

# Journal of African Transformation

Reflections on Policy and Practice

## Revue des mutations en Afrique

Réflexions sur les politiques et les pratiques

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*Réflexions sur les politiques et les pratiques*

**Rethinking African Development  
in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century**  
(Special edition in honour of Thandika Mkandawire)

**Vusi Gumedede, Guest Editor**

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## **Editorial**

Vusi Gumede (Guest Editor)

The continent of Africa stands at a critical juncture. Almost 70 years after the end of colonial rule, the continent struggles to break the shackles of poverty and underdevelopment. More important, the task of building an inclusive and democratic society remains a work in progress, and often, democratic reversals have become a common phenomenon. At the global level, the continent plays a marginal role in shaping the rules governing international economic relations. To the contrary, bad rules, unjust trade agreements, conditional aid, and debt structures are the means by which African development is regulated. As a result, the ability of African countries to chart their own independent development path is severely restricted. Such externally imposed policies have produced multiple black holes of social exclusion and pockets of slums, and made disabled nation-States more accountable to external forces than to their own citizens.

To fully grasp the reasons behind Africa's underdevelopment and its marginal position in the twenty first century, one must take a retrospective view of the theoretical and political underpinnings of the aborted national project of the early 1960s. To do so, it is important to revisit as a starting point the development thinking of the late Malawian economist Thandika Mkandawire if Africans are to embark on alternative pathways for achieving structural transformation, long-term growth, and policy independence.

Development was the central or overarching theme in Mkandawire's publications and other materials, including his speeches and presentations. He published extensively on social policy (Mkandawire, 2001a), developmental states (2003), regional integration (2014), and economic development, as well as various macroeconomic and political economy issues (2002). He looked at all these themes from a developmentalist perspective (2005). Mkandawire was unusual among economists given his work on nation building, national and social questions (2009), social cohesion, social compacts and pacts,

and other phenomena, usually outside mainstream economic thinking. He challenged neoliberal perspectives and extensively critiqued structural adjustment programmes (Mkandawire and Soludu, 1999) and other schools of thought that have either oversimplified the African development challenge or misunderstood it (Mkandawire, 2010 and 2015).

Mkandawire was inspired by the political thinking of early nationalist leaders such as Kwame Nkrumah, Modibo Keita, Sekou Touré and Nnamdi Azikiwe, among others. His essay “Thinking about developmental states in Africa” captures the full thrust of the nationalist project (Mkandawire, 2001b). The nationalist project, first and foremost, focused on nation-building and national development, overcoming the institutional legacies of colonialism, and bringing the fruits of social and economic growth to the population. In concrete terms, the national project was oriented towards achieving a more equitable appropriation of the productive forces at the local level, while playing a critical role within the Non-Aligned Movement, the Group of 77 and China, and the United Nations for a new international economic order. As a result of deliberate actions, African economies registered impressive growth rates during the 1960s and early 1970s, given the initial conditions at the time of independence. Physical infrastructure was greatly improved, in particular in the areas of health, education, and communications. Elaborate social programmes were developed that helped to diffuse social tensions.

As Africa entered the 1970s, however, the national project was being threatened from within and without. At the national level, the national project was undermined by poor political governance. Under the guise of nation-building and national development, post-independence African

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