



Towards the Next Frontier in Sustainable Debt Advocacy in Africa: From a Technocratic Approach to Fermenting the Political Will

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Abstract

This article sets out to highlight the limitations of the technocratic approach to public debt advocacy in Africa. It comes at a time when political will is at its weakest and has created policy fatigue in lieu of providing lasting solutions to African countries carrying unsustainable debt burdens. The article used qualitative style analysis, with quantitative and qualitative secondary data, and builds on experience from engaging in civil society debt advocacy. The main analysis suggests that fermenting the political will should be the next frontier in policy advocacy to resolve Africa's current debt crisis.

Keywords Debt traps · Debt restructuring · International financial architecture · Policy reforms · Policy fatigue · Technocratic tyranny

This article sets out to draw critical attention to the need to refocus debt advocacy on fermenting the political will in the face of Africa's recurrent debt crisis and at a moment when Africa's debt burdens have attained unprecedentedly high historical proportions. It premises that the lack of political will has ushered in a period of policy fatigue in debt advocacy and shifted the next frontier of policy action for adequate solutions to the current debt crisis plaguing development in Africa and the Global South to fermenting the political will. The World Bank Group (2016) recognizes this gap by asserting that 'adverse political incentives and perverse behavioral norms,' often deliberately ignore sound technical advice for costlier policy options despite the availability of alternative policies that are likely to yield higher quality outcomes. The article further highlights that the dominant role of a technocratic approach needs to be complemented by the political will for more enhanced debt governance and global debt architecture reforms. The lack of this will derives from structural and political inertia, guided by complex systemic interests, and shielded by a rules-based system that focuses largely on preserving an essentially 'extractivist' global financial architecture and a system of global economic relations that perpetrates the colonial legacies that underlie underdevelopment in African countries.

The central question is: what features of the technocratic approach and of fermenting the political will are essential for achieving more enhanced debt governance and structural reforms of the global financial architecture to address the recurrent debt crisis in Africa? What would be the most appropriate focus for debt advocacy at this moment of historically high debt burdens in African countries? The article uses qualitative style analysis, with quantitative and qualitative secondary data, and builds on experience from engaging in civil society debt advocacy. It maps the dichotomies in both the policy making and policy advocacy spaces and suggests a binary approach to civil society debt advocacy by mapping out the global debt architectures - the key stakeholders, their intervention logic, and where their power and responsibilities lie to provide credible solutions. It evaluates their actions and the gaps in interventions thus far and builds on the premise that current advocacy efforts must be complemented by significant political will to resolve the debt crisis.

Africa's Debt Trap: A Political Economy View

Africa's recurrent debt burdens have grown significantly over the decades. According to computations from the World Economic Outlook and UNCTAD, Africa's general

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gross government debt hovered at over 1.8 trillion in 2023.¹ About \$US 1.12 trillion of this is external debt according to AfDB (2024a).² This is a significant growth in the aggregate external debt of sub-Saharan countries excluding arrears, which World Bank Sources³ put at \$US6 billion in the 1970, and estimated to have attained US\$126 billion at the end of 1987. These trends make Africa the only region in the world where debt is growing faster than gross domestic product – share of countries with debt to gross domestic product ratio of over 60% rising from 25 to 46% between 2013 and 2023 (UNCTAD 2024). This is occurring amid record interest rates hikes on bond yields averaging about 10% and number of countries facing interest rates of more than 10% increasing from just 8 in 2012 to 25 in 2023 (UNCTAD 2024). This will see African countries pay out \$US 163 billion interest to service debts in 2024 - a steep rise from \$US61 billion worth of interest rate in 2010, barely US\$1 billion in 1970 to more than US\$12 billion in 1985 before falling to US\$9 billion in 1987 (Greene 1989; AfDB 2024a). These payments amount to a huge outflow of financial resources against the backdrop of weak domestic resource mobilization and widening fiscal deficits which has pushed African countries towards a development strategy that relies heavily on borrowing. The causes of this burden are multidimensional and heterogenous.

Budget Constraints and Internal Debt Governance Issues

One reason African countries have borrowed heavily derives from low-value commodity traps which results in a lean tax base and revenue shortfalls that causes countries to gravitate towards borrowing to finance budgetary gaps. This creates a debt cycle that is reinforced by persistent balance of payment problems due to import of high-value goods. The results have been elevated fiscal and budgetary deficits averaging about 5 to 6% (AfDB 2024b); and a cascading series of shocks which contribute to inadequate revenues (Comelli et al. 2023; Abanikanda et al. 2023). The sum effect is weak domestic resource mobilization (DRM) and low primary surpluses to plug existing fiscal and budgetary gaps. It is also very expensive for African countries to borrow compared to other regions in the world with bond yields averaging over 9.8% and only 0.8 and 2.5 for rich countries like Germany and USA respectively (UNCTAD

2024). This doubles down on real exchange rate depreciation of African currencies, trade deficit, trade deterioration, import dependence, low growth and low domestic saving due to poverty. They have been exacerbated by high incidence of Illicit financial flows (IFFs) out of Africa which stand at close to 90 billion USD (UNCTAD 2022). This can be seen from the slow growth in budget revenue – from 255 billion USD to about 523 billion USD between 2014 and 2024. This is by far outpaced by rising General Gross Government Debt which reached about 1.8 trillion USD in 2023, up from 375 billion USD in 2014.⁴ The sum effect of this is a development strategy that does not only heavily rely on borrowing but has not also adequately succeeded in capital projects that support revenue mobilization and the structural transformation of countries to breakout of recurrent unsustainable debt traps. The situation has been compounded by weak debt governance in Africa (AFRODAD 2022), promoted by corruption, inadequate governance structures and political fragmentation that impedes coordination among African countries to deal with unsustainable debt burdens. This amounts to the failure to effectively utilize borrowed resources to improve African economies and with some countries becoming worse-off, and ‘experiencing challenges in form of debt overhang and liquidity constraints’ (Manasseh et al. 2022).

International Financial Architecture

International financial architecture was built on rules rooted in colonial legacies that promote extractive tendencies that aggravate debt burdens. It prioritizes creditor interest over the structural transformation and development interest of African countries. This aggravates Africa’s debt vulnerabilities. One of Africa’s major vulnerabilities within the current architecture is posed by Illicit Financial Flows (IFF). It drains countries of financial and material resources and weakens domestic resource mobilization. The incidence of IFFs is estimated to have risen from over \$50 billion USD annually according to the HLP Report (2015) to close to 90 billion USD as reported by (UNCTAD 2022) These outflows are rough estimates and surpass the levels of official development assistance received by Africa – about \$US 53.5 billion in 2022 (Harcourt and Rivera 2024). The impossible architecture imposes multiple risks and constraints on African countries in the terms of accessing finance, the cost of restructuring debts and the currencies in which Africa’s debt is denominated. For instance, as indicated earlier, the average interest on bonds for African countries are about ten times higher compared to what developed countries like

¹ <https://www.imf.org/en/Publications/WEO/weo-database/2023/October/download-entire-database>; <https://unctad.org/publication/world-of-debt/regional-stories#section1>

² <https://www.afdb.org/en/news-and-events/annual-meetings-2024-ol-d-debt-resolution-african-countries-cornerstone-reforming-global-financial-architecture-70791>.

³ <https://doi.org/10.5089/9781557750419.071>

⁴ <https://www.imf.org/en/Publications/WEO/weo-database/2023/October/download-entire-database>; <https://unctad.org/publication/world-of-debt/regional-stories#section1>

the USA and Germany get.⁵ This partly is to hedge against the adverse credit ratings for African economies. The global financial system does not promote financing in national currencies of African countries, increasing their vulnerabilities to existing risks of foreign currency denominated debts in the face of depreciating African countries due to unfavourable terms of trade, strengthening of the US dollar and the Euro and their fluctuating exchange rate. This is happening against recurrent economic recessions and commodity price volatility and global interest rate hikes which further tighten Africa's debt vulnerabilities. The international creditor community in this architecture, as well as the debt instruments employed, have changed significantly in recent years. China and the private lenders have assumed significant importance in a backdrop of dwindling concessional finance from international financial institutions. For instance, Chinese and private debt respectively constituted 20 and 42% of external debt in sub-Saharan Africa in 2022 (World Bank Group 2023), with Chinese debts expected to grow based on the recent promise by China to increase lending to Africa by about 51 billion USD over the next five years (Chen and Cash 2024). This means borrowing has become more costly for African countries as concessional finance stood at only 38% in 2022 (Chen and Cash 2024). There has been multiplicity of instruments for issuing debt such as bonds and public-private partnerships that come with potential debt liabilities (Amedanou 2023; AFRODAD 2023a) – making it possible for countries to access loans almost effortlessly. Debt relief for African countries often has been infrequent and inadequate – ‘too little too late’ (Ryder and Fu 2021; Jensen 2022). While some restructuring has taken place the process has not been effective in addressing the underlying structural causes of recurrent debt traps in Africa as seen from the Heavily Indebted Poor Countries Initiative (HIPC) and Multilateral Debt Relief Initiative (MDRI) and recently the Debt Service Suspension Initiative (DSSI) and the G20 Common Framework. When debt restructuring happens, it comes with conditionalities which replicate the experiences of the failed Structural Adjustments Programs (SAPs) and their associated austerity programmes which hurt African citizens the more. Debt restructuring has become even more challenging given the multiplicity of creditors and challenges of effective coordination and achieving favourable and comparable terms of debt treatment (Ahmed and Brown 2022; Cassimon et al. 2023).

The Cost of Africa's Excessive Debt Burdens

Africa's mounting debt burdens have a detrimental impact. It constitutes a significant outflow of resources

⁵ <https://unctad.org/publication/world-of-debt/regional-stories#section1>

that compromises the effective implementation of Africa's development plans. This has become more aggravated with the growth in private debt and Chinese lending which is more expensive in terms of interest rates. Private debt has grown significantly by more than 14% points – from 30% in 2010 to about 44% in 2023 (UNCTAD 2024).⁶ This has seen bilateral and multilateral debts – often concessional – respectively drop from 33 and 37% respectively to 23 and 34% over the same period.

This limits Africa's access to affordable development finance and makes it vulnerable to the volatilities of private capital flows. The incidence of Africa's increasing debt is on its citizens who pay the price in terms of forgone social services from the outflow of resources and who bear the brunt of the resulting fiscal consolidation and austerity programmes that come with unsustainable debt burdens. This has resulted to widespread dissatisfaction and citizens unrest in countries like Kenya, Uganda and Nigeria – which typically represents the frustrations with the cost of carrying debt. Every dollar for debt service is a dollar diverted from securing the common welfare of African citizens and infrastructure development that should promote Africa's structural transformation. This accounts for worsening inequalities (Fig. 1), widespread poverty, minimal gains in GDP rates per capita, subsistence agriculture that cannot lift families out of poverty, high vulnerability to pandemics and climate change, heightened food and energy prices which all sum up to Africa's overall weak resilience.

The Technocratic Approach to Addressing Africa's Debt Traps

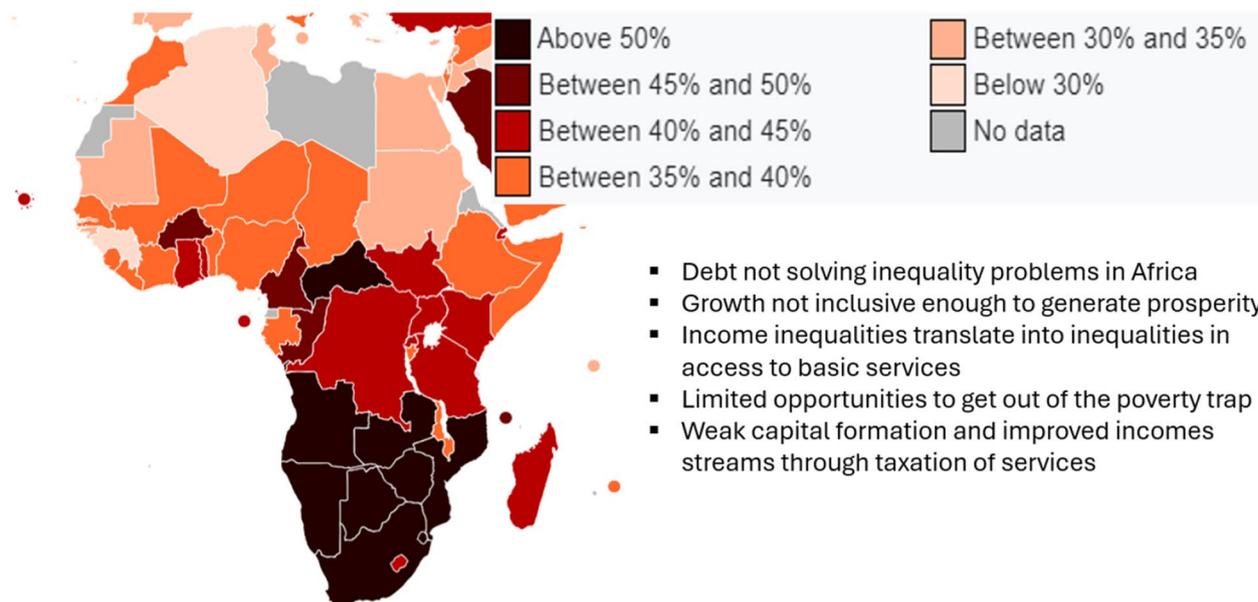
Africa's debt burdens have been perceived broadly as a technical problem which expert analysis and recommendations can resolve in isolation of the political context – at the national, regional and global levels – that impinge on public policies. Many civil society debt advocacy initiatives run on this bandwagon – from a technocratic and purely prescriptive viewpoint.

The Technocratic Approach

The technocratic approach has been interpreted variously. This includes the direct rule of experts which is also akin to a system of government made up of experts (McDonnell and Valbruzzi 2014; Esmark 2020). It covers the possession of technical knowledge and the ability to steer policy designs that may supplant political discussions (Easterly 2013; Sadowski 2020). The notion of a technocratic approach in this

⁶ <https://unctad.org/publication/world-of-debt/regional-stories#section1>

Africa's inequalities



"Gini index (World Bank estimate)". data.worldbank.org. Retrieved 2022-04-23.

Fig. 1 Africa's Gini index (World Bank Group 2023)

article draws from this broader understanding. It refers to policy analysis, recommendations, advocacy and decision-making driven largely by technical expertise and knowledge without requisite cognizance of the political expediencies that militate against policy change and reforms. The explicit or implied assumption is that this will bring about required policy changes that can supplant the political context. This understanding does not discard the need for a technical approach. It rather emphasizes that technocracy ought to be more deliberate than just being prescriptive without taking into account the need to ferment the political will to facilitate the uptake of policy recommendations on reforming debt governance and the global debt architecture. It observes the dominance of technocratic approach in how stakeholders have approached debt advocacy and proposes the need to marry this with creating the political will to address the structural and political inertia that overlooks the need for debt governance reforms at the national, regional and global levels.

International Financial Institutions and Multilateral and Bilateral Creditors

International financial institutions, multilateral and bilateral creditors as well as groups like G20 and other formal and informal arrangements by OECD and Paris Club member countries have been at the forefront of technical solutions to Africa's unsustainable debt burdens for several decades

(AFRODAD 2023b). The World Bank Group blends technical advice, financing options and political risk insurance through the IBRD, IFC and MIGA (World Bank Group 2023). This co-exists with specialized options of accessing finance from IMF at market-based and concessional rates under the General Resources Account and the Poverty Reduction and Growth Trust respectively. The IMF recently established the Resilience and Sustainability Trust which seeks to enhance the ability of vulnerable low and middle-income countries to withstand external disruptions.⁷ This follows decades of technical support to countries through the Structural Adjustment Programs recast under the HIPC and MDRI and criticized for conditionalities which promote austerity and market-based approach to development.

The approach by IFIs and bilateral creditors runs on a 'self-preserving technocratic tyranny' that is not adequately sensitive to reforms required to get African countries out of their recurrent debt traps. This is broadly guided by preserving the status quo – development within established rules favourable to the Global North and which propagates the legacies of colonialism – notably, the political fragmentation among African countries – instead of an approach that prioritizes policy demands and needs which can address the underlying structural causes of recurrent debt burdens and under development in the Global South. This approach has been superimposed in a context with an additional layer

⁷ <https://www.imf.org/en/About/Factsheets/IMF-Lending>

of political disinclination to delivering policy reforms that enforce transparent and accountable public debt management in many countries in Africa. Initiatives such as HIPC, MDRI, the DSSI, issuance of the 650 billion Special Drawing Rights, the G20 Common Framework have met very limited effectiveness and successes for the same reason – insensitivity to the right doses of political will to reform the global financial architecture and make it fit for the purpose of addressing the underlying structural causes of debt distress that the technocratic approach has struggled to fix.

In the above system, it is the African citizens who shoulder the damages for no strong voice and representation in a rules-based system that disregards their interests and needs. This creates a system with significant power asymmetries that weaken the ability of African countries to negotiate their way out of current debt burdens. The result is burdensome debt that hampers the capacity of African countries to develop.

African Governments

There are elements of debt governance that are sovereign to African governments. Aligning the legal frameworks of debt management with the principles of constitutionalism, strengthening public debt management institutions and overall fiscal policies, borrowing responsibly and enforcing measures of transparency and accountability in budget execution have been prescribed (AFRODAD 2017, 2021). This ensures effective expenditure of borrowed resources to improve the general welfare of citizens, support future debt service, and enhance trust in public finance management. Governments are being urged to strengthen parliamentary oversight and to engage in extensive public disclosure of debt, borrowing terms, and the utilization of borrowed resources (NDI 2022; AFRODAD 2023a). Aligning borrowing plans and strategies with national development plans and blueprints like Africa's Agenda 2063 and the Sustainable Development goals and curbing the high incidence of Illicit Financial Flows have been recommended (AU 2015; Fourie 2018). This is expected to leverage on Africa's natural resource riches, expand commodity value chains and to promote industrialization and Africa's structural transformation. The attendant effect is to boost Africa's domestic resource mobilization, reduce reliance on a development strategy that relies heavily on borrowing, and which creates recurrent cycles of unsustainable debt burdens for African countries (Atta-Mensah and Ibrahim 2020; AfDB 2024b). To resolve the debt burdens, many African nations through cooperation with international financial partners like the IMF and the World Bank have engaged in debt restructuring programmes like the HIPC, MDRI DSSI and currently, the G20 Common Framework, against a backdrop

of conditionalities that impose austerity measures. African countries have been advocating for fairer lending policies through the reform of the International financial architecture (UNECA 2023). Enhancing collaboration with development partners – including International Financial Institutions (IFIs), African Union institutions, and Civil Society Organizations (CSOs), is essential for addressing debt issues, promoting good governance, restructuring debt and curbing the complicated problem of Illicit Financial Flows that drain resources out of Africa.

Sovereign debt governance in Africa is, however, failing due to significant lack of political will to prioritize global financial architecture reforms and the reform of the role of international financial and non-financial institutions that shape global policies affecting debt sustainability. This includes policy reforms at national and regional levels that strengthen institutional oversight, improve debt sustainability frameworks, and establish regional coordination mechanisms to ensure long-term fiscal stability and accountability. As noted above, the technocratic approach has taken precedence and superimposed itself on another context of a significant lack of political will among international financial and non-financial actors in the global debt architecture and African governments to provide adequate policy reforms for sustainable debt governance. Debt governance frameworks remain inadequate. Resistance to global reforms remains profoundly entrenched as seen in international negotiations to reform the global debt architecture such as Financing for Development Process, promoting neocolonial debt traps for countries. On the other hand, corruption and state capture are rife. There is general political clientelism and malgovernance (Mishi et al. 2022). Inefficient budgeting, fiscal indiscipline, and tax evasion and illicit financial flows further exacerbate the problem (Hope Sr. 2017). Investment in infrastructure, education, and healthcare remain insufficient and amid a global financial architecture that is heavily skewed against African countries and its southern counterparts.

African Institutions

The African Union and its institutions, the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA) and the African Development Bank (AfDB) on their part promote a holistic approach to managing debt. They work to provide overarching institutional frameworks for cooperation and coordination among African states and regional economic communities on debt matters. This includes putting in place African monetary and financial institutions and payment systems to facilitate access to capital and trading systems (AU 2024). These institutions advocate for regional convergence policies, impartial debt management mechanisms,

fair taxation policies and mineral governance systems, and to curb IFFs to boost DRM (HLP Report 2015). They seek to establish fair credit and risk assessments systems and financial institutions to facilitate access to financing and address existing challenges with the current global financial architecture. The African Union approach includes enhancing regional cooperation and convergence, sharing best practices and aligning its continental agenda through collaboration with the regional economic communities in effectively addressing debt. Besides financing and technical assistance, the African Development Bank (AfDB) together with other African institutions actively engaged in debt relief and restructuring programmes under HIPC and MDRI to ensure the long-term debt sustainability (Ekeruche 2022). They have jointly established the High-Level Working Group on Global Financial Architecture for a cohesive approach to Africa's insertion in the global financial system (UNECA 2023). They engage international partners like the G20, IMF and World Bank for policy dialogue, create policy awareness, and enhance knowledge capacity for sustainable debt management (Munyati 2023).

These institutions, however, prioritize a technocratic process in place of political will as seen in weak coordination among states and political fragmentation when it comes to implementing initiatives and agreements like ratifying the Africa Continental Free Trade Areas, the African Mining Vision and adopting a common approach to Africa's debt problems. While African countries took a united stance through the Lome Declaration in 2025 calling for a United Nations Framework Convention on Sovereign debt⁸ (para 44 of the Declaration of the African Union Conference on Debt), its realization requires proper coordination among states and this demands significant doses of political will. Policies regarding trade, investment and resource governance in Africa are inconsistent. Infrastructure development and coordination among African states and Regional Economic Communities to provide a common front to deal with the biased global financial architecture is very weak. This hinders efforts to negotiate favourable borrowing terms as a block, magnifying Africa's vulnerabilities to the downsides of the global financial architecture. The capital structure of institutions like AfDB remains dominated by the non-regional members – replicating the same challenges of the global financial architecture. These are more than just technical problems. They have political undertones often ignored purely technocratic approach to policy advocacy and which hampers the efficacy of the current approach to dealing with Africa's debt and heightens the susceptibility

of African countries to remain trapped in unsustainable debt burdens.

Civil Society Advocacy and Policy Engagements

Civil society advocacy has carved a niche in public debt governance and enhanced civic space on this subject. One remarkable achievement was the jubilee debt campaign which contributed to the HIPC and MDRI and gave birth to national, regional and global debt platforms and alliances that continue to amplify CSO voices on matters of public debt. This guarantees contributions to potential long-term debt sustainability in Africa. CSO advocacy prioritizes debt that delivers social and economic prosperity and promotes responsibility, transparency and accountability in debt governance (Mlambo et al. 2019). This ensures that borrowing levels are regulated by laws and oversight rules that prevent countries from borrowing beyond their capacity (AFRO-DAD 2017). It further ensures that borrowed resources are allocated towards productive endeavours – benefitting the population and facilitating the structural transformation of African economics (Ryder and Fu 2021). CSOs involvement in debt advocacy has resulted in widespread engagement of stakeholders in debt-related issues as well as increased pressure on government for more enhanced inclusive and accountable debt governance. Albeit slow progress, this has created awareness, built stakeholder capacity to demand sustainable governance, fostered economic sustainability, and increased the potential for debt to be utilized as an asset rather than a liability on future generations.

These advances notwithstanding, civil society debt advocacy in Africa, despite significant gains in the call for multilateral process on debt as well as in improving governance, has to some significant extent been heavily influenced by prescriptive assumptions where expert-driven debt advocacy prioritizes technical prescriptions over emphasis on understanding and reshaping the political context that drives policy uptake and change. It has operated largely on the assumption that policy advice will automatically lead to policy adoption and change. This has not been the case. It has resulted to policy fatigue – a process whereby continuous policy input and engagements (the push for debt sustainability, fairer borrowing and lending practices, debt relief, and social justice) yield limited policy uptake. The result is policy redundancies – a situation where delayed policy uptake at the right moment makes policy suggestions inefficient without adequate political will. Civil society advocacy focusses on the theoretical prescripts and less so on the practical realities of the self-preservation of international financial institutions that resist reforms and that seek to perpetuate colonial designs by other means. There is scant attention to the nature of regimes and governments,

⁸ Declaration of the African Union Conference on Debt, Lomé, Togo, 12–14 May 2025 https://au.int/sites/default/files/documents/44785-do-c-EN_Draft_Zero_Declaration_AU_Conference_on_Debt_Final.pdf

where state capture, political clientelism, corruption, self-preservation and mal governance thrive at the expense of the state and the people. This creates adverse political incentives and weak political will that ignores civil society policy advocacy on debt (World Bank Group 2016). This calls for CSO debt advocacy to gravitate much more emphatically towards actions that focus on pushing for adequate political will for systemic governance reforms.

The Limitations of the Technocratic Approach

The main limitation of the technocratic approach is in its strong assumptions that policy analysis and advocacy will deliver policy change and transformation in an automated and prescriptive sense. It is centered on policy niceties than changing the realities about adverse political incentives and perverse behavioural norms which inhibit the update of policy recommendations. It treats political intuitions and behaviour as external to policy advocacy – the assumption that policy prescriptions will change the policy context dominated by political institutions like governments, international financial institutions, and the broader creditor community. This poses the risk of policy fatigue and becomes a hindrance to policy change when policy advocacy is not aligned with fermenting the political will. As Africa's debt problems continue to deepen and as CSOs and other stakeholders relentlessly engage in policy advocacy, this has to be accompanied with a strong intent to generate political will. This requires the understanding that good economics is not enough without mastering the political undertones and social realities of policy advocacy and how to properly leverage each of them to generate the political will required to drive CSO advocacy agenda.

The Need for Political Will: The Next Frontier in Sustainable Debt Advocacy

Political Will and Its Role in Debt Advocacy

Political will is represented as instances where power and authority are adequately responsive to needs that deliver public welfare. It refers to instances where authorities and institutions are predisposed to pursue policies recommendations that promote adequate political engagements and institute positive policy changes. This culminates in the delivery of general public goods which authorities are unquietly positioned to deliver. Weak political will or the lack of it reflects the contrary. It covers instances where instituted systems are irresponsive to policy change and fail to adequately

deliver public good. This covers political incentives which ignore or impede the implementation of sound policy advise that results in costly policy options despite the availability of alternative policies that are likely to yield improved policy outcomes and to deliver public good (World Bank Group 2016). Weak political will has its roots in instituted systems to extract rents and to deliberately weaken the possibilities for policy change. Political will here is not limited to national governments. It cuts across all systems that are expected to deliver opportunities for public welfare and structural transformation of economies at the national, regional and global levels. Broader political will accommodate necessary reforms, not turning them over to technocrats based on political expediency and preservation of existing arrangements that preserve power and authority.

The Lack of Political Will in Africa: Key Actors, Features and Analysis

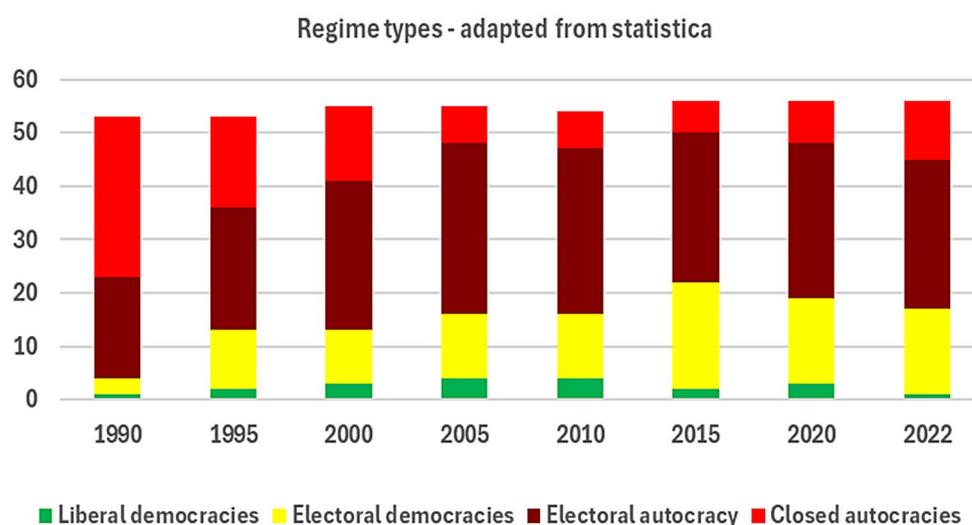
Calderisi (2006), in *The Trouble with Africa: Why Foreign Aid Isn't Working* suggests that 'the simplest way to explain Africa's problems is that it has never known good government'. What his very mainstream assertion fails to realize is that Africa's problems are bigger than just that – dating back to the legacies of slavery, slave trade and colonial and neo-colonial subjugation that is essentially damaging to good economic governance. These provide ways to start understanding the extent of political will in public debt management in Africa. For instance, an analysis of regime types in Africa shows extensive existence of electoral autocracies and closed democracies since the 1990s, despite some growth in democracies (Fig. 2).

Furthermore, the Global State of Democracy indicates that Africa ranks highest in the world with hybrid regimes, and third after Middle East and Asia Pacific with the non-democracies (Fig. 3). Longitudinal data on attempted military coups around the world shows that more than 50% of them were in Africa (Fig. 4) – having 214 of the 486 global coup attempts between 1950 and 2022 (Powell and Thyne 2011; AJLabs 2023).⁹

These events create fragility and affect political culture. In the same way, data analyzed from Transparency International Database (2023) Corruption Perception Index shows that on the average, the majority of African countries fall in the third and fourth quartile of the Index's ranking. What this means is that African countries perform poorly in the index compared to countries from other regions (Fig. 5). This is glaring evidence to suggest the need for significant improvement in political will in Africa for the technocratic approach to debt policies in Africa to start delivering.

⁹ Supplemented by data from: https://www.uky.edu/%7Eclthyn2/coup_data/home.htm

Fig. 2 Regime types in Africa
(adapted from statistica)



Number and percentage of regime types per region, 2018

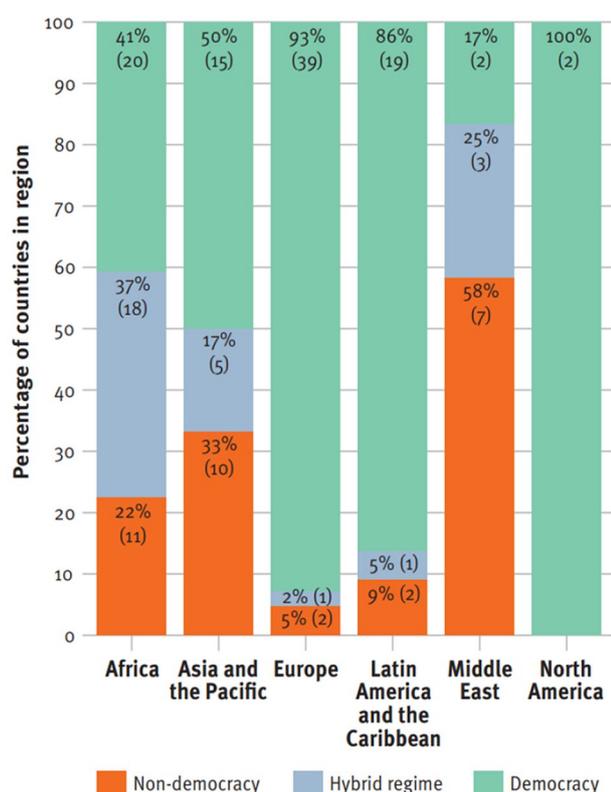


Fig. 3 Regime type per region (adapted from International Idea)

The political will for advancing Africa's quest for debt sustainability transcends national and regional concerns. The international community – multilateral and bilateral creditor community, as well as influential groupings like the G7, G20, BRICs and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), are part of the puzzle required to promote debt sustainability

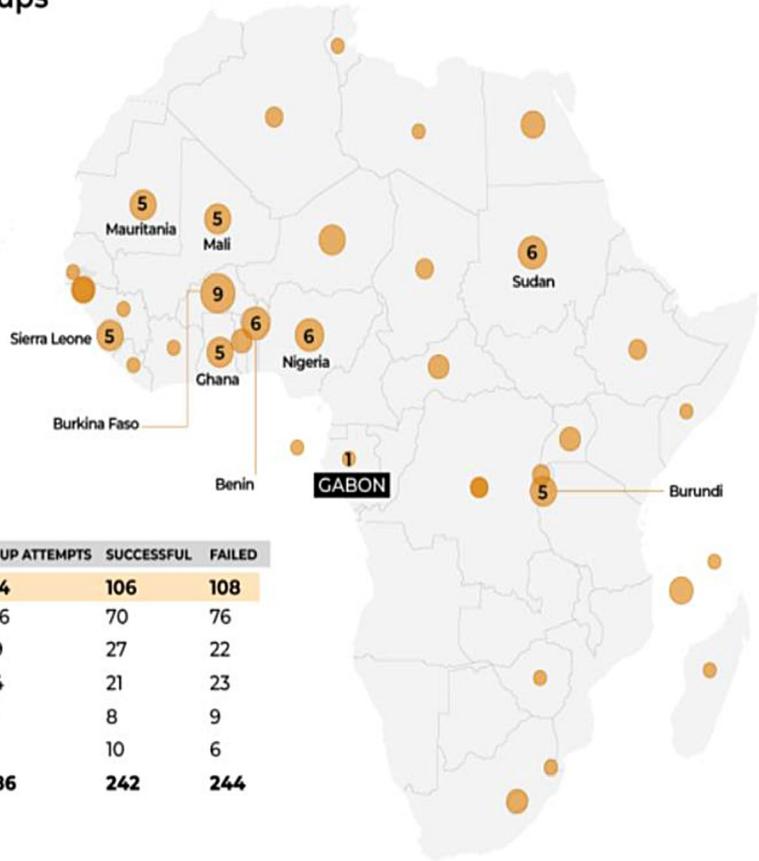
in Africa. The AfDB (2021) and Asonuma and Trebesch (2016) had estimated that African countries have restructured about 60 liabilities and reached about 149 debt restructuring agreements with Paris Club. This is only as far as the political will could travel. The process has always required political mobilization – for G20 countries to coordinate with the broader creditor community. The governance of international financial institutions and multilateral groups involved follow entrenched political interests and processes requiring a nudge to act on Africa's debt needs.

The foundations of how international political will has inched deeply into issues of how well African countries can address their debt and development needs have very deep roots in the nested history of colonization, the decolonization process, post-World War II arrangements, the birth of the current global financial architecture, all accelerated by the processes of globalization at its various stages. This has continued to deepen the history of foreign power interests and involvement in Africa, which complexify the internal dynamics of debt issues in various ways and shows no signs of abating with renewed foreign power interest in Africa, within the context of the shifting global balance of power competition and its proliferating actors.

External third-party interests and interventions exploit endemic conflicts – Fig. 6 (IISS 2022) reminiscent of the cold war years where the West and its allies, as well as the Soviets deepened unending ties with African countries in the quest for their geostrategic and geopolitical interests. This has intensified with African countries being targeted by various international development cooperations and partnership platforms (Hugon 2010; AU 2021) from China, and countries from the West and increasingly the Gulf States. The priorities of these platforms and partnerships remain inadequate and misaligned with Africa's debt sustainability needs. Foreign Direct Investment baits remain the tool in the

Fig. 4 Source Al-Jazeera

Successful coups



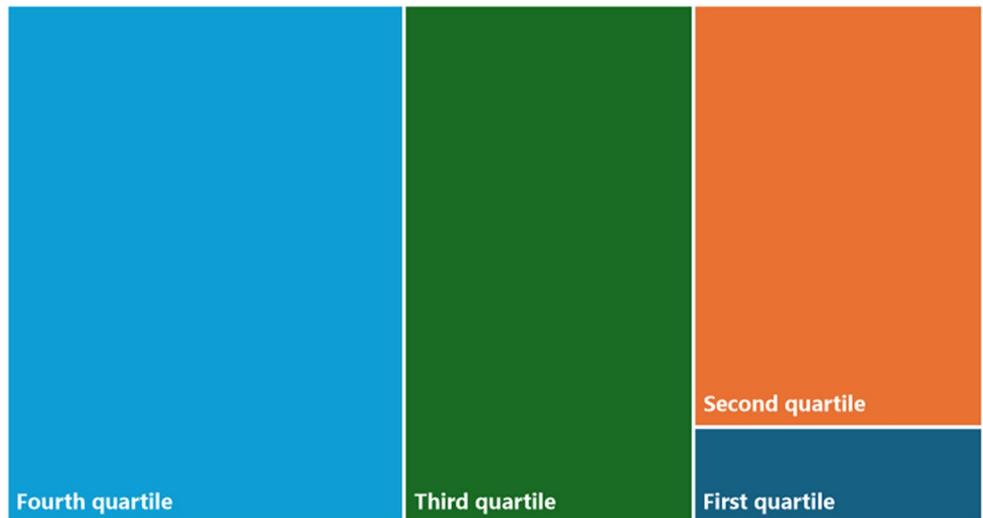
1950-2022

REGION	COUP ATTEMPTS	SUCCESSFUL	FAILED
Africa	214	106	108
Latin America	146	70	76
Asia Pacific	49	27	22
Middle East	44	21	23
Europe	17	8	9
South Asia	16	10	6
Global	486	242	244

Fig. 5 Adapted from CPI, 2003

Average ranking, CPI index 2014 to 2023

■ First quartile ■ Second quartile ■ Third quartile ■ Fourth quartile



game with newcomers like GCC countries having invested about 100 billion USD in the region in the last decade and countries like UAE becoming the biggest foreign investor after China, the EU and the United States (Munyati 2024).

This creates entrenched foreign power interests that shape and affect debt dynamics and commands the need for political will across the board to put Africa on a sustainable debt path.

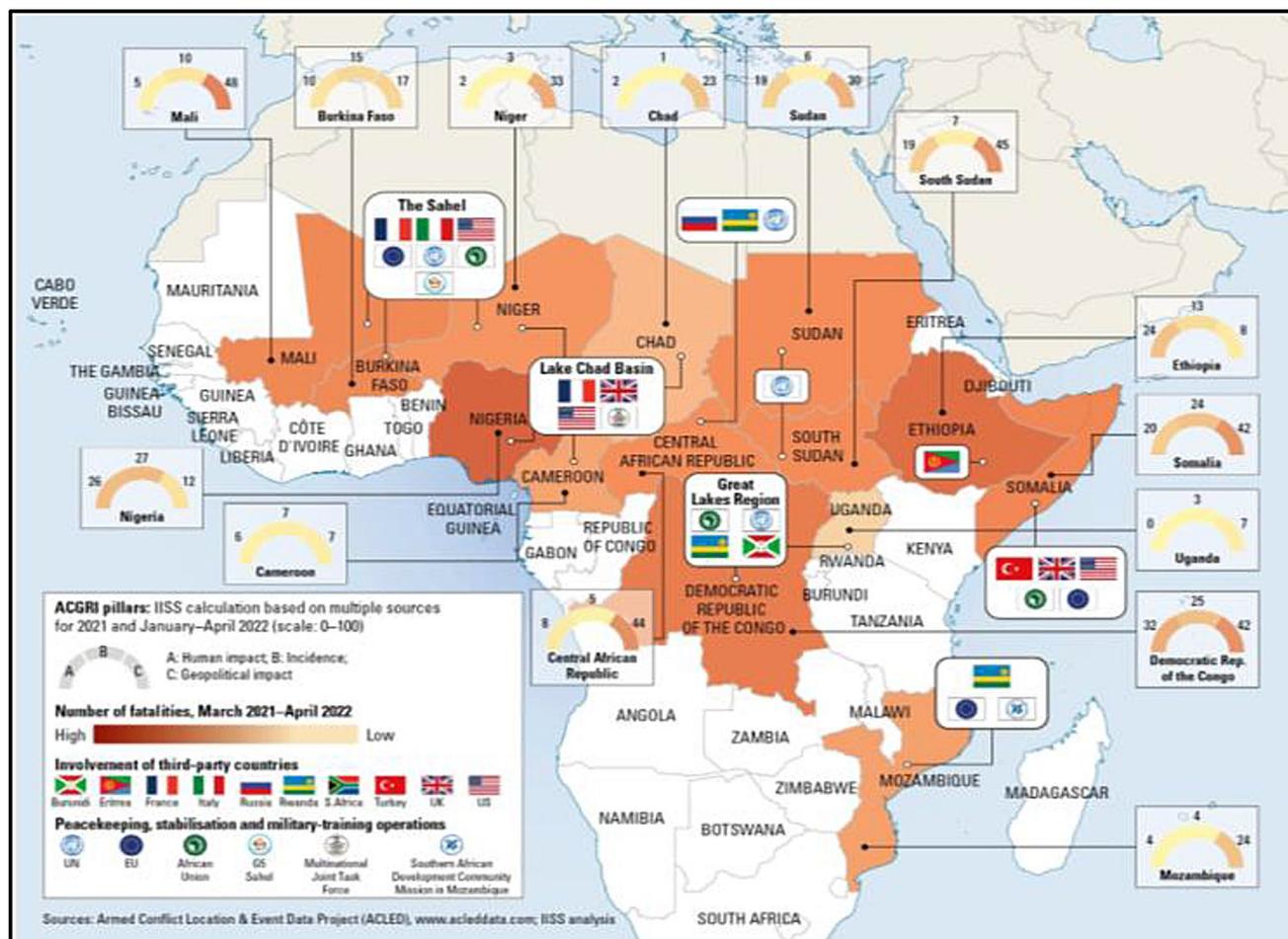


Fig. 6 Third party involvement in Africa (IISS 2022)

At the heart of demand for international political will is the call for reforms of the Global Financial Architecture and predatory lending and development cooperation agreements that militate against the insatiable quest to preserve the post-World War II status quo and its associated extractivism in Africa. These include reforming the gentlemen's agreement that established trans-Atlantic domination of the IFIs – the IMF and the World Bank respectively governed by the Europeans and American citizens appointees and veto rights. The architecture creates tax havens and IFFs that drain African countries making them critically indebted. These are purely political issues that the technocratic approach to debt advocacy alone cannot afford to resolve without a significant focus generating the political will.

Fermenting the Political Will

Fermenting the political will starts with being intentional and strategic that policy advice does not hold the key to policy success in an automated sense. It often meets with weak

political incentives to change and adverse political behavior that sits at the heart of policy dilemma. Persistent policy engagement without this hindsight orchestrates policy fatigue in efforts to bridge the gap between technocracy and the wishes and demands for sustainable economic opportunities and structural transformation that deliver prosperity to citizens. This leaves policy advocacy and policy expertise encumbered by political constraints. Being intentional about policy advice and advocacy also involves understanding the basic dichotomy between policy advocates and the policymaker (Table 1) in the quest to bring about changes that bridges gap between policy prescription and the will to implement them.

This dichotomy calls for the need to marry policy expertise with bringing about policy change – that advances the common good of African citizens – through integrating a strategic approach to creating the political will that broadly complements policy advocacy – a binary approach to policy advocacy. This is critical in addressing the systemic and political factors that hinder policy change, induces policy fatigue in public debt advocacy and hinders popular

Table 1 Policy advocacy and policymaking (author)

Criteria	Policy Advocate	Policy Maker
Goal	Often more idealistic and looking to influence policymakers – directly and indirectly	More practical and holds the power to effect policy change – enacting and enforcing policies
Focus	Policy centered and interested in change - Persuading policymakers, building public support, and raising awareness	Grapples with policy and political issues and more conservative
Drive	Driven by technical jargon, concepts, research findings and compelling narratives	Driven by bureaucratic arrangements than purely technical concerns
Motivation	Time-bound projects and grants – the quest for results	Political agenda and quest to retain power and authority
Agency	Largely non-governmental – NGOs, advocacy groups, think tanks and individuals	Government agencies, legislatures, executive branches, regulatory bodies, intergovernmental bodies
Power/legitimacy	Citizens constituted groups to speak to power	Elected and mandated by the people
Accountabilities	To donors and to institutional structure	To the citizens and to political authority
Scope	Narrow policy area to effect change	Broader societal needs and wider political issues

Table 2 Differences between advocacy, lobby and campaigns (author)

	Advocacy	Lobbying	Campaigns
Goal	Create systemic change to address debt problems and improve financial well-being	Influence the legislative process to pass favourable legislation	Achieve a specific, measurable goal related to debt, such as policy change, debt relief, or increased access to resources
Target	Policy makers and debt stakeholders	Policy makers and powers	The public , media and debt stakeholder
Method	Policy research, policy convenings, information sharing and policy advise	Direct engagements with policy maker and providing information for policy change	Public awareness, media outreach and public support
Main focus	Broader focus on addressing debt issues, encompassing research, education, policy change, and legal action	Direct influence on policymakers to achieve specific policy changes	Targeted efforts to achieve a specific objective related to debt, like debt forgiveness or legislative reform

demands for reforms in debt governance and global financial architecture. The traditional approach has been advocacy and increasingly, campaigning and lobbying. The focus of advocacy has been on policymakers as a catalyst to change and campaigns on broader range of citizens action to nudge the policymaker. Advocacy has focused principally

on a one-size fits all approach to building partnerships, conducting and disseminating policy research, offering policy advice, and lobbying in instances allowed. This includes convening policy fora and building the capacity to strengthen advocacy. Increasing challenges in affecting

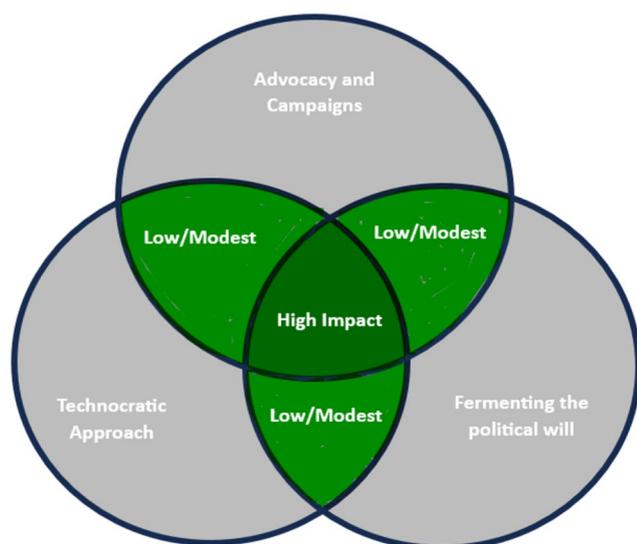


Fig. 7 Potential outcome of policy engagements (author conception)

policy advocacy and achieving policy change has shifted the needle towards campaigns and lobbying (Table 2).

The weaknesses of this have been the failure to factor in the political will as the next frontier of interventions to bring about positive change in debt governance and global financial architecture reforms. It is more than just conducting an activity. It is most importantly the consciousness in using the binary approach – the desire for policy advocacy that factors in the consciousness to engender the political momentum that brings about enhanced debt governance and debt architecture reforms. Fermenting the political will starts with policy advocates knowing the power asymmetries and where the influence lies. This includes focusing less on technical jargon and more on the strategy to change and influence the policymaker. It covers seeing the bits and pieces of change – mapping and understanding the obstacles, assessing current leverage, feasible and infeasible actions, gauging policy uptake and increasing its uptake by factoring in how to bring about the political will – political mindset that bring about truly transformative debt architecture.

As in Fig. 7, fermenting political will builds on innovative elements of lobbying and campaigning in strict and deliberate awareness of the dichotomy between the policy space (driven by technocrats) and political resistance (guided by weak incentives for the uptake of policy change). Without this, the results achieved are at best low to modest. Fermenting the political will, however, create high impact. It builds synergy in the policy spaces that makes people the catalyst of change in the face of political resistance by creating political education and awareness, media engagement, leveraging on historical and auspicious turn out of events from within the policy spaces and leaving the last line of action to a people-centred change when policy advocacy reaches its limit.

It will not mean organizations working on this all alone. It would mean leveraging on multi-stakeholder capacities to promote the combination of policy advocacy on the one hand and the enabling political environment on the other.

Conclusion and Discussions

This article set out to draw critical attention to the technocratic approach that has dominated debt advocacy among civil society organizations and other debt stakeholders for several decades but have not succeeded to enable African countries to break free from recurrent debt traps. It began with a quick political economy overview of Africa's debt – the internal and external causal factors – mainly the structural economic weaknesses, budgetary constraints, internal debt governance and Africa's susceptibility to the extractivism of the global financial architecture. It examined the technocratic approach to debt governance at various levels and among actors in Africa's debt governance process and the inherent limitations of their actions – principally, the heavy reliance on a technocratic approach and limited attention to bridging the gaps that ferment the political will to reform debt governance and the global financial system. It proposes the need for political will as the next frontier in public debt advocacy, and maps out key elements of fermenting such will through a binary approach – combining traditional and innovative methods of debt advocacy with a deliberate element to create the political will beyond the advocacy and lobbying that targets mainly policymakers, to approaches that incorporates the media and citizens action. Further research will include exploring cases where there have been significant political will and how these have been achieved; reviewing cases that have created significant advocacy gains such as the UN Tax Convention and experiences from the Jubilee dent Campaigns.

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