The effects of French colonialism in Africa in current economic development levels

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Introduction

Since the 1960s, the former French African colonies have been independent. Since then, these former colonies have reached economic development levels that are very different from each other. This project argues that the political institutions and economic systems that the French created depended on the type of colony they established. These colonies can be divided into three types: settlements, resource extractions and agricultural plantations.

These different types of colonies created institutional models that were perpetuated and ultimately affected the economic development levels in the long run.

Methods

In order to create an Economic Development Index, I chose certain variables from the World Bank Database and the United Nations Development Programme. The variables selected were the following: expected years of schooling, GNI per capita, carbon dioxide emissions, child labor, population below the poverty line of $1.25 a day, mortality rate for under 5 years old and births attended by skilled health staff.

These variables represent the different development levels of each country in education, health and economic development overall. The index was calculated over a value of one; one being the highest economic development level that could be achieved.

Since each variable added a certain amount of points, some of them had to be adjusted. For example, the variable Percentage of child labor between the ages of 5-14 was adjusted to Percentage of non child labor between ages of 5-14.

Because there were seven variables, with the maximum value for each variable being one hundred, I divided the total economic development points of each country by 700 to create the index.

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\text{Development Index} = \frac{\sum \text{All variables}}{700} \times 100
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Results

The economic development index confirmed the hypothesis that previous colonial structures could determine current development. The colonies that are performing the best are those that were settlements; these are Algeria and Tunisia. This result was expected, since settlements tend to do better globally than those colonies that weren’t; the settled population pressured their governments to invest in infrastructure and promote civil rights, such as voting.

However, it was interesting to notice the distinctions between those that were resource extractors and agricultural plantations.

Overall, colonies that were once main resource extractors are currently outperforming those that were agricultural plantations. These include Gabon, the Republic of the Congo and Mauritania.

On the other hand, those colonies that were previously agricultural plantations are lagging behind in terms of economic development, based on the variables that I chose to create the Economic Development Index. These countries form the majority of the former French colonies in the area, they are Benin, Senegal, Cote d’Ivoire, Mali, Guinea, Burkina Faso, Chad, the Central African Republic and Niger.

The division of regions into types of colonies was determined through the review of the existing literature and the Observatory of Economic Complexity reports on exports. These reports presented the exports of each country since the 1960s. With these I could determine which were the industries that were being developed during the colonial period. For example, Chad exported mostly cotton; therefore, during colonization, the French developed and exploited the production of cotton in Chad; it was an agricultural plantation

Discussion

Different findings help support and explain the differences between these former colonies.

Settlements

• Throughout the world, colonies where a high number of colonizers settled are outperforming those were they didn not. Ex. United States, Canada, Argentina.

• The number of settlers is directly related to the pressure on the government to create institutions that promote equality and rights for the settled population. Inevitably, in the long run these investments affect the country as a whole.

Resource extractions and Agricultural Plantations

• Countries that have resources often end up with a “resource curse”. This might be the reason why they have not reached their full potential, yet they still outperformed agricultural plantations

• The extraction of resources required a necessary technological investment to generate productivity. Most of these countries supplied France’s main source of oil for many years.

• Agricultural plantations required more basic skills that did not require such a high initial investment on technology. More investments were concentrated on developing trade routes

• Technological and infrastructure investments affected the development of each country. For example, the number of hospital beds is a way to measure the investments in the health care system.

Literature Cited


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