

# Foreign Aid or Foreign Control? The Role of Strategic Communication in Perpetuating Colonial Influence on South African Development

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**Abstract:** This paper investigates the strategic communication practices employed by foreign donors to influence South Africa's development agenda. Using a qualitative research approach grounded in postcolonial theory, the study draws on interviews with academics and NGO representatives in Limpopo Province to explore how donor narratives shape public perceptions, policy decisions, and institutional autonomy. Findings reveal that while foreign aid supports key service delivery areas, its communication strategies often obscure underlying power dynamics, reinforce dependency, and promote donor-centric paradigms. The study recommends a shift toward participatory communication and a reconfiguration of the aid discourse to centre local knowledge and self-determined development goals.

**Keywords:** Foreign aid, Strategic communication, Neocolonialism, South African development, Postcolonial theory.

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## 1. Introduction

This paper examines how foreign donors employ strategic communication as a mechanism to influence and maintain control over development agendas in South Africa. Recently the foreign aid has become the scholarly topic, with the focus on African development. Moyo (2009), in her book, stated that in developing countries, especially in Africa, foreign aid often arrives with the best intentions. Yet too frequently it arrives with little coordination among donors over accountability for where the funds are going. Critics argue that foreign aid has fuelled corruption, increased dependency, and left African states more indebted and vulnerable to Western exploitation (Akinola, 2012; Iwu, 2021). Despite trillions of dollars in aid, Africa continues to grapple with humanitarian emergencies and developmental challenges (Iwu, 2021). Some scholars suggest that aid has become a neocolonial instrument, imposing Western political and economic ideologies on the continent (Getachew Fentahun, 2023).

However, the research has tended to focus on how the foreign aid promulgates the dependency and influx of corruption amongst the African countries. The literature has presented the good cause of the foreign aid and indicated the problem from the recipient side, which is a sense of dependency and corruption. This paper intends to investigate how the foreign aid is presented through strategic

communication as a tool to control the African development. Communication plays a central role in the administration and effectiveness of foreign aid, functioning not only as a channel for information exchange but also as a strategic tool for influence and control. Donor agencies often use communication to frame aid in terms that reflect their own development priorities, thereby shaping the perceptions and behaviours of recipient countries (Moyo, 2009). This strategic use of communication influences how aid is understood and implemented, frequently reinforcing donor-driven narratives at the expense of local knowledge and participation.

In the South African context, the role of communication in foreign aid is further complicated by historical and economic dependencies, which allow donors to exert considerable influence over policy creation and promotion of evidence and research funding that align with their priorities, effectively shaping what issues are considered important. This process is part of a broader political dynamic where power influences knowledge production and policy agendas, often privileging donor perspectives and technical expertise. Thus, strategic communication in foreign aid is not neutral; it is a powerful tool used to manage relationships, assert authority, and legitimise donor interventions. The aim of the study was to investigate how strategic communication is used to shape foreign aid as a tool to influence South African development.

## **2. Research Problem**

Since the advent of democracy in South Africa in 1994, the country has experienced an increase in international engagements, including foreign relations, trade partnerships, and geopolitical involvement, aimed at improving the socio-economic conditions of the majority population that was previously marginalised under apartheid. Countries such as the United States of America have extended support through initiatives like the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), contributing to progress in various sectors such as health, education, politics, and the economy, while also promoting democratic values. However, over time, such assistance appears to serve dual purposes. What is presented as aid increasingly resembles a strategic exchange from which donor countries derive substantial benefits. The strategic communication of foreign aid to developing nations and how the aid is presented often imply that African countries, including South Africa, are merely recipients with little to offer in return. Jiang and Vitenu-Sackey (2020) argue that foreign aid has, in many cases, proven to be ineffective and potentially detrimental. This perspective aligns with the core issue that various underlying factors must be examined, particularly how strategic communication is employed to ensure the unquestioned acceptance of aid by recipient nations. A central concern is that the nature and purpose of foreign aid are predominantly defined by the donor, leaving recipients with minimal agency in shaping its terms. This dynamic undermines the ability of African nations to build self-sufficiency and long-term independence, ultimately impeding sustainable development.

## **3. Literature Review**

### **3.1 Historical Context of Foreign Aid in Post-Apartheid South Africa**

In the post-apartheid era, foreign aid to South Africa has experienced notable shifts since 1994. During the 1990s and into the new millennium, aid strategies across the African continent were largely aimed at promoting democratisation. Donors prioritised strengthening judicial independence, reforming public services, enhancing governmental accountability, and particularly supporting free and fair elections, which were deemed pivotal to democratic transformation (Fentahun, 2023). Nevertheless, the capacity of aid to generate sustained economic

growth remains contested. While some short- to medium-term benefits have been observed, Oyedele, Yao Nikez and Reuel (2025) assert that foreign aid's long-term efficacy is uncertain without building local capacities and involving local organisations. Research also suggests a U-shaped relationship, where initial aid inflows may yield adverse effects before potentially contributing to development (Cao & Du, 2024). Aid tends to be more effective in environments with sound fiscal, monetary, and trade policies, whereas in contexts marked by poor governance or heightened vulnerability, its influence is either negligible or counterproductive (Pham & Pham, 2020). The scaling down or cessation of donor support to civil society organisations often compels Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) to either disband or resort to state funding, a shift that may threaten their autonomy and ability to critically engage with government actions (Pallas & Sidel, 2020). South Africa's foreign policy orientation has also transformed under successive presidencies: Mandela's administration was defined by altruistic diplomacy, Mbeki's by Afrocentric principles, and Zuma's by a regressive stance (Gqiza & Ogunnubi, 2020). Despite consistent economic expansion since the end of apartheid, the country continues to confront entrenched poverty and widening socio-economic disparities (Van Zonneveld & Annette, 2007). More strategically directed aid could play a vital role in strengthening institutional capacities and preserving the independence of non-governmental organisations (Van Zonneveld & Annette, 2007).

### **3.2 Strategic Communication and Development Narratives**

Communication surrounding foreign aid frequently adopts a humanitarian and altruistic framing, presenting it as a benevolent act aimed at assisting the vulnerable and addressing the observable consequences of hardship. This narrative appeals to moral sensibilities, fostering empathy and a sense of ethical duty, thereby encouraging both individual and collective actions to relieve suffering. Such a portrayal foregrounds values such as justice, fairness, and shared humanity, casting aid as a selfless intervention intended to enhance wellbeing and meet basic human needs (Chapelier & Shah, 2013). For example, the messaging within public diplomacy has transitioned from one-way communication to a model based on dialogue and collaboration, prioritising engagement and mutual understanding (Cowan & Arsenault, 2008). This approach tends to

cultivate trust, hope, and a forward-looking outlook, resonating with audiences receptive to constructive and preventative initiatives.

In contrast, foreign aid and development assistance are also frequently conceptualised as instruments of soft power and public diplomacy, advancing the strategic objectives of donor governments (Alexander, 2020). As Lancaster (2007, p. 3) asserts, "foreign aid is not only a tool for development but also a means to achieve diplomatic, strategic, and commercial interests of donor countries." Communication framed in this manner often shifts focus from humanitarian imperatives to strategic partnerships, economic cooperation, and geopolitical influence, portraying aid as a mechanism of diplomatic engagement rather than charitable giving. This strategic reframing reflects a broader evolution in aid discourse, positioning it as a mutually beneficial tool for diplomacy and international relations (Nothias, 2015, p. 50). Empirical research by Alrababa'h, Myrick and Webb (2020) suggests that such framings have tangible effects on public perception, particularly in regions affected by conflict. For instance, in areas like Donbas, aid framed as geopolitically motivated has, in some cases, elicited more favourable attitudes than aid framed in purely humanitarian terms (R.A.H., 2020; Ala' Alrababa'h et al., 2020).

### 3.3 The Role of Media and Public Discourse in Shaping Perceptions of Foreign Aid

Scholarly evidence by Scott, Rowling, and Jones (2020) demonstrates that media coverage plays a pivotal role in shaping public opinion and influencing the allocation of foreign aid. The aid framing can reduce programme support when donors are viewed negatively (Singh & Williamson, 2022). This assertion demonstrates that media narratives may not only affect how citizens view foreign aid policies but also influence the perceptions of donor countries within recipient states. However, these effects are nuanced and highly context specific. For instance, in parts of the Arab world where scepticism towards Western powers is prevalent, aid from countries such as the United States or France can diminish support for public health initiatives due to underlying distrust regarding donor motivations (Singh & Williamson, 2022). Conversely, in conflict-affected regions like eastern Ukraine, foreign aid framed as a strategic tool for enhancing donor influence has elicited more favourable responses than aid presented in humanitarian terms (Alrababa'h et al., 2020).

Positive media portrayals of aid efforts tend to foster more favourable attitudes toward donor states, enhancing their international image and perceived legitimacy. However, political and ideological divergences between donor and recipient nations can shape both media sentiment and public reception of aid. Media framing not only influences perceptions of the efficacy of aid interventions but also affects how the donor's global role and soft power are interpreted (Luthra, 2023). In democratic societies, the media's influence on public opinion can exert pressure on policymakers, prompting adjustments in both foreign aid allocations and broader foreign policy directions (Ayowole, 2022). As agenda-setters, news outlets serve as conduits of information that inform citizens and indirectly shape political leaders' responses to issues concerning aid and international relations (Uroegbulam, Uchemefune & Iroegbu, 2024).

Donor nations are frequently represented as altruistic actors, a portrayal that reinforces their international standing as modern, responsible, and benevolent states. This identity is strategically leveraged by both established and emerging donors to gain diplomatic, economic, and geopolitical advantage (Gulrajani & Swiss, 2017). In donor countries, media coverage often highlights the positive outcomes of aid initiatives, sometimes aligning with public diplomacy agendas aimed at bolstering the donor's image, especially in countries that are not direct beneficiaries of such aid (Kim & Lim, 2023).

In contrast, the portrayal of aid recipients, particularly in African and other developing regions, is frequently reductionist and decontextualised. These representations tend to focus on poverty, disease, and dependency, often sidelining the agency, resilience, and developmental efforts of local populations (Nyarko, Mensah & Hamusokwe, 2020). Local media in recipient nations, while facing structural and financial challenges, have the potential to empower citizens by fostering public discourse on governance and development. Donor funding has in some cases supported independent journalism, thereby promoting democratic participation (Frère, 2022). Nevertheless, donor countries are often cast as active agents who control the aid narrative and direction through conditionalities and political leverage (Waddick, 2022). Conversely, aid recipients are typically framed as passive beneficiaries, a depiction that can be disempowering by reducing them to objects of charity rather than recognising them as

autonomous actors capable of shaping their developmental trajectories (de Waardt & Willems, 2022).

### **3.4 Soft Power and the Politics of Aid**

According to Madise and Isike (2020), South Africa's foreign policy has increasingly embraced soft power strategies as a means of expanding its regional and global influence. Compared to many other African states, South Africa possesses notable soft power resources (Ogunnubi, 2016). Nonetheless, scholars contend that the country must more actively cultivate and deploy these assets if it is to realise the foreign policy objectives articulated in the National Development Plan 2030 (Isike & Ogunnubi, 2017). One of the distinguishing features of South Africa's soft power approach is the incorporation of Ubuntu, an African philosophical ethos centred on shared humanity, mutual respect, and interdependence. This marks a departure from the Western-centric framing of soft power, as originally conceptualised by Joseph Nye (Madise & Isike, 2020).

Although the strategic importance of soft power in South African diplomacy is increasingly acknowledged, there remains a paucity of in-depth analysis concerning its implementation and effectiveness (Ogunnubi & Okeke-Uzodike, 2015). Harnessing soft power offers a valuable opportunity for South Africa to reassert its legitimacy and leadership on the continent, an ambition that is frequently challenged by competing regional powers (Ogunnubi & Okeke-Uzodike, 2015).

In parallel, donor countries often utilise aid programmes to project their political values and shape governance structures in recipient states. For example, the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) actively implements programmes aimed at fostering democratic institutions and civil society, thereby encouraging governance practices that align with the ideological frameworks of the donor country (Blair, Marty & Roessler, 2022).

## **4. Theoretical Framework**

Postcolonial theory, which gained prominence during the 1980s, offers a critical framework for examining the enduring effects of European colonialism on global political, economic, and cultural systems (Elam, 2019). It fundamentally challenges Eurocentric narratives, advocating for the decolonisation of thought by foregrounding epistemologies and worldviews that originate beyond the Western

canon (Young, 2020). Central to the post-colonial theory is the interrogation of residual colonial power structures and the envisioning of a genuinely post-colonial world order (Elam, 2019). The intellectual roots of postcolonial discourse can be traced to anti-colonial movements such as *négritude* in Africa, which celebrated cultural difference and enabled the articulation of alternative, non-Western interpretations of civilisation (Mishra, 2020).

Pioneering scholars including Edward Said, Homi Bhabha, and Gayatri Spivak have been instrumental in shaping the theoretical contours of the field (Mishra, 2020). Postcolonial theory has exerted significant influence across a range of academic disciplines, reshaping approaches to literary analysis, historical interpretation at both national and transnational levels, and the political dimensions of knowledge production (Elam, 2019). Although it has faced various criticisms, the theory continues to be regarded as a vital mode of critical and humanistic inquiry, both within academic circles and in broader societal contexts (Elam, 2019).

## **5. Methodology**

This study adopted a qualitative research approach, utilising semi-structured interviews as the primary method of data collection. The target population comprised non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and academics specialising in communication and public administration within the Limpopo Province. A purposive sampling technique was employed to select six participants, specifically: two lecturers in communication, two in public administration, and two representatives from two NGOs. Data was gathered through semi-structured interviews conducted via Microsoft Teams. These interviews were recorded and subsequently transcribed for analysis. The collected data was examined using thematic analysis to identify key patterns and insights relevant to the study's objectives.

## **6. Data Presentation and Analysis**

### **6.1 Donor's Presentations of Their Aid to Recipient**

The literature has shown donors' intent to assist countries in pursuing development. The donor seems to be prioritising the democratic transformation (Fentahun, 2023). The foreign aid in South Africa is portrayed as a developmental tool while pursuing

its own mission of subjecting the recipient countries, such as South Africa.

*Participant 4: "Foreign aid narratives in South Africa often emphasise 'partnership' and 'capacity building'. Yet, behind these narratives lies a complex interplay of power dynamics where donor agencies carefully curate messages to align with their geopolitical interests while maintaining an appearance of solidarity and support."*

This reflects scholarly critiques that foreign aid communication serves as a form of soft power, shaping perceptions domestically and internationally (Alexander, 2020). Participant 4 further notes the use of digital platforms, donor websites, social media, and public reports to amplify the message of collaboration, which often obscures the political economy driving aid flows. The literature always highlights the positive outcome of the donors' initiatives and programmes, which are of public interest, to bolster their positive image while convincing other countries to open up for aid (Kim & Lim, 2023).

*Participant 4: "For instance, donor campaigns highlight successful projects in health or education but rarely communicate the conditionalities or the structural dependencies these projects entail. This curated messaging shapes public perception, presenting aid as altruistic rather than strategic."*

This narrative echoed the strategic way in which donors use communication to develop or maintain the sense of dependency by relying on external assistance for development, which undermines the local agency (Moyo, 2009 & Easterly, 2006). From the perspective of an NGO operating on the ground, Participant 5 focuses on how donor communication influences local communities' understanding and engagement with aid projects. Donor agencies tend to present foreign aid in a very formal and institutional manner. However, at the grassroots level, the communication is often less clear. Communities sometimes perceive aid as something foreign or externally imposed, rather than co-created or locally owned.

*Participant 5: "We observe that language barriers and complex donor jargon create distance. When donors communicate primarily in English or through technical discourse, through official reports, glossy newsletters, and donor conferences, local beneficiaries feel excluded, which can limit trust and the effectiveness of aid."*

This commentary echoes findings in development communication literature emphasising the importance of participatory communication (Servaes, 1999) and localising narratives to enhance community ownership. Participant 6 notes that media coverage, influenced by donor-funded campaigns, often amplifies positive portrayals while sidelining critical voices:

*Participant 6: "This creates a limited discourse where foreign aid is rarely questioned in terms of its impact on sovereignty or long-term development strategies. The public is left with an uncritical acceptance of donor narratives."*

This analysis is consistent with critical development communication theories (Chilisa, 2012; Escobar, 1995) that view aid communication as part of broader neocolonial knowledge production.

## 6.2 Impacts of Foreign Aid on Development Policies and Institutional Autonomy

Foreign aid's influence extends beyond material resources to shape discourses and institutional mindsets. Foreign aid does more than provide funds or services; it shapes how development problems are understood and what solutions are deemed feasible. This epistemic impact can subtly constrain institutional autonomy by privileging donor-approved models and marginalising indigenous knowledge. Participant 4 elaborates on how donor-driven communication affects policymaking:

*Participant 4: "Institutions internalise donor narratives, which can limit the scope of policy innovation. For example, South African health policy heavily reflects donor priorities such as vertical disease programmes (e.g., HIV/AIDS), sometimes at the expense of more holistic or community-driven approaches."*

This resonates with literature on policy transfer and aid conditionality (Stone, 2004), where foreign aid communication becomes a vehicle for exporting policy paradigms. Foreign aid presents both positive impacts and risks in terms of institutional capacity. Foreign aid has enabled critical service delivery improvements, especially in under-resourced sectors, which also pose a risk to countries which fail to develop themselves.

*Participant 4: "For instance, donor funding has supported NGOs and clinics to expand HIV/AIDS treatment and awareness campaigns. These tangible benefits*

*improve lives daily. However, they caution about long-term dependency."*

Many local organizations find themselves reliant on donor funding cycles, which can be unpredictable and short-term. This financial volatility undermines institutional stability and autonomy. Additionally, donor priorities may shift, forcing organizations to realign their programmes constantly to fit funding criteria rather than local needs. Participant 6 critically addresses the sovereignty implications of aid dependency: "Foreign aid has introduced certain constraints that challenge South Africa's policy sovereignty.

*Participant 6: "Aid-linked conditions can limit the government's ability to negotiate favourable trade terms or control key sectors like pharmaceuticals or technology."*

This entails that institutional autonomy is compromised when donor agencies dictate not only what projects are funded but also how success is measured, often privileging quantitative metrics over qualitative, context-specific outcomes.

### **6.3 Influence of Strategic Communication by Donors on South Africa's Policy Direction and Public Perception**

Participant 4 discusses the power of framing and agenda-setting by donor agencies. "Donor communication shapes not only what policies are pursued but also what issues are considered urgent or legitimate.

*Participant 4: "Through carefully crafted messaging, donors influence the national agenda, privileging certain development paradigms, such as neoliberal economic reforms or biomedical health models, over alternatives."*

The participant stresses the media's role in reinforcing these narratives. The media, often reliant on donor-funded campaigns or official statements, perpetuates these frames, limiting public debate. Consequently, citizens receive a filtered version of development that aligns with donor priorities, reducing space for critical engagement.

*Participant 5 "donor messaging has a mixed impact on how communities perceive development needs. On one hand, aid communications raise awareness and mobilise support for critical issues. On the other*

*hand, if not contextualised, they can foster unrealistic expectations or feelings of dependency."*

This emphasises the need for two-way communication; it is crucial that donor agencies engage communities in dialogue, not just one-way broadcasting. Empowering local voices in shaping the narrative about development can mitigate some of the negative effects of strategic donor communication.

### **6.4 Communication Strategies Reinforcing Dependency or External Control in South Africa's Development Discourse**

Participant 4 emphasises how donor countries often use narratives of benevolence and partnership to mask underlying power imbalances.

*Participant 4: "Donor communications frequently frame aid as a generous gift or collaborative effort, which subtly positions South Africa as a passive recipient rather than an active agent."*

This narrative fosters dependency by shaping public perception that solutions must come from outside, thereby undermining local initiative and sovereignty. Such framing justifies continued donor involvement and control over development agendas. This aligns with academic critiques showing that aid discourse often perpetuates a neocolonial mindset, reinforcing the idea that African countries need constant external guidance (Moyo, 2009; Escobar, 1995). Participant 6 critically examines the political economy of donor communication, stressing how it frames development needs in ways that align with donor interests:

*Participant 6: "Foreign aid narratives often emphasise urgent crises that require immediate intervention, which can justify short-term projects controlled by donors. This focus sidelines longer-term structural reforms led by South Africans themselves."*

The media frequently echoes donor messages that portray South Africa as dependent and vulnerable. This can pressure policymakers to conform to donor-driven agendas, limiting local policy autonomy. Such communication strategies sustain external control by framing development as contingent on continued donor involvement, thus inhibiting true self-reliance. This perspective resonates with critiques of aid communication as a form of soft power that shapes policy and public opinion (Stone, 2004).

## 7. Discussion and Interpretation of Results

Donor representations of aid to South Africa are deeply embedded in strategic communication that often masks power asymmetries under the guise of partnership and development. While donors position themselves as facilitators of democratic transformation and capacity building (Fentahun, 2023), participant accounts reveal that aid communication is a calculated exercise in soft power. This aligns with Alexander (2020), who argues that foreign aid narratives shape both domestic and international perceptions, often serving geopolitical interests rather than altruistic objectives.

Participant 4's insight into donor communication reveals that platforms such as websites and social media are used to curate success stories while omitting the conditionalities embedded in such support. These narratives portray donors as benevolent actors while obscuring structural dependencies and the erosion of recipient agency (Kim & Lim, 2023). For example, aid projects in health and education are highlighted, but their underlying political or economic strings are rarely discussed publicly. This mirrors Moyo's (2009) and Easterly's (2006) critique that aid fosters dependency by undermining local capacity and positioning external support as indispensable.

On the ground, communication barriers further alienate local communities. As Participant 5 noted, donor jargon and the use of formal English exclude grassroots voices, creating a disconnect between donors and beneficiaries. This lack of participatory communication contradicts best practices outlined by Servaes (1999), which advocate for inclusive, culturally sensitive engagement to ensure community ownership of development initiatives. Moreover, donor communication shapes national policy direction through agenda-setting. Participant 4 highlighted that South African institutions often internalise donor framings, particularly in health policies that prioritise vertical, donor-funded programmes like HIV/AIDS, at the expense of more integrated local solutions. This reflects Stone's (2004) observations on policy transfer, where aid functions as a conduit for exporting foreign policy paradigms. As a result, institutional autonomy is compromised, with donor priorities dictating not only funding but also evaluation frameworks, often privileging quantifiable outputs over contextual relevance.

Finally, the repeated framing of South Africa as a needy recipient, rather than an equal partner, reinforces narratives of external control. Participant 6 observed that media, influenced by donor-sponsored campaigns, reproduces these messages, thereby limiting public critique. This perpetuates the idea that progress is contingent on foreign assistance, which supports neocolonial discourse (Escobar, 1995; Chilisa, 2012). The absence of two-way communication and the emphasis on short-term crises further diminish the potential for long-term, locally driven development planning.

## 8. Conclusion and Recommendations

While foreign aid contributes to service delivery and awareness, the communicative strategies surrounding it serve to reinforce dependency and shape South Africa's development discourse according to donor interests. For aid to be genuinely transformative, donors must adopt participatory, transparent, and culturally grounded communication approaches that prioritise local agency and autonomy.

To improve the effectiveness and integrity of foreign aid, donors should adopt participatory communication models that facilitate two-way dialogue with local communities, moving away from top-down messaging. Such engagement fosters ownership and ensures development initiatives are relevant to local needs. Additionally, aid communication must promote language and cultural inclusivity by avoiding technical jargon and translating information into local languages to build trust and accessibility. Enhancing media pluralism is equally vital; South African media should actively seek diverse perspectives and critically interrogate donor narratives to support a more balanced and locally grounded public discourse. Donors should also respect policy sovereignty by refraining from imposing rigid frameworks and instead support adaptive, context-sensitive solutions developed by local stakeholders. Transparency around aid conditionalities is crucial, and donors must make agreements and expectations public to encourage accountability and informed public debate. Finally, it is imperative to decolonise development narratives by centring African epistemologies and rejecting the notion that foreign aid is the sole path to progress, thereby empowering South African stakeholders to define and drive their own development agendas.

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