Africa in the World: Rethinking Africa's Global Connections

Background

This ASCL collaborative research group aims to explore Africa's changing global linkages in the context of an increasingly polycentric world in which actors such as China, India, Brazil, Turkey and the Gulf States have become major players.

The debate about Africa's changing relations with the world has rapidly evolved over the past decade. Whereas, until recently, the focus was largely on China and its engagement in Africa, the idea of multipolarity has made inroads with the acknowledgment that other players have also become increasingly important to Africa. While such developments in the debate are welcomed, the idea of multipolarity requires further reflection on what it means from the vantage point of Africa. First, most studies have focused on only one particular international actor (China, India or Turkey) and its involvement in Africa and have not taken multipolarity as the main focus of research. It is, however, the diversification of available partners that is one of the most important recent changes when viewed from the perspective of Africa.

Second, existing studies have focused mainly on the actions and strategies of such external actors, thereby ignoring African actors and the ways they might be co-shaping the new global relationships. Third, most studies have taken the state as the level of analysis. Such a state-centric perspective prevents an exploration of how emerging global players' involvement in Africa might not only challenge global power constellations, but also help reconfigure power constellations at the local and regional levels. The rivalry between, and among, different Western and non-Western powers in particular could offer opportunities for various actors in African society to enhance their economic and/or political positions, by linking to such initiatives, but also by publicly resisting them. In addition, illicit activities beyond the state, such as international crime, but also transnational movements, are usually excluded from existing analyses, while these may provide key focus points for studying Africa's new global position.

Current debates concerning Africa's changing position in the world must also attend to the urgent need to historicize. Indeed, taking a long-term historical perspective, the engagement and interventions of 'new' actors feed into ongoing processes of inclusion and exclusion in the economic and political spheres. In addition, they may build on longer-term traditions of economic and cultural exchange between African and other actors and regions.

Finally, looking from the perspective of Africa, one might not be necessarily able to observe multipolarity in action, but rather all kinds of new, renewed, and changing connections and evolving networks, thus helping to test and challenge the idea of multipolarity from 'below'.

Activities

The theme of 'Africa in the World' was adopted as an explicit field of enquiry in the ASCL 2012-2018 research programme and will be further developed in the coming years. As outlined above, research will focus on, among other things, economic investments and financial flows, Africa's changing educational landscape as a consequence of new transnational providers of education, travelling models of development such as frugal innovation, and the diverse roles of African diaspora groups in political and economic change on the African continent. Collaboration with others in Africa, Europe, Asia, and the Americas working on the theme of Africa in the World will be strengthened. The newly established AEGIS CRG 'Africa in the World' will be instrumental in this. The inaugural conference of this CRG, 'Destination Africa. Contemporary Africa as a Global Meeting Point' will be organized in Leiden in March 2018. In addition, seminars and guest lectures will be organized that highlight different aspects of Africa's changing global linkages, while the group and its partners will also work on joint grant proposals and publication projects.