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Macron's Africa "Problem": Will a Marshall Plan for Africa Make a Real Difference?

by Marcel Plichta

French President Emmanuel Macron's statements about Africa's "civilizational" problems ignited a controversial debate over the roots of Africa's economic and political challenges. At the G20 summit in Germany, a journalist from the Ivory Coast asked Macron why there is no equivalent to a Marshall Plan for Africa. His response was to differentiate between post-war Europe and modern Africa, saying: "The challenge of Africa, it is totally different, it is much deeper, it is civilizational, today. What are the problems in Africa? Failed states, complex democratic transitions, demographic transition [...]." He later added that, "when countries have seven to eight children per woman [...] you can decide to spend billions of euros, [but] you will not stabilize anything."¹

¹ Sarah Wildman, "French President Emmanuel Macron is in the Middle of a Social Media Firestorm", in *Vox*, 10 July 2017, <https://www.vox.com/world/2017/7/10/15949392>; Philippe

Angry responses flooded social media and news commentaries, with many pointing out how the continent's colonial legacy was conspicuously absent from Macron's statements. Such criticism was not universal, however. One article, by Remi Adekoya, a Polish-Nigerian journalist and political analyst that appeared in *Foreign Policy* magazine took a different line.² The article points out that Macron's statements on Africa were largely

Kouhon, "Ces vérités de Macron sur l'Afrique qui dérangent: Afrikipresse de retour du G20 à Hambourg", in *Afrikipresse*, 9 July 2017, <http://www.afrikipresse.fr/international/ces-verites-de-macron-sur-l-afrique-qui-derangent-afrikipresse-de-retour-du-g20-a-hambourg>; French Presidency, *Conférence de presse d'Emmanuel Macron le Samedi 8 juillet 2017 au G20 à Hambourg*, <http://www.elysee.fr/videos/new-video-17>.

² Remi Adekoya, "Is it Racist to Say Africa has 'Civilizational' Problems?", in *Foreign Policy*, 17 July 2017, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2017/07/17/is-it-racist-to-say-africa-has-civilizational-problems>.

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correct: many African countries do indeed face these challenges and they are not all rooted in history. Yet, Adekoya's article failed to address a central issue: the fact that Macron's statement was an answer to a question he was never asked. The question posed to Macron was not "what are Africa's problems?" The question was how he intends to address them.

The underlining truth of Macron's statement is beyond dispute. Yet, the choice of words and the manner in which they were spoken cannot hide a general apathy towards Africa and a continued tendency to approach the continent in a somewhat paternalistic manner by Western leaders and elites.

Macron's argument that aid on the scale of the Marshall Plan cannot help Africa because the continent faces different challenges deserves closer scrutiny. While they reflect the financial weakness of Europe and the West more generally, they also belie a continued tendency to neglect the West's complicity in exacerbating many of these challenges. If Macron wants a change in aid policy towards Africa, he will have to lead an effort to revisit the structural relations between donors and African states.

Assistance to Africa has largely been an afterthought in western politics. The Marshall Plan distributed the modern equivalent of about 130 billion dollars to 18 European countries over four years. Today, Europe is still reeling from the financial crisis and the United States is attempting to dramatically cut its already low foreign aid spending. Paradoxically, the relatively low (and

declining) quantities of aid actually contribute to the region's instability. A large percentage of this aid is provided as emergency assistance and crisis management; short-term approaches that essentially seek to stabilize present crises, rather than fix their underlying causes, and generally lead to aid dependence. What little investment there is often comes in the form of conditional loans that countries cannot necessarily afford, which leads recipients to focus on interest payments over investment. This situation often leads to debt forgiveness by donor states, yet such a scenario prevents this portion of aid from being invested in the first place, thereby skewing both total aid amounts and its impact.

Of the three reasons given by Macron on why a Marshall Plan for Africa would not work, his reference to chronic state failure is the least convincing. Major issues preventing African nations from harnessing their population growth and economic development are rooted in poor infrastructure and governance, with the latter exacerbating the former. The purpose of the Marshall Plan was precisely the revitalization of Europe's economies through massive investments in infrastructure and industrial capacity after the devastation caused by the Second World War.

The assumption that Western influence in Africa ended with decolonization is also problematic. During the Cold War, Africa was host to a variety of proxy wars that had significant effects on the processes of state building and consolidation. Former colonizers have remained active as well. France supported a series of coup d'états across

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"French Africa", and mined the nuclear material used in its first nuclear weapon in the former colonies, a trend that continues based on official documents released by WikiLeaks in 2016.³

Intervention in Africa has not only been political. Western powers continue to take advantage of Africa's natural resources, with the help of pliable local elites, at the expense of the continent's welfare. The Second Congo War, the longest of a series of conflicts that claimed over five million lives between 1996 and 2003, was largely funded through conflicts minerals such as diamonds, gold, copper and coltan. Attempts to prevent the trade of conflict minerals have been lackluster at best: European Union regulation is of limited effect,⁴ and US legislation that requires certain companies to audit their supply chains may be nullified this year.⁵

Thus we reach the underlying reason why Macron answered the question in the manner he did: France, the United States and the other international players do not have sufficient strategic interests to affect change in Africa. The Marshall Plan's purpose was to shore up Western Europe against the newly formed eastern bloc. It is no coincidence that the Marshall Plan

overlapped with the creation of NATO, or that aid was only provided to US-aligned or neutral powers.

But unlike post-war Europe, Sub-Saharan Africa does not have the Red Army at its gates. The status quo of conflict, demographic crisis and state failure does not prevent developed countries from accessing the raw materials needed to fuel their economies. Peacekeeping operations have proven half-hearted and even the threat of terrorism does not seem to merit significant resources, aside from drone strikes and occasional special operation missions.

Near the end of his statement, Macron observed that a plan for Africa must be "developed according to African interests by and with African leaders". Yet, based on the continent's troubled history and the ongoing exploitation by foreign powers, the west must acknowledge its role in Africa's problems and develop programmes as meaningful for Africa as the Marshall Plan was for Europe. The Marshall Plan was not simply a matter of aid itself, but also of revitalizing specific economic sectors and changing policy prescriptions.

The implementation of more favorable international trade regimes, disciplined monetary policy and legal protections from predatory local elites and large multinational companies would greatly benefit many struggling African nations. These problems are not simple to resolve, but that does not mean they are as insurmountable as Macron suggests.

³ Sébastien Seibt and Sam Ball, "WikiLeaks Accuses French Nuclear Giant of 'Exploiting' CAR Workers", in *France 24*, 6 February 2016, <http://f24.my/1Xanwqd>.

⁴ Jeroen Cuvelier, "Leaving the Beaten Track? The EU Regulation on Conflict Minerals", in *Africa Policy Briefs*, No. 20 (April 2017), <http://www.egmontinstitute.be/?p=21962>.

⁵ US House of Representatives, *H.R. 10 - Financial CHOICE Act of 2017*, 26 April 2017, <https://www.congress.gov/bill/115th-congress/house-bill/10/text>.

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Talk of a new Marshall Plan for Africa in purely quantitative terms is a non-starter, as international realities make such an engagement unlikely. Macron's comments were largely pointing in this direction; however, his choice of words reinforces an all too common paternalistic approach that obfuscates the West's ongoing legacy of involvement in Africa. Indeed, this was not the first time that Macron's comments on Africa created a stir. The reality is that there is much that France and international actors can do to help African nations address these problems, starting from a restructuring of current aid paradigms. Such action requires political courage and some financial pain, but would go a long way towards creating a more sustainable and just relationship with the continent. Engagement with Africa needs to be thoughtful, well-planned and long term and avoid falling pray to unhelpful generalizations or post-colonial attitudes that are often reflective of Europe's own challenges rather than those affecting the nations and people of Africa itself.

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