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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

France's debt-for-development contracts: From blame avoidance to credit claiming?

Gordon D. Cumming[1]

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Abstract
At the dawn of the new millennium, Northern states rallied around the need for unprecedented measures to write off African debt, particularly targeting Heavily Indebted Poor Countries. France stood apart from this collective trend, choosing not to cancel but to convert this debt via debt-for-development contracts (the so-called C2D). When faced with a backlash over this decision, France responded by deploying blame avoidance strategies. But how do such strategies operate in risk-filled international development contexts? What made France's approach so controversial and what strategies did it prioritise? And how far did blame avoidance give way to credit claiming over time? To answer these questions and provide a better understanding of donor behaviour, we draw upon textual analysis, a parsimonious conceptual framework, and interviews with key officials and non-state actors. We explore the introduction of the C2D and its subsequent implementation in Cameroon and Côte d'Ivoire. We identify shifts in the balance between blame avoidance and credit claiming, explain these in terms of blame 'risk' and 'reversion', and ask what they mean for wider donor-recipient relations.

Keywords France · Development · Debt · Cameroon · Côte d'Ivoire · Blame avoidance

The new millennium ushered in unparalleled levels of African debt cancellation, as Northern donor governments coalesced around the need to write off bilateral debts owed by Heavily Indebted Poor Countries.[1] Yet, one donor, France, singled itself out by choosing not to cancel but to convert these debts via debt-for-development contracts or *Contrats de Désendettement et de Développement*. The C2D, as they became known, required African states to continue repaying their debt to the French government which then returned these monies in the form of grant aid for poverty alleviation programmes. In opting for this contractual approach, France spread the

✉ Gordon D. Cumming
Cumming@Cardiff.ac.uk

[1] School of Modern Languages, Cardiff University, Cardiff CF10 3AS, UK

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economic cost of debt conversion and averted any sudden fiscal shocks. But it paid a political price for this decision, as the C2D would soon be condemned as illegitimate, neocolonial and ineffective instruments. France sought to mitigate this scathing criticism through blame avoidance strategies, essentially techniques to eschew, divert, or contest disapproval.

But how do such strategies work and evolve in risk-filled international development contexts? This article explores this far-reaching question by posing three more specific questions or sets of questions. First, why was France's introduction of the C2D so controversial and what types of blame did it attract? Which strategies did France prioritise in the early years of the C2D and how far did blame avoidance behaviour squeeze out opportunities for credit claiming, that is 'the act of attributing something … positive to a person or entity' (Hood 2011: 9)? And, conversely, how far did blame avoidance cede ground to credit claiming in the later stages of this scheme as the 'risk of blame' (Ibid: 20), that is the exposure to criticism from any number of dissenting parties, began to subside?

These questions have not been answered in the scholarship on blame avoidance or debt. The former literature focuses on efforts to eschew blame within a single national political system (Ellis 1994), area of regional governance (Heinkelmann-Wild et al 2024), or local network (Bach and Wegrich 2019). It concentrates primarily on localised, short-lived crises (MacAulay et al 2023) and, with notable exceptions (e.g., Bonoli 2012; Leong and Howlett 2017), pays scant attention to the interaction between blame avoidance and credit claiming. As to the writings on debt, these have focused heavily on the Heavily Indebted Poor Countries (HIPC) initiative—the debt reduction scheme introduced by the World Bank and International Monetary Fund (IMF) in 1996 and enhanced in 1999 (e.g., Addison et al 2004). In so doing, they have neglected an offshoot of this initiative, the C2D. Aside from French government-commissioned evaluations (e.g., Price Waterhouse Cooper (PWC) 2016[a]), only a handful of studies, none theoretically underpinned, have examined this scheme (e.g., Buckley 2011; Dupré 2013).

This research provides the first conceptually rich analysis of France's C2D scheme from its inception to the present day. It highlights the workings of the largest bilateral debt conversion mechanism by any single donor government, worth over 5.3 billion euros (Agence Française de Développement 2006: 5). Its significance is threefold. First, it challenges conventional thinking in the literature around the steady decline of French influence in Africa (Glaser and Smith 2006), showing how an innovative, if problematic, debt-for-development facility has allowed France to retain a degree of exceptionalism in some (mainly francophone) African countries. Second, it demonstrates how blame avoidance frameworks can shed light not just on responses to short-term domestic crises (Hood et al 2009, 2016) but also on approaches to longer term international development challenges. Finally, it shows how the connection between blame avoidance and credit claiming in foreign aid environments is more complex and less binary than suggested in most public policy scholarship. Indeed, donor-recipient relations may be marked by historical sensitivities and even blame 'reversion' (Hood 2011: 161–162), a retaliatory practice through which recipient states deflect blame back onto donors and other blame-avoiding parties. This capacity to strike back is a particular feature of franco-African relations as

African leaders have long enjoyed leverage over French domestic politics, funding electoral campaigns and influencing Ministerial appointments (Borrel et al 2021).

To make this contribution, this article is divided into three parts. The first outlines our parameters and our novel framework for understanding blame avoidance and its interaction with credit claiming in international development contexts. The second explains why the C2D was so contentious and what types of blame it attracted, particularly in its early years (2001-mid 2006). It also explores whether France responded differently to different sources of blame attribution and whether it prioritised blame avoidance over credit claiming. Our final part examines the two largest C2D-receiving countries (Cameroon and Côte d'Ivoire) during the years when the blame risk surrounding this instrument was subsiding, respectively from 2006 and from 2012. It investigates whether and explains why France's use of blame avoidance has (or has not) given ground to credit claiming in each of these cases. It ends by examining the significance of these findings for wider donor-recipient relations.

Research parameters, framework, and methods

Before proceeding, it is worth outlining our parameters, framework, and methods. To begin with the former, our attention is not on private sector debt, multilateral debt (as per the 2005 Multilateral Debt Relief Initiative process), non-HIPC debt (as per the 2003 Evian process), or COVID-related moratoriums (as per the 2020 Debt Service Suspension Initiative). Instead, our concern is with France's bilateral overseas development assistance (ODA) debts over and above the 1999 Cologne terms agreed at the Paris Club (the informal grouping of 22 creditor states), specifically debts arising from lendings overseen by the Agence Française de Développement (AFD), Banque de France and French Treasury. Furthermore, our focus is limited to one instrument: debt-for-development contracts. While the C2D operates on longer time frames and makes a lower net contribution to ODA than other aid flows (Brouillet 2009: 64), it is 'handled in exactly the same way as any other ODA' (Interview with AFD, 31 March 2023). It should, as such, allow for wider inferences to be drawn about blame attribution/avoidance in donor-recipient circles.

Turning to our framework, this revisits key premises in the blame avoidance literature. The first is that politicians, conscious of voters' 'negativity bias', are 'motivated primarily by the desire to avoid blame for unpopular actions rather than by seeking to claim credit for popular ones' (Weaver 1986: 371). This observation has been supported by research on unpopular policies such as welfare retrenchment (e.g., Nelson 2016), where credit claiming is something of an 'anomaly' (Bonoli 2012: 94). However, less is known about areas of public policy where credit claiming might easily accompany or even eclipse blame avoidance. This research explores this issue further, focusing specifically on international development.

A second assumption is that blame avoiders eschew responsibility for any 'perceived and avoidable harm or loss', (Hood 2011: 6). This makes sense as no policymaker wishes to be tarred by blame and since a single accusation can open the door to wider attacks. There has, however, been little thought given to the possibility that blame avoiders respond more robustly to some sources of blame attribution than others. This issue is addressed here.

A third premise is that blame avoidance strategies (as outlined below) are deployed in a sequential order (Sulitzeanu-Kenan and Hood 2005; Hood 2011). In effect, 'agentic' and 'policy' strategies are thought to be 'anticipative' and to require 'action in advance from officeholders to reduce their exposure' (Hood 2011: 67). These strategies are believed to come before, and to be less useful after, blame games begin 'since they usually cannot be put in place on an ad hoc basis or at least lack credibility if implemented swiftly' (Hinterleitner and Sager 2017). When, however, such anticipative strategies fail to prevent a crisis or other blame-worthy event from arising, a more 'reactive' response is usually required (Ibid). This takes the form of 'presentational' strategies.

To illustrate this sequencing, scholars have focused on responses to short-term domestic media firestorms (Hood et al 2009; Bach and Wegrich 2019). They have paid much less attention to problematic policies that attract blame over the longue durée. This study shows how sequencing may give way to more fluid approaches in such instances.

A final assumption is that blame avoidance techniques approximate to a zero-sum game, where the 'blame-maker' wins and the 'blame-taker' loses (Weaver 1986 385). Such thinking reflects a 'common tendency in the literature to look at blame and credit separately' (Leong and Howlett 2017: 602) or even 'as inversely correlated' and 'dichotomous' (Leong et al 2023: 566, 580). The implication is that there is a real advantage to be gained from overtly scapegoating others, particularly actors with little retaliatory power. While this is certainly true in many contexts (e.g., US Congressional politics: Weaver 1986; Russia's war in Ukraine: Rabinovych and Reptova 2024), the notion that one actor necessarily gains at the expense of another is problematic in the international development domain where (Northern) donor states are working constructively with their Southern partners. It follows that, in aid contexts, the range of obviously available responses may be narrower than in zero-sum-gain situations where blame-makers can choose freely from the full gamut of blame avoidance strategies: eight according to Weaver (1986) and 12 according to Hood (2011). This study deploys a parsimonious framework that draws upon five of Hood's strategies that have a particular resonance with the international debt and development field.[2] We add a sixth of our own, namely 'firewalling' (defined below). We then place these core strategies in Table 1, assigning each of them to one of the three overarching categories identified by Hood (2011).

The first such category is composed of *presentational strategies*, which are designed to show that 'what is perceived as a blame-worthy problem is in fact a blessing' (Hood 2011: 17). These include 'winning the argument', either by discrediting opponents or through reasoned argument suggesting that an approach is justifiable and even in the other party's interests (Ibid: 47). Another presentational strategy, 'changing the subject' (Ibid), diverts attention from accusations of blame, often by deflecting attention or reframing discursively blame-worthy issues that have arisen (Table 1).

The second category concerns *agentic strategies* which eschew blame by blurring lines of responsibility. One such technique is 'buck-passing' (Weaver 1986: 390) or

Table 1 Core blame avoidance strategies in international debt and development

Category of blame avoidance	Blame avoidance strategy	How blame avoidance strategy operates
Presentational	*Winning the argument*	Through reasoned argumentation, justifications & discrediting opponents
	Changing the subject	Through diversionary rhetoric
Agentic	*Delegation/Buck−passing*	Through assigning responsibility for difficult issues to other actors
	Partnership structures	Through complex organisational arrangements that spread/ obfuscate blame
Policy/ Operational	*Protocolisation*	Through following existing rules/ procedures in an automatic, non−discretionary way
	Firewalling	Though proactively building safeguards into new policies and sidestepping compromising procedures

Source: Adapted from Hood (2011)

'delegation', that is, passing responsibility 'down the line' and assigning decision-making on difficult issues to other actors (Hood 2011: 70). Another involves 'partnership structures', whereby 'complex structure[s] open … opportunities to dilute responsibility', which in turn makes it harder for the public to assign responsibility (Rodriguez 2022: 804).

The third grouping involves *policy/ operational strategies,* which are 'ways of trying to avoid blame' by focusing on 'the substance of what officeholders do' (Hood 2011: 19). One such strategy is protocolisation, namely 'following rules or best-practice guidelines or routines and procedures that are blessed by hierarchic or scientific authority' (Ibid: 92). This approach introduces automaticity into decision-making, limiting policymakers' discretion. A second strategy, which we call 'firewalling', involves discretionary action or inaction aimed at protecting the blame-avoiding party from blame and placing them on the right side of the firewall should a firestorm erupt. One strand of firewalling involves building into policies/procedures various operational safeguards, checks, and controls that should minimise the risk of criticism. Another strand is even more precautionary and revolves around what Hood (2011) terms 'abstinence', that is, the deliberate non-observance of compromising procedures that might attract blame.

Turning finally to credit claiming, here our research framework does not assume that this is necessarily 'inversely correlated' with blame avoidance. Instead, it works on the assumption that credit claiming, whether this is 'direct and/ or sole' or 'indirect and/ or shared' (see our later discussion), often runs alongside blame avoidance strategies.[3] It contends, moreover that, while credit claiming entails risks for blame-avoiding parties, its lure remains strong in international development contexts, particularly where donor assistance is tied to positive outcomes.

We use this overall framework to test two hypotheses, namely that blame avoidance strategies: i) are prioritised in blame risk-filled environments, squeezing out credit claiming opportunities and ii) cede ground to credit claiming where the risk of blame and exposure to criticism from a range of dissatisfied parties have subsided.

To make this contribution, several research methods are employed. The first involves NVivo coding of unique references, not all of equal length, to specific blame avoidance/credit claiming strategies, some of which are purely focused on discursive arguments in defence of the C2D and others of which relate to structures, policies, or procedures that have been established to deliver this scheme. This process began with the uploading of a corpus of 51 texts comprising French presidential and ministerial speeches on key websites (e.g., vie.publique.fr). This was supplemented with official commentary in the French and African press, specifically 270 unique articles (no double-counting permitted). These articles, plus the reports mentioned below, formed a single corpus that was drawn upon, sometimes retrospectively, for the different phases of this analysis (as demonstrated later in Tables 2 and 3). Wherever possible, Nexis-Advance UK database searches were made in French, with references being translated into English by the author.

Importantly too, NVivo was used to identify different types of blame, with the code-to-case function linking these to specific critics, either 'mainstream' actors (project evaluators, other donors, France's Court of Auditors, senior French/African government figures) or 'non-mainstream' commentators (French/ Africa civil society organisations (CSOs), pressure groups, hard-Left commentators). This critical commentary was located in 18 reports by CSOs, six articles by Left-Wing groups, 32 Parliamentary reports and questions, 22 evaluations and the 270 press articles mentioned above. While no statistical correlations were drawn, raw numbers and percentages were produced to gauge the frequency of particular criticisms and 'strategic' responses.

Our second research method involved 12 semi-structured interviews conducted over the longue durée (2013–2025), mainly with French CSOs and officials in the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA), Banque de France, Treasury, and AFD. These offered first-hand insights into the workings of blame avoidance/credit claiming. Our third, case study analysis, was employed to compare France's behaviour towards two francophone countries that were each eligible for debt reduction under the World Bank's HIPC initiative, namely Cameroon (a former mandate) and Côte d'Ivoire (an ex-colony). These lower middle-income African states have signed with France the two largest debt-for development contracts which account for 80% of the entire C2D (PFDD, 2021). While the Cameroonian and Ivoirian C2Ds are 'most similar cases', they will nonetheless be shown to have prompted quite different French approaches to blame avoidance and credit claiming.

The early years of the C2D: Avoiding blame, not claiming credit?

Before addressing our first hypothesis, it is worth noting that blame avoidance was deployed in French debt/ development circles long before the C2D. To illustrate, French President François Mitterrand (1989) used buck-passing to suggest that indebted countries should 'accept their own share of responsibility, seriously manage their affairs and … avoid falling back into [a] hellish debt cycle'. A decade later, French President Jacques Chirac (1995) highlighted the 'indispensable need for countries which have contracted debt to respect the[ir] engagements … and continue servicing that debt'.

At first glance, the launch of the C2D in 2001 might have been expected to attenuate the need for blame avoidance as this facility came on top of a larger scheme (the HIPC initiative) which broke with past piecemeal approaches to debt (Addison et al 2004).[4] The C2D offered bilateral debt relief on a small, medium or large scale to 22 signatory countries, 18 of which were in Africa (PWC 2016[a]: 18). The funds released were for poverty reduction. Even so, the scheme was attacked both at home and overseas. The criticism came primarily but by no means exclusively from African and French CSOs linked to the Jubilee Coalition, whose global anti-debt campaign garnered 24 million signatures (L'Humanité 2002).

Three distinct but also interconnected types of blame were identified. The first concerned the nature of the C2D and its presumed illegitimacy: it was accused of delaying the write-off of 'odious debt', which was harming the poor today yet contracted by former, undemocratic regimes (Merckaert 2006). It was also, according to France's 27-strong anti-debt grouping, the Plateforme Française de Dette et Développement (PFDD), not a 'true debt cancellation' and suffered from 'a great deal of opacity … with regard to the origin of the debts'(PFDD 2021: 6). Finally, C2D monies should not count as 'aid', since the scheme failed to recognise France's 'co-responsibility', its 'questionable loans' and 'frenzied approach to export guarantees' (Blamangin and Goirand 2006: 67–68).

Although these allegations were overwhelmingly voiced by non-mainstream actors (19.8% of references; see Table 2), they were also echoed by influential mainstream critics (7.9%). Thus, French Centre-Left and Right MPs participated in a 2005 campaign by the Comité pour l'abolition des dettes illégitimes (CADTM) which called for 'an audit' of past debts.[5] Equally, France's Court of Auditors (no date: 70) produced a report showing how the C2D overvalued aid by calculating debts at nominal rather than market value, failing to recognise that many would never be repaid. For the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD 2004: 69), the C2D was simply 'an "accounting device" rather than … a simple debt cancellation … that other donors are increasingly practising'. For other donors, it was France's way of 'not honouring its commitments' (PWC 2016[a]: 69).

Other accusations revolved around the logic driving the C2D, specifically its alleged *neocolonialism*. These were also levelled more by non-mainstream than mainstream

Table 2 Blame attribution: number, proportion, and sources of criticism

Criticisms	C2D early years (2001–2006)		Cameroonian C2D (2006–2024)		Ivoirian C2D (2012–2024)	
	Mainstream	Non−mainstream	Mainstream	Non−mainstream	Mainstream	Non−mainstream
Illegitimacy	14 (7.9%)	35 (19.8%)	2 (2.2%)	9 (10.1%)	8 (13.3%)	6 (10%)
Neocolonialism	5 (2.8%)	31 (17.5%)	6 (6.7%)	18 (20.2%)	3 (5%)	25 (41.7%)
Workings	32 (18.1%)	60 (33.9%)	25 (28.1%)	29 (32.6%)	9 (15%)	9 (15%)
Total	177 (100%)		89 (100%)		60 (100%)	

critics (17.5% compared to 2.8%). France was blamed for interfering in the domestic affairs of ex-colonies. According to the PFDD (2021: 7) and its African affiliates, C2D monies served French rather than African interests, with decisions resulting from 'confidential negotiations, diplomatic compromises, strategies of influence, [and with] priority given to quick disbursements.' The scheme was a form of 'tutelage', where the juridical and financial link between the debtor and creditor is not broken' and 'at any moment, in case of disagreement, … Paris [can] interrupt its refinancing of the debts reimbursed' (Blamangin and Goirand 2006: 68).

The final category of blame related to the workings of the scheme. Non-mainstream actors such as the PFDD criticised its proximity to the World Bank-led HIPC process, its 'slowness' and 'burdensome conditionalities' (Blamangin and Goirand 2006: 69). The PFDD (2021: 33) also complained that debt was repaid over time while the debt stock remained on the balance sheet, reducing the C2D signatory's solvency. For Blamangin and Goirand (2006: 69), the scheme's development impact was reduced by delays in introducing C2D contracts. These delays saved France money on the back of C2D signatories (Ibid).

As for mainstream actors, their concerns revolved around effectiveness. Thus, other donors complained that the C2D failed to exert sufficient leverage on recipients to undertake reform (PWC 2016[b]: 120). Equally, evaluators raised concerns about the scheme's over-complexity and unsustainability (D'Aversa et al 2017: 126). The Court of Auditors (no date: 41) regretted that 'a significant proportion of the time and energy needed to make this facility work is mobilised by […] procedural aspects.' It added that the mode of calculation of C2D monies was flawed and served to 'inflate' French aid.

Turning now to France's responses, these prioritised blame avoidance over credit claiming (76.8% compared to 23.2% of strategies deployed: see Table 3) in the early risk-filled years of the C2D. They also paid more attention to protests from mainstream than non-mainstream critics.

Contesting Illegitimacy

To begin with allegations around illegitimacy, the fact that these were raised by both mainstream and non-mainstream critics necessitated a more robust blame avoidance response. The key presentational strategy deployed by France was 'winning the argument' (10.2% of references; Table 2). This involved discrediting critics, particularly 'hypercritical' CSOs (Interview with AFD, May 2016). To illustrate, ex-French Development Minister Pierre-André Wiltzer (2003) dismissed CSO complaints that the French government had 'falsified' aid statistics by including 'debt cancellations.' He observed that the people making this argument had been the ones calling for debt cancellation and that their claim was 'unfounded' since '[r]educing the debt to a sustainable level is one of the Millennium Development Goals'. It follows that the C2D 'really is therefore development aid and consequently, it is not illegitimate to record it as such'.

In response to mainstream critics, the discrediting has been subtler. To illustrate, the AFD labelled the C2D an 'intelligent' approach and contrasted this with 'blind' cancellation (D'Aversa et al: 37, 30), which would have allowed indebted states

Table 3 Blame avoidance and credit claiming strategies deployed: frequency and percentage

Strategy Deployed	2001–mid 2006 (Early Years)	mid 2006– 2024 (Cameroonian C2D)	2012–2024 (Ivoirian C2D)
Presentational			
Reasoned argument	18 (10.2%)	10 (3.5%)	19 (7.8%)
Diversion	9 (5.1%)	9 (3.1%)	4 (1.6%)
Agentic			
Delegation	9 (5.1%)	23 (8.0%)	34 (13.9%)
Partnership Structures	31 (17.5%)	30 (10.4%)	24 (9.8%)
Policy/Operational			
Protocolisation	46 (26.0%)	41 (14.2%)	42 (17.1%)
Firewalling	23 (13.0%)	57 (19.8%)	41 (16.7%)
Credit Claiming			
Indirect/ Shared	15 (8.5%)	34 (11.8%)	47 (19.2%)
Direct/ Sole	26 (14.7%)	84 (29.2%)	34 (13.9%)
Total	177 (100%)	288 (100%)	245 (100%)

'every latitude in using the sums of money involved' (Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA), no date). Needless to say, the French authorities neglected to mention that all major Northern donors had followed the latter approach. Equally, ex-president Jacques Chirac (2001) used reasoned arguments to debunk the claims of several unspecified donors, observing that 'there are countries which say: let's cancel! let's cancel. And when we look, we see that they have no debts.'

A second presentational strategy, diversion, deflected attention from past lendings and placed a positive spin on them. Thus, ex-French Development Minister Charles Josselin (2002) claimed: 'France also bears an important share of the financial effort undertaken by the international community, for a simple reason: … France has an old relationship with Africa … [and] was more committed than other countries to African debt.' This look-elsewhere approach is most apparent in the way France redirected attention from past lendings, framing the C2D as 'an opportunity to contribute durably to poverty reduction' (MFA no date) and glossing over the fact that some C2D-funded projects were only tangentially linked to poverty concerns (e.g., Malawi's map-mining scheme (PWC 2016[a]: 46)).

Sidelining accusations of neocolonialism

Turning to allegations of neocolonialism, these arose primarily from hardline critics, who were never likely to be appeased. Perhaps for this reason, they elicited a less robust response. This can be seen in the way that French policymakers eschewed presentational strategies or any attempt to 'win the argument' by pointing to the weakness of African governance structures. Instead, agentic strategies such as delegation were used. Here, for example, the French government handed 'official' control of the scheme to a 'lead contractor', usually an African (Finance) ministry, thereby exposing the said ministry to criticisms over delays to debt repayment and C2D spending schedules. A related strategy involved 'partnership structures', which made it harder to track who was responsible for what. This technique stressed the complexity of institutional arrangements, such as the 'toughened-up partnership[s]' between the French government, the C2D signatory and their respective civil societies (MFA nd.). It enabled France to claim that, rather than running African economies, it was signing off 'by mutual consent' on expenditure that was under 'dual control' (Josselin 2002). According to Wiltzer (2002), African states 'rather than reimbursing us, have invested in agreement with us.' Even so, the C2D's complexity, coupled with the rotation of French Development Ministers (16 over the scheme's lifetime), made it harder to blame specific actors. On the French side alone, the organigramme included the French Treasury with responsibility for budgetary assistance; the AFD, which handled C2Ds in Africa; and the MFA, in charge of C2Ds elsewhere (Bolivia, Honduras, Nicaragua and Myanamar).

Defending the Workings of the C2D

Finally, complaints about the functioning of the C2D were raised frequently both by mainstream and non-mainstream actors (33.9% and 18.1% of references; Table 2). They produced a robust response, centred on agentic and operational strategies (22.6% and 39.0%, respectively; Table 3). On the agentic front, the buck was passed to African governments for any delays to the signature of C2D contracts, with the AFD (2006 3) stipulating that '[t]he C2D timetable is dependent on the progress of the recipient countries in the [HIPC] initiative'. Equally, the French Development Minister, Charles Josselin (2001), held African states accountable for any lack of inclusiveness in C2D structures, observing that '[t]he choice of French NGOs will fall to the [French] Ambassador and the choice of local NGOs to … the recipient government' (Josselin 2001).

As regards operational strategies, the use of protocolisation was particularly marked. A case in point was the drafting of the C2D's own rule book (the 'AFD doctrine'), written in 2001, then revised in 2002 and 2006. This advocated a rules-based approach, encouraging the selection of a small number of sectors (2.5 on average) and supporting the roll-over of sectoral priorities (e.g., education dominated all four tranches of Mauritania's C2D). It also allowed France to align to the rule-setting capacities of others and look, for example, to the IMF's Lagarde doctrine for guidance on concessional lending and to the OECD for calculations of the value of C2D aid (MFA 2005).

Another widely used operational procedure was firewalling, one strand of which involved safeguarding measures. The latter included project milestones, suspension clauses, and an *Avis de Non-Objection* (ANO) provision, which enabled France to block projects. Financial audits also allowed for retrospective checks on expenditures. A second technique revolved around the non-observance of potentially compromising procedures. Here, for example, the French government neglected to keep public records of C2D contracts secured by French companies (Interview with AFD, 29 March 2023) and was slow to evaluate the C2D, the first major evaluation not being conducted until 2016.

In such a risk-filled context, it might be reasonable to expect credit claiming to have been crowded out. Yet, this was not the case since, as Table 3 shows, credit claiming accounted for 23.2% of France's strategic response. As noted earlier, this credit claiming takes many different forms. Here, a key distinction is drawn between (i) 'direct and/or sole' credit claiming, where the blame-avoiding party attributes any successful outcomes directly and/or uniquely to its own actions, and (ii) 'indirect and/or shared' credit claiming, where the blame avoider claims success in a closely related policy area and/or shares the credit with another actor. In some instances (8.5%; Table 3), credit was claimed in an indirect/shared way with successes being trumpeted in related policy fields. To illustrate, French politicians tirelessly championed France's role as the driving force behind the overarching HIPC debt initiative (Josselin 2002). In many cases (14.7%; Table 3), credit claiming was direct and sole, attributing the C2D's benefits unambiguously and exclusively to France's actions. Often such claims were carefully calibrated and evidence-based, including for example the assertion that the C2D bolstered ODA levels in particular countries (e.g., Tanzania), supported specific initiatives (e.g., decentralisation in Mauritania) and contributed to biodiversity projects (as in Madagascar) (PWC 2016[a]: 40).

In other cases, however, France's direct credit claiming would soon prove less 'affordable' (Bonoli 2012: 92). Three examples can be cited here. First, the MFA (no date) dubbed the C2D a 'modernising force' for the French aid programme, favouring harmonisation with other donors, not least through 'the introduction of budgetary assistance as a priority instrument'. However, the proposed transition to budgetary assistance soon stalled. Second, French policymakers contended that the C2D was additional to existing ODA, even writing this commitment into its AFD doctrine (2006: 3). But this additionality was never meaningfully respected (D'Aversa et al 2017: 101). Third, the French government affirmed that it had 'set up the C2Ds "in full association" with non-governmental actors' (Josselin 2001). Yet, in practice, 'for the first eight countries that signed a C2D, there was no consultation or participation of civil society in the [C2D's] development, monitoring or control' (Blamangin and Goirand 2006: 71).

Summing up, our analysis has gone some way towards confirming our first hypotheses regarding the prioritisation of blame avoidance over credit claiming. That said, our research has also revealed surprisingly high levels of credit claiming. There are several reasons for this. First, the nature of aid-giving lends itself to credit claiming as donor monies are channelled to (often) high-profile projects. This was certainly true of the C2D which had 'long-term "visibility"', distinguishing it from 'a simple cancellation [where] the creditor's effort [only] "appears" at the time of the announcement' (PFDD 2021: 19). Second, credit claiming takes many different forms and can in some instances, notably in the case of justificatory discourse aimed at 'winning the argument', be hard to distinguish from blame avoidance techniques. This is a point which Hood (2011: 52) himself recognised, noting that '[j]ustifi cations are arguments that … turn blame into credit—for example, by persuading people who think they are losers

… that they should see the matter in a more positive light'. Third and finally, while the blame risk was high at the time the C2D was introduced, the more specific threat of blame reversion from recipients was low, not least since early C2D signatories were either small countries or had low debts. The importance of blame reversion will become clearer in our next section.

Making Room for Credit Claiming?

It is now time to test our second hypothesis, namely that blame avoidance cedes ground to credit claiming in contexts where the blame risk has subsided. A distinction is drawn here between blame 'risk' and 'reversion'. The former refers to exposure to criticism from a range of disgruntled parties. The latter relates specifically to the threat of retaliation by the blame-taker (the C2D signatory state), deflecting blame back onto the blame-maker. It is our contention that the blame risk has subsided in recent years as the C2D has become an established feature of the aid landscape, as 'the spectre of the debt crisis' has receded (Coordination Sud 2022: 37), and as CSOs have devoted less energy to this issue (Interview with PFDD member, January 2013). Yet has this changing context created more room for credit claiming by France in respect of the two largest C2Ds which were signed back in 2006 and 2012 by Cameroon and Côte d'Ivoire respectively? And if not, why not?

Cameroonian C2D

To begin with the Cameroonian C2D, this was the largest debt-for-development contract when signed in June 2006. It emerged in a context where the level of blame risk was still high: the C2D had been delayed by Cameroon's initial failure to reach HIPC completion point and had arisen just as 'the international debate around debt relief had heated up' and 'the millennial religious overtones of Jubilee 2000' had been superseded by 'the star-appeal of … Bono and Bob Geldof' (Thomas and Giugale 2014: 194). Over time, however, this C2D would become an accepted feature of the ODA landscape, attracting fewer criticisms (89 instances were recorded over an 18-year period) than the eight smaller contracts signed over the C2D's first 5 years (177 such criticisms; Table 2; PWC 2016[a]: 20).

It is worth adding that Cameroon's C2D was mainly subject to criticism in the early years. It was found by evaluators to have a 'hybrid status, neither completely French nor entirely Cameroonian', which 'weakened the legitimacy' of the instrument (Camtens and Mansoudé 2014: 8; PWC 2016[a]: 8). It was also labelled neo-colonial, a tool whereby 'the AFD chooses the sectors targeted', annuls decisions 'validated by the Cameroonian government', and maintains French 'economic and political domination over Cameroon' (Bikoko and Chartier 2014). It was above all condemned (50.7% of criticisms; Table 2) for delays to the disbursement of

C2D monies. From a Cameroonian perspective, these backlogs were down to the 'weakness' of France's aid mission and 'the inadequacy of the AFD's tools to manage projects and programmes of this scale' (PWC 2016[b]: 127).

In response, the French government has deployed presentational, operational, and agentic strategies. To begin with the former, Josselin (2002) used reasoned arguments to explain how the C2D was a balanced compromise between the demands of NGOs who wanted the C2D to 'really be used to fight poverty' and African states seeking to 'do what [they] want' with this 'headroom'. Diverting from past lendings, Josselin also stressed that the C2D was for the 'poorest' and would 'benefit the needy as directly and as widely as possible'.

As regards agentic strategies, these included passing the buck both to the Cameroonian Finance Ministry as 'lead contractor' and to local authorities in Cameroon's main cities: Yaoundé and Douala (PWC 2016[b]: 126). As the scheme's evaluators observed (Ibid), 'Project management is entrusted to the national authorities … [which] … are placed in a position of responsibility in the implementation of financial decisions' (Ibid: 38). The buck was also passed to the Cameroonian state for the chronic underspending of C2D monies. This was, for the most part, done discreetly through unattributable comments to evaluators highlighting 'a certain lassitude' on the part of Cameroonian officials and 'weakness[es] in the management of public expenditure' (PWC 2016[a]: 126, 37).

Another agentic strategy involved 'partnership structures.' Here, France emphasised collective decision-making and insisted that 'no decision, no project is adopted unless we agree in a logic of dialogue' (Raincourt 2011). In so doing, France ensured that it would not be singled out for blame on infrastructure projects (where it led) or on the performance of specialised Cameroonian government units (which France had trained). At the same time, Paris disguised who was responsible for what by involving multiple actors, effectively deploying a 'many hands' technique to dilute individual actors' responsibility for any decisions reached (Thompson 2014). The actors in question included the C2D's 20-strong joint Steering and Monitoring Committee, the 10-member bilateral technical committee, and the Technical Secretariat for C2D implementation. It was on such committees that Cameroonian government proposals were blocked, as France hid behind elaborate structures to reject, for example, the proposal that the second tranche of Cameroon's C2D focus entirely on agriculture, a move considered 'too risky in terms of absorption' (PWC 2016[b]: 123).

As to policy/operational strategies, these made up 34% of France's strategic response (Table 3). Protocolisation featured prominently. Thus, all three tranches of the Cameroonian C2D (537.6 million, 326 m and 611 m euros) included a focus on education, agriculture, and infrastructure (PWC 2016[b]: 174; Camer.be 2022). Whilst the length of these tranches varied, allowance was made for such changes in the AFD doctrine.[3] Significantly too, care was taken to link the C2D to schemes, such as the World Bank-led 'Education-For-All' initiative, where multilateral procedures prevailed (PWC 2016[b]: 39). An effort was also made to follow IMF guidance on lending, with concessional loans not resuming until October 2008 (Interview with Paris Club, January 2013). The AFD's rules on budgetary assistance were also respected. This fungible form of support was only allowed where the fiduciary risk was manageable and the recipient had sufficient absorptive capacity (PWC, 2016[a]: 7). As these conditions were not met in the Cameroonian case, budgetary assistance fell from 11% in the first to 5.5% in the second C2D, with project aid being deployed almost exclusively in infrastructure programmes (40% of total spending) (PWC 2016[b]: 124).

Turning to firewalling, here France had recourse to 'abstinence', shelving a critical evaluation (Camtens and Mansoudé 2014) and neglecting to publish the French commercial contracts secured under this C2D. Equally, France instituted sageguarding controls, including suspension clauses and the ANO. These guarded against unsound use of public monies, blocking infrastructure projects involving the 2018 Africa Cup of Nations football stadium and refusing requests for high-profile motorway projects (Interview with Banque de France, January 2013). At the same time, France introduced precautionary measures, encouraging the designation of Cameroonian paying agents such as the Caisse Autonome d'Amortissement, recommending a cell within Cameroon's Finance Ministry to identify 'sufficiently mature projects', and dispatching missions to accelerate C2D aid disbursement (PWC 2016[a]: 52). It also adopted mid-term reviews, in-house evaluations and audits. Significantly too, it established checks on C2D governance via a scheme known as the Programme Concerté Pluri-Acteurs (PCPA), which bolstered civil society's capacity to hold government accountable.

In light of the above, it is possible to make two key observations. The first relates to the blame avoidance process and finds that 'anticipative' agentic and policy strategies did not precede 'reactive' presentational strategies. Indeed, presentational strategies were at work long before any C2D structures and policies were designed or set up. Thus, back in 2002, French Development Minister Josselin (2002) was already using reasoned arguments to justify this instrument, stressing that it was 'in grant form' and focused on 'basic needs.' In part, this was down to an anomaly: Cameroon had been expected to complete the reforms associated with the HIPC process by April 2003 but had failed to do so, thereby delaying the start of the C2D by three years. In part, it was also a reflection of historical realities: the entire international debt architecture had been constructed to reschedule, reduce, or write-off debt and not to oversee colossal debt conversion programmes, such as the Cameroonian C2D. It follows that an all-hands-on deck approach was required to develop, test and refine the structures and procedures surrounding the first ever 'mega' C2D.

The above commentary suggests that the 'normal' sequencing of blame avoidance strategies has not applied in this case, partly due to the complexity of the policy-building process surrounding the Cameroonian C2D and partly due to its long lifespan. This scheme, which was launched in 2006, is still running at the time of writing, with some 25 million euros yet to be committed or allocated, while a further 300 million euros remain unspent (Interview with AFD, April 2025).

A second observation to emerge from the Cameroonian case is that, given the high levels of blame attribution in the early years of the Cameroonian C2D, we might reasonably expect there to have been little room for credit claiming. However, credit claiming was substantial, making up 41% of France's entire approach (Table 3). This was possible for three reasons: First, France's consistent application of blame avoidance strategies shielded it from the most obvious blame risk, namely financial scandals involving a Cameroonian regime ranked 144th in the world on the corruption perception index over the last 10 years (Transparency International, various years). This concern was acute given the sums involved and the French government's 'need to provide [taxpayers] with justifications that this money was being properly spent' (Interview with French Finance Ministry, January 2013). Second, credit claiming was possible since it was largely evidence-based and, in some cases, shared. To illustrate, French President Nicolas Sarkozy trumpeted the fact that, despite the global financial crisis, this scheme had 'allowed Cameroon to double the number of teachers (increasing to 23,000) in primary schools' (Jeune Afrique 2009). Importantly too, France's ex-Development Minister Henri de Raincourt teamed up with Cameroon's former Finance Minister Yaouba Abdoulaye to congratulate themselves on the 'satisfactory results of the first C2D' (Le Quotidien Mutations 2012).

A third factor creating space for credit claiming was the absence of any credible threat of blame reversion. Cameroon did occasionally make its displeasure known, suspending, throughout 2013, meetings of Cameroon's bilateral technical committee in protest at the underspending of C2D monies (PWC 2016[b]: 125). It could have pushed back against other aspects of the scheme, drawing on various levers: Cameroon's contribution to the stability of the region, its oil exports to France and the commercial benefits it offered as home to 200 French companies (Trésor 2023). But, instead, this central African country showed little appetite for a combative approach. Responsible for only 0.1% of French exports (Ibid) and beset by threats from Boko Haram, Cameroon was acutely aware of its dependence on France as its largest bilateral aid donor and a major supplier of military equipment. It was also conscious of its loss of support from other donors following its heavy-handed approach to separatist Anglophone provinces (Reuters 2019). Unsurprisingly therefore, it eschewed blame attribution, and, even in some quarters (notably spending ministries), welcomed the C2D as a source of predictable longer term funding (Interview with AFD, 29 March 2023).

Summing up, the Cameroonian case partly supports our second hypothesis, namely that blame avoidance cedes ground to credit claiming where the blame risk is subsiding. Ultimately, however, the increase in credit claiming in this case is better explained by the limited threat of blame reversion from this aid-dependent recipient. The link between blame risk and reversion is explored further below.

Ivoirian C2D

As regards Côte d'Ivoire, this ex-French colony had the largest ever C2D (almost 2.9 bn euros; Trésor 2024). It was signed in 2012, as this West African country emerged from civil war and contested presidential elections. By then, debt cancellation had fallen down the international agenda as Northern governments scrambled to recover from the global financial crisis and CSOs struggled to keep African debt, let alone the C2D, on their radar (Interview with ONE, January 2013).

The fact that the blame risk was subsiding did not, however, mean that the Ivoirian C2D escaped familiar criticisms. The first, revolving around legitimacy (23.3% of references: Table 2), was articulated at the highest level of the Ivoirian government, by President Ouattara and successive Prime Ministers, who were calling publicly for outright cancellation. The second, voiced essentially by non-mainstream actors (46.7% of references), highlighted France's neocolonial 'domination' (Imbach and Chartier 2016). Thus, France's Ambassadors were said to be 'acting like neocolonial governors' (African Banker 2013), while the C2D was 'a tool of influence in the service of the funder … largely benefiting French companies' (PFDD 2021: 48). Finally, there were complaints about the workings of this C2D (30 per cent of references: Table 2), with non-state actors protesting over the exclusion of Ivoirian CSOs (PWC 2016[a]: 35) and evaluators deeming C2D procedures too cumbersome for the local context (PWC 2016[b]: 118).

In response to this hard-hitting criticism, France's deployment of presentational, agentic, and operational strategies was, perhaps surprisingly, cautious. To begin with the former, these were used sparingly to argue that the scheme was needed by Côte d'Ivoire 'to clean up its public finances', 'regain financial leeway' and 'pave the way for bilateral aid from France of more than 2 billion euros' (Fillon 2011). However, France eschewed any attempt to 'win the argument' by discrediting critics, particularly Ivoirian government figures. The French authorities also made little use of the standard diversionary tactic, linking the C2D to poverty reduction, instead acknowledging that the scheme was designed to 'help boost growth and job creation' (Ibid).

As regards agentic approaches, these included France's delegation of responsibility to the Ivoirian government as lead contractor. In truth, Ivoirian politicians, particularly in the Prime Minister's office, were the ones who captured and appropriated C2D structures (PWC 2016[a]: 29). On the face it, this 'takeover' might have afforded opportunities for buck-passing. But instead, France opted to share responsibility. To illustrate, France's Ambassador Georges Serre, while acknowledging the 'inadequacies in the progress of some projects' (Le Patriote 2017), stressed that '[t]he C2D is … a partnership between France and Côte d'Ivoire, so the responsibility is shared when there are delays' (Abidjan.net 2017). Equally, AFD Director Gerard Collange (Fratmat.info 2015) blamed the non-delivery of high-spending projects not on Ivoirian government shortcomings but on 'a lack of available studies' by consultants.

Another agentic strategy, 'partnership structures', was also used for sharing rather than shifting blame. Here, France emphasised collective decision-making, with the AFD assuming responsibility for infrastructure projects and providing technical assistance for specialised cells which were integrated into, but partly autonomous from, the Ivoirian government. Another way of blurring the lines was through the creation of joint structures that would, according to AFD Africa Director Jean-Pierre Marcelli (cited in PFDD 2021: 39), allow for a 'co-piloting' of the country's future development. These structures included a 14-strong Steering and Monitoring Committee, a bilateral Technical Committee, and an eight-strong technical secretariat (PWC 2016[a]: 37).

Turning to operational strategies, these were heavily deployed (33.8% of France's response; Table 3). They included protocolisation, which was apparent in the way the scheme's successive tranches (630 million euros (2012–2015), 1.125 billion euros (2015–2020), and 1.1 billion euros (2021–2025)) all included a focus on education, health, and urban development (Trésor 2024). Yet, protocolisation was also frequently set aside (43 instances were recorded by the author) as the Ivoirian

C2D exhibited a 'degree of freedom … in relation to doctrine and procedures' that singled it out as 'a case apart' (PWC 2016[a]: 45). This divergence was clear from the way C2D monies were tailored to the 'needs of Ouattara's electoral mandate' (Interview with PFDD member, January 2013) and allocated for purposes other than poverty reduction, including the cultural industries and the Abidjan metro (African Press Organisation 2023). It was also evident in the way the French government began lending monies at the outset of the C2D even though the necessary conditions had not been met (Interview with French Finance Ministry, January 2013). Equally, France moved away from project aid (90% of spending in 2012) and increased, without the necessary safeguards in place, the share of budgetary assistance from 25 million euros in 2012 to 335 million during the second C2D (PWC 2016[a]: 34, 52).

As to firewalling, this strategy has been applied cautiously. Thus, France initially set in motion robust safeguarding measures such as 'audits' which 'would be conducted for each operation' (Notre Voie 2012). It also demonstrated, in the early days of the Ivoirian C2D, a readiness to use ANOs to enhance public procurement, deploy missions to assess compliance (PWC 2016), and 'refuse budgetary support' when programmes were 'too far from agreed poverty-reducing goals' (AFD 2017: 77). Over time, however, the French authorities preferred to backslide rather than risk upsetting the Ivoirian regime. A case in point was France's acquiescence to controversial Ivoirian demands for hikes in budgetary assistance. Another was France's acceptance of twice the number of sectors it had originally recommended for the Ivoirian C2D (Interview with French Finance Ministry, January 2013). Arguably the main firewalling technique to be retained has been 'abstinence'. To illustrate, there have been no publicly available evaluations specifically of the Ivorian C2D. Equally, the only large-scale evaluation ever conducted of the C2D had no 'mandate to analyse the market shares actually allocated to French companies' (PWC 2016[a]: 31).

Once again, two observations follow from the above. First, as per the Cameroonian case, agentic and policy strategies have not obviously preceded presentational strategies. Thus, for example, ex-French President Nicolas Sarkozy began developing a discursive case for the Ivoirian C2D in a speech back in May 2011, some 14 months before any debt-for-development contract was signed (L'Humanité 2011) and, perhaps not coincidentally, only a few weeks after France's controversial decision to offer a 350-million-euro loan to this debt-ridden country (News Press 2011). The early deployment of presentational strategies was, on the face of it, surprising given that France already knew from the Cameroonian C2D how to develop agentic and operational strategies to accompany such a large-scale scheme. In reality, however, France's response to the Cameroonian case, with its emphasis on buck-passing and protocolisation, could not simply be copied and pasted into an Ivoirian context, where there was much greater high-level resistance to a debt conversion scheme, as discussed further below. A more fluid approach involving the simultaneous use of different categories of blame avoidance strategy was, in effect, required in this case.

The second observation revolves around credit claiming, which appears, in line with our second hypothesis, to have increased as the blame risk surrounding the Ivoirian C2D has subsided. While such trends are hard to demonstrate, they can be inferred from the fall in the number of criticisms to 60 between 2012 and 2024 (compared to 177 in the first 5 years of the C2D) and the rise in credit claiming to 33.3% of France's overall response (compared to 23.2% in the early years of this debt conversion scheme; see Tables 2 and 3). A caveat is required here, however, namely that France remained guarded in its approach to direct credit claiming (14%), limiting itself to factual statements about the size (L'impartial 2011) and flexibility (Fratmat.info 2021) of the programme. Indirect and/or shared credit claiming was the preferred strategy, making up 19.3% of France's response (Table 3). An illustration of the former was France's claim to be improving donor coordination in Côte d'Ivoire (Interview with French Finance Ministry, January 2013). An example of shared credit claiming was the lauding by French Ambassador Gilles Huberson's of the C2D as 'a magnificent joint tool' that he was 'co-piloting' with Ivoriain Prime Minister Amadou Gon Coulibaly (Le Patriote 2019).

There is one main reason why the French government has limited its direct credit claiming. In effect, such a strategy was risky in a context where blame was being levelled by influential Ivoirian government figures who opposed the 'forced march towards procedural reform' imposed by the C2D. In such a context, self-aggrandizing forms of credit claiming would have antagonised the government of a commercially and strategically important ally that was coveted by other powers, including China (CCI France 2021). Côte d'Ivoire was not only one of the fastest growing countries in the world between 2012–2019 and one with which France had its second highest trade surplus in sub-Saharan Africa (Trésor 2024), it was also home to 300 French subsidiaries and 700 French-run Ivoirian companies (Ibid). Crucially too, it was run by President Alassane Ouattara, a former economist at the Central Bank of West African States and the IMF, who had a strong team and whose leadership was welcome in regional organisations and negotiations (Cochet and Dagoma 2017: 42).

Overall, the Ivoirian case only partly supports our second hypothesis, namely that blame avoidance cedes ground to credit claiming wherever blame risk declines. There are several factors complicating this analysis. First, credit claiming was often shared and therefore also part of the strategy of the Ivoirian government, whose motivations cannot be evaluated in the space available here. Second, the blame risk did not subside straightforwardly. Thus, while it did fall as the C2D became an established part of the Ivoirian ODA landscape (representing 97% of total aid; PWC 2016[b]: 121), the blame risk never dissipated fully as France eschewed a rigorous approach to blame avoidance. Third, blame reversion proved decisive not just in limiting credit claiming but also in curbing France's use of blame avoidance. This suggests that blame avoidance and credit claiming are not, as the literature implies, necessarily pulling in opposite directions or indeed 'dichotomous' (Leong et al 2023: 580).

Conclusion

This research has explored blame avoidance and credit claiming in the international development field, paying particular attention to France's much-maligned debt-for-development scheme. Drawing upon a novel framework, textual analysis, and interviews, we showed how blame attribution was substantial in the early years of the C2D. In response, the French government applied blame avoidance strategies rigorously and left itself little room for credit claiming. This suggested, in line with conventional thinking, that blame avoidance behaviour and credit claiming can indeed be 'inversely correlated' (Ibid: 580) in risk-filled situations, with more of one necessitating less of the other. This conclusion is, however, nuanced by our case study analysis which suggests that the relationship between blame avoidance and credit claiming is both case- and context-specific. To illustrate, the Cameroonian case showed how in the face of what were initially high levels of blame risk, France still found time for both direct and indirect credit claiming. Conversely, the Ivoirian case demonstrated how, despite decreasing levels of blame risk, France prioritised shared over sole forms of credit claiming. The explanation appears to lie in the different degrees of blame reversion in each case.

What more can these findings tell us about the C2D and blame avoidance in international development contexts? To begin with the C2D, this was an innovative scheme with the potential to reduce poverty over the long term. Its uptake was, however, limited by its neocolonial overtones, its over-complexity and the finite nature of C2D monies. The jury is still out on whether this was a mechanism 'of its time'—France now holds only 3% of African bilateral debt (Rivié 2020)—or one that might be reinvented, perhaps in the form of debt-for-nature swaps (Interviews with AFD, 29 and 30 March 2023).

As to blame avoidance behaviour, several observations can be made. First, mainstream blame-makers generally carry more weight than non-mainstream critics and provoke a more robust blame avoidance response. Second, the full gamut of blame avoidance strategies may not be suitable for international development contexts. Thus, for example, scapegoating and buck-passing can be problematic as donors, particularly former colonial powers such as France, deal with sovereign recipient states with the capacity to strike back. Third, blame avoidance strategies may not follow the sequential order suggested in the literature. Instead, they may be deployed in a more fluid way, especially where the crisis or challenge is protracted and requires the construction and constant adaptation of new structures and procedures. Fourth, a pure or 'out-and-out' blame avoidance strategy is never likely to be the preferred option in foreign aid contexts. Such an approach would rule out any form of credit claiming, result in domestic criticism of the donor for not badging its ODA (Meera 2012) and open the door to blatant credit claiming by authoritarian recipients (Cruz and Schneider 2017). Finally, while blame avoidance and credit claiming are often self-serving and hard to reconcile with donor discourse around solidarity, partnership and sustainability, they cannot simply be dismissed as anomalous forms of donor behaviour. In truth, they are, and will remain, integral to the business of international development.

Endnotes

1. In 2001, the World Bank identified 41 Heavily Indebted Poor Countries, 33 in sub-Saharan Africa (Easterly 2002), for which 'even full use of traditional mechanisms of […] debt reduction' would not generate 'sustainable external debt levels' (Paris Club no date).
2. Hoodian strategies such as 'individualisation' (holding consumers responsible) work less well in international development contexts. Others such as 'drawing a line' (accepting blame and moving on), 'lying doggo' (avoiding commentary), 'herding' (staying with the crowd), 'defensive structuring' (rotating officeholders) and 'government by market' (blaming the system) are useful in response, for

example, to aid failures. But they are less relevant here, as France avoided making excuses, trumpeted its unique approach, invested in semi-permanent structures and took care not to blame the system for France's reckless past lendings.
3. Twight (1991) distinguishes instead between 'open' and 'concealed' credit claiming.
4. Josselin (2001) outlined the C2D in June. The first contract was signed with Mozambique in November.
5. French Assemblée Nationale Question 62,900, 12 April 2005.

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