

*Reflections*

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**Reflections of an Engaged Economist: An Interview with  
Thandika Mkandawire****Kate Meagher**

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Professor Thandika Mkandawire is a leading development economist specializing in the comparative study of Africa. His prodigious understanding of the varied history, political economy and development economics of a wide range of African countries underpins a reputation for incisive analysis of African development that reverberates through orthodox as well as heterodox economic circles. A Swedish national of Malawian origin, Thandika (as he is widely known by students and colleagues) was born in 1940 and raised in southern Africa during the late colonial period. He studied economics at Ohio State University, obtaining his BA and MA in the early 1960s, and continued his graduate studies in economics at the University of Stockholm. Since then, he has taught at the Universities of Stockholm and Zimbabwe, and is currently Professor of African Development at the London School of Economics and Political Science. This marks a return to teaching after a long and distinguished research career, first as the Executive Secretary of the Dakar-based Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa (CODESRIA) from 1986 to 1996, and then as Director of the United Nations Research Institute for Social Development (UNRISD) in Geneva from 1998 to 2009. Thandika Mkandawire has been a beacon of transformative African development research for generations of African and Africanist scholars, as well as an inspiration to African students at home and abroad. His myth-busting approach to African development combines penetrating critique with an irrepressible but historically informed optimism about Africa's potential. He has published widely on African development, governance and democratization, including a number of iconic pieces on the African state (Mkandawire, 2001, 2005), developmental social policy (Mkandawire, 2004a, 2007a), and taxation (Mkandawire, 2010).

***KM: Unlike many people who study African development, your perspective is shaped by having lived under colonialism for a memorable portion of your life. Could you reflect on your experience during this time and how it has shaped your thinking?***

TM: Yes, life experiences matter a lot for one's way of thinking. I lived mostly in townships in the colonial days, first in Zimbabwe, then the Copperbelt in Zambia and finally Malawi. Although colonialism was always present in our lives, the colonial masters were quite remote to us as children and we didn't see them much. Of course, our parents complained quite a lot, so we were aware something was wrong. Huge decisions were made that had profound effects on one's life. Something I didn't know as a child was that the mining companies in the copper belt of Zambia had decided to move away from the South African model of temporary migrant workers. They decided, instead, to stabilize the labour force by allowing the spouses and children to join the mineworkers. They also allowed the emergence of a semi-skilled black labour force, and so lots of people from Malawi like my father — who was working in Zimbabwe — moved to Zambia, where prospects were better. Many Malawians had some education or skills, acquired in missionary schools, and they assumed clerical and semi-clerical positions. The mines provided housing and social services that were decent by the standards of the racial colonial order of the day. They also had 'welfare centres' where we played and had access to libraries, weekly cinema and concerts, etc.

I can say that I was brought up in a very working class family in that sense — no relationship to the land. Our lives revolved around my father working, interrupted by some *major* strikes at the time. My father had two jobs. He worked in the mines as a tailor in a mine hospital, and he also had his own tailoring business at home. There were always people dropping in. And like all tailors, my father often over-estimated how much time he had, so there was always a constant flock of people at home, sitting in our yard waiting for their dress, shirt or suit to be completed. And all they talked about was politics and working conditions in the mines. So, I was made aware of the political situation very early. My mother became a nursing assistant at a mine clinic. My father was active in both the union and the nationalist movement.

The mines were rife with rumours about what the colonial masters were up to. People tried to make sense of pronouncements and new regulations announced by the mines or the colonial government. As an example: there was a campaign by the mining companies to control rabies. All dogs were to be inoculated and the inoculated ones were to wear a metal tag around their necks while the untagged ones were captured and killed. At just about the same time, there were preparations for the coronation of Queen Elizabeth. The mines minted copper medals that were to be distributed to all school children. Some nationalists persuaded us that the medals would reduce us to the same status as dogs so we refused to wear them. The degree of mistrust of colonial and mine officials was deep and the worst was expected of

them — including one scare that they were out to sterilize Africans following a speech by the Rhodesian prime minister that population control would be necessary to slow down the growth of the ‘native’ population.

I first went to Malawi, then known as Nyasaland, when I was 13 years old. My brother and I were sent to Malawi to continue primary school because our father strongly believed that schools in Malawi, run by Presbyterian missionaries, were better than the mine schools in Zambia. Mine schools were designed to produce semi-educated mine workers. Malawi (or Nyasaland) was very different — much poorer. The colonialists called it an ‘imperial slum’. Malawi was a protectorate and so you didn’t have the crass racism of the mines of Southern Africa. Most of the struggles in Malawi were about actually moving towards independence whereas in Zambia, with its Afrikaner mine workers, people spent a lot of time fighting the colour bar. The apartheid model reserved the very simple semi-skilled jobs — you know, driving trains — that was for whites in Zambia. I came to Malawi and saw the train driver was an African and thought ‘what?’. Heads of Post Offices were all Africans. And the colonial government was *just* beginning to recruit district commissioners who were Africans. So, there was a sense that we were getting somewhere.

A big problem at that time for Africans, especially Malawians, were the plans by the British and the white settlers to impose a federation of Rhodesia and Nyasaland. For Africans, the federation was a northward extension of apartheid with its racism, land alienation and repression. Malawians were vehemently opposed to the proposed federation. Many had worked in the mines [in South Africa], and were very worried that the apartheid system would be extended to Nyasaland. Malawi had been a protectorate, so there was always the assumption that one day it would get its independence. It would take time, and the pace would be determined by the colonial master, but the country would eventually get there. The idea of a federation between Rhodesia and Nyasaland meant a complete foreclosure of that option and was viewed as a betrayal of the ‘protected’ Malawians by the colonial power.

During my school holidays, I went to Zambia. Malawians gathered at my father’s house would ask me to tell them what was going on at home. So, I found myself at 15 years of age, being the reporter of events from home. I became very aware of this role, so I had to keep track of what was going on at home in Malawi.

I went to a Catholic secondary school. This was a government-assisted secondary school which meant that it was multi-denominational. Colonialism was so restrictive on education. In Malawi, there were only three full secondary schools at that time.

***KM: In the whole country?***

TM: Yes! And only one was a government secondary school, while the other two were missionary schools. Our Catholic secondary school turned

out to be a very interesting experience. The teachers were Irish and French Canadians, both of whom were anti-colonial. At that time, there were no Africans teaching there. Then one day a new African teacher arrived — John Msonthi — who had studied in India. The Catholic Brothers used to write on the blackboard J, M, J — Jesus, Mary and Joseph. And this new Malawian teacher walks in one day and the first thing he writes on the blackboard was I, M, G, which he told us stood for ‘Imperialism Must Go’. This was heady stuff!

For two years I was a school ‘librarian’ which basically meant cleaning up the library and reshelving the books. It was a much-coveted assignment because it allowed one to read. The American consulate had brought a whole range of books which were mostly compilations of papers and speeches from the American Revolution — the Declaration of Independence and speeches of people like Patrick Henry, ‘Give me liberty or give me death’ and all that sort of thing. The American Revolution was very inspiring. We didn’t know then that the Americans were great imperialists, nor did we really know about the true condition of African-Americans.

Dr Banda returned to Malawi in 1958,<sup>1</sup> and within a year he had, in his words, ‘set the country on fire’, forcing the colonial government to declare a state of emergency under which he was arrested as were many of his followers. Our only African teacher, like most Africans with a university degree, was arrested and detained in Southern Rhodesia. There weren’t many Africans with degrees, about 100 people in Nyasaland — after more than 60 years of colonial rule! The Nyasaland Africa Congress was banned. During the emergency our detained history teacher was replaced by a Scottish missionary, Reverend Andrew Ross, who volunteered to teach us in preparation for our exams at the end of the year. He was fiercely anti-colonial. He introduced us to the plight and struggles of contemporary Black Americans and gave a radical interpretation of Negro Spirituals. He also gave us an account of the American Revolution that linked our struggle to that of the Americans and emphasized the historical importance of the American Declaration of Independence. And of course, we were very aware of the rise of Ghana and soon after several West African states.

Dr Banda’s return and the subsequent state of emergency coincided with our preparations for O Levels.<sup>2</sup> We could not concentrate, at least *I* could not concentrate, because the atmosphere was so charged. Police would come to our school with photographs looking for anyone who had been seen

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1. Dr Hastings Kamuzu Banda was to become the prime minister and later president of Malawi from 1964 to 1994. He completed his medical qualifications in Edinburgh and lived in the UK and Ghana, before returning to his home country of Malawi (Nyasaland) in 1958. He spoke out against colonialism, opposed the federation with Rhodesia, and advocated independence for Nyasaland.

2. ‘Ordinary Levels’ — exams taken by 16 year olds under the British education system at the time.

throwing stones or burning cars or shouting nationalist slogans in town. During this time, the British Prime Minister, Harold Macmillan, visited Malawi on the Africa tour that culminated in his famous ‘Wind of Change’ speech.<sup>3</sup> We had discussed holding a demonstration but that was not allowed during the emergency. However, we learnt that during his visit to Nigeria there were demonstrations calling for an end to the state of emergency in Malawi and the release of Dr Banda. So, we just said ‘This is incredible, Nigerians are demonstrating for us, and this man is going to come here and there will be no demonstration. No way!’. So, overnight, we secretly organized a big demonstration. The police were taken by surprise and embarrassed and they reacted brutally. I was among those who were arrested. The demonstration was well covered by the contingent of British journalists that were travelling with Macmillan. They were shocked by the brutality of the police. Apparently, it hadn’t occurred to them that the imperial order regularly demanded the demonstration of brute force in the colonies.

After completing secondary school during the state of emergency, I got a job at the government stores in Blantyre while waiting for the Cambridge School Certificate exam results. While working at the government stores, I worked as a volunteer on a cyclostyled paper, *Malawi News*, for the newly-formed Malawi Congress Party. The paper was founded by Aleke Banda, who was 20 years old and the editor. I was 19 years old and later became the assistant editor. The paper is still published as a weekly. The paper and the monthly *Tsopano* published by Peter Mackay were the only voice of the people of Malawi during the emergency. Virtually everyone with a university education was in jail then. So, we took upon ourselves the task of providing a voice to the masses, because under the emergency, no meetings were allowed. Both of us were supposed to be going for further study but chose instead to join the nationalist struggle.

In 1961 I was arrested again, together with six colleagues. We were accused of sedition and inciting violence and sentenced to 18 months of hard labour. That is another aspect of colonial rule — the façade of rule of law — because the whole trial was a farce. And in fact, when we appealed, the judge just could not believe it. So anyway, we were released after three months of breaking stones. But at that time, three months in jail was part of the game of liberation. After my release I went back to the newspaper.

***KM: How did you end up studying economics? You’re not the most mainstream of economists, I know you started out in journalism. . . .***

TM: Well, I started off as a journalist, as you say, and my interest in economics was to make myself a better journalist; it was not to make myself an economist. In 1961, there was an international conference in Malawi (still

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3. See: [www.sahistory.org.za/archive/wind-change-speech-made-south-africa-parliament-3-february-1960-harold-macmillan](http://www.sahistory.org.za/archive/wind-change-speech-made-south-africa-parliament-3-february-1960-harold-macmillan)

called Nyasaland). This was Malawi's first international conference, and it brought some big names in development — people like V.K.R.V. Rao, Bert Hoselitz, Gerald Meier, Peter Bauer, K.N. Raj, Nicholas Kaldor and W.W. Rostow. I was assigned the task of covering the event. I was absolutely shocked by the fact that I had no idea of what they were talking about. So, I decided if I ever got the opportunity for further studies in journalism I would include economics as my minor. I won a scholarship to the US to study journalism: I then changed and had economics as my major and journalism as a minor. For complicated reasons, I ended up first in Ecuador and then in Sweden. In both countries, language constraints made it clear that I couldn't go for journalism. And since I had majored in economics and I had a masters in economics, I just had to continue with the economics, and that was it.

***KM: You attended university in the USA in the 1960s. How did your activist youth influence your university experience?***

TM: I was lucky in the sense that I arrived in the US as things sort of blew up and America entered its most activist mode in years — the Civil Rights movement, and then, of course, the Vietnam War. There were many teach-ins then to address issues that the formal courses sidestepped. I attended a lot of those teach-ins, which were a critique of orthodox teaching in the university. As young men were drafted for foreign war there was also a thirst for knowledge of what lay behind them. One didn't study imperialism in the university, so there were also teach-ins on imperialism. And because of the Vietnam War and the Civil Rights movement, the concerns of liberation movements and new states were also taken up.

I also had one or two professors who were very influential in my understanding of things. One was teaching us the history of thought, which taught me that thought is not just abstract and that it has very strong social bases and huge material implications. The critical perspectives around the New School also had an impact on my thinking. Marcuse's *One-dimensional Man* was a big hit (Marcuse, 1964). However, at that time, my main concern was to graduate as quickly as possible and rush back home.

***KM: But it looks like things were turned a bit upside down after a few years because you found yourself facing a period of exile. How did you cope with that? Or was that something of a rite of passage?***

TM: A few months after independence in 1964 there was a 'Cabinet Crisis' that split the nationalist movement in Malawi. That soon created problems for my return to Malawi.

In 1965, I went to Ecuador with my professor, as a research assistant. He was running a USAID project — something on human resource planning. And while I was there, I found that I couldn't go back to the USA because

the government of Malawi had invalidated my passport, so I was stuck. My colleagues in the same position in the USA managed to get asylum there.

Latin America was really an eye opener for me. Coming from the British colonies, I had assumed that the US, with its support for African independence, was okay. The death of Lumumba<sup>4</sup> had, of course, tarnished that image but one's focus was still on the erstwhile colonial powers. So, when I got to Latin America, I was struck by the hostility of the Latin Americans toward the US, or 'Yanquis', and the whole sordid history of the US in Latin America. Che Guevara died while I was there. I just realized 'My God! In Africa we've been so obsessed with British colonial rule, we don't understand the new imperialist order', which was most naked in Latin America and Asia . . . . I could read Spanish, so I became interested in Latin American literature.

When I couldn't return to the USA, I was still not convinced that I was really in exile. I thought this was just a minor inconvenience: I can't go to the USA, but if I'm able to go to Europe, I'll sort it out and go back to the USA — only to find out that this was actually the beginning of exile. I went around embassies seeking asylum. Swedish officials advised me to seek admission to a Swedish university, secure some funding, and since I still had my passport, I should be able to travel to Sweden.

Sweden was very hospitable for political refugees. There were so many of us from different parts of the world in Stockholm. Intellectually you met a lot of people worrying about the same problems you were thinking about — about democracy, human rights, exile, etc. It was intellectually stimulating. But on a personal level it was very painful to realize that you can't go home. I didn't see my parents for 20 years, which was very difficult. The next time I saw my father was at my brother's funeral. My experience with the Swedish university was complicated. I came to Sweden with a Master's degree, but they insisted that I do another Master's, which I did. There was also a special course taught to foreign students in English which I took. I was asked to teach it the following year. A year later the course in English was abolished but I was asked to stay on and teach some Swedish courses.

***KM: You were able to teach in Swedish so quickly?***

TM: That was relatively easy, because economics is economics, you know. Demand, supply and a lot of graphs — I think if I had been teaching

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4. Patrice Émery Lumumba (1925–61) was the elected first Prime Minister of the Republic of the Congo, now the Democratic Republic of the Congo. He was an inspiring leader in Congolese independence and nationalist struggles and was assassinated under shadowy circumstances a few months after the country gained formal independence from Belgium in 1960. A US inquiry in 1975 pointed conclusively to CIA involvement in his death, and the Belgian government also admitted involvement in the assassination of Lumumba, leading to a formal government apology in 2002.

history, I would have had problems. But I also must thank the students for their infinite patience with me and their tolerance of my misuse of their language. The economics department in the University of Stockholm was going through some very dramatic changes away from the Gunnar Myrdal type economics [heterodox development economics] to which I was attracted, to a much more neoclassical economics. The department was also shifting from the old doctorate that took forever, to a more American-style doctorate which was a taught degree. Unfortunately our department was not clear about the requirements for the new doctorate, so they could not tell us what was needed. So, I just took as broad a range of economics as was available, including going back to mathematics for two years.

***KM: This is quite an eclectic educational career. Could you reflect a little bit on any writers either inside or outside economics that have been particularly influential on your thinking?***

TM: In economics, besides the ‘pioneers’ of development, like Arthur Lewis, Alexander Gerschenkron, Hirschman, Myrdal, I was attracted to the Cambridge school — Joan Robinson, Sraffa, etc. But I also was attracted to economists and economic historians, people like Galbraith, Maurice Dobbs and of course E.P. Thompson, who wrote good economics and economic history. That attracted the journalistic side of me. These authors have had a lasting influence on me. My Master’s paper was called ‘The Choice of Techniques’ and I was very influenced by Amartya Sen’s thinking on whether one should have labour-intensive techniques, which were employment maximizing, or capital-intensive techniques, which were surplus and investment maximizing. The interesting part for me was that Amartya Sen showed the deeply social and political nature of economics.

Outside economics, the early nationalist writing by people like Nkrumah, Nyerere, Senghor, Fanon and the pan-Africanist literature in general were very important. I was affected by the literature on the ‘national question’, as one would expect, and later, on the ‘question of class’. The Communist understanding of class was that it overrode national concerns, while for nationalists, political independence transcended everything else. We were torn apart by this division and these positions were never reconciled — the class–nation issue continues today. It was very difficult for a young person reading these texts, and the fights of people like George Padmore from the West Indies — who later became Nkrumah’s adviser. Such people were basically expelled from the Third International because they insisted on the national question and political independence. Later I read a piece by Ho Chi Minh complaining of the same problem. I think he walked out of one of the meetings of the French Communist party, because they could not admit the national question as something

to place on the agenda. So, one was torn between those two intellectual concerns.

Of course, Marxism had a lot of influence on my thinking in general. For some reason, I became interested in what Marxism said about other domains of human experience beyond political economy and for a year I didn't read anything on economics. Instead, I found myself reading the four-volume study by Arnold Hauser on *The Social History of Art* (1951), and the works of George Lucas, Raymond Williams, Terry Eagleton, Walter Benjamin, as well as work on African literature. After that digression, I went back to my economics.

***KM: Did your period of exile affect in any way your thinking about the state?***

TM: Yes, well, Sweden shook one's understanding of the state. Seeing a state that was managing the economy well, and also was democratic, with a record of significant social reform — how do I put it? I became aware of the state in a very different way in Sweden. It had reform potential. Because by that time, since I was in exile from a new African state, and the Latin American governments were horrible states, I had a kind of anti-state view, you know, in terms of being against what you might call actually existing states. In the USA the problems of poverty, racism and the bloody war in Vietnam did not give one much hope of far-reaching reformism within supposedly democratic states. And exile can breed a poorly anchored, alienated, and sometimes nostalgic view of the state. So it was nice being in Sweden and finding a state that was half decent that you can deal with. There were potentials there. Sweden made one aware of the ways in which 'embedded liberalism' could tame the structural power of capital — ways that allowed for the existence of welfare states in developed countries and the emergence of developmental states in developing countries. Sweden definitely reinforced my leftist inclinations, but also moderated them. Some of my colleagues in CODESRIA used to tease me by calling me a 'social democrat'.

***KM: At the time, did you see the Swedish model as something that had possibilities for the future of African states, or was that something that came later?***

TM: No, to be honest, I didn't, I was just fascinated by it. At first, it just looked too much *out there*, you know, it was too advanced. With the exception of Gunnar Myrdal no one had suggested that the Swedish experience could provide useful lessons for developing countries. It took me years to realize that. Ironically, it was when I came to UNRISD (in 1998) that I realized people were studying social policy with little mention of the Nordic experience. If you are interested in development and

insisted on a democratic order, then you had to bring in the Nordic experience because it was *there*. It demanded attention, not as a model to be replicated, but as one suggesting alternative paths of development for late industrializers. I also felt that social policy in developing countries had to go beyond the ‘welfarist’ task and become more transformative or developmental.

While there was great interest in the East Asian developmental states with their authoritarian features, the Nordic developmental experience offered additional perspectives to new democracies faced with the problem of providing substantive gains to their voters. While Sweden was obviously an advanced capitalist country, it offered a very strong leftist critique of the state, of social democracy. That’s what is very strange about Sweden. The social democracy in Sweden didn’t really get the support of the intellectuals. The intellectuals were left of social democracy. And the few [intellectuals] it got were refugees from Central Europe who were formulating some of the thinking, like Rudolf Meidner, or Harry Schein. So the social democracy in Sweden itself was very ‘workerist’, and a number of the key people were just trained in the workers’ schools — they didn’t go to university. I think at one time in the cabinet there were only two university graduates. Most of the people were trained in the workers’ study groups and study institutes. So there was this tension in Sweden between the academic left and social democracy.

***KM: How did you reconnect these experiences with African development research?***

TM: After 10 years in Sweden, I was given a travel grant to travel to any African institution of my choice. Samir Amin had offered me the opportunity to spend some time at IDEP, the United Nations Institute for Development Economics and Planning in Dakar, Senegal. Dakar was an intellectually exciting place and home to the African branch of the Dependency School. Such names as Andre Gunder Frank, Immanuel Wallerstein, and Giovanni Arrighi were associated with the institute.

A year after that, I was invited to come for six months to lead a programme they had on the future of Southern Africa. The six months turned into 13 years, including 10 years as Executive Secretary of CODESRIA, from 1986 through 1996. My stay there improved my skills as a social scientist because I had to deal with some of the leading scholars in social science in Africa who were part of the CODESRIA community. I learned a lot from them and from the management of an interdisciplinary institution. I learnt the importance of interdisciplinarity in studying problems of development. But I also learned it was intellectually demanding. It was not enough to bring together a little economics, a little politics and a little history to concoct interdisciplinary scholarship. You have to build interdisciplinary approaches and interdisciplinary institutions.

***KM: At the time you moved to Senegal, the reform processes in many African countries were moving in the opposite direction to your Swedish experience — not towards social democracy but towards structural adjustment. I'm wondering if you could comment a little on how you saw structural adjustment, but also on the kinds of legacies you feel that it has left in African countries.***

TM: Well, structural adjustment started very slowly, almost surreptitiously. There were all kinds of people that were saying 'Oh, this is a short-term thing'. A few countries had entered into agreements with the Bretton Woods institutions. The process then seemed haphazard and tailored to individual countries. However, when the Berg Report came out (Berg, 1981), it codified a new form of intervention in Africa that would be far reaching. In African intellectual circles, there was a very deep sense that this document signalled major changes in the development paradigm. CODESRIA organized a conference in Ahmadu Bello University (Nigeria) which produced the first major pronouncement by African scholars on structural adjustment.

Juxtaposed against the Washington pronouncement was the Lagos Plan of Action (OAU, 1980) which framed its response to the crisis in terms of industrialization through collective self-reliance. CODESRIA was involved with the Lagos Plan of Action and a conference in Addis to bring African academics and Ministers of Planning, mostly, to think about what the essential policy requirements for the new strategy were.

What was funny was that the Lagos Plan of Action was commissioned by Ministers of Planning, while it was African representatives in Washington institutions and African Ministers of Finance who had requested the World Bank to prepare the Berg Report. So, at the heart of the state, there was already a major split, with Ministers of Finance, now pejoratively viewed as the 'restraining ministers', for the Berg Report, and the so-called 'spending ministers' gathering around the Lagos Plan of Action. That divide has lasted four decades.

You know, the collapse of African economies in the main period of structural adjustment was deeper and lasted longer than the American Great Depression. In America, the depression finally ended with World War II. We call the structural adjustment period the 'lost decades' and so on, but I don't think that captures the economic decline of that period. We should be calling it the Great African Depression. There are some who suggest that Africa should forget about structural adjustment and look ahead. But people are still writing books about the American Great Depression to this day. Nobody says 'don't write about the Depression anymore, it's over'. And in Africa, it's still not over. Many countries in Africa have not fully recovered, have yet to reach their per capita income of the 1970s, so it's still there. In fact, the best we can say is that some countries have returned to the per capita incomes of the 1970s. People are now talking about the rising middle class — this new middle class in Africa. There was a middle class that rose

after independence and that was pauperized by structural adjustment, you know — professors driving taxis and all that. And some of the new middle class, including our leading writers, are children of these pauperized civil servants and professionals.

I've been concerned with the implications for African societies as a whole of having gone through such an experience. By the mid-1990s the World Bank people began to utter a number of *mea culpas*: 'we've made a mistake with the infrastructure, we've made a mistake with higher education, we've made a mistake with institutions, we've made mistakes on sequencing of policies, we've made a mistake on policy ownership', and so on. This was just before the recovery began. Then the African Boom made everyone forget about these *mea culpas* and the consequences of having gone through these terrible policies. What are their implications for the future? Did all these mistakes cause the recovery?

That's what I'm working on now. If you have that many *mea culpas*, you create an economy, and that economy behaves in a particular way. These are some of the legacies we should be looking at to understand African economies, not just colonial or pre-colonial legacies. The outcomes of the 20 years or more of decline are now the 'initial conditions' for the new Africa, and they are, in my opinion, not exactly auspicious. The new Africa is having problems, because many of its issues were not addressed. Since the boom came, the IMF tried to play 'Now structural adjustment is working'. That's rubbish. But what is important is that the boom made everyone forget about these *mea culpas* — the policy failures of structural adjustment — and the consequences of having gone through that.

***KM: Of course, the rise of neoliberal thinking didn't only damage African economies; it also discredited African states as forces for development, and you've suggested it weakened their capacity. But you've maintained quite a positive view of what African states could do. Why do you feel that the state remains an important force for African development?***

TM: Well, they simply *are* — if you think about Africa's development as a serious proposition. Once you think about that, there's no other instrument for a coordinated effort of development but the state. With all due respect to Pliny's claim '*ex Africa semper aliquid novi*' (there is always something new from Africa), Africa would have to do something incredibly different from the rest of the world to develop rapidly without the state. I mean, it's never been done. The only viable instrument for development is some reasonably intelligent and capable state.

It's not that I'm a lover of the state on a gut level — I mean, many of my generation of African academics were refugees, for heaven's sake! What I've been objecting to in my work is the assertion by some that what has happened elsewhere — the use of the state as an instrument for social transformation — is impossible in Africa. And the reasons given range from

‘cultural impossibility’, to ‘WTO does not allow it’. I mean, it’s this idea of foreclosing an option that has been so vital to transformation elsewhere that I find objectionable and ill-informed.

This idea that African states are incapable of fostering development was constructed in the 1980s and 1990s to justify rolling back the state to facilitate market-led governance. In the neoliberal era, it was often claimed that while the positions of the IFIs [international financial institutions] were based on ‘sound macroeconomics’, the perspectives of their local critics were entirely driven by greed and self-interest. Failures of African states were never seen as inadvertent but as ineluctably linked to rent seeking and neopatrimonialism. This kind of view not only supports the punitive interventions undertaken by IFIs but also eliminates the state’s essential space for trial and error, which is key to development policy.

In his controversial book on African states, Robert Bates asked: ‘Why should reasonable men adopt public policies that have harmful consequences for the societies they govern’ (Bates, 1981: 3). This question managed to do two things at once: it combined the ‘rational choice’ interpretation of politics with a neoliberal ‘stylization’ of the economy, and focused attention on the ‘right’ policies that axiomatically emerged. The resulting reading of Africa’s political economy became so much part of official common sense that other readings seemed eccentric, or even dogmatic. What ensued in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was a struggle between the notions of ‘adjustment’ and ‘development’. These two conceptions were premised on very different understandings of Africa’s economic problems and on different visions of the road ahead. In the battle between them, some ideas won not by logical force, empirical accuracy or even ease of implementation, but by the sheer power of money and political muscle on the one hand, and the weakness of African states and the disarray within Africa on the other hand. The truth is that there were many errors of omission and commission by African policy makers as well as by their peripatetic international advisors. But the latter could always walk away from the scene of crime, while African policy makers were left with the smoking gun.

I understand where some of these negative ideas about African states came from — if you were writing about Africa during the depression of the 1980s and 1990s, it might seem impossible for African states to bring development. But I’m old enough to have seen — and to have experienced — a time when Africa grew fairly rapidly and when states in Africa extended education, health provision and so on — I saw that. And I saw the decline. So to me the whole narrative of an impossibility didn’t make sense. That’s why I wrote the paper on ‘Thinking about Developmental States in Africa’ (Mkandawire, 2001). When I initially submitted it, it was suggested by one referee that I had to provide data on Africa’s performing better in the past. So there’s a table there that I produced because I was forced to. It shows that countries like Ivory Coast were growing at 11 per cent for 15 years. I mean if history stopped in 1980, this would be one of the great success stories of the Third

World. I was later to return to the ‘impossibility’ arguments by writing a paper on the neopatrimonialism school of thinking (Mkandawire, 2015). Maybe these are some of the sensibilities which come from my having lived through the colonial experience, because I learned, I think, to read the *subtext* of imperial discourse on Africa.

***KM: Many people feel that for states in Africa to be developmental, there must be a certain tolerance of authoritarianism. An effective developmental state in East Asia was in many cases an authoritarian state. You’ve always argued against that. Why do you think democracy is so important to the developmental role of the state in Africa?***

TM: The debate about the developmental state has changed over time. In the 1970s, when African states were growing, the focus was on how dependent and unequal their growth was. In the adjustment era, the new focus was on whether African countries could foster high levels of growth and structural change. Could they, like their counterparts in East Asia, have ‘developmental states’? The response from the West was generally a resounding ‘No’. The reasons given ranged from geography, culture, ethnic diversity, corruption, distance from the sea, unfortunate colonial past of having high mortality among missionaries — the list goes on. One implication was that African governments could not learn from the most recent cases of rapid industrialization. So one had to challenge that by demonstrating that over a whole decade in the early independence period, some African states had grown rapidly and witnessed significant structural change.

My own research then was directed first to establishing the possibilities of developmental states in Africa and then arguing that they could also be democratic. Nowadays, when people talk about democratic developmental states, the two most frequently cited African states are Botswana and Mauritius. So within Africa, we have had examples already. It is not simply aspirational — I mean, it can be done. You can argue that Mauritius is a small country or that Botswana has got diamonds, but the fact is, these are African experiences. I also lived in Nordic countries which, as late industrializers, were developmental states — *and* they were democratic. There’s no reason, whether from economics or history, for assuming there is always an ‘authoritarian advantage’. The East Asian model was authoritarian but that is just one model. Usually people say authoritarian states are good because they can override myopic demands of the population for instant gratification and can pursue a long-term vision. But the European democracies built the Euro Tunnel — it took years to build. The Americans sent a man to the moon. Democracies are quite capable of very long-term thinking. They’re actually much more consistent than authoritarian regimes which can change at the whim of the leaders. But ultimately the most important argument is normative. Democracy has an intrinsic value. I just don’t like authoritarian regimes!

**KM: [Laughs] From personal experience!**

TM: Yes, from personal experience! And I've really done and I will continue to do as little as possible in thinking on behalf of authoritarian regimes.

In fact, one of the consequences of adjustment was to provoke popular revolts, some of which led to movements for democracy. Here we have a second problem. Adjustment was initially said to work better under authoritarian rule. Pinochet's regime was iconic. In Africa, military regimes in Ghana and Uganda seemed to prove the validity of this argument. In 1985, CODESRIA sent a delegation of leaders of African social science networks to Latin America to study how the social sciences were managing under authoritarian rule. A key concern in Latin American research at that time was the issue of 'governability', which contrasted with our concern about 'governance' — back in the 1980s, before it had entered the official development lexicon. While our approach pointed to the state actors and the problem of misrule, the governability approach in Latin America tended to focus on the supposedly excessive demands of civil society that had led to the economic disasters that created space for military rule. One implication was that democratic movements should tone down their substantive demands on emerging democracies. So you see, the new movements for democracy were trapped. Ascending to power under adjustment severely curtailed their policy options, which were restricted to producing what I have called 'choiceless democracy' (Mkandawire, 1994, 2004b). We had some heated debates over these approaches.

My argument is that developmental democracies need to do more than to shore up economic reforms. They have to address some of the substantive demands of the population not only through high economic performance but also through inclusive social policy. It is here that the Nordic experience played a role in my work on developmental states, social policy and democracy.

**KM: Why do you think it's important to focus on social policy in the context of African development? Social policy may seem a strange priority for a region that is still struggling to industrialize.**

TM: Well, part of it is the Nordic experience, you know. But also, intellectually, Gunnar Myrdal had argued for many years for what he called social investment as a developmental tool. That was always in my mind. When you talk to Swedes, when they tell you about their own history, the Nordics were late industrializers. It turns out social policy was an important part of their *development*. I mean the focus on social democracy turned to talk about social investment and the deliberate use of social policy for catching up. After all, the welfare state does not emerge first in Britain. It emerges first in Germany — because in a sense, a number of 'social questions' are more serious for the late industrializers. In retrospect, maybe they were not

aware of the developmental impact of what they were doing at the time. But now they look back and they say ‘my God, a lot of the things we did actually helped’. In countries like Finland, which were late industrializers — very late industrializers — social policy became one of the most important parts of their catching up, because social policy provides you with human capital; with the savings for development, through pension schemes; with the social cohesion you need to survive the very rough process of transformation. So you don’t do social policy *after* development, you have to do it *with* development.

***KM: You seem to see development as a more complicated process than just focusing on economic and governance reforms. What do you see as the central goal? In your inaugural lecture at the London School of Economics in 2010, you argued that Africa must ‘run where others walked’.<sup>5</sup> Do you see catching up as the main goal? Won’t this just lead to new problems of environmental degradation and community disempowerment as is often the case with rapid development?***

TM: ‘Catching up’ does not mean being like the West, or the East. My concern is with bridging the huge gap in material well-being between the developed countries and the rest of us. And within the ‘rest’, Africa is at the tail end. Such catching up involves rapid growth, structural change and technological mastery. It involves learning from others, selectively applying the lessons, being innovative to partly ‘leapfrog’ over certain ‘stages’. ‘Catching up’ suggests intentionality and the drawing up of strategic plans to attain the goal. Neoliberal reforms have been against any intention other than that sanctioned by markets. It is against ‘planning’ and has little vision of Africa beyond the role that ‘comparative advantage’ assigns to it.

It’s true that, all too often, human rights have been violated and nature devastated in the name of economic development. But we must be careful that our environmental concerns are not framed for us. There are views on the environment that would relegate the continent to a kind of game park, where poverty and disease roam as freely as Africa’s rich fauna, and African farmers are reduced to gardeners of the world.

I once said, rather provocatively, at an environment conference that if we must eat all our elephants to stop our children from starving, we would have to do it. This was in response to an eco-fascist view of Africa in which the lives of animals were given greater value than our lives. A speaker had cited as a model the creation of South Africa’s Kruger National Park, without bothering about how people had been moved around or evicted from those places.

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5. For the text of this lecture, see: [http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/55395/1/Mkandawire\\_Running\\_while\\_others\\_walk\\_LSE\\_African\\_Initiative\\_2010.pdf](http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/55395/1/Mkandawire_Running_while_others_walk_LSE_African_Initiative_2010.pdf)

Our continent is rich in fauna and flora and we should do everything to preserve them but not at the cost of the dignity and well-being of the African people. We can learn a lot from the mistakes of others, including from those who in their gilded palaces never cease to preach to us about the virtues of simplicity and ‘living close to nature’.

When one reads about projections of climate change, it is quite clear that most of the negative outcomes for Africa stem from, and will be aggravated by, the low levels of economic development and technological mastery. Managing droughts and floods will require huge amounts of energy and sophisticated infrastructure to protect African populations against the ravages of climate change. And all this will require rapid economic development and structural change.

We will have to find out how we can minimize the environmental cost of development without stifling economic development. We must insist that these debates on environment and climate change are attentive to and relevant to the social well-being and economic growth in poorer countries and societies — and simultaneously minimize the cost to the environment and maximize our human welfare. Although the debate about climate change is often conducted at a highly abstract level about our common humanity and common future, it is ultimately a highly political issue about the distribution of costs of adjustment — how to compensate victims of the abuse of the environment by others, and how to share the benefits that arise from our prudent use of resources.

***KM: One of your hallmarks as a thinker has been to emphasize the need for a comparative perspective in the study of Africa. I wonder if you could reflect on why you feel a comparative perspective is so important.***

TM: I think it’s easier to generalize about Africa than to understand all these differences. Africans have a lot of things in common, and if you’re not a good observer of the continent, all you will see is this chromatic Africa. Those things in common dominate everything else. But once you look closely at African countries and travel around Africa you realize Africans and African countries are very, very different amongst themselves. And the cause of the differences, some go as far back as the pre-colonial days. The Sahelian countries with their empires and pre-colonial trade patterns are very different from Southern African countries or from some of the stateless societies in various parts of Africa. And then, of course, African countries were confronted with different colonial experiences that shaped nationalist movements in a variety of ways. Nationalist movements in Africa were not the same, nor did they have the same agenda other than decolonization; it all depended on what they were confronted with from the colonial powers.

You take the simple case of agriculture in Africa. The agrarian question appears differently in different parts of Africa. In Southern Africa, the central concerns were to end the migrant labour system, and more importantly

to take back land through land reform, most dramatically in Zimbabwe. In West African cash crop economies, the obsession was how to capture the rents that were going to colonial merchant houses or marketing boards. In fact, in Ivory Coast, the issue was how to allow the emerging [black] agrarian capitalist farmers to have the right to employ labour, because they weren't allowed to. The former President of Ivory Coast, Houphouët-Boigny, joined the nationalist movement — he was a landlord — to fight for the right to employ African labour! In other parts of Africa, they're fighting against colonial neglect, because nothing happened there. So, there are all these differences in colonial experiences, and responses to them shaped policies after independence. Then the World Bank goes to Zimbabwe in 1981 saying 'your problem is with getting prices right'! This is crazy! It's quite clear that the main issue in Zimbabwe is the land question, not getting prices right. In fact, the reality in Zimbabwe is that the agricultural marketing boards, because they were serving white farmers, never extracted surplus from agriculture. So, the whole advice about prices was just totally off the mark.

When you come from a rich country, poor countries look the same, and sometimes, even when they make progress, you don't see it, because they're still so far away from the rich countries. You can see people writing about a city like Nairobi and they see no changes because it still looks poor compared to London and Paris. So maybe that's part of it, too, the vision problem. That is why so much of the Western aid establishment simply can't see Africa industrializing. Asians can see easily because they are not far off from where we are, and that's why they can imagine Africa industrializing. The Japanese and the Chinese have always thought Africa can industrialize — I suppose because their own experience is quite recent in their memories.

***KM: You've been very critical of the kind of 'doom and gloom' perspectives on Africa that characterized the 1980s and the 1990s. Do you think the shift to the more optimistic perspectives of 'Africa Rising' are more constructive than those of Afro-pessimism — especially now that the IMF admits that structural adjustment was 'oversold'?***

TM: No, I don't think what is happening now is more constructive. I was critical, not so much because it was doom and gloom, but just that it was bad social science. The basis for being optimistic or being pessimistic was just purely subjective. And in many cases, these were personal biographies. People came in the 1960s, young, very enthusiastic about Africa — by the 1970s and the 1980s, they were disillusioned and depressed. One of them, Gavin Kitching, wrote an article called something like 'Why I Left Africa' — I think he went to Australia. And I remember responding, 'I didn't know he had left'.<sup>6</sup> It was not good social science — with no sense of

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6. See: <http://motspluriels.arts.uwa.edu.au/MP1600gk.html>

conjuncture, you know — to experience something that takes place in a 10-year period and that becomes that country's culture and history. It didn't make sense.

When Africa 'recovered', the mood shifted from Afro-pessimism to 'Afro-euphoria' — all about 'Africa Rising'. I have been critical of that stance too because it does not address the questions about the legacies of such a deep and prolonged depression and the quality and the sustainability of the recovery. While the Great Depression in the Western countries spawned many new ideas, including Keynesianism and modern social democracy, the neoliberal hegemony simply blocked any new thinking in African policy circles. It placed African economies on a trajectory whose drivers and direction we have not fully grasped as people glibly celebrate Africa's 'rise'. But is the 'rise' sustainable in the absence of adequate domestic resource mobilization and structural change? Many countries in Africa have yet to reach their per capita income of the 1970s. The accretion of policy errors under structural adjustment has created 'maladjusted' economies that have not been able to respond well to fleeting opportunities that have presented themselves. We saw this during the recent commodity boom.

In many countries the extractive capacity of the state had collapsed, and so states could not capture the new rents of the commodity boom. Take the case of Zambia as a classic example. Chile makes US\$ 35 billion out of the copper boom. Zambia makes US\$ 200 million. Under the new recovery, hardly any industrialization took place because the capacity for industrialization had collapsed. Many countries which now have all those reserves, have no capacity for investing in the long term. There are no institutions within the country for financing long-term projects. Then there is human capital — the policies led to massive neglect of higher education and the crisis led to large-scale human flight, if you will — the brain drain.

As for new thinking about adjustment, I'm sure this occurred not because of the terrible pain the policy regime inflicted on the African continent, but because of the failures of the austerity regime in the Western countries. No amount of documentation of the negative effects of adjustment seemed sufficient to challenge neoliberalism in Africa. In their minds, the cause of crisis in Africa was obvious: bad policies driven by rent seeking and clientelism. But when the advanced countries were faced with the same problem, it was difficult to say that it was simply a product of bad political culture. There has been some admission by people — gurus of neoliberalism, Greenspan and so forth — that their understanding of markets was wrong. A large number of economists have criticized the model, because of its effect in Europe and in the US. Sadly, it's quite possible for people to say this model was wrong for Europe and the US and still insist that it's good for Africa. And we're seeing that: the IMF is still going around in Africa and imposing the same model.

***KM: There has been some new thinking about African development involving a return to industrial policy and to universal social policy. Does this represent more of a convergence of mainstream policy with your own thinking, or do you think there are important differences?***

TM: The apparent return to more structuralist policy ideas is not really much of a shift. It remains within neoliberal ideas about pursuing ‘comparative advantage’ and addressing ‘market failures’, and is not part of a strategic, developmental allocation of resources. My concern over all these years has been the economic development of poor countries. The litmus test for any policy is whether it contributes to economic growth and structural change. I’m not sure that the new criticism of the neoliberal model necessarily addresses the issues: does it contribute to economic development, structural change and social equity? Many of the solutions suggested by the new approach have pushed the focus of policy towards transaction costs, ignoring the more pertinent problem of production costs. But if there is any convergence between those who are concerned with the issues of employment and stabilization in the rich countries and those who are also concerned with economic development and structural change, fine.

***KM: Do you feel your ideas have had more of an influence on specifically African debates about industrialization and social policy?***

TM: It is difficult to say. One thing we succeeded in doing was to undermine the intellectual dominance of neoliberalism in African academic circles and regional policy organizations. If you look at some of the reports of the ECA [Economic Commission for Africa] — its annual reports of the last five years or so — there was an impact, with much more of a heterodox focus on issues like the developmental state, industrialization, social policy, and so on. We also brought to the attention of African policy makers some economists other than the usual suspects that have crowded the consultancy industry. But I think it was a temporary victory. At one time, the heads of the ECA were sympathetic to or proponents of developmental thinking while at other times they support more neoliberal thinking.

I also think that most of the leaders in Africa — the Zenawis and Kagames of the world — were desperately looking for a developmental model, and developmental thinking, because they had to *deliver*. Hence, their openness to rather heterodox thinking. Some leaders and advisers explicitly read the work that critical African scholars have been producing on these issues, while others developed heterodox policy ideas by looking at the Asian experience directly. The late Ethiopian Prime Minister Meles Zenawi told me he was influenced by my paper on developmental states.

As for shifts in the social policy agenda, that is largely donor driven. For the past 30 years or more, social policy was not understood as a developmental issue. It was more about safety nets or anti-poverty measures

to make structural adjustment more palatable, but it was not seen as central to the project of economic transformation, something I've written about extensively. Now you can link social policy to economic policy through Keynesian full employment thinking, as in the developed countries, or to problems of accumulation and structural change, as in developing countries. But the mainstream debate on social policy in Africa today does not make any explicit link to any economic model, except implicitly to neo-classical economics, where it is still essentially about correcting 'market failures', and sometimes about limited notions of redistributive justice. But this perspective still does not regard social policy as a major instrument of socio-economic transformation.

***KM: Shifts to more spending-intensive development policies have been accompanied by a new thinking about financing. In particular, there is growing attention to domestic resource mobilization. Do you see this as a positive development?***

TM: It's absolutely a must to improve domestic resource mobilization! Adjustment was premised on the argument that if you had 'good policies' in the form of financial liberalization, high interest rates would attract foreign capital. But capital does not flow from the capital rich to the capital poor. Like water flowing uphill, 61 per cent of global savings go to the US, and only a trickle is attracted to African countries, no matter how liberalized they become. Neoclassical economists acknowledge these 'paradoxes' but still insist on countries behaving as if financial markets work perfectly. So, there is just no choice: if Africa wants to finance industrial and social policy, it has to mobilize its own savings. There is no money of the required magnitude that will come in from outside. In many countries in Africa, there was a collapse in savings in the 1980s. Their savings today are lower than they were in the 1970s. The immediate task is just getting back to where the savings were in the 1970s. Some of the African countries that are considered good performers today are very poor savers — I'm talking about Rwanda and Ethiopia — countries with active industrialization and social protection strategies. That is not sustainable.

We see today that countries like China with high savings — 50 per cent of GDP is saved — attract the most foreign investment. The Chinese bring in foreign investment not for the capital but for the technology. At one time in China, foreign companies were not allowed to bring in their own money. They had to borrow from Chinese banks. That strengthened the capacity of the Chinese government to negotiate technological transfers with these companies, because they are using Chinese money. Most countries in the world finance investment with their own savings. We often forget that while a small country like Malawi may indeed be dependent on aid and can say that aid is an important part of the national budget, most countries in Africa are already financing much of their budgets, but they spend too much time

worrying about donors and foreign investors who contribute a much smaller part of expenditure. The donors have been very smart in using the little money they give to leverage the entire policy regime.

So we must rebuild the institutions for domestic resource mobilization and allocation. Many of those that served such roles were closed — you know, development banks, marketing boards, etc. Africa's recovery is taking place at a time when all the institutions that enhanced the extractive capacity of the state are weak. Because of state retrenchment, the capacity for domestic resource mobilization collapsed and governments failed miserably in capturing the rents from improved commodity prices, as in the case of Zambia mentioned earlier. One of the most heated political debates of today is how we lost this. Owners of companies such as Glencore became billionaires on Zambian copper. In fact, what happened in Zambia was so extreme that it's the only case I know of where the IMF actually urged the country to increase mining royalties [laughs]. It was that bad!

***KM: You've had a long-term interest in the role of universities and academic freedom. Why do you feel that universities have such an important role to play in Africa?***

TM: Well firstly, one of the reasons why I was forced to stay in exile by Kamuzu Banda was my protest against academic repression in Malawi in the 1960s. Just after independence, the youth wing of Banda's political party attacked the new university. I wrote an article attacking Banda's party for interfering with the university. Banda was very angry and called me a 'yelping intellectual puppy' that should be brought back 'alive if possible, dead if necessary'. So, I've always been interested in that side of the story because it was so clear in our case.

Later, in CODESRIA, we regularly received reports that people were being arrested and killed and that certain research themes and publications were taboo in some countries, or that a researcher could not travel to a CODESRIA conference because he/she had been denied a travel permit. In response to these terrible academic conditions, we organized the famous Kampala Conference on Academic Freedom in 1990, which was a major event that was highly publicized. The fact of the matter was that we were fed up with repression. Even during the conference, I recall, we received a letter from young African students who were in prison in Ivory Coast. They managed to smuggle out a fax with a message of solidarity. Many African students and academics wanted to come, but they were not allowed. At that time, Kenyan academics couldn't leave the country without permission from the state. One Kenyan academic simply walked across the border to take a bus, and she arrived a day after the conference was over. I was told by CODESRIA staff that there was a woman who had just arrived and she needed accommodation. I thought, 'How can she come now, the conference is over', you know. I went to see her, and it was the Nobel prize winner,

Wangari Maathai. She just said something like, ‘OK, I don’t care where I’m sleeping, I just wanted to make the point that I have *arrived*, I’ve made it, and I endorse whatever the symposium has declared’.

The symposium came out with the Kampala Declaration on Academic Freedom.<sup>7</sup> There is something about African governments and pan-African institutions. Some governments had no idea what CODESRIA is, so they just assumed that it must be a pan-African inter-governmental authority, which had said that we must have academic freedom [laughs]. And they began responding. In three countries — Namibia, Malawi, and I think Ghana — the new constitutions that were being written *included* academic freedom. Later, when Malawian universities were having trouble with the government, they appealed to the constitution which said academic freedom was one of the foundational laws of the country.

On a broader scale, one of the big achievements of African countries was building African universities, and today when you visit the campuses of many of these universities, the dilapidated structures are still testimony to the high ambitions and aspirations of the time. African governments invested a lot of resources in the universities. And it was terrible for my generation to watch, in the 1980s, the destruction of the African university. Not only in terms of the ideological onslaught on the university as nationalism lost its power, what with the soldiers coming in, but also the *physical* destruction of the universities due to the fiscal onslaught related to structural adjustment — with libraries closing, and no new monies coming in. One had to react to defend the universities.

When I was in CODESRIA, many academic networks in Africa that would eventually collapse, wanted to be an alternative to universities. We in CODESRIA believed and openly said that our basis and lifeblood was the universities. Our objective was to strengthen the universities, not bypass them. At that time people said ‘CODESRIA is very difficult to work with’. One of the problems was that people from outside Africa had written off the universities. They wanted to work with us as a network, but not with our universities. Our headache was that, when all was said and done, our universities were in trouble. There was this risk of CODESRIA being out there and having poor responses from academics — it took longer to get papers done by people. Academics were doing two, three jobs trying to make ends meet. But we could not be isolated from the academic community — we would end up being a spider without a web.

There is also an academic argument. The study of Africa by Africans has — partly because of the weakening of the African university but also partly because of the division of labour between scholars in the North and in Africa — never enjoyed the free space and the assertiveness that you see in other parts of the developing world. It’s still quite possible to write a whole

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7. For the text of the Declaration, see: <http://hrlibrary.umn.edu/africa/KAMDOK.htm>

book on Nigeria with no reference to Nigerian scholars. You wouldn't do that for Brazil or India. When it comes to Africa, there's no demand that you should demonstrate some knowledge of local scholarship. Instead, foreign researchers go to African universities and ask for the doctoral theses and unpublished academic papers, and use them, but there's no reference. I've called this the 'Dr Livingstone syndrome', where people want to say, 'I discovered this or that'. They don't want to say, 'I read this in Africa'.

I used to complain a lot about that, but I just realized, maybe we have different concerns, and each other's concerns look odd to the other side. In the North, if you want to cover Malawi's elections, before you get the money, that's a whole year, and then you do the research . . . So, by the time you get it published, three years have gone, and Malawians have been writing in newspapers or writing small pieces here and there all that time. So you have articles from the North with the latest bibliography and the latest references, but with a very old story. On the African side, it's the other way around, you know: the story is new, but the bibliography is dated. And so, we reject each other for those reasons. We're not communicating, you know. I think that Africanist scholarship loses a lot by not taking the African literature more seriously.

***KM: From within CODESRIA, there's a strong emphasis on a commitment to the promotion of an African research agenda, grounded in African experience. Could you expand on what you mean by that?***

TM: It seems quite natural to us that African researchers should address issues that they have reason to believe are important to their societies. Some of these concerns may not be of much interest to others. Many times, we embarked on themes which were not interesting to anybody except Africans and a few Africanists. We were very obsessed with militarism, for instance, very, very early on. We began worrying about democracy in Africa before it was even discussed in the mainstream development literature. I mean our first network on democracy and social movements was in the 1970s. The themes may not be uniquely African, but it's partly about who gets there first. We would normally get there first because we were driven by our own concerns. But you couldn't get money for research on militarism or democracy in Africa back then. Fortunately, because of our core funding by the Nordics, we could embark on any research we wanted. So we began working on these themes that mattered to us.

I've written a small piece about this with regard to the issue of 'governance' (Mkandawire, 2007b). Within African intellectual circles, when the World Bank was pushing structural adjustment, we were obviously opposed to it. In our view we had a governance problem internally, not simply a pricing problem. We understood that this whole focus on prices and judging state performance by that was so wrong. At one time, Mobutu brought somebody from a New York bank, liberalized the economy, and Zaire was hailed as a

good performer! To every African scholar, this was crazy. So we got a grant from the Ford foundation: it was US\$ 400,000, which in those days was a lot of money. It was given to us by a Kenyan officer who was familiar with the CODESRIA intellectual milieu. He immediately understood our pre-occupation and he said he would take the risk and give us some money. The first governance institute in Africa was organized by CODESRIA; since then, there have been a lot of governance institutes all over Africa.

Usually, the issue is timing — whether we felt such things were important or not important for Africa. CODESRIA had a relatively participatory way of choosing the overarching agenda. It had to go through the General Assembly, and there were big debates — people had to write ‘Green Books’ which contained an overview of the current issues and proposed new directions. There were debates in the CODESRIA Bulletin before something got onto the agenda. It wasn’t as easy as saying ‘the executive committee wants you to work on this’. CODESRIA wasn’t just about agenda setting; it was about institution building.

***KM: Do you think that the expansion of private universities nowadays, and satellite campuses of Western universities, helps to expand academic space in Africa?***

TM: I think it’s good that there’s space for private universities, though sometimes I fear they will undermine their credibility by making outrageous claims. These days the private universities talk of training people to become leaders. But most of the countries they are in are democracies. How you rise to power is very complicated, you know. You don’t come with a certificate that says ‘I’m a leader’. You have to be elected. We just have to watch out for these false solutions — once this person spoke about what his university is doing — ‘we’re going to produce 100,000 graduates’ and I thought ‘What?! Who is going to fund 100,000 people for him? And what does it mean to have 100,000 leaders [Laughs] . . . and no followers’.

The real challenge for Africa is how to make public universities produce better human resources for their political and economic development and to ensure private universities are of high quality and not simply fly-by-night sources of income. Whatever you say about public universities in Africa, they remain the most important providers of higher education. Most Africans will go to public universities. And it’s true not only of Africa; it’s also true of the USA. The state universities are the largest providers of education. No country that I know of has private universities as educators of the majority of the student body. So, Africans should not be fooled into believing that private universities are the key to their future. They can play some catalytic role if they are very sharp, or they can train the *crème-de-la-crème*, you know, that sort of thing. But in terms of the fundamental human resources of the country, it’s public universities that will do that.

Public universities have been through a bad patch, but they are on the way to revival. Currently, the fastest growing university population in the world is in Africa — last time I looked at figures it was 8 million. There are many reasons for this. The first is the improvement in many governments' finances owing to improved performance of their economies. The second is the fact that the middle classes are concerned about the quality of universities because it's getting harder to send their kids abroad. So, you find debates in parliaments today which you never had in the 1980s, discussing the quality and the funding of universities. The new technologies are helping not only in making information available but also in heightening the sense that our universities are not doing as well as they should in terms of research output. And finally, the restrictions on African migration are forcing governments and the middle class to the realization that there are no alternatives to making national universities work. The solution is not to fund private universities as substitutes. We have been very irresponsible with respect to public universities — but we still must insist on making the quality of both public and private universities better.

***KM: In the past 10 years, universities in the UK and other European countries have become very focused on engagement with Africa. That was, in fact, one of the reasons for creating the chair that you currently hold at the LSE. What do you see as the best way of promoting constructive collaboration between African and European universities and academics?***

TM: Well, the ideal thing, the ideal model, would be that both sides bring their resources, and academics meet entirely based on intellectual affinities. Unfortunately, much of the collaboration and the financing is skewed because African universities are bringing no money to the table. So, one should be aware, right from the beginning, of the asymmetrical nature of the relationship, and try to find ways of fighting the structural asymmetries that come up as a result. I also believe that, if what African academics think is not considered important to the intellectual project, then of course collaboration will not work. As I said before, Africa is the only place where you can write books about, say, Malawi, with no reference to Malawian scholarship. It's just seen as irrelevant to the intellectual project of the North. The scholars themselves must feel, 'I need to know what scholarship is going on there'.

Ideally, I think it's important for Africa to continue sending scholars abroad, for research or special training. When I was at CODESRIA we had this programme called 'Reflections on Development', a programme which gave people a US\$ 30,000 grant to go abroad for some research or writing. Significant books by scholars like Mahmood Mamdani, Claude Ake and Paul Zeleza came from that programme. They came and were given a room, and library access, and they wrote their books. My hope was that we would do the same thing here at the LSE. What we can do from this end is provide space, especially for sabbaticals. People come here for three months, six

months, and go back. I think this would be extremely productive. And if it was possible to send faculty from the West to teach in Africa, that also would be very good. But that's difficult because there is no reward for that here.

**KM: Looking to the future, Africa is the youngest continent in the world, with 60 per cent of the population under 25. You once commented that this means that most of the population has no memory of colonialism and not even a memory of structural adjustment. Do you see this as constructive or as problematic?**

TM: It's problematic — in the sense that if you don't know where you're coming from, you don't know where you're going. For the future of Africa, the initial conditions for the future have been set by structural adjustment. So, it's very important to know *how* you got to where you are.

On the one hand, there is new interest in African nationalism. There is a sort of fascination with the Lumumbas, the Nkrumahs and the Sankaras. You see them on T-shirts now, hear about them in songs, etc. There is an awareness that there was at some time in our history good African *leadership*. I imagine that with the passage of time the images of these heroes may have been mystified, but the fact that these young people know these individuals is very important.

We have the bizarre situation that Africa is the youngest continent in the world with the oldest leadership. Ageing autocracies sitting on Africa's young population. Something we don't say very much — but the youth, the new youth of Africa is *urban*. What's more, they are very aware that Africa is lagging behind. All the social indicators show Africa is lagging. It's not simply that they want to do well materially. They are not happy about the *standing* of the continent. I think it was Lenin who said: 'shame can be revolutionary'. The question 'why is Africa lagging behind?' is forcing them to think their way through. I see it with students. They will come to their professors and say 'Prof, do you think Africa can make it?'. There may be some moments where young people do strange things like, you know, join terrorist movements, but so far the majority of Africans have been quite open to engaging in democratic struggles. And almost all these Afro-barometer reports show that they are keen on having democratic societies. The thing that bothers me is whether, in fact, they can find a democracy that can provide the substantive benefits that people want.

**KM: What do you make of recent game changers in the global context, for example, the rise of China and other BRICS countries? Do you see them as good for African development?**

TM: Anything that erodes the monopoly of one super power is welcome. I always assume that these countries have their interests and that Africa must be able to assert its own interests too. We just must be aware that

the Chinese government serves the Chinese people, you know. And more power to them for that. China is not in Africa for philanthropic reasons. In fact, our main headache is that China has a plan for Africa, but Africa has no plan for China. It's vital that Africa begins to realize that we can't continue negotiating with China one by one, as small nations. We should be able to find ways of collectively negotiating with China on a number of things. I think China would accept that. I mean China's been very involved in building the headquarters of the African Union, so it sees these regional organizations, in some sense, as something important. But opportunities like that come and go. If you don't seize them, they'll be gone. We just have to build capacity for seizing any moment that is beneficial.

Sometimes these external opportunities take our attention away from thinking of domestic capacities. People say 'well, the Chinese / Korean / Taiwan model is over now because these models were built on export orientation and every market in the world is dominated by the Chinese, so Africans have no chance'. But what we forget is that in all these countries, a huge part of their economies are non-tradable infrastructure, bridges, services etc. It's just not true that everything about our development should be tradable. A large part of it, by virtue of being backward economies, would have to be goods which are not in the global market. And a lot of the goods that we still must produce in Africa are going to be resource-intensive and non-tradable. You know, the dams, bridges, hospitals, etc. — they are the hardware of development. The most impressive thing about China, if you think about it, is not that China is exporting so much, but that they built so much infrastructure and industry within China. That's really amazing. Same thing with Korea, and Taiwan.

If you understand trade as not just marketing, selling, buying goods, but selling things to acquire *technology* — then you don't have to think that everything you produce is going to be traded globally. You can start thinking about how to use your home market for your own development, rather than allowing foreign companies and Bottom of the Pyramid schemes to capture all the gains of providing goods for Africans. So, I would hope that Africans would say, yes, we are looking for these external opportunities, but we just must resolve a lot that is still within our control. Ultimately how the outside world reacts to you will depend on how much leverage they have over you.

**KM: That takes me to the second game changer: the shift towards protectionism and isolationism in the US and Europe — basically Trump and Brexit. Do you see it as problematic or beneficial for Africa?**

TM: Given the unevenness and the inequalities of the existing global order, you could argue that anything that undermines it is good for Africa. We haven't benefited from this free trade world. In fact, there were all these calculations by the World Bank and everybody — the world will benefit by

however many billions of dollars from the Uruguay Round — except for Africa. So, obviously, these free arrangements don't help us. If the regime we have now makes it impossible for Africa to pursue industrial policy, and the new protectionism coming up allows for it, so much the better. I don't think Africa loses from a world in which other regions are trying to address their own problems. If they decide that they are going to allow some protectionism — in a framework where every region could have some industrial policy — then there is no problem. This is what happened after World War II and that was the era when most Third World countries grew fastest, in terms of industrialization. Only if Africa is required to open, while others are allowed to close — then we are in trouble.

What I hope is that African countries will realize that in the early phases of development their prime market will be Africa. African trade is growing faster now than trade with the rest of the world. It is also qualitatively different. To the rest of the world, we export raw materials. But amongst each other we trade manufactured goods. We just have not thought systematically about what this means. It means, let's improve inter-African transport. One of the good things the IMF did for Africa is that there are today fewer trade barriers among Africans. The main barriers are largely physical — transport routes and bureaucratic encumbrances. So just improving the infrastructure, you would immediately see a very dramatic increase in trade. Africans must realize that if you are going to compete globally in trade, the best ground for learning by doing will be large African markets.

***KM: When you look at the prospects and challenges faced by African countries today, what gives you the greatest cause for concern, and what gives you the greatest hope for the future?***

TM: The greatest concern is whether Africans will create for themselves the space they need to address their problems. Whether they will have the so-called policy space. People will have to accept that African resources are African resources. When people discuss African resources or African labour, it's like they are *reserved* for somebody else to use. The second concern is about vision. One of the things that structural adjustment did was to lower our expectations and narrow Africa's visions. Our leaders are happy with 3 or 4 per cent growth, totally oblivious of the possibilities suggested by Asian countries. The levels of growth that Africa can achieve can easily be over 10 per cent because new technologies are highly productive and permit high levels of surplus. That is partly what would explain the Chinese miracle. The savings ratios that countries can afford today without starving people to death, were *impossible* under the technologies in use during Britain's industrial development. So, after squeezing national labour, including child labour and colonial labour, they could only achieve 1–2 per cent growth. Ethiopia's been doing 10 per cent for the last 10 years. So, it's not *impossible*. But it will require that people have more space to think and

can use that space in the best interests of their people. As a pan-Africanist, I think it calls for a measure of collective self-reliance. There is a lot of self-doubt and despondency in Africa today. That bothers me a lot. Sometimes I hear young Africans mouth the whole neopatrimonial argument against *themselves* — ‘oh, we Africans are corrupt, you know, we do it almost by nature’. That sort of self-deprecation undermines their capacity to *change* the situation.

On the positive side, in my lifetime I’ve seen a lot of remarkable things. I’ve seen Malawi become independent, I’ve seen Malawi become democratic, I’ve seen South Africa liberated. And there’s no end. Pretty much every big dream I had about Africa, except for development, has come true. Honest to God, I did not believe that South Africa would be free in my lifetime. In the 1970s, you know, it didn’t seem possible. Albert Hirschman once said that by the time social scientists have described an issue as totally impossible, society will have long since started to address it. I see that same thing happening in Africa. When people were saying ‘democracy in Africa, forget it’, it turns out there were already other forces working on it. I’m essentially very upbeat about Africa, I have always been. But Africa must be given space, or capture space, to think its own way out of its predicament.

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