

**Carlos Lopes. *The Self-Deception Trap. Exploring the Economic Dimensions of Charity Dependency within Africa-Europe Relations*. Cham: Springer. 2024. 252 pp.**

After almost three decades of international public service as Director of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), Executive Secretary of the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA), and United Nations (UN) Deputy Secretary-General, Professor Carlos Lopes returned from a practitioner to an academic. Currently teaching at the University of Cape Town at the Nelson Mandela School of Public Governance, he has also negotiated with Europe as the representative of the African Union (AU). His path makes him an ideal thinker on institutional power relationships, particularly between Africa and Europe.

The degree of oppression or agency of Africa is a growing literature. Carlos Lopes intertwines older and newer literature in his most recent book, addressing the topic in nine chapters. The book is knowledgeable but has an accessible writing style.

Carlos Lopes draws on personal experience to denounce the “traditional [European Union] EU-centric negotiation paradigm”. The constant donor views prevalence distorts any possibility of co-production that could enhance aid effectiveness. Instead, the author proposes focusing on “common interests” and constructing an effective, mutually beneficial relationship among equals. Topics included migrations and ageing, consumer market and natural resources. The unwillingness of the EU Commission to hear the AU’s voice contrasts with the receptive stance of some European Foreign affairs ministries. However, the consolidation of the AU’s “Strategy for Europe” in response to the EU’s “Strategy for Africa” failed.

He notes the inadequacy of the outdated African, Caribbean and Pacific Countries (ACP) framework, a refusal of the “aid logic”, and the need for a joint African approach. The ACP framework is incoherent, and the AU construction is still imperfect. Well-intended European aid can have unintended effects, and

one of these is making it more difficult for African unity. While negotiating jointly through the AU could provide better benefits, the EU Commission and key African countries have preferred to negotiate individually.

Part 1 deals with history (chapters 2 to 4). Colonial legacy is read under the lenses of Frantz Fanon and Amílcar Cabral. Eurocentrism, the neglect of African history before colonial rule, and the own understanding of European rule and influence as benevolent have conditioned Europe-Africa relations. Instead, colonial domination was eased by the earlier centuries marked by the millions enslaved and the “language, ideologies and practices” imposed by the colonizer, constraining since then African thought, with spill overs to maps or categorization of countries (Black vs. North Africa). Recovering Cabral and Fanon, the author affirms that culture is crucial to reclaiming African agency.

Dependency is framed by aid effectiveness, structural adjustment, and conditionality. Many countries’ paternalistic attitudes transform aid into charity, even if some, such as those in Nordic countries, have humanitarian concerns. The African primary commodity “development” model is contrasted to the Asian development miracle and traced to colonial legacy. The emphasis on short-term solutions and the perception that all of Africa is poor are common mistakes. Instead, he argues for structural transformation, which only works if nuanced and context-specific solutions are utilized.

Trade does not necessarily bring better living conditions for all. The hypocrisy of the traditional recipe for growth is reminded by the example of British textiles rising to eat the expenses of their Indian counterparts. Capital flight, trade restrictions to more profitable markets, and “monopoly control over industrial knowledge” are some obstacles to African development. The commodification of knowledge (against the need for global commons) is particularly harmful if Africa is to benefit from dynamic comparative advantage.

Part 2 deals with the nuances of the present (chapters 5 to 8). External interferences in Africa, from the “rent-seeking and extractive approach of foreign interests in Africa” (p. 86), often prioritized “over human rights and justice” (p. 88), to the nefarious effects of Stabilization and Association Processes (SAP). It denounces the “capitalism of mercy” when Non-governmental Organizations (NGOs) compete for funds.

Addressing the opportunities and challenges presented by Europe’s low fertility rates and ageing contrast with young Africa could transform the current asymmetric relationship in demographic shifts, migrations, policies, and international humanitarian law. Instead, border security has overshadowed human rights and the root causes of migration.

The developmental needs of Africa lead to suggestions for capacity development. The author advocates for industrial policy, acknowledging the importance of transferring capital and technology and emerging tax capacity. However, African agency has been neglected. He reviews the EU strategies and diplomatic initiatives, the challenges of the Europe-Africa dialogue, and the building of a joint African position. Europe lacks commitment and openness to negotiation and pushes conditionality. Instead, consistency and ownership of policies are crucial, as embodied in the AU motto “African solutions for African problems”.

Trade agreements and African economic integration are promising but with pitfalls. The rise of neo-protectionism in Europe and the waiving of custom duties fragilized African countries, even if, in the meantime, the capacity to tax has been improving. Regional agreements harm the incentives to cooperate at the continental level, but there are prospects of this changing into a single market. The latter can improve international bargaining power and promote intra-African trade, but to reap all the benefits, there is a need to fund infrastructure, for example.

In short, the author provides an informed and nuanced view of contemporary African development. Free trade agreements have excluded most African countries from potential gains by perpetuating an unequal international division of labor. The colonial and historical heritage weighs on this outcome, which was exacerbated by the World Trade Organization (WTO). True cooperation between the EU and Africa could have made better rules for development. Instead, Africans felt the EU was twisting their arms. Power asymmetries also favor the EU, including a qualified bureaucracy and negotiators.

The book presents, however, some incongruences. First, the book title could be more informative. Second, a distinction between resource curse and Dutch disease literature would be welcome (See, for instance, Larsen, *American Journal of Economics and Sociology*, 2006). Third, is aid not potentially relevant for countries that are forced to pay expensive funding? After all, in its genesis, authors such as Arthur Lewis, the first Nobel Prize in Economics from the South, and many others thought of Gross National Product (GNP) transfers as key for funding growth and empowerment of developing countries (Clemens and Moss, *International Journal of Development Issues*, 2007). Is the problem the transfer of funding, the power conditions in which these are made, or the conditionality associated? Finally, few time is spent discussing human capital or the internal divisions and interests of African countries that have hampered collective efforts towards an effective AU, but that stays hopefully for another book. However, academic interest in the latter topic may work against the mobilization of Africans.

Overall, in the footsteps of Amílcar Cabral, celebrated in this special issue, Carlos Lopes has gathered training and experience as a practitioner and forged relationships to become one of the foremost African voices of today. Several academics strongly recommend his book as it details evidence on “colonial attitudes and power dynamics” (Dani Rodrik), “European paternalism and low self-esteem on the part of Africans” (Ha-Joon Chang), “misconceptions about Africa” and “unequal power” (Jayati Ghosh), “frustrations of Europe-Africa relations” and the “sometimes-divisive African dynamics” (Ricardo Soares de Oliveira). Carlos Lopes’ *The Self-Deception Trap* is a must-read.

**Pedro Vaz Goulart**

CAPP e ISCSP, Universidade de Lisboa

pgoulart@edu.ulisboa.pt

ORCID: 0000-0001-6599-5043

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