

A Transformative Economist: Remembering Thandika Mkandawire

In an era of financial crises and mounting global inequality that have tarnished the reputation of economists, Prof. Thandika Mkandawire, the late Chair of African Development at the London School of Economics, stood out as an icon of transformative development research. Thandika, as he was called by everyone, young and old, drew on a depth of historical and political vision that cut through the ‘failures of collective imagination’¹ that have so crippled the discipline in recent years. Far from adopting the insularity that often characterizes the field, Thandika was known for breaking boundaries – between generations, between disciplines, between ideological perspectives, between North and South – to create a more informed, more innovative approach to contemporary development thinking. A Malawian of Swedish nationality, Thandika was a disruptor of stereotypes, and a fierce adversary of the Afro-pessimism and Afro-exceptionalism in all its forms. His death on 27 March, just months before his 80th birthday, is a profound loss to African development scholarship, but he has left a legacy of academic activism and original research that will continue to transform the way scholars, donors and policymakers think about Africa.

Iconoclastic Thinker

Thandika’s myth-busting approach to the study of Africa was grounded in a lived knowledge of the continent and an insider’s understanding of its political and economic

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capacities. In his early years in the townships of southern Africa, he experienced forced removals, was sent back to what was then Nyasaland to escape poor quality education in the mines, abandoned his A-level exams to fight for Malawian independence as a journalist and protester, and was briefly jailed by the colonial government. His intellectual formation in the US during the height of the civil rights movement, followed by decades of political exile and an intellectually productive period of asylum in Sweden have all contributed to the breadth and originality of his thinking. His eclectic life experience created an intellectual arsenal of historical insight, innovative development perspectives and nuanced institutional analysis that have been the hallmarks of his scholarship.

The result has been a distinguished and unconventional career trajectory. After a few years’ teaching economics at the University of Stockholm, Thandika headed back to Africa in 1978 to serve as one of the founding figures of the Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa (CODESRIA) in Senegal. In 1982, he returned to Southern Africa on secondment to help set up the Zimbabwe Institute

of Development Studies just after Zimbabwean independence. He then served as Executive Secretary of CODESRIA from 1986–1996, where he focused on sustaining the creative energies of African social scientists during the neo-liberal evisceration of African universities. As Director of the United Nations Research Institute for Social Development (UNRISD) from 1998–2009, Thandika brought the fruit of his grounded heterodoxy into the global sphere, overseeing dynamic research programmes on Social Policy and Development, and Public Sector Reform. In 2009, Thandika became the first Chair of African Development at the LSE, where he continued to pursue his driving objectives of research in the service of African economic transformation.

An iconoclast to the core, Thandika refused to be bound by ideology. He confronted all received wisdom – Marxist and post-structuralist as well as neo-liberal – with rigorous empirical and theoretical critique. But Thandika was an iconoclast with a mission: to challenge the prevailing intellectual models that mainstream economists and policymakers held of Africa. He enlisted a wide range of perspectives into this process. The scholars who influenced him ranged from Arthur Lewis and Alexander Gerschenkron to E.P. Thompson (whom he said he liked for his fluent writing), along with African nationalists such as Nkrumah, Senghor and Nyerere. Even when he was in prison, he

read voraciously, and continued to read across a wide range of literatures all his life, constantly delving into new perspectives in search of fresh insights.

Iconic Scholarship

Years of reading and original thinking, leavened by a journalist's flair, made Thandika a prodigious and gifted writer. He was best known for his work on the African State and the developmental role of social policy. His iconic article, 'Thinking about developmental states in Africa'² offered a scathing critique of the intellectual pathologizing and policy-induced mutilation of African states, leaving a legacy of 'maladjusted states' poorly equipped to benefit from the post-2000 economic resurgence.³ For Thandika, scholarship had to be more than critique – it needed to map a way forward, offering 'dispassionate analysis in search of a world of passionate possibilities'.⁴ Thandika's work on Transformative Social Policy turned attention away from the policy failures of the past to development models appropriate to the realities of Twenty-first century 'late late late development'. This path-breaking research gave a new twist to the social protection turn in development thinking. Drawing on Nordic models of social policy as a source of resource pools and stable social contracts, Thandika showed how social policy can move beyond poverty alleviation to drive economic transformation and employment generation.

Thandika's optimism about the developmental potential of African states under supportive conditions was accompanied by a frank assessment of their weaknesses. As he said in a recent interview, 'It's not that I am a lover of the state on a gut level – I mean, many of my

generation of African academics were refugees, for heaven's sake!'.⁵ While Thandika was conscious of the failings of African states, he had little patience for uninformed critique. In various polemical pieces on rock-star economists and post-culturalist ideologues, Thandika meticulously exposed the lack of intellectual rigour behind fashionable perspectives on Africa. He called out the 'interpretive audacity' of big names who relied on loose combinations of anecdotes, regressions and stereotypes to churn out analyses that were 'theoretically thin and empirically vacuous'.⁶ With sardonic precision, he took aim at the hubris and veiled racism that submerged complex material, historical and symbolic processes in an undifferentiated morass of culture, rebels and mosquitoes.

As an economic sociologist, I found myself particularly drawn to his work on the role of institutions in African development, some of it tucked away in a secret garden of working papers and unpublished conference papers. This body of work cuts to the heart of issues of taxation, social contracts and informality in contemporary development – now hot development issues that once again show that Thandika was often ahead of his time. Key pieces include his brilliant article 'On Tax Effort and Colonial Heritage in Africa' (2010) and his working paper on 'Institutional Monocropping and Monotasking in Africa' (2009),⁷ both of which tilt on an African axis the 'institutional turn' in development economics associated with Douglass North, Daron Acemoglu, James Robinson, and other leading New Institutionalists. In place of dodgy proxies and Manichean notions of 'good' and 'bad'

institutions, Thandika showed how econometrics could be combined with a deep knowledge of African history and political economy to produce genuine insight into how colonial legacies shaped patterns of taxation, informality and inequality in contemporary Africa. In person as well as in print, Thandika was like a walking 'aha moment'. In departmental seminars, he had a knack for raising some little known political or historical fact that allowed both speaker and audience to see the issue in a completely different light. He cut through the homogenizing influence of Africa dummies and patrimonialist narratives to reveal how history, resource endowments and nationalist projects made nonsense of binary analyses and one-size-fits-all models.

In place of the veiled imperialism of demands for Africa to get the institutions, geography, culture or history 'right', Thandika shifted the focus to what kinds of institutions are 'right' for African development. His central concern was how to activate the transformative potential of institutions within African settings, rather than seeking to straightjacket them into Western templates. His eye was on learning from more appropriate development models, borrowed from a variety of successful late development experiences in central Europe, Scandinavia, and East Asia. Development for Thandika was not about copying, but leapfrogging, compressing stages, hybridizing institutions and experimenting in the service of 'development friendly' rather than 'market friendly' institutions centred on the priorities of African countries rather than those of global investors and neo-liberal policy advisors.

At the heart of Thandika's work was an emphasis on the need to

take African institutions seriously. This meant criticizing the tendency to treat them as products of culture and corruption, as well as rejecting the celebration of informal economies, which he saw as glorifying poverty and backwardness. We tended to part company on this last point, since Thandika's own work on the diversity of African informal economies showed why they could be more dynamic in parts of East and West Africa – but I just put it down to a southern-African blind spot. His broader argument that African institutions were about more than the cultural and the small-scale was an important one. Thandika moved the conversation about African institutions from things like customary land tenure and witchcraft to judiciaries, central banks and universities, shaped by the distinctive histories and needs of African societies. In the process, he revealed the damage done by the 'monocropping' and 'monotasking' approach of neo-liberal institutional reform, which treated the value of institutions to foreign investors as their *only* value, sidestepping the complex adaptations required to address concerns of national cohesion, social equity, political legitimacy and economic aspiration. Dismissing the preoccupation with abstract institutional purity, he highlighted the need for hybrid arrangements capable of accommodating ethnic diversity, plural legal systems and the demands of economic transformation. At the same time, he was a sharp critic of the more fashionable notions of 'hybrid governance' currently gaining traction in the donor community. With their focus on bypassing rather than building the state, Thandika dismissed these novel hybrid arrangements as a Twenty-first century version of indirect rule.

Decolonizing African Development

Thandika was active in decolonizing the social sciences long before it was trendy. Not only did he cite a wide range of African scholars in his own work, but no African Development course worth the name could afford to ignore his work in their reading list. More importantly, he was an active proponent of the decolonization of knowledge about Africa. He once told a CODESRIA colleague who was searching for a reference to back up a point in an article, 'You don't have to cite some Western academic to prove something that you know to be true about your own country. Just write it.' He strongly criticized the aggressive colonizing of African economic thought that has inexorably drawn African economists into the orbit of quantitative modelling, donor consultancy and Randomized Control Trials, crowding out the teaching of more heterodox forms of economics and eroding the capacity for African-centred economic insight. In countries with a desperate need of statisticians, planners, and trade negotiators, Thandika expressed alarm at the waste of valuable resources to churn out endless supplies of mechanical number crunchers through institutions such as the Nairobi-based African Economic Research Consortium (AERC). In a region increasingly unable to write its own policy documents, he lamented the reduction of Africa's younger generation of economists to hewers of wood and gatherers of data.

Thandika's approach to decolonization of knowledge was linked to a wider agenda of institution building. Instead of the bean-counting approach of some decolonization initiatives in Western academia,

Thandika focused on building institutional systems to nurture independent thinking and development solutions grounded in the needs of late developers. At CODESRIA and UNRISD, Thandika presided over active research programmes to challenge prevailing perspectives in the service of African economic transformation and liberation from intellectual slavery. During his time at the LSE, Thandika sought to mobilize resources to bring promising African scholars to the UK to consolidate and write up their research, much like the Rockefeller-funded 'Reflections on Development' programme he ran at CODESRIA. He often found himself swimming against the tide of policy paradigms, global economic interests, and funding imperatives, but he always worked toward building capacities to challenge received development templates that ignored African realities and development needs.

Remembering Thandika

Thandika's unique combination of intellectual brilliance and twinkly good humour touched the lives of many people. He was central to my intellectual pantheon for years before I met him, through conversations with my late husband, Raufu Mustapha, about CODESRIA debates, as well as my admiration of his elegant writing style, and his incredible capacity to cut right to the core of development issues. So many times after I started teaching, I found myself uncomfortable with a particular position in the development literature, only to find that Thandika had written a critique years before that perfectly articulated the concerns I was struggling to express. I didn't actually get to know him until he took up his professorial post in my

department in 2009, the year after I joined the LSE.

At the LSE, Thandika continued searching for new ways to be of service to African scholarship. In addition to his popular African Development course, he taught in the LSE-University of Cape Town summer school, networked with wealthy African business moguls for funds to build new training and research opportunities for African scholars, and, although he was already over 70 then, took it upon himself to raise additional funds for the Africa Talks public lecture programme he coordinated by undertaking a sponsored run around Lincoln's Inn Fields at the edge of the LSE campus. He often found himself at odds with the Africa research and fundraising ethos at the LSE. While the LSE wanted to bring in funds to build up African research and teaching there, Thandika wanted funding to bring African students to study other things, like Finance, Law or Asian Studies, and to build up research and writing capacities on the continent.

Working and teaching with Thandika was a great privilege, though we had a strange intellectual relationship. Thandika was not a fan of the informal economy, which is the central focus of my research, and I never managed to convince him that informal institutions, drawn from pre-colonial state systems, skilled craft guilds and transcontinental trading networks, could be sources of economic transformation. Yet he taught me more about African informal economies, in his writing and in casual lunchtime conversations than I have learned from most informal economy specialists. When the journal *Development and Change* was looking for people to interview for the 'Reflections on

Development' segment of the 2019 Forum Issue, I jumped at the chance to interview Thandika.⁸ It took months to organize the three sessions necessary to complete the interview owing to Thandika's hectic schedule, but they were a wonderful opportunity to sit and listen to the stories that made up his amazing intellectual journey. My son transcribed the recordings, and when he was at loose ends in the months after Raufu died, and was reminded of happier times, listening to Raufu and Thandika discussing...

Revising the final draft of Thandika's reflection coincided with a new round of chemotherapy, which kept Thandika away from the LSE. He was impatient with the way his treatment slowed down his work, though he turned his wavering concentration into an opportunity to hang out with his grandchildren. He was eager to get on with his two book projects on the World Bank's structural adjustment '*mea culpas*', and on transformative social policy. Trust Thandika to have too many ideas to fit into one *magnum opus*. An unexpected additional round of treatment slowed him down further, preventing him from coming back to the LSE in early 2020 to teach his African Development course as he had intended. When I last saw his wife, Kaarina, I had recognized a delicate note of concern in her voice, and I feared this was a worrying turn. But Thandika's main worry when I spoke to him was not about his health, but about finishing his books. This, and his dream of funding promising African scholars to come to the LSE to write up their research, are the two pieces of unfinished business he has left for others to complete. The last time I spoke to him, in early March, he sounded

pragmatic but optimistic and eager to get on with things.

In a world increasingly out of joint, Thandika was a rare gift: lively, erudite, grounded and visionary, he brought to the study of Africa a light that burned through parochial stereotypes and econometric distortions to reveal real people, institutions and development aspirations. His simplicity and generosity of spirit were an inspiration, and his perceptive iconoclasm was like the Zen master's slap – an arresting moment that turns knowledge into insight. Thandika's passing is an immeasurable loss to the global as well as the African academic community. But Thandika was never one to dwell on the past – he only used it to build the way forward. He has left a treasure trove of publications to remember him by, along with a wealth of fond and inspiring moments, and the task of furthering his vision of a just and equitable African future. I offer my heartfelt condolences to his gentle wife, Kaarina, his sons Andre and Joshua and their families, and to the wider Mkandawire family.

Go well, Thandika.

Notes

1. Heather Stewart, 'This is how the credit crunch happened, Ma'am...' *The Guardian*, 26 July 2009, <https://www.theguardian.com/uk/2009/jul/26/monarchy-credit-crunch>
2. Thandika Mkandawire, "Thinking About Developmental States in Africa", in *Cambridge Journal of Economics*, Vol. 25, No. 3, 2001, pp. 289–313.
3. Thandika Mkandawire, "Mal-adjusted African Economies and Globalisation", in *Africa Development*, Vol. 30: Nos. 1&2, 2005, p. 1–33.

4. Thandika Mkandawire, "From National Question to Social Question", *Transformation: Critical Perspectives on South Africa*, Vol. 69, 2009, p. 155.
5. Kate Meagher, "Reflections of an Engaged Economist: An Interview with Thandika Mkandawire", *Development and Change*, Vol. 50, No. 2 March, 2019; p. 522.
6. Thandika Mkandawire, "The Intellectual Itinerary of Jeffrey Sachs", *African Review of Books /Revue africaine de livres*, Vol. 2, No.1, 2006, p. 4–5.
7. See Mkandawire, "On Tax Efforts and Colonial Heritage in Africa," in *Journal of Development Studies*, Vol. 46, No. 10, 2010, p. 1647–1669 and Mkandawire, "Institutional Monocropping and Monotasking in Africa", in Akbar Noman, *et al.*, eds., *Good Growth and Governance in Africa: Rethinking Development Strategies*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011, p. 80–113
8. See Meagher, 'Reflections of an Engaged Economist,' pp. 511–541.