

Online Article

Whose Ecosystem? Whose Africa? Whose Future? A Decolonial Critique of the Entrepreneurial Ecosystems Approach to African Development

Introduction

Africa continues to be treated as a terrain of deficiencies and lacks, and this conception of the continent and its people has opened floodgates for numerous development models conceived in the Global North and imposed on Africa. The latest is what has been rendered by its proponents as “entrepreneurial ecosystems for Africa” which are driven by Silicon Valley models of development and are being imposed on Africa as magic wand for development of the African people. This article provides a decolonial critique to this continued imposition of models of development from Europe and North America and how their proponents and advocates try to hide the Eurocentrism of the models by using what they term African “stories” and African “voices” which they “harvest” to give their model an African tinge.

The event that provoked a decolonial critique

Every act of theorising begins somewhere, in a body and a biography, even when it pretends to

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begin nowhere. I write as a historian born in Gwanda, in Matabeleland, and declare this locus of enunciation because the trouble with much Northern theory is not that it is located but that it has forgotten it is located (Mignolo 2011). These reflections began as an invited response delivered on 9 July 2026 at a seminar convened by Eurac Research in Bozen-Bolzano in Italy, on Phumlani Nkontwana and Erik Stam’s ‘Entrepreneurial Ecosystems for the Africa we want’ (2023) —a serious and generous paper by scholars who plainly tried to shift the geography and biography of knowledge but failed because their theories remained Euro-North American-centric. The authors tried to compensate for this through a methodological approach, which in their words “harvested African stories.” What follows is a sympathetic critique of their sympathetic critique

toward Silicon Valley prescriptions for African development, by an ally who insists it does not go far enough.

Anti-Eurocentric Eurocentrism in display

Immanuel Wallerstein (1997) warned about the limits of those critiques of Eurocentrism that are themselves Eurocentric. Nkontwana and Stam fell into this trap, for example in the paper they mounted critique of Euro-North American models while remaining inside a Eurocentric episteme. Consequently, they opposed the *content* of the dominant model without changing the *terms* of the conversation, wanting a context-specific entrepreneurship where a decolonial critique asks whether ‘entrepreneurship’ should be the master category at all.

Even some anticolonial critique tends to pitch struggles on the coloniser’s terrain—‘your model is wrong for us’—with the model still the standard against which the local is found wanting. The decolonial critique changes the terrain as it deprovincialises the silenced

archives of the South and provincialises the North, so that European knowledge becomes one regional knowledge among many (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2018). This is a radically different stance to anti-Eurocentric Eurocentrism, in which the dominant terms return under the banner of resistance to them. Much of what passes for the ‘decolonisation’ of development is exactly this.

Five points of critique *Genealogy*

The paper by Phumlani Nkontwana and Eric Stam concedes, with a candour I honour, that its model derives from hundreds of studies drawn primarily from Europe and North America—then builds on that foundation anyway, importing Schumpeter, Baumol, Sen and Raworth as the scaffolding of an African future. But where is Claude Ake, whose *Social Science as Imperialism* (1979) named this very transaction, in which African reality is mined to feed theories made elsewhere? Where are Amin, Rodney, Nkrumah, Nyerere, Cabral, Hountondji? Their absence is the signature of the cognitive empire, which trains us to experience African thought as ethnography rather than theory. And it is load-bearing: African political economy is the theory most likely to unsettle the assumption that more market participation is the road to the Africa we want.

The concept

Concepts carry ontologies. ‘Ecosystem’ naturalises the market as a quasi-biological given, beyond politics and history; the figure of the ‘entrepreneur’ installs the self-maximising individual as the elementary unit of the social; displacing collective forms of labour, obligation, and reciprocity; and the idea of ‘productive entrepreneur-

ship’ routes all value through firm formation, so that the African who feeds a neighbourhood or holds a lineage together through redistribution appears only as arrested development. The dish is marinated in Africa and Africans to make an imported recipe palatable: the spices are local; the recipe is not.

Method

The paper describes its method as the ‘harvesting’ of local stories, and verbs disclose worldviews more honestly than arguments do. Where once the ships carried copper and cocoa, now the servers carry stories (Hountondji 1997; Smith 2012). A hundred Africans furnished narratives; none co-authored the theory. SenseMaker®, the proprietary instrument used, prestructures what an African narrative may become before the telling begins. The countries, meanwhile, were chosen partly by the World Bank’s corruption index and a *Financial Times* ranking: one cannot escape Northern measurement by using it to decide where to look.

The absences

The economy flattened by the word ‘informal’ is overwhelmingly a woman’s economy—the markets, the cross-border trade, the food systems (Meagher 2010)—while the entrepreneur-hero is a quietly gendered figure whose autonomy is underwritten by the reproductive labour of others (Oyěwùmí 1997; Tamale 2020). Equally absent is Indigenous knowledge: cosmologies in which wealth is counted in relationships honoured rather than monetised assets. These absences are not omissions addable in revision; they are constitutive of a frame that cannot hold them without ceasing to be itself.

Circularity

If you offer respondents choices along an axis running from ‘private sector led’ to ‘government led’, you should not be astonished when the findings portray the state as either absent or punitive. The neoliberal common sense was built into the survey instrument: the conceptual triangle is already tilted before any respondent engages it, pre-structuring the space of possible answers and predetermining the kinds of conclusions that can be drawn. Asked to imagine 2030, they imagine futures of entrepreneurship, as people handed a hammer describe a world of nails. Yet the weak signals knock on the wall of the questionnaire: keep value local, feed people, distrust the capital that extracts and departs. These are requests for a different economy, and the authors recorded the sound without letting it change the room.

Lessons for Africa: from critique to reworlding

It would be poor decolonial practice to just offer objections without suggestions. I therefore offer four decolonial-informed ways of rethinking and researching development in Africa which are aligned to what I have termed reworlding.

Deprovincialise the archive: read Ake, Amin, Rodney, Nyerere, Cabral, Mkandawire, Hountondji and the African feminists not as local colour but as theory able to frame an inquiry.

Replace harvesting with co-theorising: let Africans author the concepts and frame the questions — owners of a share in the refinery, not only suppliers of the ore.

Provincialise the master concept: demote the 'entrepreneurial ecosystem' from sovereign to citizen, so that it argues for its relevance in each African context rather than assuming it.

Practise an ecology of knowledges (Santos 2014): build success measures from within African lifeworlds. If a community measures its health by how many of its members are fed, housed and held in dignity rather than by high-growth firms per million, that is the metric — even at the cost of legibility to the World Bank.

Together these amount to reworlding: refusing the temporal structure in which Europe occupies the present and the future while Africa occupies a permanent past, forever catching up to a modernity whose terms were fixed before it set out. The ecosystem approach is a technology of catching up — a better vehicle for a race Africa never agreed to enter. Reworlding asks whether the race is the thing.

It will be objected that youth unemployment demands bread now, not epistemology. But the frame determines what counts as bread: Ferguson (2015) shows that southern Africa's most effective antipoverty interventions abandoned the entrepreneurial premise and simply distributed. The epistemic and the material are one question, asked at two depths.

Conclusion

If the hundred African stakeholders were co-authors of the theory rather than suppliers of stories, and if African political economy and African feminism were the framework rather than the afterthought, would the 'entrepreneurial ecosystem' survive the encounter at all? By mid-century Africa is to be home to a quarter of humanity and the youngest population on the planet. If that future is imagined only as the extension of a model distilled from Boston, Boulder and the Bay Area, the pluriverse will have been foreclosed where it had its best chance — not by the crude coloniality of conquest but by the gentle coloniality of the sympathetic critique, which comes bearing gifts. The Africa we want will not be found by supplying better stories to a theory made elsewhere.

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