

BEYOND HANDOUTS

Africa's Long Walk from Aid Dependency to Productive Sovereignty — A Forensic Response to President Mahama's Provocation

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ABSTRACT

Ghanaian President John Dramani Mahama's contention that Africa has historically "lived on handouts" has reopened one of the continent's oldest and most consequential debates: whether Africa's underdevelopment is fundamentally a financing problem or a structural one. This article undertakes a forensic, evidence-based examination of that proposition against the backdrop of a rapidly contracting global aid architecture, the sharpest annual decline in Official Development Assistance on record, and a parallel resurgence of the African reparatory-justice movement that Mahama himself has helped lead at the United Nations. Drawing on current data from the OECD, the African Development Bank, UNCTAD, the African Union, and Afreximbank, the article argues that aid dependency is a symptom rather than the disease itself; the deeper affliction is a cluster of structural weaknesses spanning domestic revenue mobilisation, illicit financial outflows, commodity dependence, fragmented markets, costly debt, and institutional fragility. The article distinguishes aid dependence from strategic development cooperation, interrogates Ghana's "Beyond Aid" experience as a policy antecedent, and situates the contemporary reparations campaign as a matter of justice that must not be allowed to become a new dependency mechanism. It closes with a ten-transition Africa Beyond Aid framework and a set of implementable recommendations for African leadership, arguing that the continent's future must be negotiated from a position of productive strength rather than either aid dependency or reflexive self-sufficiency.

Keywords: *Africa; aid dependency; domestic resource mobilisation; economic sovereignty; African Continental Free Trade Area; industrialisation; illicit financial flows; capital flight; commodity dependence; reparatory justice; governance; African integration; development finance; Ghana Beyond Aid; strategic interdependence*

Introduction: What Happens When the Financier Walks Away?

Every generation of African leadership eventually confronts the same uncomfortable question in a new disguise: on whose resources, and on whose terms, will this continent build its future? In March 2026, Ghana's President John Dramani Mahama gave that question fresh urgency. Speaking first at a high-level United Nations event on reparatory justice and later before the UN General Assembly, Mahama argued that the transatlantic slave trade had been deliberately structured to strip Africans of their humanity, and that the resulting economic extraction still shapes the continent's position in the world economy today (Presidency of Ghana, 2026; UN News, 2026). His broader public commentary, echoing years of Ghanaian policy rhetoric under the banner of "Ghana Beyond Aid," has also revived a blunter and more contentious claim circulating widely on social media and in commentary pieces: that Africa has, in effect, "lived on handouts."

That claim deserves to be taken seriously rather than either dismissed as populist rhetoric or accepted uncritically as settled fact. It arrives at a moment of genuine historical inflection. According to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, net Official Development Assistance from members of its Development Assistance Committee fell by 23.1 per cent in 2025 — the steepest annual contraction ever recorded, bringing aid volumes back to where they stood roughly a decade earlier — and is projected to fall by a further 6.9 per cent in 2026, the third consecutive year of decline (OECD, 2026a; OECD, 2026b). Bilateral aid to sub-Saharan Africa alone fell by roughly a quarter in 2025 and is projected to fall by a further 11.6 per cent in 2026 (OECD, 2026b; African Business, 2026). For the first time in decades, the five largest donor governments — the United States, Germany, the United Kingdom, Japan and France — cut their aid budgets simultaneously, with the United States alone responsible for three-quarters of the global decline (African Business, 2026).

Africa, in other words, is being forced to answer Mahama's question empirically and immediately, not merely philosophically. The purpose of this article is to take his provocation seriously, test it against the best available evidence, and use it as the starting point for a wider argument about what genuine African economic sovereignty would actually require. The central proposition advanced here is this: Africa's fundamental problem was never simply that it received "too much" or "too little" aid. The deeper problem is structural dependency — weak domestic resource mobilisation, illicit financial outflows, commodity dependence without value capture, fragmented markets, expensive and poorly allocated debt, and institutions not yet strong enough to convert either aid or domestic wealth into durable productive capacity. Aid

dependency is a symptom. The disease is Africa's continuing difficulty in retaining, taxing, processing and reinvesting the extraordinary value that its economies already generate.

This distinction matters because the two diagnoses point to very different prescriptions. If aid itself were the problem, the solution would be simple, if painful: reject it, and self-reliance would follow. But if dependency is structural, then reducing aid without addressing revenue mobilisation, illicit flows, industrial capacity, market integration and governance will not produce self-reliance — it will simply produce a financing vacuum. The evidence assembled in this article supports the second diagnosis. Africa should not seek a world in which it needs nobody; no economy in an interconnected global system can credibly make that claim. It should instead seek a world in which it can negotiate with everybody — donors, investors, trading partners and, where reparatory justice is genuinely owed, the governments and institutions that profited from historical extraction — from a position of productive strength rather than supplication.

Was Mahama Actually Saying Something New?

The intellectual lineage behind Mahama's argument is older than his presidency and older, indeed, than the current reparations campaign. Ghana's "Ghana Beyond Aid" doctrine was articulated formally under President Nana Akufo-Addo, whose government told the United Nations in 2017 that Ghana was not rejecting international assistance outright but seeking to shed a mindset of dependency in favour of an economy built on production rather than charity. That framing — abandon dependency, not cooperation — is precisely the distinction this article defends, and it is worth noting that Mahama's current rhetoric, whatever its sharper edges, sits within a continuous Ghanaian policy tradition rather than a wholly new departure.

It is also important to be forensically honest about what can and cannot be verified from Mahama's public remarks. His UN addresses on reparatory justice are matters of public record: he told the General Assembly that no human being taken from Africa during the transatlantic trade was ever, properly speaking, a "slave" — a status imposed rather than inherent — and he framed the 400-year system of trafficking and chattel enslavement as one of the gravest crimes in human history, deliberately organised to deny Africans their dignity (GBC Ghana Online, 2026a; Presidency of Ghana, 2026). Ghana led the resolution, ultimately adopted by the General Assembly on 25 March 2026 with 123 votes in favour, three against and 52 abstentions, formally designating the trafficking and racialised enslavement of Africans as the gravest crime against humanity (UN News, 2026; UN in Ghana, 2026). Separately, in June 2026, African and Caribbean states endorsed a nineteen-point reparatory-justice framework covering apologies,

compensation, debt relief and the restitution of cultural heritage, and the African Union has designated 2026 to 2036 as the Decade of Reparations. Where this article draws on the specific phrase "lived on handouts" or on broader summaries of Mahama's economic commentary circulating in secondary reporting, it treats those as representative of a wider argument rather than as verified transcript, and focuses its analysis on the substantive thesis rather than on any single sentence.

Understood this way, Mahama's intervention belongs to a much larger African intellectual current running from dependency theory through structural-adjustment-era critiques to the contemporary "Beyond Aid" and economic-sovereignty literature. The question this current keeps asking, in different vocabularies across different decades, is the same one posed here: has Africa actually made the transition from aid to agency? The honest answer, developed across the sections that follow, is partial. Africa possesses dramatically greater economic capacity than it did at independence, yet many governments continue to lean heavily on concessional finance, donor-funded health systems, humanitarian assistance, multilateral programme financing and external borrowing to perform basic functions of the state. That is the contradiction this article sets out to dissect.

Not All Assistance Is a Handout: A Necessary Conceptual Correction

Before the forensic work can proceed, a conceptual correction is required, because the rhetorical power of "Africa lived on handouts" depends on collapsing several very different categories of external finance into one undifferentiated pile. Humanitarian assistance during conflict and disaster, vaccination and disease-control programmes, concessional financing extended to the poorest and most fragile states, agricultural research funding, and technical co-operation are not equivalent to unconditional cash transfers, and treating them as interchangeable produces bad analysis and worse policy. There is an enormous difference between a handout that entrenches dependency and strategic development co-operation that builds productive capacity; between humanitarian relief that saves lives during an emergency and budget support that substitutes indefinitely for domestic revenue collection; and between concessional development finance, which is repayable and disciplined by conditionality, and genuine grants, which are not.

This distinction is not merely semantic. OECD data show that ODA remains disproportionately important precisely for the poorest and most fragile states, and that the current contraction in aid is already threatening health, humanitarian and governance programming across the continent, with financing for health projected to fall as much as sixty per cent below its 2022 peak (OECD, 2026a; OECD, 2025). A blanket dismissal of all external assistance as a "handout" therefore

risks obscuring the genuine humanitarian cost of the current aid collapse, even as it correctly identifies a deeper pathology in how African states have financed their development over the past several decades. The more defensible formulation — and the one this article adopts — is that Africa should reject dependency, not development co-operation. That should become, in explicit terms, the operating doctrine of African fiscal and diplomatic policy.

The Collapsing Aid Architecture: Reading the 2025–2026 Numbers Correctly

Whatever position one takes on the moral and historical dimensions of Mahama's argument, its practical urgency is no longer contestable. Total ODA from OECD Development Assistance Committee members and associates fell to 174.3 billion United States dollars in 2025, a 23.1 per cent decline in real terms from 2024 and the largest annual contraction in the history of the instrument, pulling total aid volumes back to roughly where they stood at the start of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (OECD, 2026c; African Business, 2026). This followed an 8.5 per cent decline in 2024 and is projected to be followed by a further 6.9 per cent decline in 2026, which would mark the second time in the history of ODA that flows have fallen for three consecutive years, the first being the aftermath of the Cold War between 1992 and 1995 (OECD, 2026a). Bilateral core development programming — stripped of the more volatile categories of in-donor refugee costs, humanitarian aid and debt relief — fell by 26.3 per cent in 2025 alone, the largest decline on record for that component, suggesting that the retrenchment now extends well beyond the categories that typically fluctuate year to year (OECD, 2026c; ONE Campaign, 2026).

The regional distribution of this retrenchment is especially consequential for Africa. Bilateral aid to sub-Saharan Africa fell by roughly a quarter in 2025 and is projected to fall by a further 11.6 per cent in 2026, while bilateral aid to least developed countries fell by nearly 26 per cent and is projected to fall by close to 11 per cent again the following year (OECD, 2026a; African Business, 2026). To place this in comparative perspective, when outflows from European Union institutions are included, Ukraine alone received more net ODA in 2025 than the whole of sub-Saharan Africa combined (OECD, 2026c). Five donor governments — the United States, Germany, the United Kingdom, Japan and France — accounted for 95.7 per cent of the total global decline, with the United States responsible for roughly three-quarters of it after cutting its own aid budget by nearly 57 per cent (African Business, 2026).

Africa is becoming less able to rely on aid precisely at the moment when many of its economies are becoming more fiscally exposed. That is the paradox at the centre of the current crisis.

Understanding why this contraction is occurring matters as much as measuring it. The drivers are overwhelmingly domestic to donor countries rather than African in origin: fiscal pressure at home, rising defence and security spending amid the war in Ukraine and conflict in the Middle East, domestic political backlash against foreign assistance, migration anxiety, and a broader reprioritisation of scarce public resources toward national interests narrowly defined. None of this is primarily a judgment on African performance; it is a function of donor-country politics. But the consequence for Africa is the same regardless of cause: a financing model built, even partially, around the assumption of steady external transfers is no longer a credible basis for national development planning. That is the empirical core of the Mahama provocation, whatever one makes of its historical framing, and it is the reason this article treats "Africa cannot sensibly build its future around the assumption that somebody else will finance its development" as an uncontroversial starting premise rather than a contested conclusion.

The First Forensic Question: How Dependent Is Africa, Really?

It is tempting, and analytically lazy, to treat "Africa" as a single aid-dependent unit. It is not. The fifty-four economies of the continent range from highly aid-dependent fragile and conflict-affected states, where ODA can constitute a substantial share of government budgets and of gross national income, to middle-income economies such as South Africa, Nigeria, Egypt, Morocco and Kenya, where aid is a comparatively marginal input relative to domestic revenue, remittances, trade and foreign direct investment. Collapsing these very different fiscal realities into a single continental narrative — whether the narrative is "Africa lives on handouts" or its opposite, "Africa does not need aid" — misrepresents both groups of countries and undermines the credibility of the policy conclusions that follow.

What is true across nearly the entire continent, however, is a second and more damaging pattern: heavy reliance not on aid as such, but on external capital more broadly — concessional finance, foreign direct investment, portfolio flows, diaspora remittances and commercial borrowing — to fund development that domestic resource mobilisation alone has not yet financed. This is the more accurate diagnosis of Africa's dependency problem, and it points toward the domestic revenue question addressed below as the central forensic issue rather than aid volumes narrowly defined.

The Biggest Myth: Africa Is Financed by Foreign Aid

Here the evidence is unambiguous and, for a continent still popularly associated with donor dependency, genuinely striking. According to the African Development Bank, Africa's domestically generated government revenues — tax and non-tax revenues, excluding grants — rose by almost forty per cent between 2015 and 2022, from roughly 435 billion to 604 billion United States dollars, and were projected to reach approximately 626 billion dollars by 2025 (AfDB, 2024). Tax revenues account for more than three-quarters of that total domestically generated revenue (AfDB, 2024). Domestic resources, in other words, already dwarf foreign aid as a share of Africa's development-financing architecture; the popular narrative that casts Africa as fundamentally aid-financed is simply not supported by the continent's own fiscal data.

This reframes the central policy question. It is not, in the first instance, "how does Africa secure more aid?" It is "why do African states mobilise and retain so little of the extraordinary economic value already circulating within their own economies?" That is the forensic question this article treats as central, and it is the question to which the African Development Bank's most recent flagship research has now attached a startling number.

The \$1.43 Trillion Blind Spot: Domestic Resource Mobilisation

The African Development Bank's 2026 African Economic Outlook, released under the theme "Mobilising Africa's Development Financing at Scale in a Fragmented World," estimates that Africa faces an annual financing gap exceeding 1.3 trillion United States dollars to meet the Sustainable Development Goals — but that, with the right reforms, the continent could unlock as much as 1.43 trillion dollars annually through a combination of improved tax and non-tax revenue collection, more efficient public investment, action against illicit financial flows and corruption, deeper capital markets, expanded public-private partnerships, better diaspora financing and more effective use of natural capital (AfDB, 2026a; AfDB, 2026b). Of that figure, the Bank attributes roughly 469 billion dollars to stronger tax and non-tax revenue mobilisation alone and a further 299 billion dollars to efficiency gains in public investment, noting that each additional dollar of public investment currently mobilises approximately 1.40 dollars of private investment when structured well (Leadership, 2026; MSME Africa, 2026).

This is not a marginal adjustment. It is, on the Bank's own figures, financing potential larger than the entire global ODA envelope several times over — generated internally, from Africa's own tax bases, capital markets, pension funds and natural-resource royalties, rather than solicited externally. The 2026 Outlook also documents the underlying resource base that makes this plausible: Africa holds an estimated thirty per cent of the world's mineral reserves and stands to capture more than a tenth of an anticipated sixteen trillion dollars in global green-mineral

revenue by 2030; the continent's median age of nineteen represents a demographic dividend potentially worth tens of billions of dollars in additional GDP through higher labour-force participation; African pension fund assets already exceed 1.1 trillion dollars; and formal remittance flows could rise toward 500 billion dollars by 2035 if transfer costs were reduced (Independent Uganda, 2025; AfDB, 2025).

The persistence of a financing gap alongside this scale of underexploited domestic resource is the central paradox this article seeks to explain. Public debt across the continent climbed by roughly 170 per cent between 2010 and 2024 to exceed 1.8 trillion dollars, with the composition shifting from concessional to more expensive commercial borrowing even as the domestic-resource alternative sat comparatively untapped (Ecofin Agency, 2026). If Africa possesses this much unrealised domestic-resource potential, the pressing question is not why aid is declining but why the continent has not yet captured the value it already generates.

Taxation and the Social Contract

Part of the answer lies in taxation itself. According to the OECD's most recent Revenue Statistics in Africa report, the average tax-to-GDP ratio across the thirty-eight African countries covered stood at roughly the mid-teens in 2023, having risen only modestly — by about 1.4 percentage points — over the preceding decade, and remains well below the averages recorded in Asia and the Pacific, Latin America and the Caribbean, and especially the OECD (OECD, 2025a). Tax-to-GDP ratios vary enormously across the continent, from under three per cent in Somalia to over thirty per cent in Tunisia, with nineteen of the thirty-six countries surveyed in the Bank's 2024 edition recording ratios below fifteen per cent, a threshold widely regarded by fiscal economists as a minimum for financing basic state functions (OECD, 2024). A separate African Development Bank macroeconomic update similarly places the continental average tax-to-GDP ratio at around fourteen per cent, a level the Bank describes as leaving limited scope for financing development domestically or absorbing external shocks (AfDB, 2025b).

This is fundamentally a state-capacity problem rather than an aid problem. Narrow tax bases, extensive and often poorly justified exemptions, weak customs and property-tax administration, under-taxed natural-resource rents, limited digital tax infrastructure, and a very large informal sector all combine to leave enormous economic activity effectively invisible to the fiscal authorities that would otherwise convert it into public revenue. The relationship between taxation and accountability runs in both directions, and it would be naive to demand higher compliance without also acknowledging that citizens and businesses have legitimate reasons for scepticism where tax revenue has not historically translated into reliable infrastructure, security, justice or

public services. The reform agenda, in other words, cannot be reduced to "collect more tax." It must be a genuine bargain: broader, fairer, more digitised revenue systems in exchange for visibly better and more accountable public spending.

The Informal Economy: From Exclusion to Productive Formalisation

Roughly eighty-six per cent of employment across Africa sits within the informal economy, according to African Development Bank estimates — an enormous concentration of economic activity that governments can neither easily tax nor easily support (AfDB, 2024). This is simultaneously a symptom of institutional weakness and a rational survival strategy for millions of entrepreneurs facing high costs of formal registration, limited access to credit, weak legal protection and minimal return on compliance. The correct policy response is not aggressive taxation of businesses that have never received anything from the state in return; it is what might be called productive formalisation, in which government explicitly reframes the bargain on offer. If a business becomes visible to the state, the state must become genuinely useful to that business — through digital registration, access to credit and insurance, pension inclusion, procurement opportunities, legal protection and export support. Formalisation has to be made economically attractive rather than merely mandated, or the vicious cycle in which weak taxation produces weak public services, which in turn produces weak legitimacy and low compliance, will simply reproduce itself indefinitely.

The Second Great Leakage: Illicit Financial Flows

If domestic revenue mobilisation is the first forensic failure, illicit financial outflows are the second, and arguably the more damaging, because they represent wealth Africa has already generated leaving the continent rather than wealth never collected in the first place. UNCTAD's most comprehensive assessment to date estimates that Africa loses approximately 88.6 billion United States dollars annually — equivalent to roughly 3.7 per cent of the continent's GDP — through illicit capital flight, encompassing tax evasion and avoidance, trade mis-invoicing, corruption and other criminal channels (UNCTAD, 2020a; UNCTAD, 2020b). Trade mis-invoicing alone accounts for as much as fifty-two billion dollars of that annual loss, much of it linked to the deliberate misreporting of commodity exports from Africa's extractive industries (Quartz Africa, 2022). Cumulatively, UNCTAD's analysis found that illicit capital flight from the continent between 2000 and 2015 totalled roughly 836 billion dollars — a sum comparable to, and by some measures exceeding, Africa's entire external debt stock, leading UNCTAD to

describe the continent, provocatively but not inaccurately, as a net creditor to the rest of the world (UNCTAD, 2020a).

KEY INSIGHT

Africa asks the world for development assistance while wealth of African origin simultaneously leaves the continent through channels the state cannot see, tax or recover. That contradiction, more than any single aid statistic, is the real "handout" story — except the flow runs outward, not in.

This is not a historical curiosity; it is an active, ongoing drain that continues to widen even as aid contracts. UNCTAD estimates the continent's overall Sustainable Development Goals financing gap at roughly 200 billion dollars annually, meaning that eliminating illicit financial flows alone could close nearly half of that gap without a single additional dollar of foreign assistance (UN Office of the Special Adviser on Africa, n.d.; UNCTAD, 2020b). Confronting this leakage requires a continental financial-security architecture capable of tracking beneficial ownership, mining and customs revenues, transfer pricing by multinational corporations, offshore structures and politically exposed persons; UNCTAD's recent technical collaboration with Ghana, Namibia and Zambia to build national systems for measuring tax- and commercial-related illicit flows offers a template that other African states could usefully adopt and scale (UNCTAD, 2020b). No serious conversation about African aid dependency can proceed without confronting the fact that far more wealth leaves the continent illicitly each year than African governments received in bilateral development assistance even before the current contraction began.

From Resource Ownership to Resource Value Capture: The Cocoa Paradox

A third structural weakness sits at the intersection of trade and industrial policy: Africa's persistent pattern of exporting raw commodities and re-importing the finished goods manufactured from them elsewhere. West Africa's cocoa sector remains the clearest illustration. The region produces the majority of the world's cocoa, yet the largest share of the value generated across the chain — fermentation, processing into cocoa butter and liquor, manufacturing into chocolate, branding, retail distribution and financial intermediation — accrues overwhelmingly outside the producing countries. The farmer captures a fraction of what the final consumer ultimately pays; the processor, manufacturer, brand owner, retailer and financier each capture a larger share further down a chain the producing country does not control. Producing a commodity, in other words, is simply not the same thing as controlling the

value chain built on top of it, and the same pattern repeats across coffee, cotton, crude petroleum, gold, cobalt, copper, lithium, uranium, bauxite, iron ore and timber. Africa can export a billion dollars of raw material and subsequently import several times that value in finished products manufactured, in part, from those same underlying resources.

Correcting this requires moving deliberately from resource ownership toward resource value capture: linking mining and extraction licences to binding local-content and beneficiation requirements, building continental pharmaceutical, agro-processing, textile and mineral-processing capacity rather than continuing to export unprocessed inputs, and treating natural-resource royalties as a platform for domestic industrialisation rather than merely a fiscal receipt. None of this is achievable at the scale of individual national markets; it depends on the continental integration project examined next.

The Debt Trap Behind the Aid Trap

A further danger, and one the "Beyond Aid" literature has sometimes underweighted, is that Africa risks solving aid dependency by substituting an equally damaging commercial-debt dependency. Africa's external debt stock reached approximately 863 billion dollars in 2023, driven upward by rising global interest rates, currency depreciation and the shift toward costlier commercial financing described above, and total debt-servicing costs for sub-Saharan Africa reached roughly 72 billion dollars that year — more than double the figure recorded a decade earlier, with interest payments alone having tripled over the same period (OECD, 2025b). Government interest payments now consume a substantially larger share of public revenue than they did a decade ago across much of the continent; UNDP places the median sub-Saharan African figure at roughly twelve per cent of revenue in 2023, more than double the level of a decade prior, while separate comparative analysis notes that several African economies — including Malawi, Kenya and Ghana — now devote around a quarter of their tax revenue to interest payments alone, a burden considerably heavier than that carried by European economies with far higher debt-to-GDP ratios, reflecting the much higher interest rates African sovereigns are charged to borrow (UNDP, 2024; Tony Blair Institute, 2025).

This is the debt trap replacing the aid trap, and it deserves as much forensic scrutiny as ODA statistics receive. A government can borrow to build roads, railways, ports, power plants and digital infrastructure, but if those assets do not generate sufficient economic activity to service the resulting obligations, the country eventually faces fiscal compression, higher taxation and reduced investment precisely when it can least afford them. Sovereign borrowing should therefore be judged principally by the productive capacity it creates rather than by the volume of

infrastructure it finances or the ease with which it was contracted; a simple discipline worth institutionalising is that no major sovereign borrowing should proceed without an independently verified assessment of its economic rate of return.

AfCFTA and the Unfinished Continental Market

One of the most significant missed opportunities in the entire dependency debate is intra-African trade. Africa's total merchandise trade rose by nearly fourteen per cent to reach approximately 1.5 trillion dollars in 2024, and intra-African trade grew even faster, rising by roughly 12.4 per cent to reach an estimated 220 billion dollars, according to Afreximbank's Africa Trade Report (Ecofin Agency, 2026a). Yet even after that growth, intra-regional commerce still accounts for only somewhere between fifteen and eighteen per cent of Africa's total trade — a figure that has fluctuated in that narrow band for years and remains dramatically below the roughly sixty per cent recorded within the European Union or the sixty per cent Asia reached in 2025 (Standard Media, 2026; GIS Reports, 2025). Africa's own share of global exports has, if anything, slightly declined over the past decade and a half, from 3.5 per cent in 2009 to 3.3 per cent in 2024, underscoring the continent's continued dependence on raw-material exports even as intra-continental trade improves at the margin (Ecofin Agency, 2026a).

This is a profound structural weakness for a continent of more than 1.4 billion people with enormous natural-resource endowments, rapidly urbanising populations and expanding consumer markets, and it is economically irrational for African economies to continue trading more intensively with Europe, China and other external partners than with one another. The African Continental Free Trade Area, whose Guided Trade Initiative had expanded to include thirty-seven of the fifty-four member states by late 2024, offers the institutional vehicle to correct this, and the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa projects intra-African trade could rise by as much as thirty-five per cent by 2045 under full implementation (Brookings, 2025). But AfCFTA's promise depends on evolving beyond tariff reduction toward genuine value-chain integration: the strategic question is not merely which tariffs to eliminate but what Africa can manufacture collectively that it currently imports from outside the continent — pharmaceuticals, processed food, refined petroleum products, textiles, and increasingly, digital services and artificial-intelligence applications built on African data and African compute infrastructure. Africa does not merely need a continental market. It needs a continental production system, built around interoperable customs regimes, continental payment infrastructure, regional transport corridors and harmonised standards.

Artificial Intelligence: Will Africa Repeat the Commodity Mistake?

There is a further dimension to this argument that conventional development commentary too often omits, and it deserves explicit attention from an audience of leaders and policymakers precisely because the window for action is narrow. Africa must not repeat, in artificial intelligence, the pattern it has lived through with physical commodities. The risk is real and structurally familiar: African markets could easily become spaces where data is generated, digital labour is performed cheaply, and AI products are consumed, while the underlying intellectual property, the advertising revenue, and the computing infrastructure itself remain owned and controlled elsewhere. That is the AI-era equivalent of exporting raw cocoa and importing finished chocolate.

The alternative is deliberate: building African AI capability, African-owned datasets and data-governance regimes, African compute capacity, African intellectual property, and African products designed for African languages, African problems and African markets, with export potential rather than pure import dependence. Digital and AI sovereignty deserve a place alongside fiscal, industrial and trade sovereignty in any serious continental economic-sovereignty agenda, because the terms on which Africa enters the AI economy over the next decade will shape its terms of trade for a generation, in much the same way that colonial-era commodity structures shaped the terms of trade for the century that followed.

The Reparations Question: Justice, Not a New Development Model

This brings the argument back to Mahama's own primary preoccupation, which is not development financing at all but historical justice. Ghana has become one of the leading voices in the contemporary African reparations movement, and the substantive achievements of 2026 are considerable: the General Assembly's adoption, on Ghana's initiative and with African Union backing, of a resolution formally designating the transatlantic trafficking and racialised chattel enslavement of Africans as the gravest crime against humanity; the endorsement by African and Caribbean states of a nineteen-point reparatory-justice framework encompassing apologies, compensation, debt relief and the restitution of cultural heritage; and the African Union's designation of the period from 2026 to 2036 as the Decade of Reparations.

This creates an important philosophical question that this article answers directly: can Africa credibly demand reparations while simultaneously demanding self-reliance? The answer is yes, and there is no contradiction, provided the two demands are kept conceptually distinct. Reparations are a matter of historical justice — compensation owed for a documented,

quantifiable system of extraction. Self-reliance is a matter of development strategy — the deliberate building of productive capacity regardless of whether reparatory justice is ultimately achieved, on what timeline, or in what form. The danger, and it is a genuine one, is allowing reparations to become psychologically or fiscally substitutable for the harder work of domestic revenue mobilisation, industrialisation and institutional reform — in effect, reproducing dependency under a more morally compelling vocabulary. The strongest position available to African leadership is therefore a dual one: justice is demanded because it is owed, and development is built because the future belongs to Africa regardless of whether that justice materialises on any particular timetable.

This has direct implications for how any eventual reparatory resources should be structured and deployed. They should not be distributed as recurrent political expenditure or short-term consumption support, however politically tempting that would be. They should be channelled into human capital — universities, technical and vocational education, health systems, research institutions and scholarships; into infrastructure — power, rail, ports, water and digital networks; into industrialisation — manufacturing, pharmaceuticals, agro-processing and mineral beneficiation; and into cultural restitution — museums, archives and historical research. A dedicated African Development Sovereign Fund, structured to invest reparatory resources into productive, revenue-generating African assets rather than recurrent budgets, would convert historical compensation into intergenerational capital rather than a one-time transfer that is spent and forgotten. The operative principle is straightforward: reparations, if and when they materialise, must be transformational rather than consumptive.

Toward Strategic Interdependence, Not Isolation

It is worth being explicit about what self-reliance does not mean, because the rhetorical energy around "Beyond Aid" arguments can easily curdle into something closer to economic isolationism, which would be strategically irrational for any economy, let alone economies still building industrial capacity, deep capital markets and technological infrastructure. Africa needs continued access to foreign investment, advanced technology, research partnerships, global export markets, concessional financing where it remains genuinely appropriate, diaspora capital and international technical expertise. The objective is not autarky. It is a shift from structural dependence — in which a country cannot function without external actors' continued goodwill — to strategic interdependence, in which African states and their partners genuinely need one another, but neither side controls the other's survival. That distinction should define how African governments negotiate every future partnership, whether with traditional Western donors, China,

the Gulf states, India or multilateral institutions: not "give us money," but a commercially structured proposition built around a defined market, a credible revenue model, a clear regulatory framework, an explicit allocation of risk, and a meaningful African equity stake.

The Africa Beyond Aid Framework: Ten Transitions

Drawing the preceding forensic analysis together, this article proposes a continental Africa Beyond Aid framework organised around ten simultaneous transitions, each of which is already underway in pockets across the continent but nowhere yet pursued with sufficient coherence or urgency.

The first transition runs from aid to domestic revenue: building sophisticated, digitised tax administrations capable of capturing a far larger share of the roughly 469 billion dollars in additional annual revenue the African Development Bank believes is achievable through better collection alone, while simultaneously rebuilding the trust that voluntary compliance requires. The second runs from raw-material export to value addition, ensuring that every major African commodity — cocoa, cotton, oil, copper, lithium and the rest — is attached to an explicit national or regional industrialisation strategy rather than left as an unprocessed export line. The third runs from informality to productive formalisation, in which government makes visibility to the state an economically attractive proposition rather than a punitive one. The fourth runs from external debt to productive capital, disciplined by the principle that no major sovereign borrowing should proceed without an independently verified assessment of the productive capacity it will create.

The fifth transition runs from commodity dependence to economic complexity, deliberately expanding manufacturing, financial services, pharmaceuticals, creative industries, logistics and technology exports as shares of national output. The sixth runs from fragmented national markets to a genuine continental production system, accelerating AfCFTA implementation alongside continental payment infrastructure, interoperable customs, transport corridors and digital trade rules. The seventh runs from capital flight to capital retention, built on the recognition that African wealth will only stay in Africa once domestic investment becomes at least as attractive, secure and predictable as investment abroad — which in turn requires stronger institutions, credible courts, secure property rights and stable macroeconomic management. The eighth runs from resource ownership to resource sovereignty, in which natural-resource extraction is required to generate local employment, technology transfer, downstream manufacturing and government revenue, not merely export earnings.

The ninth transition runs from aid-funded projects to strengthened African institutions, so that international partners increasingly finance the capacity of African public institutions themselves rather than permanently substituting for them through parallel donor-run delivery systems. The tenth, and arguably the most difficult, is psychological: a shift from a dependency mindset that asks what the world will give Africa, to a development-agency mindset that asks what Africa itself can build. This tenth transition must be pursued carefully, because a simplistic "bootstraps" narrative that ignores the continuing weight of historical exploitation, unequal international financial architecture and asymmetric global trade rules would be both intellectually dishonest and politically counterproductive. Institutions matter. Infrastructure matters. History matters. International rules matter. All of these interact with African agency rather than substituting for it, and any credible Beyond Aid doctrine must hold both truths simultaneously.

Recommendations for African Leadership and Policymakers

Several concrete priorities follow directly from the forensic analysis above and deserve immediate attention from heads of state, finance ministers, central bank governors, the African Union Commission and continental financial institutions. On fiscal sovereignty, governments should prioritise the digitisation of revenue administration, the systematic rationalisation of tax exemptions that no longer serve a clear developmental purpose, and the integration of customs and tax databases so that trade mis-invoicing becomes harder to conceal, all with the explicit target of closing a meaningful share of the 469 billion dollars in additional annual revenue the African Development Bank has identified as achievable. On illicit financial flows, the African Union and its member states should accelerate the rollout of beneficial-ownership registers, strengthen transfer-pricing enforcement against multinational corporations operating in extractive sectors, and extend the UNCTAD-supported national IFF-measurement systems piloted in Ghana, Namibia and Zambia to every member state, since a continent that cannot measure its own leakage cannot credibly plug it.

On industrial policy, every major commodity of continental significance — cocoa, cotton, crude petroleum, copper, cobalt and lithium among them — should carry an explicit, time-bound domestic-processing and beneficiation target, with mining and extraction licences increasingly conditioned on measurable local value addition rather than royalty payments alone. On continental integration, African governments should treat the acceleration of AfCFTA implementation, and specifically the build-out of continental payment systems, harmonised standards and transport corridors, as a first-order economic-sovereignty priority rather than a secondary trade-policy matter, given that intra-African trade still accounts for less than a fifth of

the continent's total commerce. On debt management, sovereign borrowing decisions should be subjected, as a matter of institutionalised practice rather than case-by-case judgment, to independent verification of the economic rate of return the financed asset is expected to generate, precisely because interest payments already consume a disproportionate and rising share of government revenue across much of the continent.

On digital and artificial-intelligence policy, African governments should treat data governance, compute infrastructure and AI-skills development as strategic assets deserving the same seriousness historically reserved for mineral-resource policy, so that the continent becomes a producer rather than merely a consumer of AI capability. On the reparatory-justice agenda, African and Caribbean governments should press ahead with the demand for justice on its own moral and historical merits, while simultaneously and explicitly ring-fencing any eventual reparatory resources for transformational investment — human capital, infrastructure, industrialisation and cultural restitution — through a dedicated sovereign investment vehicle, rather than allowing such resources to be absorbed into recurrent budgets. And on diaspora engagement, governments should move deliberately beyond the remittance-centred model that has dominated diaspora policy for decades, toward structured mechanisms for diaspora investment, venture capital, technology transfer, mentorship and market access — treating the global African diaspora as a source of capital and knowledge rather than merely a source of household transfers.

Conclusion: Africa Does Not Need to Be Saved

Was Africa really "living on handouts"? The honest, forensic answer is that the claim is partly true as a description of genuine dependency in specific fragile and aid-reliant contexts, misleading if extended to describe the entire African development experience, and ultimately inadequate as a complete explanation of the continent's economic condition. Aid has saved lives, financed schools, fought disease and responded to disasters, and the current collapse in global development assistance carries real humanitarian costs that should not be minimised in the pursuit of a tidier ideological narrative. But aid was never capable of substituting indefinitely for productive economies, competent states, accountable institutions and indigenous capital formation, and the deeper causes of African underdevelopment — weak institutions, low productivity, commodity dependence without value capture, inadequate infrastructure, capital flight, under-taxation, fragmented markets, costly debt and, at times, governance failure — sit well beyond anything foreign aid could plausibly have fixed even at its historical peak.

The deepest lesson to draw from Mahama's provocation, then, is not that Africa should turn hostile toward its development partners. It is that the continent must finally stop defining its own development primarily through the generosity, or the withdrawal, of outsiders. And the reparatory-justice campaign he has led at the United Nations, however historically overdue and morally compelling in its own right, must never be allowed to become a new development strategy dressed in the language of justice; reparations are owed because they are owed, and Africa must build its productive future regardless of whether or when that debt is finally paid.

Africa's greatest problem is not that the world has given it too little. It is that Africa has not yet converted enough of its enormous human, natural, financial and intellectual assets into productive power.

The task facing the next generation of African leadership is therefore not simply "Beyond Aid." It is beyond dependency altogether — from extraction to value creation, from consumption to production, from fragmentation to integration, from commodities to industries, from capital flight to capital formation, from aid recipient to investment partner, from political sovereignty to genuine economic sovereignty. Africa's objective should not be to reach a point where it needs nobody; that is neither possible nor desirable in an interconnected global economy. The objective should be to reach a point where Africa can negotiate with everybody — donors, investors, trading partners and, where justice is owed, former colonial and slaving powers — from a position of productive strength rather than dependency. That, and not the volume of any single year's aid disbursement, is the measure by which Mahama's challenge, and this continent's response to it, should ultimately be judged.

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