

# African Social Sciences and the Study of the Economy: Building an Independent Pan-African Infrastructure

The African continent is at a critical juncture. In the last three decades, the World Bank, the IMF and Western governments have imposed a regime of aggressive neoliberalism that quashed any possibility for meaningful political and economic independence. The wealth produced in Africa remains squarely in the hands of Western capital – but increasingly also Chinese and other Asian investors – and a small number of African business people and politicians co-opted by the system.

As multinational companies and financial capital have effectively alienated local resources from the people who rightly own them, the development sector routinely crafts narratives that obscure the dynamics of neocolonial exploitation – from “Corporate Social Responsibility” to “inclusive growth”, or more recently the “Sustainable Development Goals”.

But one thing is changing: the veil of respectability that these labels evoke has been lifted. Powerful governments in North America and Europe have been captured by xenophobic and racist populists. Unlike their liberal predecessors, Donald Trump and Theresa May have no qualms telling it like it is. They want to extract anything they can from Africa to feed their declining economies at home. Their politics privileges Northern citizens at the expense of everybody else. The closing of borders disrupts one of the few forms of North-South economic redress available to Africans: international migration.

In recent years, Africa has already been a playground for military intervention from Western powers and regional players. This recent political shift will only increase the ease with which armed conflicts and rapacious trade deals will be used to expedite land grabbing and the extraction of raw materials.

Western academics have also been co-opted in the process. On the whole, our work has contributed to sanitise these trends. We are now even more silent than

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usual, eager to please the new masters or simply scared for our comfortable jobs. Funding for African studies in the West is aligned with the interests of Northern governments and big capital, reflecting their needs to gather information in key strategic areas to fuel the ongoing scramble for Africa.

Discourses of decolonisation and radical transformation of North-South inequalities in knowledge production are spreading to Western universities as well, but so far the structures of academic power seem largely unaffected. Western research projects in Africa have little to no accountability to the host national societies and local communities, and are filled with foreign personnel. Meanwhile, African public universities struggle to get funds from the state to pay for their basic operational expenses, and the lack of research funds pushes many academics to produce consultancy research for big business and the development sector (Mamdani 2011).

The challenge is two-fold. Firstly, African social sciences need to continue the ongoing work of strengthening an independent research infrastructure that is controlled and owned by Africans. We need more critical studies of current trends in the extractive industries and agribusiness, that throw light on the exploitative practices and inequalities at play, and produce knowledge that is framed and consumed by local communities, national societies and governments, and Pan-African institutions, including Africans in the diaspora. Working closely with social movements, community organisations and social justice actors will be helpful in finding synergies and reducing costs.

Digital media and telecommunications offer opportunities for networking and collaboration, and

cheap access to an infrastructure that can grow spontaneously, driven by the passion and motivations of those who use it. We should do more to build participatory networks that bring together communities and people across different scales, and connect various localities horizontally, while scaling up knowledge to influence national and international social movements and policy makers.

As global capitalism enters terminal decline and the fight for dwindling resources intensifies, it is important to focus on alternative economic models that privilege human relations, social value and sustainable engagement with the environment, delinked from the abstract imperative of the profit motive (Nyamnjoh 2015). Action research networks should reflect this ethos, and foster grassroots democracy, egalitarian management structures, healthy interpersonal relations, and decent working and living conditions for all those involved, breaking away from neoliberal hegemony. There are plenty of experiences to learn from, as many informal groups and social movements already work along these lines, from rotating savings schemes to landless movements.

The second area of action concerns the renegotiation of the political and economic relations of knowledge production with the rest of the world. African actors must come together to develop effective ethical and professional guidelines that are binding for all foreign research conducted in the continent. This should not be merely a bureaucratic exercise, as it is often the case with current national regulations.

There is a need for procedures that compel European and American universities doing research in Africa to redistribute a large share of resources to African universities, researchers and local communities, including areas such as project recruitment and research funds.

Even in cases where significant numbers of African scholars are involved in projects funded from overseas, there is a rigid hierarchy that sees foreign researchers almost always in charge. The trend is reminiscent of what Michael Burawoy (1972) refers to as the “upward floating colour bar”, a common situation in post-liberation African economies where the lower and middle management of companies were transformed, but expats retained control of the top tiers. As the late Archie Mafeje (2000) highlighted in his vision of Africanity, the goal is for all research in Africa to be carried out under African supervision.

Redressing North-South inequalities goes beyond the issue of material resources and personnel structures. It is also true that there are differences across African contexts. For instance, West African countries have developed a more independent knowledge base than Southern Africa, where Western

and local white researchers occupy a prominent position.

Most high-quality research across Africa is already produced by Africans. Yet, Western scholars in African studies continue to have a disproportionate amount of visibility and influence, even though the quality of their outputs is often mediocre. They regularly appropriate the work of African scholars, while making them invisible or, worse, turning them into objects of study (Nyamnjoh 2012). These practices too need to end. There should be clear guidelines and sanctions to make sure that African scholars' contributions are properly acknowledged in peer-reviewed publications, public dissemination and university curricula. These forms of invisible violence (Henkeman 2016) continue to characterise contemporary racism in Euro-American academia.

Western academics and funders will not be eager to embrace this agenda, or

collaborate in its implementation. They need to be reminded that they would find it unacceptable if the roles were reversed.

## References

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