The Discourse of Development in Africa
Grace Klein, Class of 2013

During my time interning at an international development firm that functions as a contractor for USAID, I grew curious about the discourse of development and how it translates into activity “on the ground”. Upon returning to Bowdoin as a Riley fellow, I tailored my research to this inquiry. I focused on development initiatives in sub-Saharan Africa, comparing China’s involvement in the region with the West’s. I also hoped to find an answer to who’s approach was better – who’s development “style” most reduced poverty, accelerated growth, and built capacity so that states might become self-sufficient in the near future.

My initial findings on China’s theoretical approach to African diplomacy framed the bulk of my project. Since the early 1970s, China has positioned itself as Africa’s peer – a country rising “out” of its “developing” status to a “developed” one and looking to partner with Africa out of mutual economic benefit. This stance has been decisively different than that of the West, which is often perceived as neo-colonialist under the guise of selfless charity.

I found that a lot of recent literature on development disparages the West’s policies in Africa. Scholars like Dambisa Moyo and James Easterly point to the hundreds of billions of dollars that have been funneled through aid pipes to Africa for four decades, yet which have failed to bring about the democratic stability and economic capital intended. I sought to question this finding by learning the perspectives of native Africans, but localized ethnographies and newspaper articles only complicated the picture. Some individuals praise the Chinese’ “diligent” work ethic and frills-free work camps; others lament how the influx of cheap Chinese goods hurts local manufacturers. Regarding the West, some point out that only charitable aid builds wells in rural villages or combats malaria; others criticize the conditionalities tied to aid, and typical “one-size-fits-all” policies that disregard local specificities.

Neither approach to aid seems to be successful. Perhaps it’s the idea of aid itself. One Tanzanian electrical engineer, quoted in The Atlantic, summed up Moyo’s main objection to aid at large. “As soon as we have problems, we ask someone else to take care of them for us…This is not development.”

As I discussed with Professor Riley these colossal and seemingly unsolvable world problems, she pointed me to Ferguson’s Global Shadows, in which he discusses the very meaning of modernity and purpose of development. I grappled with the idea that there may be other “modern cultural trajectories” than those experienced and touted by the West, though the world hasn’t successfully seen any to fruition. If put into practice, this realization would fundamentally change international involvement in Africa.

So rather than finding answers to how the world can eliminate the region’s poverty, corruption, and violent conflict, I was left with a longer list of questions than I began with. The literature and Professor Riley’s mentorship did, however, enable me to conceptualize poverty and economic growth as political products that are grounded in man-made hegemonies and policies. Overall I grew as a student of the social sciences and I look forward to engaging with this subject matter in the near future.

Faculty Mentor: Nancy Riley
Funded by the Riley Fellowship