This chapter examines the ability of international organizations to shape and reform African administrations. In doing this, it highlights the practical implications of buzzwords such as ownership and capacity-building. It builds on the case-study of the technical unit (Cellule technique Cadre stratégique de lutte contre la pauvreté) established under the Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (PRSP) in Mali, an aid-dependent country in West Africa. Until the coup d'état that took place in 2012 and the ensuing political instability, despite its poor economic performance, Mali was considered by the international community as a model of democracy, good governance and aid management in sub-Saharan Africa. However, empirical data collected over the course of six months of fieldwork and participant observation within the PRSP unit in Bamako in 2007–2008 tells another story.

This chapter primarily seeks to explain this paradox. I argue that targeted capacity-building initiatives—embodied by the PRSP unit—have limited impact, particularly when they have to deal with pre-existing institutional features, social relations and competing interests created by the unit itself. However, I also show that international support has made unexpected contributions to the process of state formation in Africa.

The chapter is divided into three main sections. The first section presents the theoretical framework used to interpret international initiatives

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1 This article is based on six months of fieldwork in Bamako in 2007 and 2008 where I was able to conduct approximately 100 interviews with civil servants and representatives of aid organizations, and to carry out participant observation as an intern in the Malian PRSP technical unit. I would like to thank the staff of the PRSP unit, its coordinator and technical assistants for welcoming me among them. I would also like to thank Jeremy Gould and Philippe Bezes for their early advice on how to approach this topic and conduct fieldwork, and Jean-Pierre Olivier de Sardan and Thomas Bierschenk for their comments on a draft presented at the third European Conference on African Studies in Leipzig in 2009 and subsequent drafts. I thank Hélène Charton for proofreading the final draft of the text. I bear sole responsibility for any remaining errors.

2 There are approximately 40 bilateral and multilateral donors in Mali, the biggest of which are the European Commission, the World Bank and France, followed by the Netherlands, Japan, the United States, the African Development Bank, Canada and Germany. Aid accounts for a large share of the country’s total budget. Between 1996 and 2005, aid represented an average of three-quarters of the country’s Special Budget for investment and 27.6 per cent of the state’s general budget (Bergamaschi 2008: 222–223).
aimed at strengthening African states. It provides both an overview of donor approaches to state capacity-building and a critical overview of how the issue has been addressed in the academic literature. The second section explores the daily activities of Mali’s PRSP unit and accounts for its failure to achieve its goals. The root causes of this failure, mainly the external and internal resistance to the unit’s hegemonic ambitions, are identified. The third section presents some concluding remarks on capacity-building and state formation in Mali.

**International Donors and the African State: Shifting Paradigms**

The approach adopted by international donors towards African states over the past 50 years has been contradictory and shifting. Over time, it ranged from support for the developmental state (from the 1950s to the 1970s) to anti-state policies (diminution of resources, retreat from the main economic sectors, the privatization of parastatals) with structural adjustment programmes (SAPs) implemented in the 1980s and 1990s. A partial reassessment of the role of the state was carried out in the late 1990s together with the promotion of capacity-building strategies (Bezes 2007). This shift arose in response to the mitigated outcomes of SAPs, and the harsh criticisms they triggered at a time when the legitimacy of the international financial institutions (IFIs, e.g. the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund) was called into question. The Asian miracle highlighted the role of the state in development success stories and invited the World Bank to develop a new approach, which was presented in its 1997 annual report under the title “The state in a changing world” (World Bank 1997).

This reassessment was limited, however. First, an implicit defiance towards the state persisted at the World Bank and the IMF, particularly when it came to dealing with Africa. Second, the myth of the ‘apolitical’ norm prevailing in IFIs led to a technical conception of state reform, viewed and promoted as a set of measures to be uniformly implemented in developing countries (Miller-Adams 1999: 5–6, Peñafiel, 2008; see also Anders, Charton and Muñoz in this volume).

In the post-Washington consensus, a lack of “commitment” and “political will” on the part of recipient governments was identified as a major impediment to successful reform (Killick 1998). IFIs did not question the relevance and content of SAPs. Nor did they rehabilitate the idea of sovereignty, self-determination (Whitfield 2008) or indigenous policy-space as