

By Ann-Sofie Isaksson

Neighbours and Family First

Donors should consider the effects of political favouritism in Africa

In many African countries it is a known fact that a person belonging to the same ethnic group as the president is less likely to be treated unfairly by the government. The same is valid for people living in the president's home region, regardless of their ethnic affiliation. Ethnic and regional favouritism are two distinct but parallel problems.

This Policy Note, drawn from data involving 20 000 citizens in 15 African countries, explore the scope of favouritism and its implications for citizens and democratic attitudes.

African policy-makers are often assumed to favour their own homelands and ethnic groups in allocating public funds. Recent research confirms that ethno-regional favouritism needs to be taken seriously in formulating development policy. It also shows that the severity and nature of the problem differs across countries. To counter favouritism and address structural inequalities, policy-makers should use the research findings on ethno-regional favouritism in specific African countries to guide their actions.

Personal favours

In the early 1980s, Ivorian President Félix Houphouët-Boigny made his birthplace Yamoussoukro the national capital. At the time little more than an agricultural village, it soon boasted an artificial lake with crocodiles, a six-lane highway, an airport that could land a Concorde, and perhaps most notably, the world's largest church – the Basilica of Our Lady of Peace. While this is an extreme case,



Photo: Nic Borham/Reuters/TT-Netherlands

The world's largest church, the Basilica of Our Lady of Peace, in Yamoussoukro, Ivory Coast. It was just a small village when President Houphouët-Boigny in the 1980s decided his birthplace to be capital and had the church built.

it corresponds with the widespread belief that African policy-makers favour their own homelands and ethnic groups in allocating public funds. African politics is often described as clientelist: rulers tend to distribute personal favours in exchange for political support, and voting is often based on kinship loyalties and ethnic ties rather than broadly based policy accountability.

Donors contribute to favouritism

Moreover, recent evidence indicates that ethno-regional favouritism in African politics can notably influence development outcomes. For instance, studies from Kenya suggest that children with the same ethnicity as the national president or minister of education during their primary school years generally achieve significantly better educational outcomes. And road investments are disproportionately made in the president's district of birth and regions where his ethnicity is dominant.

Donors sometimes contribute to ethno-regional favouritism in countries with

weak institutions, where a disproportionate share of foreign aid has been found to end up in the birth region of the political leader.

Voting for personal gain

Politics based on favouritism is problematic for several reasons. First, if the government focuses on private transfers rather than providing public goods or projects of national interest, there will be significant distributional consequences. In short, political connections rather than need or development objectives will guide resource distribution. Favouritism is also likely to affect a country's democratic development by encouraging a democratic system in which citizens vote for narrow personal gain rather than broadly based policy accountability, and where policy-makers place short-sighted narrow and local interests ahead of long-term development. Also, favouritism is at odds with the ideal of inclusive institutions and impartial government emphasised in recent academic debate on development.

However, we still know relatively little

about the scope and implications of the problem across a wider group of African countries. This policy note draws on two projects exploring the different dimensions of ethno-regional favouritism in sub-Saharan Africa. Through quantitative analysis of detailed survey data involving some 20,000 citizens in 15 African countries (Benin, Botswana, Ghana, Kenya, Malawi, Mali, Mozambique, Namibia, Nigeria, Senegal, South Africa, Tanzania, Uganda, Zambia and Zimbabwe) we can explore the scope and extent of the problem and its implications for citizens and democratic attitudes.

Frequent unfair treatment

Is unfair treatment based on ethnic affiliation perceived as an important problem in the countries being studied? Undoubtedly, yes. More than half the respondents (52 per cent) report that their ethnic group is sometimes, often or always treated unfairly by government. Furthermore, and consistent with accounts of ethno-regional favouritism in African politics, perceptions

of unfair treatment by government vary depending on which group you belong to and where in the country you live.

An individual with the same ethnic affiliation as the national president is less likely to be treated unfairly by government, irrespective of where he or she lives. Similarly, irrespective of his or her ethnic affiliation an individual living in the president's home territory or in a region with a large share of the president's co-ethnics is less likely to be treated unfairly.

Ethnic and regional favouritism are seemingly two distinct, but parallel, problems.

Acceptance of clientelism

Yet, despite these perceptions of injustice, there is likely to be resistance to change. Regarding citizen attitudes towards clientelism, 27 per cent of respondents agreed

that "once in office, leaders are obliged to help their home community," rather than with the idea that "since leaders represent everyone, they should not favour their own family or group." Because those receiving

the targeted benefits are likely to give greater support to clientelist policies, groups enjoying privileges in the current system could be an important barrier to change.

Examination of the variable attitudes towards

clientelism in fact challenges the dominant role of ethnic divisions in African clientelist practices. Rather, regionally based targeting of clientelist transfers seems to be more relevant. While the president's co-ethnics do not differ from other ethnic groups in their support of clientelism, people living in the president's region of origin tend to support clientelism significantly more than people from other regions. These findings

// *Once in office, leaders are obliged to help their community...*

PHOTO: TOM PILSTON/PANOS



Studies from Kenya suggest that children with the same ethnicity as the national president or minister of education during their primary school years generally achieve significantly better educational outcomes.

may indicate that compared with co-ethnics of the president, people in the president's region of origin to a greater extent view themselves as likely to receive clientelist transfers. In other words, regional targeting of clientelist transfers may be more prevalent than ethnically based targeting. Indeed, many potential voter benefits – for instance, infrastructure projects – are more feasible on a regional basis.

Favouritism and policy-making

So what are the lessons for donors and local policy-makers? The empirical findings based on representative data for these 15 African countries indicate that ethno-regional favouritism needs to be taken seriously when formulating development policy. At the same time, the results show considerable country variation. For instance, in Senegal and Botswana, just over 20 per cent of respondents report that their ethnic group is treated unfairly by government. By contrast, in Uganda and Nigeria the equivalent shares are 82 and 88 per cent respectively. Policy-makers should thus consult the research findings on ethno-regional favouritism in assessing the severity and character of the problem in specific African countries.

This will serve several purposes. It will allow donors and local policy-makers to take pre-emptive steps to counter ethno-regional favouritism and direct resources to where they are most needed. Case study evidence is needed to explore how best to achieve this end, but such initiatives might include ensuring merit-based recruitment into the civil service.

Second, comparing perceptions of unfair treatment along with actual socioeconomic inequalities across regions and groups in specific countries will highlight marginalised groups and the structural inequalities that need addressing. Examples of such measures are the introduction of equalisation funds to promote healthcare and education services, for instance, in marginalised areas.

Furthermore, by being better informed about the extent and nature of government favouritism in recipient countries, donors will be better able to



Photo: Wilum Daniels / PANOS

Road investments are disproportionately made in the president's district of birth and regions where his ethnicity is dominant.

assess where there is a particular risk of local capture of aid.

Importantly, however, efforts to counter ethno-regional favouritism need to take into account the long tradition of clientelist politics in many African

countries and the possibility that groups currently enjoying privileges will be an important barrier to change. Ensuring that policy initiatives reach out to these groups and bring them onboard should thus be a priority.

Policy recommendations

1

Given substantial country variations, policy-makers should consult research findings on ethno-regional favouritism in assessing the severity and character of the problem in specific African countries.

2

This information should be used to 1) inform pre-emptive actions to counter ethno-regional favouritism and direct resources to where they are most needed, 2) highlight marginalised groups and the structural inequalities that need addressing, and 3) help donors assess where there is a particular risk of local capture of aid.

3

Groups enjoying privileges in the current system could be an important barrier to change. Policy initiatives should reach out to them and bring them onboard.

This Policy Note draws on two ongoing projects exploring different dimensions of ethno-regional favouritism in Sub-Saharan Africa. (Ahlerup and Isaksson, 2015, and Isaksson and Bigsten, 2014)



Ann-Sofie Isaksson was a researcher at the Nordic Africa Institute 2013 - 2014. She is a development economist with a PhD from the University of Gothenburg. Her research focuses mainly on inequality, institutional development and governance in developing countries.

Literature

Acemoglu, D. and J.A. Robinson (2012) *Why nations fail: The origins of power, prosperity and poverty*. London: Profile Books.

Ahlerup, P. and A. Isaksson (2015) "Ethno-regional favouritism in Sub-Saharan Africa". *Kyklos* 68(2), pp. 143-152. (published online April 6 2015, DOI: 10.1111/kykl.12077).

Burgess, R., R. Jedwab, E. Miguel, A. Morjaria and G. Padró i Miquel (2013) "The Value of Democracy: Evidence from Road Building in Kenya". Mimeo, August 2013.

Hodler, R. and P.A. Raschky (2011) "Foreign Aid and Enlightened Leaders". Mimeo, January 2011.

Isaksson, A. and A. Bigsten (2014) "Clientelism and ethnic divisions". Working Papers in Economics No. 598, University of Gothenburg

Kramon, E. and D. Posner (2012) "Ethnic favoritism in primary education in Kenya". Mimeo, August 2012.

Rothstein, B. (2011) *The quality of government: Corruption, social trust and inequality in international perspective*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Vicente, P.C. and L. Wantchekon (2009) "Clientelism and vote buying: Lessons from field experiments in African elections". *Oxford Review of Economic Policy* 25(2):292-305.

Wantchekon, L. (2003) "Clientelism and voting behaviour: Evidence from a field experiment in Benin". *World Politics* 55(3):399-422.

More analysis on current affairs from the Nordic Africa Institute.
Download NAI Policy Notes at www.nai.uu.se



The Nordic Africa Institute



Free publications
NAI publications are available at the open archive, DiVA.
www.nai.uu.se/publications/



Join us on Facebook and Twitter!
www.facebook.com/TheNordicAfricaInstitute
www.twitter.com/nordicafrica



NAI Blogs
Read the blogs of NAI researchers Mats Utas and Annika Teppo.
www.nai.uu.se (see 'blogs')



Update on Africa research?
Subscribe to the NAI Newsletter.
www.nai.uu.se/about/order-form/