official donors in Mali who collectively have provided 5,429 distinct aid commitments since 1990, which suggests a high level of aid fragmentation and donor proliferation.<sup>6</sup> The biggest donors are the World Bank, France, the European Union, and the United States.

In interviews in Bamako in June 2011, it was common for both donor and Malian respondents to suggest that Mali had benefited from a 'democracy dividend' from the donors, meaning that the donors had rewarded the country with extra funds following democratization in the early 1990s. Such a claim is in fact problematic, as even a cursory glance at Figure 1 suggests. The end of the Traoré regime in early 1991 was a period of stagnant aid, albeit at the historically high levels of just under US\$600 million. The government's adoption of structural adjustment policies after 1987 had increased external support, even if the slow pace of implementation reduced the flow of disbursements (Coulibaly and Diarra 2008). Unlike in some other democratization episodes in West Africa in which donor conditionality played a key role, the collapse of the Traoré regime took the donors largely by surprise (Smith 2001). The next couple of years, when the fledgling democracy could have used external support, were actually characterized by declining aid levels.

Table 1 suggests these aggregates disguise some significant differences across donors. France and the US substantially cut their support to Mali, for instance, in the years following the emergence of Malian democracy, while the World Bank (IDA) and the European Union actually increased their aid. In Mali, as in most low income countries, aid flows are marked by considerable volatility, and the annual variation for a single donor can swing widely as a function of disbursements into single large projects and the vagaries of the project cycle or the fiscal politics in the donor country. Without more information than historical aid statistics, it is hard to state why, for instance, French aid to Mali declined in the early 1990s; this may have signalled a rethinking of policy in France, or reflected disbursement vagaries. Nonetheless, the numbers do not suggest that the overall donor response to Malian democratization was to increase aid. If there was a democracy dividend, it was mostly rhetorical.

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<sup>6</sup> This data was accessed from AidData.org. This may exaggerate the extent of project proliferation because many projects generate multiple commitments from the donor agency.

Table 1: Average annual ODA to Mali around democratic transition (millions constant 2009 US\$)

Donor	1987-1991	1992-1996
France	165.0	122.1
USA	50.5	36.6
EU	70.8	95.9
IDA	82.8	92.6
Germany	61.3	46.1
ADB	46.4	24.8

Source: Calculated from OECD-DAC data base online.

Nor does the aid record suggest a significant democracy dividend since the late 1990s. To be sure, aid underwent large increases during the last decade, but the evidence makes it clear that aid to Mali generally followed donor trends elsewhere in Africa, that the higher than average levels of aid to Mali characterize the entire post-colonial era and predate democratization, and that in recent years, relative to the size of the economy, aid has actually declined, even as it seemed to hold steady to the region, as a whole, albeit at a lower level.

In sum, the evolution of aid appears to have followed a logic external to events in Mali itself. It seems likely that the decline in aid in the 1990s occurred despite democratization in Mali, as the domestic process of fiscal retrenchment occurring in the donor countries resulted in a general stagnation in aid levels. Similarly, the sharp increases in aid between 2000 and 2008 were driven by international dynamics following the Monterrey Donors Conference, rather than because of the successful transition in Mali from the Konaré to the Touré presidencies in 2002.

### **3 Positive impacts of aid on democratic consolidation**

Since its transition to democracy in 1991, Mali has undergone a modest transformation due to steady economic growth, a decline in the rate of poverty, and rapid urbanization. Higher levels of income, as well as sustained economic and political stability for over two decades, have strengthened the middle-class. This is particularly true in the major urban metropolis of Bamako, which now has a population of over 2 million people and reputedly is the fastest growing city in SSA (City Mayors Foundation 2012).

If, as much democratic theory suggests, such a structural transformation contributes to democratic consolidation, then economic growth should have improved Mali's prospects for democratic consolidation. If, in turn, aid has contributed to economic growth, which is a contentious issue well beyond the ambitions of this paper, then it has had an indirect effect in promoting Malian democracy.

Over this time, a substantially larger civil society has emerged in Mali. From a handful of operational national civic organizations in the 1970s, the third sector has been in steady expansion, with some 8,542 associations and 1,125 NGOs officially registered with the Government in the late 2000s (Freedom House 2011: 4). Interest groups have emerged to play an increasingly effective advocate for specific economic and corporate interests (Open Society Institute 2007). For instance, the National Union of Cotton and



Food Crop Producers (SYCOV), has exerted real power on policies in that sector (Docking 2005; Bingen 1998). Various associations have advocated for improved service delivery, including the numerous parents' associations that have risen around community schools, or the various groups lobbying for better health services (Open Society Institute 2007: 4-5).

Similarly, the diversification and liberalization of the media has been striking, from a couple of government-controlled news outlets at the time of transition, to an explosion of radio, hard print, satellite TV and internet options. In 2010, Reporters without Borders ranked Mali as having the second freest press sector in Africa, behind only Namibia (cited in Freedom House 2011: 5).

The precise role of foreign aid in promoting the expansion of civil society is much harder to establish, but seems incontrovertible. First, donor money directly encouraged the emergence of local associations. For instance, French NGO aid to the cotton sector was in part responsible for the emergence of (SYCOV) (Docking 2005), and some education projects have encouraged parents' associations. Second, a significant proportion of local NGOs are led by Malians who gained significant professional experience working for donors and international NGOs, before striking out on their own. Third, in ideational terms, many of the ideas and values of civil society are universal, but were in practice introduced into the country through foreign aid activities and funding. In sum, without underestimating the indigenous dynamics involved, it seems likely that the large volume of aid invested into Mali has helped develop the organizational and ideational dimensions of the country's growing civil society.

In this respect, one subcategory of aid, democracy assistance almost certainly has a distinctive impact on democracy, since it directly seeks to improve both the demand for democratic institutions and their supply. Insofar as the aid is effective, it is thus likely to have a positive effect on democracy. Between 2000-10, aid commitments to Mali from all donors totalled US\$5.6 billion. Of these commitments, approximately 113 project commitments totalling US\$58 million were specifically aimed at advancing electoral democracy and human rights. This then implies that democracy assistance constitutes about 1 per cent of total aid. Such a total seems low, given qualitative evidence from interviewing in Bamako in the summer of 2011, notably regarding the support provided by the donors for recent national elections, but it provides a rough order of magnitude for the share of total assistance going to the support of democratic institutions in recent years.

In addition, Table 2 further subdivides democracy assistance in order to identify the relative emphasis of the donors. The conflict management category includes a number of mediation and demilitarization actions based in northern Mali, often in the wake of the last Tuareg rebellion (2007-09). The most important donor in these activities has been the United States. More than many donors, the US government's programming in Mali took into account the risk of instability in northern Mali, and provided support for conflict mitigation activities by USAID (Management Systems International 2009). The presence of AQIM in northern Mali had resulted in some limited American military assistance, through the Trans-Saharan anti-terrorism initiative (Gutelius 2007). The 'Elections' category included voter registration efforts, civic education efforts and projects designed to improve the organization of elections, both at the national and local levels.

Table 2: Democracy assistance, 2000-10

Category	Number of commitments	Total funding (millions US\$)
Conflict management	16	5.19
Judicial sector	9	14.17
Elections	15	10.20
Civil and political rights	61	22.00
Legislative/party support	9	5.31
Other, miscellaneous	3	1.29
Totals	113	58.16

Notes: 'Democracy assistance' includes all commitments under the 'Government and Civil Society' category provided by Aiddata.

Source: Author's calculations based on Aiddata.org.

Although it may be hazardous to put too much weight on these rough counts from an imperfect categorization and a perhaps incomplete data, what nonetheless seems striking is the extent to which democracy assistance appears to favour mechanisms of vertical accountability (elections, civil and political rights) over horizontal mechanisms (judicial sector and legislative/party support). This may reflect the view that in the course of the last decade the former was much more likely to constitute an effective check on executive power in Mali, than the latter, and thus would be more likely to advance democratic consolidation. The donors may well have been encouraged in this direction by the fact that President Touré's practice of forming governments of national unity, with the participation of most legislative parties, in effect eliminated a parliamentary opposition and reduced the legislature to a rubber stamp (Baudais and Chauzal 2006).

Significantly, most donors present in Mali do not provide direct democracy assistance. Since democratization in the early 1990s, only a small subset of donors has provided the majority of direct democracy assistance. USAID has provided support for the strengthening of the National Assembly, and support for community radio in order to promote freedom of the press. Canada has supported voter registration and human rights projects. UNDP and the EU have been the only two multilateral donors willing to provide democracy assistance.

Moreover, even donors that have an active and ongoing 'democracy and governance' (DG) programme often treat it as a separate self-standing sector rather than as a form of institutional logic and a set of values that should permeate all of the donor's aid activities. In interviews with several donor organizations in June 2011, officials seemed genuinely puzzled when asked about the DG dimension of, for example, their health activities or energy portfolio. Few donors have integrated a DG dimension across their entire aid programme. As a result, in many cases, aid activities outside of the DG sector may work at cross-purposes with the DG programme. For instance, donors like the US, Denmark and Norway have had programmes of technical assistance to the National Assembly for much of the last decade, in order to improve its policy analysis capability to provide an oversight of government programmes. At the same time, these same

donors have also participated in broad education or health sector assistance programmes led by the World Bank, which regularly have been criticized in Bamako for making sector policy in dialogue with the ministry through a process that almost entirely sidestepped the national assembly (see Bergamaschi et al. 2007). In sum, the failure to mainstream DG tends to undermine the influence of donors' DG programmes, which are themselves only a small minority of the total aid portfolio.

#### **4 Aid dependence dynamics and democratic consolidation**

Following the logic of donor processes such as the PRSP and the objectives of the Paris declaration of 2005, a number of regular fora for aid co-ordination have been put in place during the last decade (Bergamaschi 2009; Magassa and Meyer 2008; Dante et al. 2003; Cissoko and Ramatou 2005). The Minister of Economy and Finance chairs meetings of a Mali-Development Partners Joint Committee, the Ministries of Education and Health provide co-ordination of sector wide support programmes (SWAPS), each involving half a dozen donors, and donor-government roundtable meetings alternate between Geneva and Bamako. In sum, a complex array of structures facilitates donor-government interaction regarding the design, implementation and assessment of policies. All this activity suggests that the donors are genuine partners in the process of development, deeply involved in policy making and implementation.

The aid effectiveness literature has pondered the impact of aid dependence on state capacity and state building (van de Walle 2005; Moss et al. 2008; Bräutigam 2000). The involvement of donors in the policy making appears to continue to displace national development programmes and administration. Despite much rhetoric, the development of programme aid has not ended the resort to independent project units that are not fully budgetized. The progress on implementing the Paris Declaration agenda has been painfully slow, as evidenced in various implementation reports. The OECD (2006: 19) monitoring survey thus tabulates the existence of 65 project implementation units in Mali that still exist outside of the orbit of line ministries as of 2006, which presumably still undermine capacity development in the central administration by attracting the most skilled members of the labour force.

The effects are predictable. Donors and outside observers note and lament the limited policy-making ability of much of the central administration (Bergamaschi 2009; Magassa and Meyer 2008, Dante et al. 2003). Public sector corruption appears rife, and the state's low implementation capacity is often noted; typical is the World Bank's assessment that more rapid growth will require, 'a deepening of the governance reforms to remove administrative bottlenecks for the delivery of public services and to address corruption in the public sector' (IDC and IFC 2007: 17). The fact that donor reports often add that these capacities are improving would be cause for optimism, except that many donor reports going back to the 1960s note such improvements.

Notwithstanding the above observations, some areas of policy have clearly enjoyed genuine 'local ownership' in the sense that the Malian public and two democratic-era presidents clearly have had policy priorities and areas of emphases. Thus, the extension of primary education and decentralization were policy areas of distinct and genuine importance to the presidency of Konaré (Management Systems International, undated; Bleck 2011). President Touré has continued to emphasize both of these policy issues. The problem has been that the implementation of these broad priorities by successive

democratic presidents largely occurred through a narrow dialogue between top officials and donors, which did not always engage the policy making capacities of the permanent administration, and left the legislative branch almost totally out of the picture.

Indeed, one effect of aid dependence with direct implications for democratic consolidation has been the tendency of foreign aid to lessen the accountability of the executive branch of government to both the citizenry and to the other branches of government. First, how is intense donor involvement in policy-making compatible with the democratic sovereignty of Malian citizens and their ability to enforce vertical accountability on their elected officials? The question seems pertinent: for instance, the donors and the small cadre of senior officials who are currently involved in the design of the third phase of the country's PRSP programme were scheduled to come out with a new programme just before the elections planned for spring 2012. In the end, these elections were cancelled, but one can ask whether or not the election would have constituted in some sense a referendum on social policy by the current administration. Would the new government have chosen to scrap the agreement with the donors and sought a new one? The early press reporting on the elections, notably regarding the candidatures of several ex-prime ministers, hardly mentioned policy areas such as the PRSP, other than to suggest in general terms, that these policies would be continued and not contested.

In some countries, aid directly provides an 'incumbency advantage' during elections to the government because the government can claim credit for the projects and social service delivery systems funded by foreign aid, while opposition candidates cannot. In electoral periods, this provides a direct and significant advantage to incumbents. In Mali, the absence of a legislative opposition makes this specific dynamic less salient. In effect, during President Touré's two terms, the entire political class was in government and able to claim credit for the accomplishments of foreign aid. However, it seems likely that the substantial developmental resources made available to the state by foreign aid strengthened Touré's position and made it less attractive for politicians to remain in the loyal opposition (Baudais and Chauzal 2006).

Second, how does a large volume of aid affect the need to lessen the imbalance between the power of the presidency and the executive branch more generally, and the other branches of government? Elections and a lively civil society provide some vertical constraints on executive power, but a horizontal system of checks and balances between the branches of government is widely viewed as critical to deepening democracy. In Mali, the weakness of the legislative and judicial branches has been noted by many observers since democratization in the early 1990s. The legislature has largely served as a rubber stamp for governmental decision-making, while the underpaid and poorly trained judiciary has played little to no role in constitutional debates or as an institutional constraint on the country's chronic problems of political corruption within the government (Freedom House 2011).

Unfortunately, the overwhelming focus of aid resources on the central government strengthens it relative to the other branches of government, which receive only a small share of aid resources, as was shown above. The enhanced policy dialogue with the donors today hardly involves the legislature, which appears to have been further marginalized. Moreover, because so much of economic policy making occurs outside of the budgetary process, the legislature in effect exercises only incomplete oversight on

executive branch policy-making. This dynamic has been worsened as a consequence of the move to budget support, which now accounts for as much as 40 per cent of total assistance, and a considerably larger share of aid in some sectors such as education (Thunnissen 2009). Budget support was in part designed to better integrate donor resources into national decision making mechanisms, including budgetary decisions in which the legislature should, in principle, be involved. Yet, budget support has had negligible impact on the balance of power between the branches of government because much of the enhanced policy dialogue between the donors and the government is not reflected in legislative debates. The effective absence of a legislative opposition under President Touré exacerbated this tendency because opportunities to constitute a check on executive power often were not wielded.

Did these deficiencies in the institutions of vertical and horizontal accountability endanger the consolidation of democracy in Mali before the coup of 22 March 2012? On the one hand, the absence of debate and contestation may have reflected the genuine consensus that existed for the current policies. The legislature basically agreed with what the government was negotiating with the donors. Indeed, elections in Mali are mostly about competence and the legitimacy of individual politicians precisely because there is general agreement on policy and no ideological debate about the economy (Bleck and van de Walle 2011, 2013). Moreover, the donors did enforce a kind of accountability, such as when they suspended aid to protest ministerial corruption, or when they engaged in various forms of policy and political conditionality.

On the other hand, the biggest impediment to democracy in Mali in recent years had been the non-accountability of the president and executive branch, and it makes sense to believe that democratic consolidation hinged in no small manner on the development of institutions of vertical and in particular horizontal accountability. Even though civil society was quite vibrant in Mali, it was not broadly representative, typically suffered from the same urban bias as the rest of the political class with which it was closely related (Thiriot 1999; Sears 2007), and often did not appear in tune with popular policy preferences (Bleck and van de Walle 2011). In sum, while the role of domestic institutional mechanisms of accountability seemed critically important to democratic consolidation, they appeared to be often ignored or undermined in Mali by the modalities of aid delivery.

It thus seems likely that the weakness of vertical and horizontal accountability can be linked directly to various abuses of power within the executive branch. In addition, these persistent abuses are likely to have undermined support for the democratic order, which may have played a role in the debacle of 22 March. Thus, 59 per cent of respondents to a 2008 Afrobarometer survey believed that public officials who broke the law were not punished, and roughly half of the population was not satisfied with the functioning of the current democracy (Afrobarometer 2008). Public opinion thus seemed favourable to democracy but not to its performance in Mali in the last decade. The coup plotters of March 2012 may well have underestimated the attachment of the population to its democratic institutions, but gauged correctly the dissatisfaction with democratic politics under Touré.

## 5 Aid and the structural impediments to democratic consolidation

The democratic order before 22 March 2012 remained highly imperfect, and the country was marked by some serious persistent governance issues (Smith 2001; Sears 2007; Baudais and Chauzal 2006; Villalon and Idrissa 2005). What role were the donors playing in promoting democratic consolidation?

The last section argued that aid tends to exacerbate the non-accountability of the executive branch of government in Mali, despite the fact that excessive executive power is one of the structural impediments to democratic consolidation. This final section addresses the impact of foreign aid on two other structural impediments to democratic consolidation: the general gap between the average Malian and political elites in Bamako, and significant regional cleavages. The lack of improvement in these structural imbalances since independence is striking. In each case, I ask what the donors could have done to address these issues.

*The gap between masses and elites:* Mali's democracy has been undermined by a fundamental disconnect between the political class in Bamako and the typical Malian citizen. Successive attitudinal surveys by the Afrobarometer group identify strong majorities of Malian citizens in support of electoral democracy in preference to other forms of government. At the same time, an equal proportion expresses misgivings about their own political class. Seventy-four per cent of Malian citizens thus agreed with the statement that 'the government's economic policies have hurt most people and only benefited a few' (Afrobarometer 2008). This popular discontent regarding the political class is longstanding and deep, and appears to have been present since the very first days of the democratic era (Lange 2000; Sears 2007).

In Bamako, support for Malian democracy has been undermined by the repetitive corruption scandals. As a result, the country continues to score very poorly in the various rankings on public corruption (U4 Anti Corruption Resource Center 2008). In the latest of a series of scandals to involve the political class, in 2010, the acting Minister of Health, Oumar Ibrahima Touré, was forced to resign, under considerable donor pressure because of accusations of corruption surrounding his ministry's misuse of project funds from the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Malaria and Tuberculosis. An internal investigation by the Global Fund found that US\$4 million had been stolen, and it froze its aid to Mali (*La Croix* 2010).

The donors often complain about the corruption, have occasionally made it the subject of conditionality, and have supported various efforts to reduce it. Still, as in the case of the Global Fund just cited, many of the corruption scandals have directly concerned donor funded activities, and in the popular imagination, it is a short step to view the donor system as complicit in the shenanigans of the political class. As Sears argues (2007: 128) already back in the 1980s, many Malians viewed the IMF as complicit in the enormous corruption then benefiting President Moussa Traoré and his family. As a popular joke had it, FMI, the French acronym standing for the International Monetary Fund, actually referred to 'Famille Moussa et Intimes' (Moussa's Family and Friends).

Little appears to have changed since then, and reports from Bamako in the spring of 2012 indicated that the junta sought to legitimate its coup, not without some success, with reference to the ripe corruption in the Touré regime and popular unhappiness about

it. The substantial role of the donors in public expenditure and their visibility in all public sector development activities ensures that they are often associated by non-elites with political corruption. Whether or not this perception is fair is moot. Instead, the bigger issue is that the donor community should be concerned that, despite decades of deep involvement in building state capacity, they have failed to reduce public sector corruption.

Bleck (2011) argues a fundamental aspect of this socio-political disconnect between elite and masses is linguistic and educational. The apex of the educational system, accessible to a small minority, is closely modelled on the French educational system, and in a language that only a small minority of the population actually masters, but which is also the language of government and public administration. Most Malians believe that mastering French is a prerequisite to full citizenship, and the popular demand for education services is unrelenting; President Konaré, a university professor himself, understood this and made improving the country's dismal educational policy record one of his major priorities. His policies have been followed by his successor President Touré to this day. The donors officially shared this national priority and devoted substantial resources to the education sector (Bleck 2011).

Improvements in the breadth of provision of educational services in the course of the last two decades have been impressive, though it is increasingly clear that the strain of sustaining significant increases in the numbers of children in school has had a negative effect on the quality of provision. Still, the official literacy rate remains under 30 per cent and the effective rate is probably significantly lower. The gap between urban and rural literacy rates has probably increased. In addition, the government and donors have encouraged schooling services in vernacular languages and Arabic, largely out of expedience. Bleck (2011) finds a positive sense of political efficacy associated with all forms of education, including for students in Arabic madrassas. Still, some forms of political participation, including voting rates, are strikingly low in Mali, and the country is among the very few democracies in having a majority of its citizens unable to speak the language of government and public administration.

*Regional cleavages:* a third structural weakness of Malian democracy has been constituted by the significant and persistent regional socio-economic disparities. The disconnect between elites and the rest of the citizenry is characterized as well as exacerbated by the high levels of inequality that mark the country, and which democratization has done little to change. The Gini coefficient for income in Mali was estimated at 0.41 in 2001. Much of this inequality is spatial; Bamako, the capital city remains much better off than the rest of the country. Thus, as suggested by Tables 3 and 4, poverty reduction and health services have dramatically improved since the democratic transition in the early 1990s. Table 3 suggests an appreciable drop in the rate of absolute poverty across the country between 1989 and 2001. Table 4 shows that the proportion of women giving birth in a hospital has increased substantially in recent years, suggesting a meaningful increase in people's access to medical services. But the most striking thing about both tables is the sharp differences between Bamako, the capital district, and the other provinces in the country.

Table 3: Decline in the rate of absolute poverty, 1989–2006

	1989	2001	2006
National	72.8	68.3	64.4
Rural	80.6	79.2	79.5
Urban	72.7	37.2	31.8
Kayes	60	67.9	61.5
Koulikoro	61.7	83.5	
Sikasso	84.1	81.8	81.7
Segou	83.9	65.3	75.2
Mopti	90	78.5	
Tombouctou	74.8	54.4	57.9
Gao	66.9	48.2	
Bamako	37.2	27.5	11.0

Note: The 2006 numbers aggregate Kayes with Koulikoro, Segou with Mopti, and Tombouctou with Gao.

Sources: UNDP, Poverty Profile of Mali 2001. UNDP, Mali (2001); International Development Association and International Financial Corporation (2007: 14); and International Monetary Fund, Mali Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper, August 2010 (no. 10/266).

Table 4: Proportion of live births taking place in medical establishment

	1995	2006
Kayes	20.4	34
Koulikoro	33.4	53
Sikasso	26.5	42.6
Segou	25	41.7
Mopti	16.5	29.5
Tombouctou		23.9
Gao	66.9*	31.9
Kidal		19.7
Bamako	78.8	85.1

Note: \* a single data point for all three northern regions, for 1995.

Source: Mali: Demographic and Healthy Survey. (Republique du Mali,) 1995-1996, 2001 and 2006.

These regional imbalances provide a significant medium term structural challenge for Malian democracy. They fuel resentment by outsider groups such as the Tuaregs (Management Systems International 2009). They also spur rural flight and in-migration into the country's cities, placing enormous pressure on public infrastructure and civil peace.



To what extent have the donors contributed to this regional imbalance? Given the preponderant role of donor funding in the social sectors—the donors pay an estimated 70 per cent of the government’s investment budget and 30 per cent of current public expenditure (Dante et al. 2003)—the donor community is clearly not completely blameless in the evolution of regional and class divisions. Indeed, a recent paper by Roy (2010) on food security issues blames the donors for what it calls the country’s severe urban bias in its food policies. In recent years, and in the wake of several significant bouts of urban unrest over food prices, donors have strongly supported the policy of promoting rice production as a long term strategy for food security; yet, the data suggests rice consumption is favoured by a minority of relatively wealthy urban segments of the population, as rice prices have continued to render it a largely inaccessible basic food stuff for the average citizen (Roy 2010).

The current rebellion in the north illustrates the dangers of persistent regional inequality, since the north’s social statistics suggested a substantial developmental lag compared to the urban areas of the south. But the rebellion also illustrates an additional disparity that is extremely dangerous for fledgling democracies: the spatial deficit in governance that undermined stability in the north. Much of the northern third of the country largely escaped the sovereignty of the government, and was characterized by lawlessness and the occasional terrorist activities of AQIM (Gutelius 2007; Scheele 2009). By the mid-2000s, the central government could claim full sovereignty over little more than the main cities in the north. Instability in the northern third of the country has increased because of local grievances about the north’s underdevelopment and isolation, which the instability in turn exacerbates. Indeed, by the end of 2011 when the NMLA emerged, little donor activity remained in the north, due to security concerns.

The aid community has been aware of the threat to national unity posed by the situation in the north, as attested to by many donor reports over the years. But donor activities in the north suggest a large degree of complacency regarding this threat. Despite longstanding plans going back to independence, there is still no permanent road linking the more developed south to the major town in the northeast, Kidal, which is where the Tuareg population is concentrated.

As part of the government’s response to the Tuareg rebellion of the 1990s, the donors agreed to fund a parastatal, the *Agence de Développement du Nord-Mali* (ADN), which was created in March 2005. The aim of the ADN was to develop the north, but it never performed this mandated role. Bestowed a fancy headquarters in Bamako rather than in a northern city such as Kidal or Gao, its disbursements have remained halting and small. Instead of spearheading the development of public infrastructure in the north, it seems to have been deployed by the authorities in Bamako primarily as a vehicle for the clientelistic co-optation of segments of northern elites (Management Systems International 2009), and much of its funding appears never to have reached the north.

## **6 Conclusion**

The culpability of foreign aid in failing to resolve the structural issues analyzed in the last section needs to be relativized. The government in Bamako itself should not be absolved of primary responsibility in these matters. In addition, these structural issues are exceedingly difficult to resolve, involve complicated trade-offs, and require much time. The security situation in the north has involved a vicious cycle which posed real

problems for the donors; entirely legitimate fears for the safety of donor staff resulted in a progressive decline in aid activities in the north, which contributed further to the marginalization of the region, as well as even greater security issues.

Nor is there an easy causality between the flaws in Malian democracy and the breakdown in the democratic order that took place in early 2012. In the absence of an obvious counterfactual, I cannot prove that the three issue areas I have discussed had anything to do with the breakdown, and, on the other hand, a much more aggressive donor effort to attack these issues could conceivably not have prevented it either.

Still, the preceding survey of Mali does call into question the role of foreign aid in the processes of democratic consolidation in low-income countries, and it points to several issues in which a more pro-active and careful intervention on the part of the donors is desirable. First, the current modalities of foreign aid and their almost exclusive focus on the executive branch of government do have implications which the donors need to heed more than they have in the past. Second, and relatedly, direct democracy assistance has focused on vertical accountability mechanisms and has typically paid inadequate attention to strengthening horizontal accountability, which is equally important to democratic consolidation. Third, several fairly clear threats to Malian democracy were either ignored or treated without adequate urgency. I am not arguing that the foreign aid community is influential or prescient enough to have anticipated and acted upon the dangers posed by, for example, allowing deep-seated grievances to go un-addressed in a largely ungoverned northern region of Mali, or by the growing disconnect between Mali's political elite and the mass of its citizens. However, it seems clear in retrospect that more could have been done to avert the collapse of Malian democracy in the spring of 2012.

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