

Thandika Mkandawire: The Nordic Africa Institute Guest of Honour 2011¹

In recognition of his decades' long contribution to the advancement of knowledge production in Africa and in the world Thandika Mkandawire, Olof Palme Professor for Peace with the Institute for Future Studies in Stockholm and Professor of African Development, London School of Economics; formerly Director of the United Nations Research Institute for Social Development (UNRISD) and Executive Secretary of the Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa (CODESRIA), has been appointed NAI Guest of Honour 2011. This is the first such appointment ever and who could better deserve it than Thandika Mkandawire.

Having recently read through most of Thandika's extensive scholarly production on behalf of Rhodes University of South Africa for his promotion to become a senior doctorate of Rhodes University, I am extremely honored to have been asked to make this presentation.

Thandika Mkandawire's special field of activity has been "Development Economics" and/or "Political Economy". He has published extensively from the end of 1970s in several journals and books, which have been in the forefront in his field of study. He is extensively cited in the development discourse in a great number of journals and in many books in the field (423 hits on Google Scholar). In his

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studies he has been dealing with central themes in the discourse of development in general and in Africa in particular. He has been an advocate of the counterpoint arguments to the mainstream discourse of neoliberal economic theory (Björn Hettne 2005).² He has with rigour been examining and criticising the mainstream discourse. While the mainstream discourse, for example, maintains that the different measures introduced through the structural adjustment programmes lead to improved conditions for industry in the adjusting countries, Thandika shows already in his article of 1988 *The Road to Crisis, Adjustment and De-Industrialisation: The African Case*³ that the measures instead lead to de-industrialisation. His arguments from late 1980s and early 1990s, such as the one on de-industrialisation, became established truths in the late 1990s. Although his basic themes are mainly the same, he examines the theory and practice of development from many angles and perspectives. He looks at the problem from the point of fiscal policies, industrial policies, privatisation policies, domestic savings and

domestic as well as external direct investments, the role of the state, the contradiction between economic and political reform and from the point of view of internal and external interventions. At a general level, his most important contribution is that he succeeds in interrogating issues both from an economics and from a political science points of view. He integrates these two disciplines in a way very few other scholars do. Of importance is the way in which he questions the assumptions underlying economic theories. In his articles on the development of development economics, over time he emphasises these points to an extent that it must be breaking new avenues for the discipline. This is for example done by studying carefully the underlying reasons given for State Failure in the African context such as *a) dependency, b) the lack of ideology, c) the weakness of the African state and its proneness to capture by special interest groups, d) lack of technical and analytical capacity, e) the changed international environment that did not permit protection of industrial policies, and f) the poor record of past performance.*⁴

His major area of study in which he also possesses most knowledge is of Africa. His many years of studying Africa also give him ample of knowledge of case studies, which he uses to support his theoretical arguments. However, in the past decade he has widened his

views considerably and brought in examples from both Asia and Latin America. Of interest are his views on what is relevant in the Asian experience for Africa where he again brings in counterpoint views to the mainstream discourse emanating mainly from World Bank-financed studies. *While it is now admitted that the state has played a central role in the development of Asian countries, it is suggested that replication of the Asian experience is somehow impossible for Africa.*⁵

The area in which he definitely has contributed to the advancement of knowledge in the field of development economics is in the interplay between economic reform and democratisation. Here he has even created a special term, which is attributed to him by all scholars in the field namely “choiceless democracies”. It was defined for the first time in his article in “Crisis management and the making of “choiceless democracies” in Africa in the book edited by Richard Joseph in 1999.⁶

All through his work he emphasises the role of the state. His article on “Thinking about development states in Africa” summarises well his arguments, which is present in most of his work. Here also his pioneering critique of the implementation of the neoliberal theories of the 1980s and 1990s comes to fore. He uncovers the contradictions between on the one hand decreasing the size and the duties of the state and on the other adding new demands on the state. “Wrong diagnoses and the jaundiced view of the state have produced a number of paradoxes for neoliberal projects. Structurally adjusting an economy was a state activity that required much more capacity than was implied by simply retrenchment. Most of the measures proposed ac-

tually needed a strong state to see through the major structural changes implied by the policies”.⁷

Mkandawire’s critique on the implementation of the neoliberal theories has been strong and forceful. It has not been one-sided without seeing the problems on the ground and the need for major reforms. His critique is based on a deep understanding and historical knowledge of the situation in Africa and his major contribution is to point at lack of consistency and contradictions in the practical implementation of the theories.⁸ His personal experience as a fighter for democracy and Human Rights already at a young age has permeated all his writings and his engagement in these issues all through. Suffice here to mention the campaign for Academic Freedom that he started and led from his position as Executive Secretary of CODESRIA. In recent years he has also added a new dimension to his research and writings, by increasingly pointing at the importance of comparative studies and on using the insights and lessons for developing countries from experiences in other parts of the world including the developed countries themselves. In the recent UNRISD research on social policies this has been a major mode of work. “...both the history and the current use of social policy in the developed countries can provide useful insights and lessons for developing countries”.⁹

In conclusion there is no doubt in my mind that Thandika Mkandawire fulfils the conditions to become the first NAI Guest of Honor. With his extensive publications over a long period of time he has made a distinguished contribution to the advancement of knowledge in development economics with

particular emphasis on Africa. His writings are used as learning materials all over the world and he has through his important position in the past decade been able to engage other researchers in his field of research. His importance for engaging young scholars in particular during his years at CODESRIA should be specially emphasized. He is widely cited and his views have had impact on the discourse and policy implementation over the years. Already at CODESRIA he introduced efficient dissemination policies something he has refined during his years at UNRISD. Being a citizen of both Malawi and Sweden, he has put both Africa and Sweden on the map of development research.

Notes

1. This presentation of Thandika was done in 2011 on the occasion of the 4th European Conference on African Studies held in Uppsala from 15 to 18 June 2011 after Thandika accepted to be Nordic Africa Institute Guest of Honour in 2011.
2. Hettne Björn, 2005, “Discourses on Development”, In: Haynes J. (eds) *Palgrave Advances in Development Studies*; Palgrave Macmillan, London; and Hettne, Björn, 2005. ‘Beyond the “New” Regionalism, *New Political Economy* 10(4) 543-572.
3. Mkandawire, Thandika, 1988, “The Road to Crisis, Adjustment and de-Industrialisation: The African Case,” in *Africa Development*, Vol. 13, no. 1, p. 5-31.
4. Mkandawire, Thandika, 2001, ‘Thinking about Developmental States in Africa,’ in *Cambridge Journal of Economics*, Vol. 21, Issue 3, May.
5. Mkandawire, Thandika, *ibid*, p. 289-313.
6. Mkandawire, Thandika, 1999, “Crisis Management and the Ma-



- king of 'Choiceless Democracies' in Africa," in Richard Joseph, ed., *The State, Conflict and Democracy in Africa*, Boulder CO: Lynne Rienner, p. 119-36.
7. Mkandawire, Thandika, 2002, "Incentives, Governance and Capacity Development: What Role for Technical Assistance in Africa?" in Annan, Kofi, Lopes, Carlos, Malik, Halid and Fukuda-Parr, Sakiko, (eds.) *Capacity for Development New Solutions to Old Problems*. Earthscan Publications Ltd, London, UK, pp. 147-168.
 8. Mkandawire, Thandika, 1995, "Fiscal Structure, State Contraction and Political Responses in Africa" in Thandika Mkandawire and Adebayo Olukoshi eds., *Between Liberalisation and Re-pression: The Politics of Adjustment in Africa*. Dakar: CODESRIA, pp. 20-51.
 9. Mkandawire, Thandika, 2004, "Social Policy in a Development Context," in Thandika Mkandawire ed., *Social Policy in a Development Context*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, p. 1-36.
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