Desk study on aid and democracy

Central African Republic

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This study is part of a series of ten country-focused desk studies on aid and democracy prepared under the project The state and statebuilding in the Global South. They are prepared under the guidance of Rachel M. Gisselquist as background to a broader research effort on aid, governance, and democracy promotion. The studies follow a common template and each draws on the research literature and selected cross-national sources to discuss regime type and timeline, findings from the literature on democracy/democratization, findings from the literature on aid and democracy/democratization, aid flows and sources, and specific aid examples. This study addresses the case of the Central African Republic, from independence in 1960 and with focus on the post-Cold War period.

Key words: foreign aid, democratization, Central African Republic, statebuilding, development

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1 Regime type and timeline

The Central African Republic (CAR) currently ranks 126th out of the 179 countries in the liberal democracy index (Papada et al. 2023). Having undergone significant shifts in the last few years, the country is ranked in the bottom 20–30% of the democracy index in terms of rank order. The Regimes of the World typology (Lührmann et al. 2018) qualifies the CAR as an 'Electoral Autocracy', which implies that multiparty elections for executive offices exist, but there are insufficient levels of fundamental requisites such as freedom of expression and association, free and fair elections. The country scores 0.32 (out of 1) on the electoral democracy index, which captures to which extent political leaders are elected under comprehensive voting rights in free and fair elections, and freedoms of association and expression are guaranteed. The table below summarizes how the CAR performs on the major democracy and freedom indices:

Table 1: Central African Republic's performance in democracy and freedom indices

Country	Central African Republic
Liberal democracy index	0.17 (in 2022)
Electoral democracy index	0.32 (in 2022)
Regimes of the World typology	Electoral Autocracy
Freedom House	Not Free

Source: author's compilation based on the indices listed the first column.

The Varieties of Democracy's (V-Dem) Episodes of Regime Transformation (ERT) dataset (Edgell et al. 2023) marks six main episodes in the CAR's history of democracy as illustrated in Figure 1. Before examining each episode in greater detail, I provide a brief backdrop of the country context.

The Central African Republic, previously named the Oubangui Chari province of French Equatorial Africa (AEF), gained independence from the former colonial power, France, in 1960. David Dacko, supported by the then French Commissioner and belonging to the Mbaka ethnic group, became the first president. He subsequently adopted a series of laws to repress disobedience or resistance, almost repeating the colonial era tactics (Bagayoko 2018). Dacko also permitted the French to provide the new country with assistance in the areas of trade, defence, and foreign relations (O'Toole et al. 2024). Fast-forward to the contemporary times, the CAR has since experienced six coups. The collapse of the state institutions and their replacement by armed militias, gangs, and bandits, combined with interference of regional and foreign actors, has led to a complex scenario. The vacuum in public service provision is haphazardly filled by aid agencies. Furthermore, the humanitarian crisis has been progressively worsening since 2012, when an insurgency led by the Séléka (meaning 'alliance' in Sango)—a coalition of armed, primarily Muslim groups—launched an offensive against the current government. In retaliation, the 'anti-balaka' (meaning 'invincible' in Sango) coalitions of Christian fighters began committing revenge attacks (Center for Preventive Action 2023). This marked a cycle of renewed violent conflict in the already-fragile country. The fair presidential and legislative elections of 2016, the deployment of UN peacekeeping forces, MINUSCA, and other attempts at upholding recent peace agreements including the Political Agreement for Peace and Reconciliation (APPRRCA) have changed little in reality.

Figure 1: Episodes of regime transformation in the CAR
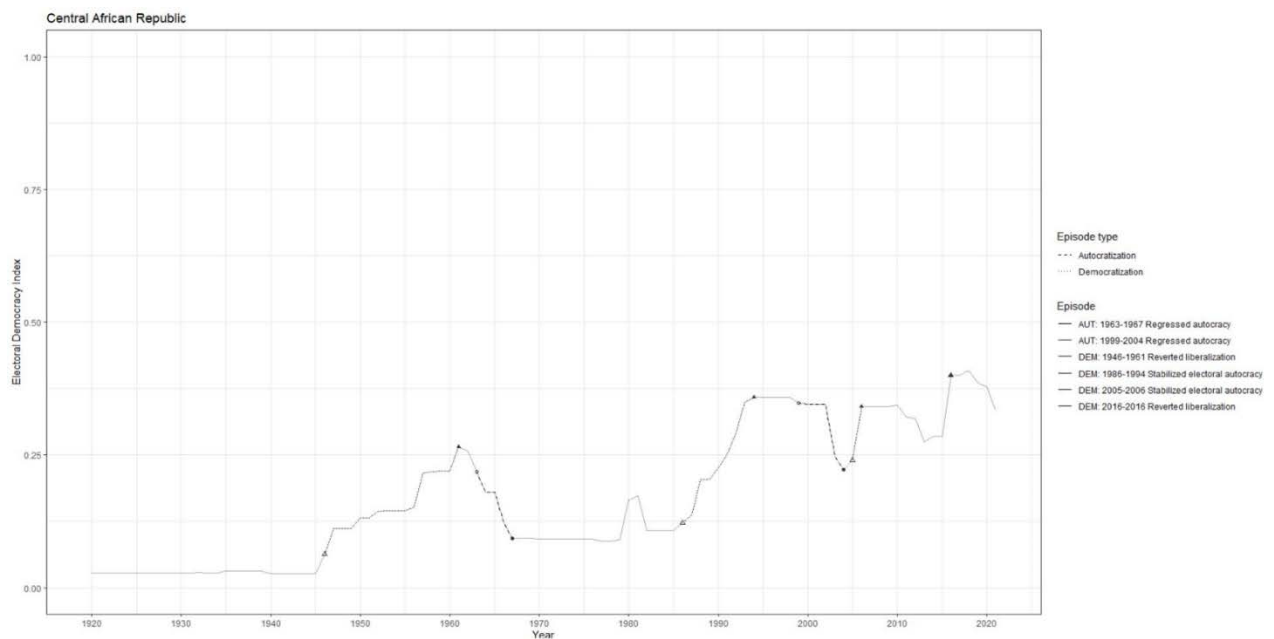
Source: author's construction based on ERT.

Against this brief background, the ERT dataset (see Figure 1) marks the following six episodes as turning points in the CAR's democratization process:

1946 to 1961 (V-Dem outcome: reverted liberalization)

In 1946, the (now) CAR was given its own assembly and representation in the French parliament. Barthelemy Boganda, the founder of the pro-independence Social Evolution Movement of Black Africa (or MESAN), became the first Central African to be elected to the French parliament. In 1957, MESAN won control of the territorial assembly and Boganda was appointed as the president of the Grand Council of French Equatorial Africa (BBC Country Timeline 2018). In 1958, the CAR achieved self-government within French Equatorial Africa with Boganda as the Prime Minister. The subsequent year, however, Boganda died under mysterious circumstances. When the CAR achieved full independence in 1960, his nephew, David Dacko, came to power (BBC Country Timeline 2018).

1963 to 1967 (V-Dem outcome: regressed autocracy)

Dacko declared MESAN as the only legal national political party in 1962. He ran the elections in 1964 unopposed and was formally elected. In an attempt to repress any resistance, Dacko also forbade the formation of trade unions, associations, and other political parties (Bagayoko 2018). In the face of bankruptcy and risk of nationwide strikes in 1965, Dacko was ousted by the army commander, Jean-Bedel Bokassa. Bokassa justified his coup using the name of Boganda (Bagayoko 2018).

1986 to 1994 (V-Dem outcome: stabilized electoral autocracy)

After Dacko led a countercoup against Bokassa in 1979, he was then deposed in another coup led by the army commander, Andre Kolingba, in 1981. In 1986, Bokassa returned to the CAR from exile and was sentenced to life imprisonment (BBC Country Timeline 2018). In 1991, the ban on political parties was lifted, and 1992 saw the first multiparty presidential and parliamentary elections held. The results were annulled by the Supreme Court on the ground of widespread irregularities. Ange-Félix Patassé won the elections and ended the 12-year military rule by Kolingba (BBC Country Timeline 2018).

1999 to 2004 (V-Dem outcome: regressed autocracy)

In 1999, Patassé was re-elected. Over the next few years, however, his administration was accused of corruption and mismanagement. Through a coup in 2003, Bozizé officially took power of the CAR from Patassé, He was supported militarily by his rebel troops, many of which were Chadian, and politically by the Chadian and French governments (Herbert et al. 2013). Bozizé used the National Congress of 2003 to legitimize his rule, both internally and externally.

2005 to 2006 (V-Dem outcome: stabilized electoral autocracy

Bozizé formed a new cabinet, a National Transitional Council as a legislative body, and announced that he would hold elections and formulate a new constitution by 2005. While Patassé was excluded from contesting, Bozizé was declared the winner of elections after a run-off vote (Herbert et al. 2013).

While ERT points to 2016 as the next main 'episode', other crucial events took place in the interim. This included signing of the Libreville Comprehensive Peace Agreement in 2008 between the government and two rebel groups (APRD and UFDR). The commitments included ceasefire, a general amnesty, the release of prisoners, the integration of rebels into the national army, a new Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration (DDR) programme, among others. As fighting erupted two months later, this agreement broke down. In 2013, another Libreville Peace Agreement was signed, although the Séléka coalition felt that their demands were not met. Eventually, in 2013, the Séléka took over Bangui in a coup, ousted Bozizé, and announced a new transition government with Djotodia as President (Herbert et al. 2013).

2016 to 2016 (V-Dem outcome: reverted liberalization)

In the immediate aftermath of the Séléka takeover, the group quickly disintegrated, and sectarian violence became widespread with the emergence of the 'anti-balaka'. Djotodia resigned shortly afterwards in 2014, with an interim leader taking over. United Nations' Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in the Central African Republic (MINUSCA) was deployed, and a new constitution was approved in 2015. In 2016, Faustin-Archange Touadéra won the presidential election in the run-offs (BBC Country Timeline 2018).

2   Findings from democracy literature

2.1 Origins of democracy/democratization

Post-independence, the Central African Republic only underwent limited experiences of statebuilding. The main 'state' apparatus was built in Bangui, with the rest of the country being neglected to a large extent. A similar set-up prevailed during both pre-colonial and colonial times, where the administrations experienced severe challenges in controlling the territory. Post-independence, this loose territorial control was perpetuated. This lack of central authority was combined with an absence of monopoly on the use of force by the state authorities (Bagayoko 2018), which eventually paved way for rebel groups and gangs.

Additionally, the outward flow of the country's resources and placing power outside of the formal state thwarted development and democratization within the CAR. During the French colonial period, rather than develop local administrations within the CAR, territory was leased to private companies to exploit the country's rich resources (Lombard 2014). This system has continued since independence, with external actors buying concessions from the state in exchange for provision of services/favours to the ruling class (Knoope and Buchanan-Clarke 2017).

Institutionally, the country has judicial systems resembling the French model. Most laws have their roots in French civil law, with other sources of law (such as local traditions and customs) complementing

them. Between its independence in 1960 and 1992/93, when the first multiparty elections were held, the CAR adopted five different constitutions and experienced five different regimes (which included a period of constitutional monarchy), with three coups d'état (Vohito-Anyanwu 2020).

The country's first constitution was adopted in 1959 before independence. The Constitution set up a parliamentary system and provided for the rights and duties of political parties. However, in 1962, an amendment was passed which prohibited multi-partyism and established a one-party system in the CAR with MESAN as the sole ruling party. While there were brief stints with a multi-party system, coup leaders were quick to reverse the changes. The 1991 Party Law was a turning point in the CAR, as it paved the way for multi-party presidential elections (Vohito-Anyanwu 2020).

The army has also exerted considerable influence in the CAR's democratization process. As Saba (2005) notes, the fact that the composition of the army does not reflect the country's geographic and ethnic diversity provides room for political manipulation. Presidents in power can tailor their own army and presidential guard (including the police and gendarmerie) to suit themselves. This was especially evident during the tenure of the Bokassa and the Kolingba regimes. This type of overly militarized system has been detrimental to the CAR's democratic progress.

An added constraint to democratization comes from the lack of a unifying historical narrative and widespread trauma (Knoope and Buchanan-Clarke 2017). The nation is divided into over 80 ethnic groups, with some groups sharing more in common with communities in neighbouring countries rather than within the CAR. Moreover, historic divisions between local Central African agriculturalists and pastoralists, shifting political loyalties, and the opaque role of external actors have all prevented a cohesive national identity from emerging. In the recent years, the politicization of religion by the Séléka and anti-balaka groups has further obfuscated the identity politics (Knoope and Buchanan-Clarke 2017).

2.2 Stages of transition

In the last two decades, select events marked a sharp shift in the CAR's political landscape. The coup of 2003 is one such event. Bozizé (supported militarily by his largely Chadian-origin rebel troops and involving other countries such as France, Chad, the Democratic Republic of the Congo [DRC]) took power from Patassé, who was supported by the Libyan government and the Congolese rebels. Given that Chadian rebel forces used North CAR as a base, the military influence of Chad grew as even President Bozizé personal security was ensured through 80 Chadian servicemen (Herbert et al. 2013). As violent conflict escalated between 2004 and 2008, Bozizé's government attempted to broker bilateral peace agreements with the different rebel groups. In 2008, the Libreville Comprehensive Peace Agreement was signed, with Gabon acting as the mediator. However, the group Democratic Front of the Central African People (FDPC) did not recognize this agreement, and it was further rejected by factions of exiled Union of Democratic Forces for Unity (UFDR) leadership (Mehler 2009). Fighting erupted just two months later, leading to a breakdown of peace.

The worsening internal political crisis, mass violations of human rights, and the lack of economic opportunities nurtured the creation of another coalition of armed forces called the 'Séléka'. Séléka managed to overthrow Bozizé in March 2013, and its leader, Michel Djotodja, took power in the country (Lizak 2016). At this time, the humanitarian crisis became extreme as casualties grew and internally displaced people reached record-high levels. After taking power, instead of becoming a new official military force, the Séléka coalition (that quickly disintegrated) engaged in criminal activities in the territories they controlled. Pillaging, looting, and physical violence became everyday experiences for civilians, prompting the creation of a resistance movement (called anti-balaka) to oppose Séléka rule. Anti-balaka quickly became another element of the country's criminal structure (Lizak 2016). Unable to control the spiralling violence, Djotodia resigned in 2014 and MINUSCA was deployed shortly after. France also intervened militarily during this phase. Following the interim rule, elections (albeit with

several irregularities) were held in 2015/16 where Touadéra was elected to power (Mangan and Murray 2017).

2.3 Key actors

Internal actors

These include rebel movements and groups (Séléka, anti-balaka, UFDR, APRD, CPJP, CPJP, UFR, A2R), political groups and parties, national security forces (FACA, The President Guard), civil society, religious leaders, and the private sector.

Regional actors

- Chad—Sudan, Chad, and the CAR are said to be in a 'tormented triangle' owing to the regionalization of conflict in the Central African region. Chad is not only involved with local rebel groups and criminal gangs throughout northern CAR, but even formed the inner circle of Bozizé's personal security. The Presidential Guard consisted of several Chadian soldiers, although many left after the 2008 attacks in Chad. Chadian troops have also been involved in key peacekeeping missions including UN missions (Giroux et al. 2009).

While Chad is a key regional player, others such as Sudan, Cameroon, the DRC, Angola, South Africa, Uganda, and Libya also directly and indirectly influence the political dynamics within the CAR.

Multilateral organizations

- United Nations (UN)—The UN has had a long-standing presence in the CAR. During the recent escalations of 2013, the UN converted the previously African Union (AU)-led MISCA mission to MINUSCA. While there were three forces present on the ground at the time (the AU, France, and the EU), 'none "had the numerical spread across the country or depth to do the military, police, and civilian work" [words from interview with a senior UN official, New York, 8 January 2016], and none of them could integrate everything together – something which some in the UN Secretariat thought the UN was better placed to do' (Carayannis and Fowlis 2017: 227). However, the peacekeeping mission struggled to remain credible in the light of reports of abuse of power and general ineffectiveness (Carayannis and Fowlis 2017).

- European Union (EU)—The EU has played an active role in the CAR. In the wake of escalating violence on the Chad–Sudan border throughout 2007, the European Union Force (EUFOR) in Chad and north-eastern CAR was created (Carayannis and Fowlis 2017). Subsequently, the EU also created the EU Military Advisory Mission in Central African Republic (EUMAM RCA) mission in 2015. As Nováky (2016) notes, for both these missions, there was a mismatch between EU Member States' desire to act and their willingness to invest resources in those actions.

Other crucial actors include the Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS), which led a peace consolidation mission called MICOPAX, and the African Union, which led the African-led International Support Mission to the Central African Republic (MISCA).

International actors

- France—The former colonial power has been active in the CAR's political, economic, and military affairs since the country's independence. In fact, Bozizé was supported by France when he staged his successful coup in 2003, and until 2013 French support for Bozizé was a major factor in his maintenance of power (Herbert et al. (2013). France also remains the leading foreign investor in the CAR and its businesses are active in several strategic sectors, despite the insecurity. It is also one of the largest donors of foreign assistance for the country. France has also intervened militarily in the CAR on several occasions (including Operation Sangris in

2013), although it is argued that such interventions offer France an opportunity to extent greater influence over its former colony (Raphala 2017).

2.4 Gaps in empirics and literature

- Given the number of coups and the persistent state of political unrest in the CAR, it is difficult to ascertain the exact moments of 'democratic transition'.

- External actors seem to play a crucial role in the CAR's political trajectory. However, studies that systematically study external involvement through unique theoretical lenses/frameworks are limited.

3   Findings from aid and democracy literature

In the context of the CAR, there is scant literature on aid and democracy explicitly. Existing works are typically intertwined with peacebuilding and peacekeeping. Given the constant state of violence and insecurity, ensuring peace has been viewed as a pre-requisite for achieving any form of longer-term developmental goals and institution building. In this direction, several actors, including the UN, African Union, France, Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS), and the EU, have been active in leading on-ground missions and operations (Welz 2016).

Perhaps the most notable (and recent) of these is the Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in the Central African Republic (or MINUSCA), which was introduced by the UN Security Council in 2014 in light of the growing tensions between the anti-balaka and Séléka. MINUSCA, however, faced severe implementation challenges of its own, and largely proved ineffective for the following reasons:

- Conflict parties did not respect the older peace agreements, and the further disintegration of armed groups into multiple factions pursuing conflicting interests across different parts of the country made it challenging for MINUSCA to implement its mandate (Mwanyika 2021).

- Owing to poor state capability within the CAR, areas previously secured by MINUSCA could not continue to be secured by the police and gendarmerie. Additionally, there was a lack of coordination of negotiation processes between various armed groups, African Union efforts, and those undertaken under the auspices of MINUSCA. Thus, each entity was largely operating in a vacuum with imperfect information (Mwanyika 2021).

- The current UN intervention in the CAR was preceded by an AU-led mission (MISCA). These missions also had to work alongside the French mission (Sangaris), which was pursuing its own interests. These conflicting mandates created competitive relations with sub-regional organizations (Mwanyika 2021).

- Lack of sustained funding for MINUSCA and reports of sexual exploitation committed by peacekeepers heavily undermined the credibility of the peacekeeping mission (Alunaza SD and Sherin 2018).

While the peacebuilding literature largely looks at the upstream dynamics of the peacekeeping missions and the prerequisite conditions required to build durable peace, other studies have looked at the downstream effects of the fragility on the country's economy. Yapatake Kossele and Shan (2018: 462) show that 'political stability and absence of violence/terrorism, voice and accountability proxies of political governance crisis has had a different impact on the proxies of economic security such as: on net national income per capita, agricultural raw materials exports, agriculture value added, and external balance on goods and services, food exports, food imports, [etc.]'. Another study by Ghura and Mercereau (2004: 19) shows that 'a low domestic revenue-GDP ratio and an adverse terms of trade shock significantly raise the probability of a coup. Weak revenue performance undermines the

government's ability to pay civil servants' wages and to provide basic social services, which may raise frustration among the population and trigger political instability'.

3.1 Gaps in empirics and literature

- The main gap is the lack of systematic literature on how foreign aid (directly and indirectly) influences democracy outcomes in the CAR and how underlying mechanisms guide it.

- Furthermore, little is known about the role of aid by 'western' actors relative to 'non-western/emerging' donors and how these two types of aid vary in terms of conditionality, modalities, and engagement with the state apparatus within the CAR.

- Given the big role of rebel groups and non-state actors within the CAR, how exactly aid can get weaponized or captured by elites warrants further research.

# 4   Aid flows and sources

4.1 Available data

Detailed data on development assistance to the CAR are best captured by the OECD-CRS (Creditor Reporting System) dataset (OECD 2023). The CRS includes data on bilateral and multilateral aid (Official Development Assistance [ODA]), aid from private sources, and some other resource flows to developing countries. The data are mainly reported by the 32 members of the OECD Development Assistance Committee (DAC), some international organizations such as multilateral development banks and funds, and select non-DAC members (Atteridge et al. 2019).

4.2 Aid flows

In terms of total ODA flows, the CAR has received close to US$8 billion between 1990 and 2021. The first big spike is observed in 2009, followed by increased levels of ODA starting 2014 onwards. Another major peak is observed in 2020.

Figure 2: ODA funding volume to the CAR
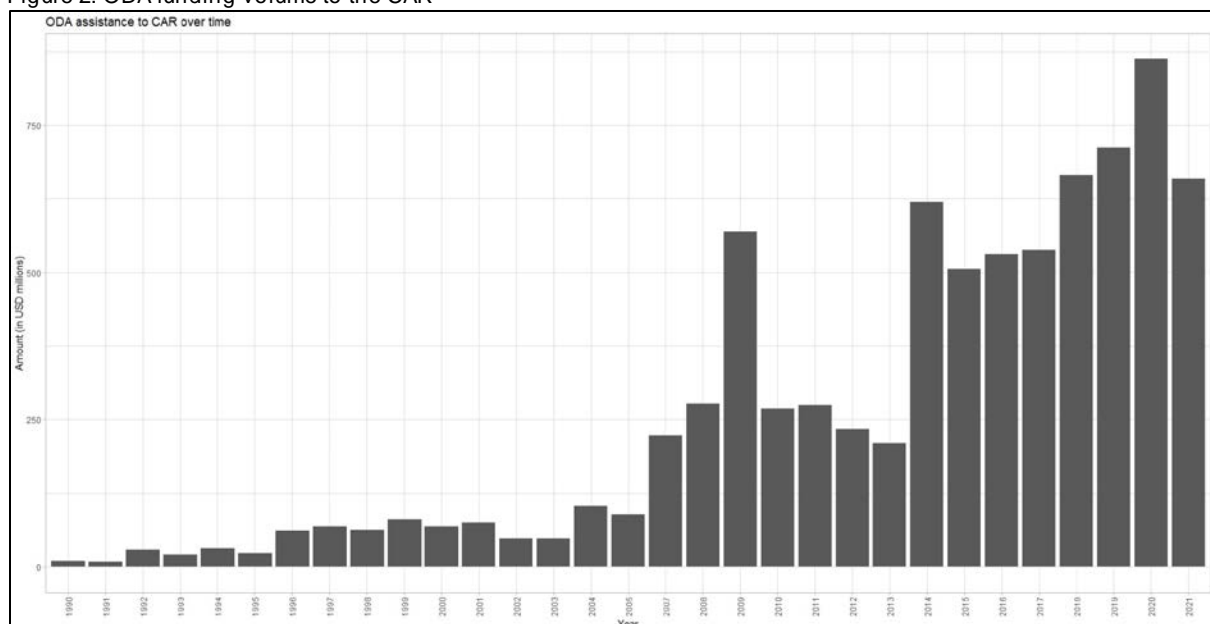
Source: author's construction based on OECD-CRS.

In terms of volume of funding by different donors (see Figure 3), France emerges as one of the most consistent bilateral donors. This is anticipated, given France's status as the former colonial power. Other prominent bilateral donors include the US, Germany, and Japan. For multilateral donors, EU institutions have been consistently active since 1990. The International Development Association(IDA)/World Bank has also provided spurts of ODA, especially starting 2010.

Figure 3: Top ODA donors to the CAR over time
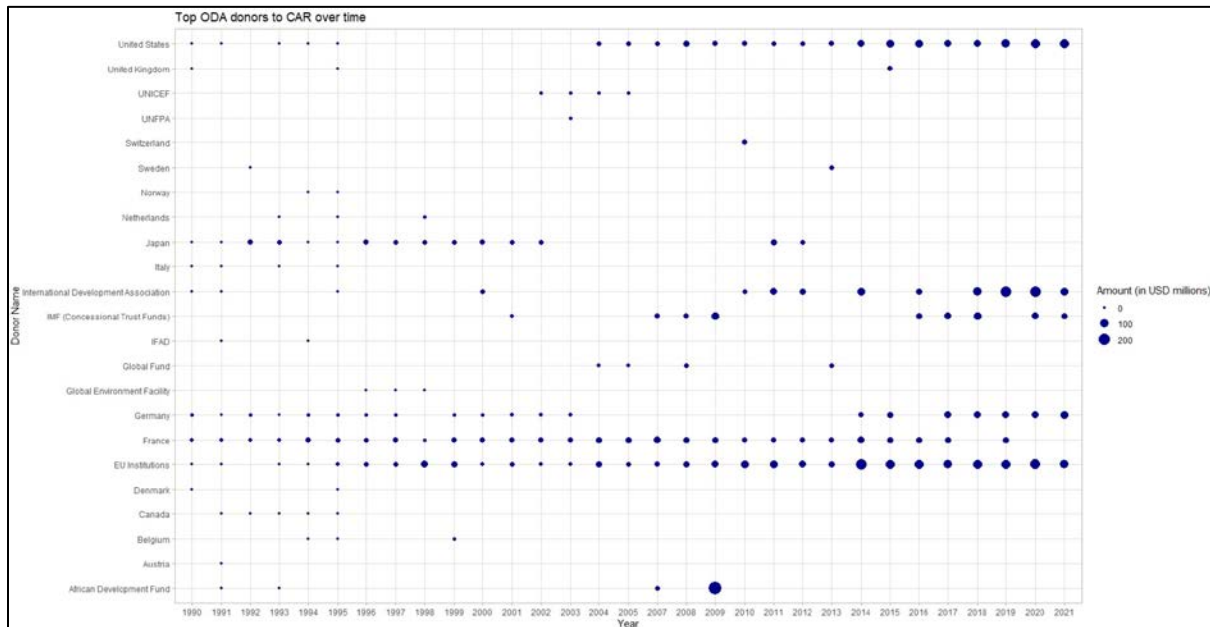
Source: author's construction based on OECD-CRS.

To gauge sectoral split, the visual below maps out the top-10 sectors funded each year in the CAR. From Figure 4, general budget support and debt relief emerge prominent. This could be indicative of the varied modalities preferred by donors to provide ODA to the CAR. In the recent years, more ODA seems to be directed towards health (medical relief/services) and emergency food assistance. This could be reflective of the worsening humanitarian crisis in the country. While infrastructure was initially prioritized, the funding has fallen since.

Figure 4: Top sectors of ODA funding in the CAR over time
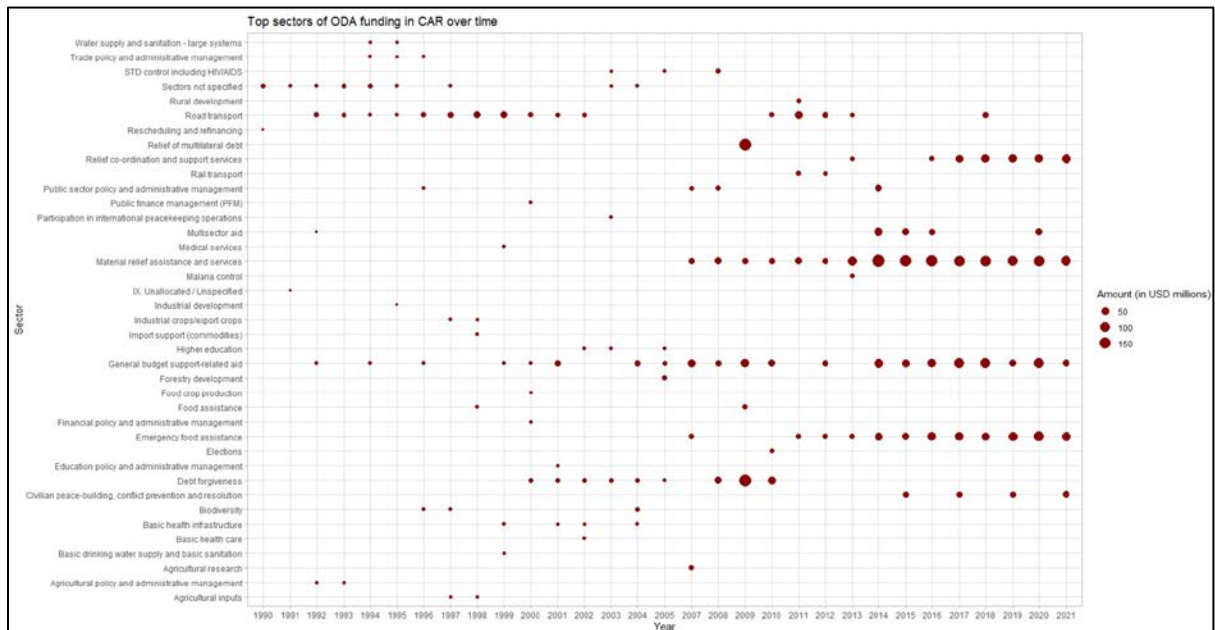
Source: author's construction based on OECD-CRS.

Specifically zooming into democracy aid (see Figure 5) reveals notable patterns. EU emerges as one of the most active donors overall, with substantial aid volume directed towards 'civil society' and 'elections'. It is also the one of the few donors funding 'political parties' and 'media' sub-sectors. The UNDP also provides limited funding towards 'elections'. The 'civil society' space has a larger range of donors including UNDP, UN Peacebuilding Fund, UNICEF, and Switzerland, among others.

Figure 5: Democracy funding in the CAR over time
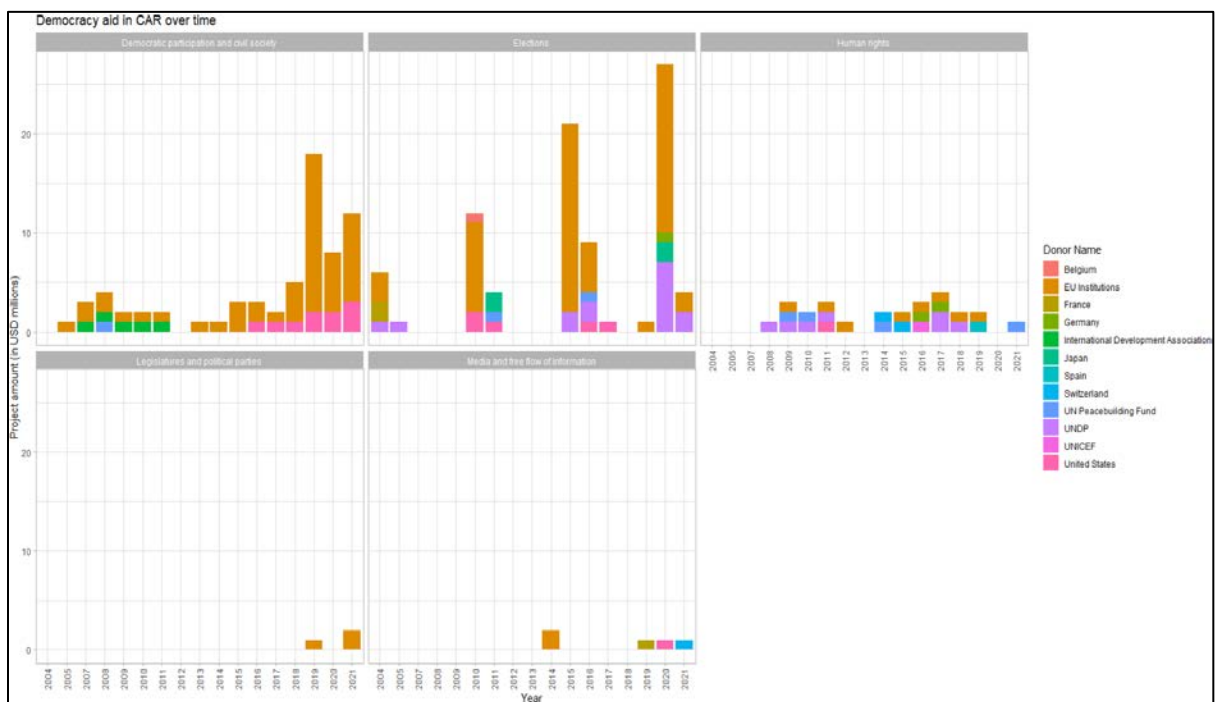
Source: author's construction based on OECD-CRS.

4.3 Perception of aid

Within the CAR, intergovernmental actors including the UN, World Bank, and EU hold considerable influence. They typically decide which sectors/themes gain priority over others. This is typically done through their own internal assessments of the evolving situation in the country. As Piquard (2022) argues, these aid actors regularly conduct strategic exercises and assessments oriented towards the return of displaced populations, recovery, and peacebuilding, even though field realities in the CAR are showing relapses of violence, insecurity, and ongoing displacement. Using these outdated assessments as a starting point, international aid actors fall into the trap of 'path dependent' decision making (Darcy et al. 2013), which directly contributes to reducing programme effectiveness. Furthermore, knowledge is often only transferred to local actors in a top-down approach that serves international interests and needs (Seybolt 2009). This leads to a mixed perception by local NGOs in the CAR who are forced to operate within the international, top-down ecosystem where their knowledge of local needs and the context are largely underutilized (Piquard 2022).

4.4 Gaps in empirics and literature

- Given the extent of insecurity and violent conflict, the veracity of the data submitted by donors to the OECD-CRS is difficult to ascertain. Additionally, whether the 'committed' projects are being implemented or not cannot be determined from the data. Thus, it may be misleading to claim that a specific sector within the CAR received X millions, when the on-ground realities may convey a totally different story.

- Data from emerging donors are crucially missing from the current scholarship.

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