

Towards Radical Reclaiming of African Economic Futures

Call for Abstracts; Panel at ASAA Conference 2022

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Panel Organizers:

Leiyo Singo, Richard Mbunda, Stefan Ouma, Eugen Pissarskoi, Kerstin Schopp



Panel Description

Envisaging the future is important (Kallis et al., 2020:87). Equally important is reclaiming that future, precisely because development as we know it has impacted African peoples in unrewarding ways (Matthews, 2017; Rodney, 1973). Despite disappointing experiences with development there is a continued desire for development in Africa (Sachs, 2019). Africa ‘must run while others walk,’ Nyerere suggested. Nyerere’s call to run and catch up was common to all African nationalists who announced nation-building projects in their respective countries. These legitimate aspirations arise in the context where majority of the African people constitutes what is referred as the ‘Bottom Billion’ -those who have ‘missed the boat’ (Collier, 2007). Economic growth is therefore pursued with expectation that it will reduce human material suffering, increases people’s capabilities, and widen their choices (Mkandawire, 2011). Today, the ‘Africa on the rise’ narrative has gained momentum both within and outside the continent following impressive growth rates. However, African scholars are already asking provocative questions: “Africa on the rise, but to where?” (Khisa, 2019; Frankema & van Waijenburg, 2018; Taylor, 2016; Obeng-Odoom, 2014).

The common answer to this question points to the market economies as they have been established in the Global North after Industrial Revolution in the mid of the 18th century. Since then, these countries have experienced tremendous growth in economic product, accompanied with improvement in various indicators of quality of life (health, literacy, life expectancy etc.). This developmental trajectory led to the impression that economic growth is a necessary condition for creating desirable futures. The growth mantra has become the main political goal of African governing elites and global centers of finance. It is beyond reasonable doubt that African people deserve dignified lives, but there are at least two reasons against imitation of the developmental path of the Global North.

Firstly, Africa would be wise not to repeat the errors committed by the first runners as several scholars have argued (Keita, 2020; Prashad, 2012; Amin, 2011; 1987; Ake 1996). For instance, Franz Fanon (1963) strongly argued against imitating Europe. Instead of creating societies that draw their inspiration from Europe, Africa should turn over a new leaf, a new history of Man that does not repeat practices of the European economic system (ibid). Challenges such as ecological limits, global financial crises and global inequalities are all the by-product of an economic system based on infinite growth. Ian Taylor (2016) points out that measuring economic progress by privileging ‘growth for growth’s sake’ tells us little about broad-based development. One of the great challenges in Africa is to address the ethical, social and environmental problems that the new economic growth spawns (Mkandawire, 2014; Obeng-Odoom, 2014). It is argued that the African growth has stimulated *conspicuous* consumption and less in poverty reduction (Frankema & van Waijenburg, 2018). So, amidst demands on the continent to ‘rise’, ‘run’, and ‘catch up’, it is important to pose and reflect: whose growth anyway? Who appropriate the benefits of growth and who must bear its burdens and risks?

Secondly, besides the distributive injustices across the globe and within capitalistic societies, the developmental trajectory of the Global North has turned out to be intergenerationally unjust. Early industrialized economies of the Global North have caused environmental pollution in an amount that critical thresholds in environmental



systems (so-called “Planetary Boundaries” Rockstroem et al. 2009, Steffen et al. 2015) have been or are close to be transgressed. There is broad agreement among scholars in the Global North that their economies require a radical transformation to comply with the requirements of Sustainable Development. That shows that the developmental trajectory of the Global North has come under pressure in the Global North itself (Fitoussi et al. 2009, Mazzucato and Jacobs 2016). Within the current discourses, visions such as Degrowth, Post-Growth, Sustainable Well-Being are being brought on the public arena, but the growth mantra remains entrenched in the political mainstream. Still, the beginning discourses in the Global North might provide a window of opportunity for the African countries to establish their own economic and societal visions which might even inspire the corresponding discourses in the Global North.

Agenda 2063: The Africa We Want envisions “a different and better Africa” (AU Commission, 2015:2). The vision designed by political mainstream sticks to the goal of economic growth and envisions Africa as the global powerhouse of the future signaling a continued desire for more growth. However, there is a much richer discourse on African Futures within African societies than the official positions pretend. Social groups with diverse backgrounds are demanding for autonomous spaces to create futures outside of the hegemonic constructs (Kinyanjui, 2019). Indigenous communities and rural movements fighting against multinational mining corporations, land alienation (Moyo & Yeros, 2005), large infrastructural projects and genetic modification points to a different future. Amidst the COVID pandemic, petitions to protests debt-financed development are signed in some African capitals.¹ Times of ruptures and disruptions provide opportunities to rethink alternatives. A shift from a short-term approach predominantly focused on near term profits to long-term planning sensitive to universal well-being and the natural environment. Thandika Mkandawire (2011) argue that what is needed is a series of political battles within different African countries to ensure that the interests of elites are made to match more squarely with those of non-elite groups. Concerted efforts attest the disenchantment with current development designs.

Africa’s history, diversity of lifestyles, and worldviews undoubtedly provide fertile ground on which desired worlds can be cultivated. The continent has an opportunity to (re)produce different worlds and provide new terms of reference and recognition for the future of humanity. It is in that context this panel invites scholars, policymakers and practitioners to reflect on the “better and different Africa” as an attempt to reclaim desirable futures. In particular we invite contributions which address at least one of the following or any other related aspects/issues:

- Philosophical backgrounds for African Futures: what do African philosophies like masakhane, ujamaa, ubuntu etc. recommend regarding desirable futures?
- Visions of African Futures: How do African visions of Sustainable Development look like, and which parallels to the Degrowth concepts do they contain?
- Policy Strategies for African Futures: Which localised discourses, habits and commoning practices have opposed colonialism and capitalism?

¹ Don’t Lend Our Government, Debt-Weary Kenyans Demand of IMF, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2021-04-09/don-t-lend-to-our-government-debt-weary-kenyans-demand-of-imf>.



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