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The debate on the nature, causes, and legitimacy of sovereign debt accumulation in peripheral countries has historically occupied a central place in critical development studies. In the case of Africa, the magnitude of debt, its origin and consequences are a reflection of an asymmetrical international order, the development model that produces it, and the unequal exchange dynamics to which the continent has historically been subjected.

The financial development of many African economies occurs in a context of unequal integration into the world economy, caused by the promotion of an extractive financial pattern that has its origins in the financial relations established between the metropolises and the colonies between the 19th and 20th centuries. This generates structural imbalances and reproduces the dynamics of subordination of African economies in the financial dimension of international economic relations.

The so-called 'debt crisis' on the African continent has been recurrent, ever since a series of external logics first hit African economies in the decades following the independence of many of them, and continuously in the decades since.

The continent's debt stock has grown steadily since then, as has debt servicing (the payment of principal plus interest), so that today, according to figures from the United Nations Commission on Trade and Development (2024), 768 million people live in African countries that are forced to spend more on debt repayment than on health or education. Also, settlement costs are increasingly high: African economies must pay off their debt up to four times as much as the US and up to twelve times as much as European economies such as Germany and France. Debt servicing and liquidation costs are structural drivers of Africa's indebtedness trap, as is the mismatch between debtor economies' revenues (denominated in their local currencies) and debt service obligations (denominated in dollars or euros).

In many cases, the loans that have been unsustainably accumulated by African economies were acquired by undemocratically elected leaders, a logic that would call into question the legitimacy of the debts contracted during the periods in which these regimes were active. On the other hand, in many cases, these sums derive from the consequences of the implementation of structural adjustment plans and their conditional policies that forced African economies to liberalise their capital account with the argument that this would facilitate the entry of private capital, but the limited bargaining power that African countries had to deal with creditors (international financial institutions, private entities from developed economies and the developed economies themselves) prevented them from being able to obtain reasonable conditions for the repayment of the loans acquired. Thus, external debt has become a mechanism for remote control of many African countries and is the raison d'être of the contemporary global financial architecture.

Although the volume, structure of debt and creditor profile have changed substantially, the capacity to repay external debt in many of these economies remains very limited. This is explained by the internal configuration of African economies, but also by their dependent relationship with the world economy. The way in which they engage with it through the export of raw materials contributes to their external vulnerability. The characteristics of international commodity markets, price volatility and negative terms of trade for primary commodities (i.e. the fact that the remuneration of primary commodities on international markets is lower than that of manufactured goods) mean that less foreign exchange is available to meet debt repayments. Therefore, it is not only financial dynamics that explain the relationship that African economies have with debt, but this must also be understood in a context in which the commercial and productive dimensions of international economic relations also converge: Africa's peripheral position fundamentally conditions its payment capacities.

However, if other variables beyond the value and volume of debt are taken into account, Africa's debtor position changes and it becomes a creditor to a large part of the world economy and, in particular, to many developed economies: The historical looting of the continent's natural and human resources by many -now developed- economies, the repatriation of profits and the transfer prices set by transnational corporations operating on the continent, capital flight, the payment of intellectual property rights and the net transfer of natural resources (material and energy) to advanced economies are elements that are not taken into account when calculating the actual real transfer of resources that takes place between the continent and the rest of the world. With an honest accounting of the total sum of these transfers, it would not even be necessary to raise the debate on debt cancellation in the continent, as the net creditor position of Africa would be evident, a picture which greatly differs from the very different from the image that the conventional economic narrative has produced of the continent.