



Development-driven, Iconoclastic, Witty, and Informal: Thinking About Thandika Mkandawire (1940–2020)

The news of Thandika's passing on 27 March 2020 came as a big shock, even though I knew he had been unwell in the last few years. His casual but forceful personality and unbounded energy made me believe that the laws of nature might not easily apply to him. He always seemed to bounce back from adversity with renewed vigour and focus.

He survived two cancers in 2004 and 2009 when he was at the United Nations Research Institute for Social Development (UNRISD), but continued to work diligently, giving inspiring lectures around the world, writing brilliant academic papers, and generating insightful and provocative ideas. Always sharp, witty, and booming with insights, I felt he would survive the third attack, which, sadly, turned out to be fatal.

Even when, a year ago, he was undergoing a difficult treatment for his illness, he wanted us to co-organise a Summer Institute Programme at the Council for the Development of Social Science

Yusuf Bangura
Nyon, Switzerland

Research in Africa (CODESRIA) on the transfer of power in Africa's fledgling democracies.

Thinking seriously and passionately about development, especially as it relates to Africa, was the defining feature of Thandika's scholarship. He was the quintessential iconoclast—restless, uncompromising, and laser-focused when discussing development and challenging conventional ideas.

For Thandika, dealing with development was like being confronted with 'the fierce urgency of now', to borrow one of Martin Luther King's famous expressions; or, as Thandika himself expressed it, drawing on the late Tanzanian President Julius Nyerere's insight on the subject, Africans 'must run, while others walk'.¹ It is difficult to think of a scholar who is as driven as Thandika was

on the imperative of promoting development in Africa. He was never tired of urging like-minded friends and colleagues not to relent on the development project and to combat dominant, but dodgy frameworks and perspectives.

Thandika was solidly rooted in African research and social networks and had numerous friends around the world, as well as a healthy and critical global outlook. He was a voracious reader; had the rare gift of thinking quickly and clearly on his feet; kept a huge library, a part of which he carried around in a USB stick; and had an amazing ability to frame issues in refreshing ways.

Because of his pioneering work in developing social science research in Africa during his leadership of CODESRIA, he became a household name in research communities in virtually all African countries. Young scholars saw him as their mentor. One beneficiary of his research capacity building programme at CODESRIA, the Nigerian political scientist, Jibrin

Ibrahim, recently coined the term ‘CODESRIA Brought Ups’ to describe those who were initiated into the world of cross-national research at CODESRIA.

Thandika’s eleven years as Director of UNRISD (1998–2009) and ten and half years as Professor of African development at the London School of Economics and Political Science (2009–2020) broadened his reach and vision beyond Africa. He became a globally recognised scholar for his writings on the harmful effects of structural adjustment programmes, the possibility of crafting developmental states in Africa, and theorising the transformative role of social policy. He was also respected for his systematic critique and demolition of conventional, neopatrimonialism ideas of the African state.

Thandika’s worldview can be traced to three sources. The first was the oppressive and racist nature of the colonial enterprise. Born in Zimbabwe (Southern Rhodesia) to a Zimbabwean mother, and having grown up in Zambia (Northern Rhodesia) and Malawi (Nyasaland), his paternal home, he had a mature and informed understanding of the twin evils of colonial domination and racial discrimination before embarking on university studies in the US. Recounting his experience in Zambia, where his father worked as a tailor in the copper mines, he observed that ‘mine schools were designed to produce semi-educated mine workers.’²

When Thandika relocated from Zambia to Malawi to continue his education, he was shocked to see that Africans were employed as train drivers—high status jobs that were reserved for whites in Zambia, which had a strictly enforced

apartheid labour market regime. As a secondary school student and later journalist, he was active in Malawi’s anti-colonial struggles. At the age of 21, the colonial government arrested him and six of his colleagues on allegations of ‘sedition and inciting violence’. They spent three months in prison breaking stones. The colonial encounter transformed him into a fierce nationalist, pan-Africanist and anti-imperialist.

The second influence on his worldview was his early realisation that independence did not necessarily mean freedom from despotism. His Malawian passport was revoked in 1965 by the then Prime Minister Hastings Kamuzu Banda government after a ‘Cabinet Crisis’ in which the radical wing of the nationalist movement, with which Thandika identified, was driven out of the seat of power. He had written an article that was critical of the governing party’s youth wing’s attack on Malawi’s new university. Banda was offended by the article and called him a ‘yelping intellectual yuppy’ that he wanted ‘alive if possible, dead if necessary.’³ The revocation of his passport cost him 30 years of exile. He could only see his parents in Zimbabwe after 20 years when he was invited to help establish Zimbabwe’s Institute of Development Studies. Banda’s despotism instilled in Thandika a visceral hatred for authoritarian rule and belief in the need to ground development in democratic processes.

The third influence was the social democratic character of the Swedish state, which granted him asylum and citizenship, as well as an opportunity to further his studies and teach in one of its universities. He was impressed by the effective way the Swedish state

managed its economy, as well as its redistributive policies and social reforms that produced highly egalitarian outcomes—all achieved without sacrificing democratic principles and processes. In his words, ‘Sweden made one aware of the ways in which ‘embedded liberalism’ could tame the structural power of capital.’⁴

Thandika was a prolific writer—his writings exploded exponentially during his twenty-one years at UNRISD and LSE. He wrote on a wide range of issues—on macro-economic development, structural adjustment programmes, economic policy making, institutions and development, agriculture, industry, the state, social policy, democracy, conflict, nationalism, pan-Africanism, ethnicity, academic freedom, culture and African intellectuals. He also occasionally forayed into literature to illustrate his arguments. He had an opinion—often controversial—on almost every subject in the social sciences and public policy.⁵

It is impossible to address all Thandika’s work in this tribute. However, I will discuss some of his major contributions in the study of development. I will start by examining his understanding of development, which was at the heart of his scholarship. I will then discuss his key works under four themes: combatting Africa’s maladjustment; developmental states and neopatrimonialism; advancing the development agenda in social policy; and grounding development in democratic processes. In the last three sections, I will discuss his role as an institution-builder in social science research, focusing on his leadership in CODESRIA; his ‘outsider’ status in the UN, which covers his tenure at UNRISD; and my personal relations with him as a colleague and a friend.

The primacy of development

For Thandika, development was the filter or primary lens for assessing public policies and the human condition. His training in economics in the 1960s, when development economics was fashionable, and exposure to the classics in economic history and radical political economy were the building blocks for his conceptualisation of development. Development economics emerged in the 1940s and 1950s, enjoyed much respectability in the 1960s and 1970s, but was eclipsed in the 1980s by neoliberalism. Development economists focused on how late industrialising or poor countries could catch up or bridge the development gap with countries that were already industrialised.

As Thandika observed in summarising the key ideas of this branch of economics in his paper for an UNRISD-IDEAs conference on 'Rethinking Development Economics' in 2001, late industrialisation requires a '*big push* or *critical minimum* effort or a *great spurt* to turn the process of cumulative causation into a virtuous cycle of positive feedback'. The aim is to aggressively move countries from 'a low equilibrium trap' or 'vicious circle of poverty' that history, or in the case of Africa, colonialism, bequeathed them, towards a state of high equilibrium or self-sustained growth rates and transformation.

Some of the influential development economists that Thandika was attracted to were Paul Rosenstein-Rodan, Harvey Leibenstein, Gunnar Myrdal, François Perroux, Arthur Lewis, Albert Hirschman and Alexander Gershenkron. Gershenkron's *Economic Backwardness in Historical Perspective* (1962), which Thandika often cited, had a strong impact on his ideas on catch up and structural change.⁶ To Ger-

shenkron, late industrialising countries can leapfrog or skip stages traversed by developed countries by learning from prior mistakes. Countries that take catch up seriously are expected to have high growth spurts and rapid rates of industrial growth, will prioritise capital goods over consumer goods, and the state and big banks will play an active role in driving development.

The key lessons Thandika drew from this literature were that development represents: i) sustained levels of high growth, structural change and economic diversification; ii) qualitative improvements in well-being, especially for those in the lower scales of the income or social ladder; and iii) improvements in social relations and institutions. In his inaugural lecture at the LSE, which he titled 'Running While Others Walk: Knowledge and the Challenge of Africa's Development' (2010), he argued that as a 'late, late, late' industrialising continent, Africa should not only study the front-runners of industrialisation but also the development experiences in every part of the world. To Thandika, leapfrogging in development calls for 'levels of education and learning that are far higher than those attained by the pioneers at similar levels of economic development' (p. 18).

Thandika's commitment to economic and social change made him reject the neoliberal turn in economics, which emphasised the importance of getting prices right, deregulation of economies, public expenditure cuts and dismantling of development planning institutions. Under neoliberalism, economics became a study of macro-economic stabilisation and trade liberalisation. Indeed, neoliberalism and the multilateral financial agencies' capture of Africa's policy space negated everything he learned in development economics;

it challenged his dream of rapid industrialisation and fierce sense of nationalism and anti-imperialist beliefs. In his insightful interview for *Development and Change* in 2019, he singled out development as the unfinished business in Africa. In his words, 'pretty much every big dream I had about Africa, except for development, has come true.'⁷

Thandika was also critical of development approaches that largely seek to manage poverty. These include studies that celebrate incremental changes in the lives of the poor, such as the literature on coping strategies of informal low-skilled individuals; micro-credit programmes that barely lift people above starvation income levels; and targeted handouts to the poor that fail to transform lives in meaningful ways. As he argued, where poverty is widespread, it makes little sense to target the poor, as this may be administratively costly, may generate leakages, limit the poor to inferior services, and make it hard to build links or solidarity between the poor and better-off groups in financing and providing quality services. To him, low value-added informal income-generating activities are an index of underdevelopment. While it is important to understand how the poor make a living, the goal of development should be to transform economies and the lives of the poor, not manage or glorify them.

He was also dissatisfied with the anti-growth positions of sections of the environment movement and much of the literature on environmental economics, which he believed does not pay sufficient attention to industrial catch up, including the need not only to transfer resources to poor countries as part of the much discussed climate change mitigation bargain, but also, and more importantly,

to give poor countries policy space and tools to advance the industrialisation project. As he often argued, poor people will only be able to devise effective adaptation strategies to climate change, take the environment seriously and contribute to universal mitigation targets when they have seen substantial improvements in their lives. Unfortunately, his writing on the environment was very thin. It would have been useful to know how strategies for industrial catch up would look like in the context of environmental sustainability, especially as Africa is likely to pay a much higher price than rich regions, even though it is least responsible for the warming of the planet.

Combatting Africa's maladjustment

Thandika spent much of his time studying, analysing, debating and campaigning against the IMF and World Bank's neoliberal adjustment programmes. Africa's maladjustment, as he described the continent's experience under adjustment, was the one issue that he consistently engaged with for over thirty years in his study of development. Whether at CODESRIA, UNRISD or LSE, he was obsessed with what the multilateral financial institutions were doing to Africa.

He read virtually everything the World Bank wrote on Africa and meticulously tracked the progression of that institution's adjustment policies and programmes. He organised several conferences, wrote many articles in journals and edited books, and published in 1999, with Charles Soludo (an economist who later headed Nigeria's Central Bank), an influential two-volume book, *Our Continent, Our Future: African Perspectives on Structural*

Adjustment (1999); and *African Voices on Structural Adjustment* (2003). *Our Continent, Our Future* was a succinct, well-argued and evidence-backed synthesis of Africa's adjustment experience in the 1980s and early- to mid-1990s. *Foreign Affairs* (September/October 1999) described it as 'a valuable primer on current development debates'.⁸

Thandika and Soludo made three important points in that study. First, they were among the first scholars to show that African countries were not the perennial failed states that the multilateral financial agencies and Africanist political scientists imagined them to be. In the logic of these agencies, the post-colonial African state was a captured, neopatrimonial institution that largely served coalitions of narrow urban interests. The multilateral agencies believed that these special interests extracted rents from Africa's state-directed development, leading to price distortions, system-wide inefficiencies, and economic backwardness. The historical record, however, was different. Thandika and Soludo demonstrated that Africa's annual GDP per capita growth between 1965 and 1974 was positive. At an average of 2.6 per cent, it was much higher than the GDP per capita growth of the 1980s, which declined by 1.3 per cent per annum, despite Africa receiving about ten years of neoliberal adjustment medicine. Some countries, such as Cote d'Ivoire, Kenya and Nigeria were, in fact, growth miracles before their economies were plunged into crisis.

Second, Thandika and Soludo demonstrated that the focus on domestic policy failures deflected attention from efforts by African states in building the foundations for industrial development; the big push in social development,

especially in the field of education, which produced a cadre of quality professionals and administrators; and nation-building strategies in a continent that hosts the largest number of ethnic groups in the world. The preoccupation with domestic policy failures also meant that the role of external factors, such as the volatility of global commodity prices, was ignored. In the eyes of the multilateral agencies, if the crisis was caused by domestic policy failures, it was justified to apply shock therapy or the full burden of adjustment on African countries. This distorted reading of the problem caused a rift with African policy makers, who highlighted the significance of deteriorating terms of trade in explaining the crisis. It led to ruptures in policy dialogue and what the agencies liked to call policy slippage.

Third, *Our Continent, Our Future* provides a useful overview of the economics literature that tracked African countries' performance under structural adjustment, and the numerous, but often contradictory and ultimately failed efforts by the World Bank to present the adjustment programmes as successful. While there were positive results in macroeconomic stabilisation, the record on economic growth, industrialisation, agricultural performance, foreign investment flows, domestic resource mobilisation and poverty alleviation was shockingly poor. Many countries that the World Bank classified as success stories, including so-called strong adjusters, often found themselves downgraded as non-adjusters within very short periods. The lesson was unmistakable: the adjustment programmes were largely about macroeconomic stabilisation; they failed to address issues of growth, structural change and the well-being of the poor.

By the mid-1990s, it was obvious to most observers that adjustment was not working. There were strong calls, therefore, for a change of direction. The reform package that emerged added issues of growth, participatory policy making, national ownership of policies, poverty reduction strategies, governance reform and institutions, but did not dilute the fundamental demands for stabilisation, liberalisation and privatisation.

Faced with the stark reality of Africa's poor economic performance and pressures for change, the World Bank was forced to acknowledge many of the policy failures of adjustment but failed to change the way it engaged African economies. Thandika meticulously tracked these acknowledgements of failure, which he called *mea culpas*. When he was at UNRISD, he was my primary source for keeping abreast of the World Bank's policy gymnastics, or *mea culpas*. He published four useful papers on these policy changes and the maladjustment of African economies ('Maladjusted African Economies and Globalisation', *Africa Development*, Vol. XXX, Nos 1 and 2, 2005; 'Institutional Monocropping and Monotasking in Africa', in A. Norman et al (eds.), *Good Growth and Governance in Africa: Rethinking Development Strategies*, 2011; 'Can Africa Turn from Recovery to Development?', *Current History*, May 2014; and 'Globalisation and Africa's Unfinished Agenda', *Macelester International*, Vol. 7, Spring, 1999).

When African economies experienced growth spurts in the late 1990s and 2000s, the multilateral financial agencies quickly forgot about the *mea culpas* and, as Thandika observed, touted the recovery as a delayed outcome of the structural adjustment programmes.

However, the recovery has failed to transform African economies and average per capita incomes in many countries are still lower than in the 1970s. As he put it, 'if you have that many *mea culpas*, you create an economy, and that economy behaves in a particular way.'⁹ Understanding the type of African economies that have emerged after more than 30 years of structural adjustment and the World Bank's large number of *mea culpas* was one of the two issues he was working on as book projects before his illness. One hopes that CODESRIA will collaborate with his family to finalise and publish these books, which should be a treasure in the study of African development.

Developmental states and neopatrimonialism

Development economists recognised the critical role states play in industrialisation. States are useful for correcting market failures, devising catch-up strategies, mobilising and allocating resources, and ensuring that firms comply with rules and development-enhancing targets. For much of the 1960s and 1970s, the development literature on catch up was theoretical and aspirational, and focused largely on Africa, Latin America and South Asia. It had no clear-cut success stories to draw on, apart from the historical experiences of Western societies. East Asia's rapid industrialisation in the 1960s and 1970s hardly featured in the debate.

By the 1980s, however, East Asia's successful state-led industrialisation could no longer be ignored. There was an explosion of scholarly interest in the 1990s in what came to be called the 'East Asian miracle', despite the World Bank's attempt to downplay the state's role in that miracle (*The*

East Asian Miracle: Economic Growth and Public Policy, 1993). The concept and literature of the developmental state gained wide currency and strongly challenged the assumptions of neoliberal theory. Thandika devoured that literature, which confirmed many of the ideas he was grappling with in his critique of Africa's adjustment programmes. His article, 'Thinking about Developmental States in Africa',¹⁰ set the tone for the Africa debate. It is his most widely read and cited work, generating more than 1,000 scholarly citations.

The key value of 'Thinking about Developmental States in Africa' was the systematic way Thandika critiqued what he called the 'impossibility arguments' for crafting developmental states in Africa. These arguments range from Africa's presumed lack of ideology, weak state capacity and external economic dependence, to the continent's alleged neopatrimonial systems of governance and rent-seeking behaviour of special interest groups. As he argued, if developmental states are assessed on the basis of ideological dispositions that are developmental, and in which serious attempts are made to deploy the state to the task of economic development, Africa had many such states in the first decade and half of independence.

Using tax efforts and public expenditure patterns as proxies to measure seriousness, it was clear that many African states took development seriously before experiencing hard times in the mid-1970s. Some of these states were among the fastest growing economies in the world, registering growth rates of 6 per cent or higher. Indeed, as Thandika demonstrated, 10 of the 27 fastest growing economies were in Africa. The

savings rates of many countries were also high. The problem, as he argued, is that critics assess the developmental potential of African states by focusing only on the crisis period when the administrative, technical and coordination capacities of most states had been eroded by the fiscal crisis and the anti-state policies of the IMF and World Bank.

The most popular thesis in the ‘impossibility arguments’ on African developmental states is neopatrimonialism. This bemoans Africa’s failure to develop Weberian-type rational-legal bureaucratic state systems. The African state is, instead, said to be mired in redistributive activities that are guided by patron–client and affective relations, rendering economic development impossible. Thandika was highly critical of this literature, which he consistently challenged in many articles. However, because of the framework’s appeal in the study of Africa, he decided to engage it more comprehensively in 2015. The result is his 50-page magisterial article, ‘Neopatrimonialism and the Political Economy of Economic Performance in Africa.’¹¹ This is a work of outstanding scholarship—rigorous, empirical, and a tour de force on the literature on neopatrimonialism. It is, unequivocally, a demolition of the conceptual edifice on which much of the study of Africa has been constructed. It may well end up as the most important work for devising new ways of thinking about African states, economies and societies. It is, in my view, Thandika’s best piece of work.

Neopatrimonialism is the default explanation for every bad outcome or ‘pathology’ in Africa’s development. Thandika identified the specific mechanisms and

effects highlighted by the literature on neopatrimonialism, and used empirical data, alternative findings in the development literature, and logical reasoning to assess the concept’s explanatory power. The pathological effects of neopatrimonialism range from bad governance, low savings and lack of capitalist classes, to hyperinflation, bloated state bureaucracies, low taxation, interest group capture of industrial and trade policy, and misuse of foreign exchange.

The empirical evidence is, however, different. As he demonstrated, the governance performance of African states is not worse than what should be expected for their level of economic development; Africa’s low savings is a recent development that is tied to the fiscal crisis and almost twenty years of adjustment policies; clientelism is not confined to African capitalism—it is also a salient feature of East Asian developmental states; African countries did not have Latin American-type levels of hyperinflation—indeed, inflation rates in the pre-crisis period were relatively low in Africa; African states employ less people per capita and spend less per GDP compared to other developing regions, suggesting that the continent does not have over-bloated bureaucracies, but is instead largely under-governed; African countries vary greatly in tax efforts, however on the average they collect a higher percentage of taxes than other countries and their tax efforts surpass the minimum of 15 per cent of GDP recommended by the IMF for developing countries; and there is no evidence that special interest groups are the main drivers for initiating industrial and trade policies, even though they benefit from them.

Advancing the development agenda in social policy

Although Thandika took the social aspect of development seriously, it did not feature prominently in his work before he joined UNRISD. He often made brief remarks on post-colonial social contracts and in discussing social development his main focus was on education and health expenditures. His primary concern in the study of development was economic growth and structural change. This was to change when he arrived at UNRISD—an institution whose *raison d’être* is to examine development from a social lens.

Thandika was at the peak of his powers in advancing a developmentalist agenda in the study of Africa when he joined UNRISD in 1998. How would he address UNRISD’s social concerns and remain faithful to his own agenda as a development economist? UNRISD’s work on ‘the social’ covered a wide range of issues—such as the social impact of economic reforms; environment, sustainable development and social change; gender and development; corporate social responsibility; new information and communication technologies; public sector reform in developing countries; land reform; social integration in urban settings; the international trade in illicit drugs; ethnic conflict and development; political violence and social movements; war-torn societies; agriculture and food systems; social indicators; and participation. There were also a few studies on social welfare policies.

Thandika resolved the problem by injecting his concerns for economic growth and transformation into the study of social policy, and narrowing the issues to be

addressed in social policy to social protection and social services, while paying close attention to issues of equity, social pacts, cohesion and democratic processes. The result was what I believe was his most innovative contribution in development studies—the mega project he christened ‘Social Policy in a Development Context’,¹² which gave social policy the same powers as economic policy in theorising development. There were tensions between this radical turn in conceptualising ‘the social’ and UNRISD’s other programmes that also addressed important social issues.

In the end, ‘Social Policy in a Development Context’ became hegemonic because Thandika was not only a great thinker; he was also a super-effective fund-raiser with a wide network of friends in the donor world. The social policy project became UNRISD’s biggest project in much of the 2000s, generating 18 books and numerous programme papers, journal articles and book chapters. At its peak, it had four or five resident research coordinators, seven external coordinators, and more than 150 researchers worldwide working on different dimensions of the project. Part of that work continues in the research programme of the coordinator of the Africa study, Jimi Adesina, who now organises regular conferences on social policy in Africa, after a series of successful summer programmes he directed for senior African development policy makers in Dakar.

In rolling out the project at UNRISD, insights on the developmental role of social policy were derived from the experiences of successful late industrialisers, especially the developmental states of East Asia and the Nordic social democratic states. The

project contended that for social policy to be developmental, it must do five basic things. It must stimulate economic development or enhance productive capacities; serve as a redistributive channel for narrowing economic and social inequalities; protect people from income loss associated with unemployment, pregnancy, sickness, disability and old age; reduce the burden of reproduction or care work; and act as an automatic stabiliser to the macro-economy in periods of crises. Late industrialising countries used combinations of these roles of social policy in transforming their economies.

Importantly, the project affirmed that social policy can be transformative when it is universal rather than targeted to specific groups, and when it is linked to employment-centred growth strategies, which may allow more people to be incorporated into social insurance schemes that are redistributive across classes, groups and generations. Thandika’s ‘Targeting and Universalism in Poverty Reduction’,¹³ which influenced many UN agencies, systematically laid out the advantages of universalism over targeting when crafting social policies.

Four of the five social policy roles discussed above were already well researched in the welfare state literature of advanced economies before the social policy project was launched. Thandika was particularly drawn to the fifth—the productive role, which he felt was under-theorised. This addresses the issue of how social policy can spur innovation by creating conditions for industrial peace; raising human capital, skills and savings rates; converting savings into productive investments; and deepening the financial sector.

The social policy–savings–investment links are best captured by the experiences of late industrialising countries in using pension funds to generate high savings rates and promoting rapid industrialisation. For instance, Singapore’s Central Provident Fund accounted for about 40 per cent of its gross domestic savings in the 1980s, and South Korea’s funds represented 30 per cent of its GDP in the mid-2000s. These funds were used to finance heavy and chemical industries in Korea and universal homeownership in Singapore. Finland, a late Nordic industrialiser, used its own pension funds to industrialise through extensive electrification and public housing provisions.¹⁴

Thandika wrote extensively on the developmental role of social policy. These publications, which spanned his tenure at both UNRISD and LSE, include the following: *Social Policy in a Development Context*; *Social Policy and Development Programme Paper No. 7*, 2001, UNRISD; *Social Policy in a Development Context* (ed.), UNRISD and Palgrave Macmillan, 2004; ‘Targeting and Universalism in Poverty Reduction’, *Social Policy and Development Programme Paper No. 23*, 2005, UNRISD; ‘Transformative Social Policy and Innovation in Developing Countries’, *European Journal of Development Research*, 19 (1), March 2007; ‘Transformative Social Policy and the Developmental State’, LSE and Institute for Future Studies, n.d.; ‘How the New Poverty Agenda Neglected Social and Employment Policies in Africa’, *Journal of Human Development and Capabilities*, Vol. 11, Issue 1, 2010; ‘Welfare Regimes and Economic Development: Bridging the Conceptual Gap’, in F. Valpy and T. Rosemary, (eds.), *Overcoming the Persistence of Inequality and Pov-*

erty. Palgrave Macmillan, 2011; ‘Social Policy and the Challenges of the Post-Adjustment Era, in E. Paus (ed.), *Getting Development Right*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2013; (with I. Yi), *Learning from the South Korean Developmental Success*, 2014; and ‘Colonial Legacies and Social Welfare Regimes in Africa: An Empirical Exercise’, *Social Policy and Development Working Paper*, No. 4, 2016, UNRISD.

His succinct policy brief on the sixteen lessons drawn from the project, titled ‘Transformative Social Policy: Lessons from UNRISD Research’, is also highly recommended (*UNRISD Research and Policy Brief No. 5*).

Grounding development in democratic processes

So far, I have presented Thandika as a committed, indeed unflagging, developmentalist. People with this mindset, including the pioneers of development economics, often privilege economic development over everything else, including democracy, or have a benign view of authoritarian rule if it delivers economic growth and transformation. It is very common to hear colleagues in economics and other disciplines in Africa arguing for a benevolent dictator or ‘strong man’ to sort out the problems of the continent. Thandika was very different. He refused to accept a trade-off between economic development and democracy.

He strongly believed in both the intrinsic and instrumental value of democracy. In a popular debate with the Kenyan political scientist, Peter Anyang’ Nyong’o, in the *CODESRIA Bulletin* in the late 1980s and early 1990s, Thandika defended the intrinsic value of democracy against attempts to in-

strumentalise it as a prerequisite for development.¹⁵ Throughout his writings and public interventions, he advocated for democracy to deliver on development, but did not reject it if it did not; instead, he often insisted on more effort to get democracy to deliver good outcomes.

He was a great admirer of East Asia’s developmental states, but detested, in equal measure, their authoritarian history. He always held up the rich tradition of democracy, industrialisation and equity in the Nordic countries as a counter to the authoritarian underpinnings of the East Asian miracles. In fact, to his delight, and as he often pointed out, many studies now treat economic growth and democracy as mutually reinforcing. Thandika’s dislike for authoritarian rule may have been influenced by the harsh treatment he received under Banda’s despotic government in Malawi, causing him to spend 30 years in exile. As head of CODESRIA, he played a big role in defending academic freedom in Africa when, in the 1980s, university academics were under attack as governments tried to implement unpopular structural adjustment programmes.

For Thandika, therefore, development should be grounded in democratic values and processes. In this sense, he shared Amartya Sen’s view of development as freedom—including political freedom. He identified with Sen’s statement that ‘a country does not have to be deemed fit for democracy; rather, it has to become fit through democracy’ which he quoted approvingly in one of his papers on democracy.¹⁶

There were two sides to Thandika’s treatment of democracy. The first was his defence of new or fledgling democracies against

the technocratic styles of policy making associated with the IMF’s structural adjustment programmes. He coined the term ‘choiceless democracies’¹⁷ to underscore the American Political Scientist Adam Przeworski’s observation that the conditionalities of the IMF and World Bank limit the choices of new democracies, producing, as Przeworski observed, ‘societies which can vote but cannot choose.’¹⁸

One of the first projects Thandika launched at UNRISD was ‘Technocratic Policy Making and Democratic Accountability’. This examined the tensions between technocratic styles of policy making and democratisation in a selected number of countries in Africa, Latin America and Asia. The adjustment programmes, we should recall, narrowed policy options to a limited number of objectives that emphasised fiscal restraint, privatisation and liberalisation. To meet these objectives, governments tried to insulate policy making technocrats in finance ministries and central banks from public pressure. This approach to policy making distorted structures of accountability and made governments more answerable to multilateral agencies and investors than to emerging representative institutions and the wider public. It also downplayed the importance of employment, social protection and poverty eradication as policy makers were mainly concerned about stabilisation and market-enhancing activities.

Thandika’s second approach to democracy was instrumentalist. He downplayed, at least at UNRISD, the study of democracy in its own right and insisted that it must be linked to development objectives. The difficulty with this position is that many countries that have held

multiple elections and liberalised their political systems still have strong authoritarian reflexes and are not always responsive to the needs of voters. It may explain why studies on the link between democracy and economic or social development always produce poor or ambiguous results.

Linking democracy to social or economic outcomes may require, therefore, interrogating the quality of democracy itself. How institutionalised are social and political rights? How independent are state institutions, especially the judiciary, electoral management bodies and police, from governing parties and leaders? How competitive, fair and credible is the electoral system? What are the social bases of political parties? How are the poor connected in the political process? Are political parties governed democratically? What is the quality and depth of civil society organisations and mass-based interest groups? And how responsive are governments to citizen demands? Answers to these questions, which fall in the domain of political science, require studying democracy as an issue in itself if we are to understand democracy's role in advancing good or bad social and economic outcomes. Despite his tendency to believe that Africa has passed the democracy test, these are issues that I enjoyed discussing with Thandika as we both tried to understand the links between democracy and developmental outcomes in Africa.

An institution-builder in social science research in Africa

Thandika was not just a great scholar; he was also an innovative institution-builder. He was central in the development of CODESRIA's in-

frastructure for collaborative social science research in Africa when he headed that institution from 1986 to 1996. I am sure his colleagues who worked closely with him at CODESRIA will provide richer insights into this aspect of his work. But let me say a few things, based on my observation as a participant in CODESRIA's work.

It was under Thandika's leadership that CODESRIA's membership expanded beyond the limited circle of deans or heads of social and economic research institutes, to embrace all who teach and do research in the social sciences in Africa. CODESRIA's triennial General Assembly has now become the largest gathering of social scientists in Africa, attracting more than 500 participants, who are mostly sponsored by CODESRIA.

In promoting social science research in Africa, Thandika was concerned about many issues, which can be summed up in seven ways. First, he was critical of the tendency of many Western scholars to publish articles and books on Africa without citing African scholars or engaging with local African debates. Second, he strongly disapproved of debates on Africa that did not include African contributions. Third, he criticised the North-South intellectual division of labour in collaborative projects in which Northern scholars arrogated to themselves more intellectually challenging roles of theory building and delegated less challenging roles of case studies or supply of primary data to African scholars.

Fourth, he bemoaned the crisis of African universities in the 1980s and 1990s, which was linked to the defunding of universities and the World Bank's myopic and destructive view that Africa did not need universities. Fifth,

he worried about the future of young scholars growing up in highly under-resourced university environments. Sixth, he strongly believed that senior scholars should be empowered to inspire and mentor young scholars. And seventh, he was a firm advocate of inter-disciplinary research and breaking of geographical and linguistic barriers in African social science research.

In order to build national and cross-national research capacity, CODESRIA created two important tools—National Working Groups, which encouraged scholars in any country to organise teams and conduct research on any theme of their choice; and Multinational Working Groups, which were headed by senior scholars, involving the participation of scholars from different regions on the continent. The senior scholars are required to produce Green Books, which provide methodological guidance and comprehensive reviews of the literature on the subjects to be studied.

CODESRIA also mounted a well-resourced, Rockefeller-funded 'Reflections on Development' programme, which targeted established and promising young scholars. They were offered USD30,000 each to go to reputable foreign universities or research centres for some research and given office space at CODESRIA on their return to conclude their research and produce book manuscripts. Some of CODESRIA's best books came out of that programme.¹⁹

Another innovation was the Small Grants Programme, which targeted Master's and doctoral degree students by providing them with grants for their dissertations. This programme was launched in the 1980s when most universities were experiencing difficulties in

funding postgraduate students because of cuts in university budgets. Grantees were required to send copies of their theses to CODESRIA to be deposited in the institution's library, which should now be a rich source of knowledge on various aspects of development in African countries.

Under Thandika, CODESRIA also launched two Summer Institutes—on Gender and Governance—which exposed young academics to the literature and debates on these emerging issues of global concern. Summer Institutes on a variety of issues have since exploded in leaps and bounds.

The popular *CODESRIA Bulletin*, which publishes think pieces, debates and short articles on burning issues, was another of Thandika's innovation. The *Bulletin* is now more widely read than the Council's lead journal, *Africa Development*. It published two famous debates during Thandika's tenure—on democracy, and the Mazrui-Mafeje debate on recolonisation.²⁰

An 'outsider' in the UN

UNRISD was already an established institution with a 35-year history when Thandika was appointed to head it in 1998. It had developed its own rules, infrastructure, networks, and competence for conducting social development research on a global scale. Its staff—those in administration, publications, and research—were well trained, experienced, and highly motivated, and required little supervision. UNRISD's efficiency was of such quality that it could be run on autopilot. What it needed from directors were fresh research ideas and ability to raise funds.

Another feature of UNRISD that played to Thandika's preferences

and strengths is its unique position within the UN system as an autonomous institution with an independent board—made up largely of top scholars from different regions of the world. It also has a tradition of questioning conventional wisdom and advancing critical ideas on contemporary social problems. The administrative hierarchy is relatively flat, with researchers enjoying considerable autonomy in leading projects.

These features of UNRISD suited Thandika very well—he was ideas-driven and iconoclastic, very informal in his personal relations, and not impressed by the trappings of bureaucracy. The dress code at UNRISD was, as in universities, 'business casual' without ties, unless when attending formal meetings. But the Director always dressed formally, which Thandika had to adjust to because of his frequent official meetings. He once told me that he did not like dressing formally, and always looked forward to summer when he could be his normal self in wearing loose African shirts or slightly unbutton his shirt and roll up his sleeves. His informal approach could sometimes confuse those who did not know him. During the closing session of a CODESRIA project planning meeting I once attended in Harare in the 1980s, one of the participants asked the group to censure the Executive Secretary for failing to attend the meeting. Those of us who knew Thandika exploded in laughter because Thandika made some of the most incisive contributions at the meeting. The poor guy obviously expected to see the Executive Secretary in a suit.

The organisational setup and tradition at UNRISD allowed Thandika to focus on ideas, project proposals, fund-raising and his

own research and writing. His strength was not in administration or management. Indeed, we very quickly learned that copies of every paper that required his attention should also be given to his able secretary, Angela Meijer, for easy retrieval. His love of ideas and the efficiency of the staff meant that he could give valuable feedback on projects without interfering in how they were run. I always joked with friends and colleagues that you could go to Thandika with one idea and leave with three or four new ones or seriously question the one you took to him.

As an ideas person, he staunchly defended the integrity of the academic content of research projects even at the cost of losing funds. I would like to narrate two incidents that stuck with me in thinking about him as Director of UNRISD. The first was our effort to secure from the Swedish agency, SAREC, funding for a project on 'Economic Policy Making and Parliamentary Accountability'. SAREC suggested that they would consider funding the project if we worked with the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU), which was headed by a Swede. However, the Head of IPU insisted that we should delete references to the IMF and World Bank in the research proposal. He touched a raw nerve. Thandika chastised him in a telephone discussion on the project for making such a demand. When he dropped the phone, I knew the funding request was up in flames, but he greatly earned my respect for standing up for his ideas and protecting the integrity of our research.

The second incident was in Durban during the anti-racism world conference in 2001. UNRISD had sponsored a parallel conference on 'Racism and Public Policy',

involving the participation of 40 high-level scholars from around the world. We had invited the Ghanaian sociologist, Kwesi Prah, who had taught at the University of Juba and worked on identities and xenophobic practices in Sudan to prepare a paper and lead a discussion on that country. The Sudanese ambassador to South Africa contacted Thandika on the eve of the conference and demanded the withdrawal of the Sudan paper. He ‘threatened’ to take the matter up with Mary Robinson, the UN High Commissioner on Human Rights and convener of the official inter-governmental conference, if his demand was not met.

Thandika told him that UNRISD would not take instructions from governments and Mrs. Robinson had no power over UNRISD’s work. He advised him that the best he could do was to reply to Prah after his presentation, and UNRISD would willingly give him a few minutes to do that. As coordinator of the project, I informed Prah to expect a rebuttal to his paper from the Sudanese mission. The following day, about five members of the Sudanese mission attended Prah’s session and occupied the front row seats. The hall was full to capacity, with more than 500 participants. We thought there was going to be a nasty exchange, but Prah completely disarmed the Sudanese delegation by his brilliant presentation. They did not utter a single word during the discussion of the paper.

Thandika’s relative distance from the day-to-day running of research projects sometimes created problems. One clear case was the preparation of the Institute’s flagship report *Combatting Poverty and Inequality: Structural Change, Social Policy and Politics* (2010), which I coordinated. The project’s conceptual framework

had taken a different direction from his original ideas, which I thought were not feasible because of data limitations. He had not consistently followed the evolution of the project, which involved contributions from more than 100 individuals, detailed comparative research in eight countries selected based on the extent of their industrialisation or structural change, and numerous thematic papers.

He questioned the direction of the project only after the first draft report had been discussed in a review meeting. A stalemate ensued that threatened the report’s viability, but his position was untenable because the research staff that worked on the report did not agree with his approach. After a series of heated but inconclusive staff meetings and bilateral discussions, he asked me to lock myself in my office and write the report. I was deeply moved when he said, ‘Yusuf, I know I have been an obstacle, but I’m sure this report will be concluded very quickly as soon as I get out of the way’. He was such a remarkably honest and transparent person that was driven largely by ideas.

Personal interactions

Let me conclude this tribute by saying a few things about my personal interactions with him. Thandika was remarkably open, welcoming, witty and charming. Every minute spent with him was intellectually and socially enriching. Sometimes it was difficult to tell whether it was his ideas or wit that attracted people to him. He was good in stimulating your brain and making you laugh. Like all humans, he could be impulsive and lose his cool when he did not have his way on issues he felt strongly about. But he did not hold grudges and found

ways to make amends and let you know he was wrong.

His *joie de vivre* was just as intense as his love of intellectual work. I sometimes felt that his enjoyment of life was a stimulant for his academic work ethic and sharp mind. He enjoyed bantering with colleagues and loved music, football, beer, nightclubs, and the arts in general. He was an amazing storyteller and frequent—indeed, very frequent—traveller, having literally visited every part of the world many times over. I always liked to engage him after his missions to hear his jokes and stories about the places he had visited. He was a good listener and observer—quick to feel the pulse of a place and pick up what people were worried about. His jokes and stories could have produced tons of books that would have been the envy of scholars who rely on anecdotes to explain the African condition.

I first heard of Thandika in 1983, when I engaged CODESRIA on a paper I wrote with two colleagues, Abdul Raufu Mustapha and Sa’idu Adamu, on the politics of Nigeria’s economic crisis. I might have met him for the first time in 1985 at a conference CODESRIA organised at the Ahmadu Bello University, where I was teaching, on structural adjustment programmes in Africa. I met him in Sweden in 1986 after another conference on structural adjustment. Thereafter, I became involved in CODESRIA’s networks, attending its workshops and conferences in Dakar and other cities. Even when I moved to Geneva in 1990, CODESRIA, through Zenebeworke Tadesse, Thandika’s Deputy, asked me to join the Carter Centre’s elections monitoring team during Ghana’s presidential and parliamentary elections in 1992.

Thandika introduced me to Dakar's jazz nightclubs and the music and nightclub of Youssou N'Dour in the 1980s, before N'Dour became a superstar. We discussed football a lot. I recall the time Zambia won the African Cup of Nations in 2012. When we met after the match, he thought he could tease me because Zambia defeated a West African team, Cote d'Ivoire, in the final. He laughed and changed the subject when I told him I rooted for Zambia because West and North Africa had dominated the Cup of Nations for too long.

I also recall when Guinea fielded three Banguras in their football team in a Cup of Nations tournament. He rushed to my office the following morning and joked that he did not know that the Bangura clan had so many footballers. I informed him that Bangura is originally a Soso name in Guinea and parts of Sierra Leone, which the Themneh, Limba and Loko in Sierra Leone have appropriated on a large scale through a long history of migration and inter-marriage. I do not even know one percent of the Banguras in Sierra Leone, let alone those in Guinea. He dropped the football talk and launched into a discussion on ethnic identities.

When he was at CODESRIA, he invited me in 1994 to give two seminars at their Governance Institute. Since I was holidaying with my family in Sierra Leone, I decided to take them along. At the end of the seminars, he took us to Gorée Island, an important trading post during the transatlantic slave trade, to see the so-called House of Slaves. As other Africans and African Americans who have visited that island have recounted numerous times, it was an

emotionally draining experience. We later regained our balance when he treated us to a lovely meal—a super huge grilled fish—in one of the restaurants on the island. I still have a picture of him carrying my two-year old son on his chest in the return journey as the boat was trying to anchor on the shores of Dakar.

I introduced Thandika to Nollywood films (Nigerian movies), when the industry was still in its infancy. He fully embraced the films as a source of entertainment and for understanding how young Africans view their world. He was pleasantly surprised that Africans were beginning to make films about their everyday lives and aspirations that appeal to mass audiences—something literary scholars have been unable to achieve on the same scale using the written word. As we both observed in one of our discussions, these mass-produced videos have transcended the more intellectually challenging films that have dominated the Pan-African Film and Television Festivals in Burkina Faso, which most Africans do not have the opportunity to watch.

Thandika was an amazing person who touched many lives in many ways. I will miss his infectious laugh, wit, vision, hunger for development, critical scholarship, indefatigable defence of justice, and effortless ability to relate to people across the divides of race, ethnicity, class, gender, and age. I thank the Mkandawire family in Malawi and Zimbabwe for giving us such a fine, gifted and engaged human being; and Kaarina Klint, his wife, and children, Andre and Joshua, and grandchildren for sharing him with us.

Notes

1. See his Inaugural Professorial Lecture titled “‘*Running While Others Walk*’: Knowledge and the Challenge of Africa's Development,” in *Africa Development*, vol. 36, no. 2, 2011, pp. 1-36.
2. Kate Meagher, ‘Reflections of an Engaged Economist: An Interview with Thandika Mkandawire’, *Development and Change*, Vol. 50, No. 2 March, 2019; p. 513.
3. Meagher, *ibid*, p. 532
4. Meagher, *ibid*, p. 519
5. See the bibliography that CODESRIA has prepared of Thandika's work at this link: <https://www.codesria.org/thandikamkandawire/thandikas-work/>
6. Gershenkron's *Economic Backwardness in Historical Perspective*, 1962, Cambridge, The Belknap.
7. Meagher, *opp cit*. pp. 540.
8. Gail M. Gerhart, Capsule Review of *Our Continent, Our Future: African Perspectives on Structural Adjustment, Foreign Affairs*, September/October 1999.
9. Meagher, 2019, p. 522.
10. ‘Thinking about Developmental States in Africa,’ in *Cambridge Journal of Economics*, Vol. 21, Issue 3, May, 2001.
11. ‘Neopatrimonialism and the Political Economy of Economic Performance in Africa,’ in *World Politics*, Vol. 67, Issue 3, 2015.
12. <http://www.unrisd.org/research/socialpolicy>
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14. Olli Kangas, ‘Pensions and Pension Funds in the Making of a Nation-State and National Economy: The case of Finland’, *Social Policy and Development Programme Paper No. 25*, 2006, UNRISD.



15. See Mkandawire, T., 1994. "Comments on Democracy and Political Instability." *CODESRIA Bulletin*, 1.; Mkandawire, T., 1991. "Further Comments on the Development and Democracy Debate." *CODESRIA Bulletin*, 2; Mkandawire, T., 1989a. "Comments on Democracy and Political Instability." *CODESRIA Bulletin*, 1; Mkandawire, T. 1989b. "Further Comments on Democracy and Political Instability." *CODESRIA Bulletin*, 2.
16. Amartya Sen, 'Democracy as a Universal Value', *Journal of Democracy*, Vol. 10, No. 3, pp. 3-17, 1999; p.4.
17. See his 'Disempowering Democracies and the Persistence of Poverty', *Democracy, Governance and Human Rights Governance Paper*, No. 21, UNRISD, 2006.
18. Adam Przeworski, *Democracy and the Market*, Cambridge: CUP1991, p. 84.
19. See for example, Paul T. Zeleza, *A Modern Economic History of Africa. Vol 1: The Nineteenth Century*, 1993, CODESRIA Book Series; Jimi Adesina, *Labour in the Explanation of an African Crisis*, 1995, *CODESRIA Book Series*; Eghosa Osaghae, *Between State and Civil Society in Africa*, 2004, *CODESRIA Book Series*.
20. See Article exchanges between Mafeje and Mazrui in *CODESRIA Bulletin* No 2, 1995, and *CODESRIA Bulletin* No 3, 1995.