On Resuscitating the Aborted National Project: A Retrospective and Prospective View (*Notes from my Last Conversation with Thandika Mkandawire*)

Text of the Inaugural Thandika Mkandawire Annual Memorial Lecture presented at the 3rd edition of the Social Policy in Africa Conference convened virtually from 22–24 November 2021.

Fantu Cheru*

Opening Statement

First of all, let me thank my long-time friend, Professor Jimi Adesina, for inviting me to give this inaugural address. It is a tall order to try to give a talk on the intellectual contributions of Thandika Mkandawire to the social sciences. He covered so many timely and important topics in the field of development; his work was too cumulative and exhaustive for me to be able to summarise and discuss them in the time allotted to me.

I also want to thank Professor Jimi Adesina for carrying the 'transformative social policy' torch – a topic so close to the heart of our late colleague, Professor Thandika Mkandawire. This is a topic that Thandika theorised deeply and he subsequently built one of the most successful research programmes during his tenure as Director of UNRISD. He dedicated his time to grounding theoretically the transformative role of social policy. This particular theoretical journey into social policy came after his ground-breaking work on the harmful effects of structural adjustment programmes. While others, such as Sir Richard and his colleagues at UNICEF, had started to take a critical look into SAPs and introduced the idea of 'Adjustment with a Human Face', Thandika took theorising on the transformative role of social policy to the next level once he arrived at UNRISD in 2009.

* Emeritus Professor of International Political Economy, American University, Washington, DC. Email: cherufantu@gmail.com

It is difficult to think of a scholar who is as driven as Thandika was on the imperatives of promoting development in Africa. Because of his lived experience and encounter with colonial rule, he was a fierce nationalist, pan-Africanist and anti-imperialist. Because of his demeanour and way of speaking, one would not suspect that he carries all these admirable labels. It was not only the radicals who always sought his wisdom and critical perspectives on any topic; but also, conservative academics and politicians who disagree with him on so many issues, and still seek his acquaintance. The more he provoked them; the more he demolishes their distorted worldview; the more they actually want to engage him in a debate. He was an amazing storyteller: he was a voracious reader and interested about everything under the sun. More importantly, he had a fine sense of humour and loved to have a good time with friends.

Context

My talk today is primarily centred around the many memorable conversations I have had over the past four years with Thandika Mkandawire on the topic of development and on the aborted nationalist project. The last of those lunch meetings took place on 6 December 2018. Little did I know then that, over the subsequent months, his health was to deteriorate badly.

The title of my talk, 'Resuscitating the "Aborted" Nationalist Project: A Retrospective and Prospective View', is a topic that Thandika has written and spoken about. I chose to use the term 'aborted' instead of 'unfinished' national project deliberately. My aim is to show the inter-connectedness between the notion of democracy, development, independence, and the centrality of the state in transformative politics under an overarching theme of the 'nationalist project'. These themes are rooted in Mkandawire's deep thinking on the nationalist project and its future. I purposely used the term 'aborted' to imply that our present politics is dis-embedded from our rich history – that is a history of resistance; a history of pan-Africanism; and a history of anti-imperialism. I sometimes feel that the current generation are completely disconnected from this rich legacy of the founding fathers.

To start off my lecture: we live in interesting times and how I wish Thandika was alive to deconstruct many of the contradictory tendencies in global politics. We are experiencing tectonic shifts on many fronts – political, economic, social and ecological. These contradictory shifts have a strong bearing on the trajectory of African development, and more particularly on the transformative and emancipatory national project. As a scholar–practitioner and critic, I am trying hard to unlearn what I had learned – which is a difficult thing to do. Given the complexity in global politics,

we need to break away from our own disciplinary ghettos and try to look at things differently! Thandika thought coherently; he rejected disciplinary boundaries. It is increasingly obvious that we need 'new politics' and 'new analytical narrative' in order to achieve structural change.

The old categories of First World, Second World and Third World do not make any sense anymore. The First World, whose development experience that we Africans are constantly told to emulate, is in deep crisis and the financial crisis has only helped expose the insanity of free market dogmatism. The Second World virtually does not exist anymore. What used to be the Third World has gone in different directions – while many countries are immersed in poverty, looting and self-destruction, the other half is making their own history, thus fundamentally shifting the balance of power in the world economy. What once used to be the 'periphery' now has a significant influence on what goes on in the 'core' countries. As Samir Amin once said to me, the past is dead, and the future is unknown. Is this a good thing or a bad thing? What one can say is that we are finally free from the tyranny of 'received ideas'. It is up to us to make new history.

For us Africans to embark on the task of writing a new history, we must go back and re-examine the past. We need both a retrospective and prospective view. For me personally, it means revisiting the visions and aspirations of the aborted nationalist project for self-determination and independence, underpinned by a broad-based quest for an African renaissance and unity of the African people. To quote Adebayo Adedeji, 'A society which forgets the instructive values of its past for its present and future cannot be self-confident and self-reliant and will therefore lack internally generated dynamism and stability'.[1]

Learning from our Past History: Remembering the National Project
What Were the Objectives of the 'Nationalist Project'?

In this context, let me start by recounting the objectives, achievements and shortcomings of the first 'nationalist project' of the late 1950s and early 1960s whose aim was to overcome the institutional legacies of colonialism.[2] Inspired by the political thinking of early nationalist leaders such as Kwame Nkrumah, Modibo Keita, Sékou Touré and Nnamdi Azikiwe, among others, African countries embarked upon programmes of nation-building and national development designed to bring the fruits of social and economic growth to all sections of the population.

For the early African nationalist leaders, self-determination was a precondition for realising all human rights, the right to development in

particular.[3] The national project was, therefore, a strategy for more equitable appropriation of the productive forces at local, continental and global levels.[4] It involved deliberate state intervention to strengthen national political capacity in the face of a polarising logic of the world order, which undermines such capacity.[5] Further, inspired by the spirits of the 1955 Bandung conference of non-aligned nations, the nationalist leaders, joined by other newly independent countries from Asia and Latin America, called for a New International Economic Order under the auspices of the United Nations. Though little progress has been made since 1975, African countries remain fully engaged in the struggle for reforming the global governance system.

In the 1960s and early 1970s, as a result of deliberate state actions, African economies registered impressive growth rates given the initial conditions at the time of independence. Physical infrastructures were greatly improved, particularly in areas of health, education and communication. New universities, agricultural research centres, national transport networks, and local government structures were established to facilitate the national development project.[6]

Since the early 1980s, however, this mood has been dispelled by increased levels of poverty, social disintegration, and political instability. The spectacular political and economic progress registered during the first decade and a half of independence is now a distant memory. Instead, the balance has turned once again and shifted in favour of the nations and social classes which are best placed to profit from the polarising logic of world order. In short, the politics of 'inclusion' that was central to the nationalist project has been overtaken by politics of 'exclusion'.

At this point, a word of caution is in order. Let me not over-glorify the 'nationalist project'! There were many contradictions in it, both in theory and practice. Among the many contradictions that Thandika points out, I will focus just on four.

First, the need to maintain national sovereignty and nation-building were high on the agenda, even if that meant dismissing the existence of deep cleavages based on ethnicity, gender, class and religion.[7] Ethnicity and tribalism were officially banished, while in practice these were the main criteria for distributing public resources in exchange for social groups' recognition of the authority of the power holders. Thandika referred to this practice as 'nationalist by day and tribalist by night'. The nationalist discourse denied ethnic claims; it denied sub-nationalism; it denied the existence of tribes.

Second, class analysis was never fully embraced by nationalist movements. Instead, the focus was on ending past forms of racial and horizontal

inequalities without transforming the old order. Thus, policies such as 'indigenisation', 'Africanisation' and 'Black Economic Empowerment' were applauded in the face of growing intra-group inequality.[8] Let me take a line from Thabo Mbeki who said in 1999: 'As part of our continuing struggle to wipe out the legacy of racism, we must work to ensure that there emerge a black bourgeoisie, whose presence within our economy and society will be part of the process of the deracialization of the economy and society'.[9] How perverse can one possibly be to equate the rising fortunes of Tito Mbwani, Tokyo Kiwale, Cyril Ramaphosa and a few thousand emerging black middle class with the upward mobility of all South Africans?

Third, the central assumptions of the African nationalist project of the 1950s and 1960s were centred around the idea that 'industrialisation by invitation' is possible and that its achievement is dependent upon the maintenance of intimate links with the former colonial powers.[10] The second assumption underpinning this approach was the belief that market forces would allow the benefits of growth to trickle down to benefit everyone. In other words, 'a rising tide will lift all the boats stranded on the sand'. This was, of course, a fundamental mistake that later spelt disaster across the continent.

Fourthly, social policy also took an instrumentalist approach in the nation-building project, with its heavy *productionist* emphasis. Little attention was given to its *redistributive role*.[11] The instrumentalist approach of constructing elaborate social subsidies and major social programmes in education, urban planning, health, etc. became the means for attacking emerging social problems that might subvert the nationalist project. This instrumental view did not prevent inter-group conflict; rather it helped exacerbate the problem.

What Really Contributed to the Premature Demise of the National Project?

To answer this question, we need to periodise the post-independence political order and locate at each phase the factors that contributed to the eventual demise of the nationalist project. The post-independence history of Africa is replete with examples of broken promises and unfulfilled dreams. Since the 1950s, Africa has gone through four different political and social experiences, all of them to the detriment of the vast majority of ordinary Africans. Broadly speaking the four phases include: (1) the independence struggle itself; (2) the post-independence experience with development and nation-building; (3) the post-1980 experience with market-oriented reform, dominated by the policy of structural adjustment; and (4) the post-1990 experience of liberal democracy.

During the first three phases, peasants and the urban poor saw their living conditions deteriorate and their democratic rights evaporate. Phase 4 – the experiment with multi-party democracy – which raised a lot of expectations, has so far failed to bring substantial economic and political changes to the majority.

Already halfway into the first decade of independence, many commentators were sounding the alarm bells that the politics of 'inclusion' was being overtaken by politics of 'exclusion'. Publications like Chinua Achebe's (1958) *Things Fall Apart*; Basil Davidson's (1964) *Which Way Africa?*; René Dumont's (1965) *False Start in Africa*; Oginga Odinga's (1967) *Not Yet Uhuru*, and many others elaborated on how things were moving in the wrong direction. How else can you explain the fact that one African dictator after another extends their hold on power through the ballot box with increasing regularity!

However, the conventional wisdom about Africa is that the continent is marginalised because (1) it is not sufficiently integrated into the capitalist global economy; and (2) patrimonialism is rife and goes against entrepreneurship and capitalist accumulation. Both assumptions have been refuted by Mkandawire in many of his writings.

And to the contrary, I take the position that a proper understanding of Africa's marginalisation must focus on the theoretical assumptions and institutional structures which underpin the changing nature of North–South relations and, in particular, the aid, debt and trade regimes through which African development is regulated. In addition to the crisis of leadership at the national level, bad rules, unjust trade agreements, illegitimate debts, and bad policies imposed on Africa by the institutions of the world system have produced multiple 'black holes' of social exclusion, pockets of slums, and disabled nation states. If there is anything pervasive about 'the presence of the past', it is this lack of freedom to manoeuvre – the ever-shrinking policy space.

Claude Ake agrees with me on this. In his last writing before his tragic death, he argued: 'It is not that development has failed in Africa. It has never begun.' Because of exogeneity, 'Africa never had a development agenda – but a confusion of agendas.'[12] Ake argued that development theories tended to ignore the peculiarities of African countries and cultures. He then called upon all of us to 'challenge and subvert' the constraints of dominant and received disciplinary approaches and paradigms – a sentiment also shared by Mkandawire.

As Africa entered the 1970s, the national project was being threatened from within and without. Whether political independence was achieved through direct negotiation or the barrel of the gun, the nationalist leaders came to the world stage in a very unfavourable political and economic

environment and with little room for manoeuvre. Consequently, pragmatic accommodation to the inherited international system thus became a preferred solution to 'revolution' or delinking. Only a handful of African countries set out to transform their economies from external domination by promoting self-reliant strategies, but with limited success.

The nationalist project was undercut by poor political governance as unaccountable political elites, often supported by competing Western powers, let loose their predatory instincts and indulged in corruption, abuse of office, and repression.[13] As the African military emerged as the sole conductor of state politics in many parts of the continent from the 1970s onwards, the national project took a different direction. The new power holders became too preoccupied with short-term considerations over long-term ones: power over welfare, personal over institutional considerations, national unity over distributional justice, and security over development.[14] Policies came to be determined solely by concern with the means rather than the conditions of development. This gave rise to preoccupation with structures leading to centralisation and expansion of state bureaucracies and encouraged a top-down approach to the management of public affairs.[15]

More importantly, the post-independence international context was no more propitious than the colonial one. Africa became the prime battleground in East–West rivalry.[16] Conflicts between and within African states were intensified as a result. Each side backed their 'own' dictators, who abused their power to enrich themselves. As the African nationalist project came to be perceived by the Western powers as being synonymous with 'communism', leaders who expressed any desire to chart an independent development path (e.g., Lumumba; Nkrumah; Sékou Touré) were either assassinated or overthrown by Western-sponsored military coups.[17] In their place, neo-colonial regimes – both civilian and military juntas – were imposed and often sustained by foreign aid. Thus, barely halfway into the second decade of independence, the vision of an independent Africa had started to fall apart and the gulf between state and society widened considerably in the process.

As Africa entered the decades of the 1980s and 1990s, a 'new world order' has emerged that favoured powerful Western nations and giant firms that are best placed to profit from the polarising logic of world order. This is what Susan Strange once called the rise of 'business civilization'. Imperialism has changed its modus operandi. The operative logic of the post-1980 political order has been that market economies give birth to democratic rule and the latter in turn contributes to a well-functioning market and prosperity in general.[18] Following this logic, debt structures,

conditional aid flows, and unequal systems of trade became the main instruments for regulating Africa's development. African countries were forced to open up their markets, dismantle many aspects of the African state and institute minimal democratic procedures essential for the well-functioning of the market.[19] In the process, what was left of 'development welfarism' of the 1960s and 1970s was completely erased from the economic reform package.[20] So, policymaking, an important aspect of sovereignty, has been wrenched out of the hands of the African state.

Four decades later, the role of the state in Africa as the driver of development has been significantly curtailed, the dominance of market forces is set in place, and economies have been wide open to external competition. Yet, few African countries have achieved credibly in terms of any of the indicators that measure real, sustainable development. Instead, most have slid backwards into growing inequality, ecological degradation, de-industrialisation and poverty. By imposing particular policy choices on poor countries, creditors take away governments' sovereignty and accountability to their own people, and instead make them answerable to unaccountable external institutions for their choice of economic policies, their level of spending on public services, and other crucial political decisions. This is *recolonization*, not development.

Resuscitating the National Project: The Way Forward

Africa's marginal position in the new global hierarchy provides us with a compelling occasion to set in motion a *transformative* and *emancipatory* national development project that will create the necessary policy space. A transformative and emancipatory project will entail the need to adopt key reforms at national and regional levels, with greater emphasis on 'strategic integration' of the national economy into the international economy.

I do believe that transformational change that will move societies forward to a different level and quality of life requires the simultaneous, significant participation of the three major elements of society: the private sector, the development state, and civil society. Without the full engagement of these three engines of change, the end result will be an extrapolation of existing conditions or at best an incremental improvement, which fails to give society a new sense of itself as just, open and fair.

Key Questions that we must Interrogate

What is the future of the national project? How and who should resuscitate and drive the new national project that is emancipatory?

What is the line-up of the balance of social forces that are capable of contributing to the construction of the new emancipatory national project? Civil society? Peasants? Intellectuals? Who?

Is an African-owned and African-led development agenda possible in an environment of a high level of aid dependency, endless 'conditionality' and shrinking policy space that characterises the donor–recipient relationship?

What are the objective conditions today that will permit a transformative national project to emerge? I am not sure if I will be able to answer all of them, but I will try.

What are the Pre-requisites for a Transformative/Emancipatory National Project?

While the aborted national project of the 1960s operated within the confines of the inherited colonial order, the new 'transformative national project' is essentially a strategy for more equitable appropriation of the productive forces at local, continental and global levels. It involves deliberate intervention to strengthen national political capacity in the face of a polarising logic of the world order, which undermines such capacity.

Renewing Democracy and Improving Governance

Notwithstanding remarkable progress in democratisation since 1989, democracy in Africa is still in profound trouble and has not moved beyond the holding of multiparty elections. Entrenched and repressive structures continue to frustrate the process. This is partly because democratic institutions including legislatures, local governments, electoral bodies, political parties, the judiciary, the media, and civil society remain weak and are therefore unable to act as countervailing forces to an often-powerful executive branch of government. Mkandawire refer to this outcome as '*choiceless democracy*'.

For democracy to succeed in the African context there must be significant social reform and a reduction of inequalities as well as the decentralisation of political power and decision-making. By enlarging visions and raising consciousness, citizens can undermine the vicious circle of mass exclusion and marginalisation. This will in turn increase the legitimacy of the state as the people will possess major decisions and feel involved in decision-making. The most reliable way of getting the citizens behind the national development agenda is through democratic structures and the empowerment of people at the grassroots.

Building a Democratic Developmental State

Central to Africa's renewal is the development of a strong, democratic and activist state that would assert its development role within the context of a common national vision. Successful development demands a greater role of the state in the economy than neoclassical theory has assumed.[21] A competent state has a vital role to play in guiding national development, ensuring egalitarian distribution of resources, linking urban and rural production, and investing in human capital formation to provide equal opportunity and upward mobility for all.

Indeed, the lessons of the recent and distant past teach us that those countries that experienced faster rates of growth are not those who indiscriminately open up their economies to foreign trade and investment but, rather, those who first develop their domestic markets adequately enough to compete in the world economy. Such is the case of China, India and Vietnam – three important countries which violated virtually all the rules in the neoliberal guidebook even while moving in a more market-oriented direction. These countries actually grew faster under protective barriers, and only later did they begin to liberalise. In other words, if the market is to function effectively, it requires elaborate state guidance.

Constructing a Viable Social Contract, Underpinned by a Strong Social Protection System

In order for democracy to succeed, there must be significant social reform and a reduction of inequalities. Political freedom and participation cannot be divorced from hunger, ignorance and diseases. In every political system, there must be a bargain in being a member of that political community. A social bargain is the glue that keeps a political community together. It is within the social bargain that every citizen seeks to exert accountability.

Revitalizing Agricultural Production and Empowering the Peasantry

The disappointing economic performance of the continent over the past three decades has been caused, to a large extent, by the failure of African governments to create the proper conditions for an agricultural revolution to take place, which would, in turn, propel the process of industrialisation and social development. Instead, since independence, many governments have pursued policies that are essentially 'anti-peasant' and anti-poor. *Citizen and Subject*, a title coined by Mamdani, perfectly describes the pathetic condition of the African peasantry. Of course, the priority task of

an African agricultural revolution, that will remain for several decades to come, is obviously complex and multi-faceted. At the minimum, it requires the presence of a strong and effective 'enabling state' with the capacity to respond to the demands of rural producers.

Investing in African Education and Basic Research

Africa cannot flourish unless the intellectual capital of the continent is developed and maintained. Education is a cornerstone of human development in every society. Through education, people become aware of their environment and the social and economic options available to them. At the present moment, however, the state of education in Africa is pathetic. Despite the tremendous gains made since the 1960s in increasing access to education, greater challenges lie ahead. Fiscal crisis, poor student participation, high dropout and repetition levels, and low academic achievements are widespread destructive trends throughout the system. The only way to narrow the knowledge gap is by investing in education, basic research, and development. Investment in education and basic research should emphasise the need to scale-up the technological ladder and tap into the global system of information and knowledge. Intellectual marginalisation will occur unless Africa raises its educational levels and standards.

Giving Real Meaning to the Ideal of Pan-Africanism Through Regional Cooperation

Regional integration and cooperation are important aspects of 'strategic integration'. The emergence of three powerful trading blocs – NAFTA, the EU and APECC – over the past twenty-five years poses great challenge to the African continent. Africa will find itself ever more vulnerable and isolated if it chooses to remain a collection of fifty small, competing exporters, dependent on these regional giants to purchase its output and supply its needs. To accelerate the continent's economic integration, governments must create the desired conducive environment. This includes the need to invest heavily in regional infrastructure; simplify procedures for promoting intra-regional trade and investment; build a strong financial sector to support intra-Africa trade and investment; and address the coordination and harmonisation gaps at national and regional levels. Such policies should support the goal of increased international competitiveness, for example by promoting regional production chains, and also nurture the development of regional markets in order to reduce demand-side constraint on growth.

Business–government Strategic Alliance

Transformational change that will move African countries forward to a different level and quality of life requires the simultaneous engagement of the three major elements of society: the private sector, the development state, and civil society. One key factor that contributed to the spectacular economic transformation of the East Asian NICs (Newly Industrialising Countries) has been the strong business–government strategic alliance under the guidance of an activist developmental state. Policies are implemented through private initiatives rather than public ownership, and through the market mechanism rather than administrative control. In this regard, economic policies are formulated by a capable and pragmatic economic bureaucracy, which through formal and informal ties with the private sector develops a common vision of development objectives and targets, and a common understanding of how these can be achieved.

Securing Policy Space by Pursuing 'Heterodox' Economic Policies

Developing countries need policy space to exercise institutional innovations that depart from the now discredited conventional orthodoxies of the IMF and World Bank. The key to Africa in today's world is to try to weave through the parameters set by the world economy and maintain as much independence (or policy space) as possible. The lessons from China and East Asia certainly demonstrate the importance of pursuing 'heterodox' national policies that support strategic industries, develop internal infrastructure, invest in human capital formation to provide equal opportunity and upward mobility for all, and control financial markets. They were able to succeed for two reasons: (1) because governments had the freedom to control basic economic policy; and (2) the state had the administrative, legal and regulatory capacity to guide the market in a way favourable to national development. Therefore, an effective state is a prerequisite for a well-functioning market.

What nation states do in regard to domestic wage levels, foreign investment, public services, and economic diversification can help determine, to a considerable extent, whether a country develops or not. Although these powers are not always simple or easy to exercise, they have by no means completely disappeared from the national arena.

Conclusion

The current African development crisis provides us with new openings for activism, social pacts, and public policy debates on a number of key issues aimed at reintegrating 'the economy' and 'the social' through democratic politics. Structural change requires the reconfiguration of the balance of social forces – i.e., social movements; labour movements; peasant movements; consumer movements – in order to create genuinely redistributive structures and institutions at local and global levels. In short, I am calling for a new politics of liberation. We need a major paradigm shift; a new analytical narrative on what is to be done. Of course, resistance will take many forms and the outcome will depend on the capacity of the forces of civil society to gain sufficient influence to qualify as a genuine counter-project.

A strategy of recovery should centre on transforming the production system; transforming 'social relations'; and transforming 'democratic governance' at global and local levels. Central to this endeavour is the need to employ 'social policy' as an instrument of recovery. The social question cannot be dis-embedded from the economy; and the economy cannot be separated from the 'social question'. To repeat, we need new politics; and new analytical narratives on what is to be done.

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