



Regions
Refocus

Post-Colonialisms Today

A project to recapture post-Independence African agency and progressive policies for our times

CONCEPT NOTE

November 2017

I. INTRODUCTION

This is a project¹ on development policies and initiatives adopted, promoted, or formulated by governments and policy institutions across Africa in the immediate post-Independence period. With a particular focus on the period from the 1950s/1960s to the onset of the crises of the mid- to late 1970s, the project aims to recover the key policies that sought to address what were then perceived as the limits of socio-economic progress imposed by Africa's colonial experience and to fulfil the material, cultural, and spiritual needs and aspirations that drove the movement for independence from colonial rule. Applying feminist and heterodox approaches to economics (see Appendix), these policies will then be examined in the light of on-going developmental challenges in Africa, with a view to identify ideas that can usefully be adapted.

II. BACKGROUND AND RATIONALE

Early post-colonial African leaders and governments pursued a vision (supported by the aspirations of their peoples) of Africa's autonomous development, self-fulfilment and active place in a world of equal nations. In line with this, they promoted development policies geared at the rapid transformation of their economies from essentially primary export, overwhelmingly small peasant-based agrarian societies, into 20th century industrial economies with health, education, and other social amenities for all. The specific strategies and related policies took different forms among the countries, and went under different often bewildering ideological labels². Concretely, however, they shared the common feature of being driven by the exigencies of the structures of Africa's economies as they emerged from colonialism, and were rooted in African agency, however contested.

It goes without saying that even where "correctly"/appropriately formulated,³ application of these policies was not always consistent; state institutions lacked the capacity and legitimacy for transparently holding economic agents to account to the policy objectives and their social goals, leading to much abuse and corruption⁴. Further, and more significantly, global collapse in primary commodity export prices took away much of the means for financing these policies, and, complicated by global economic developments, led to profound economic crises.

¹ Regions Refocus is initiator of this project which it seeks to define and to carry out with partners in Africa. Beyond the initial roll-out, however, an African-based institution or set of institutions can assume management of the project.

² The differences of ideological labelling and philosophical elaboration – e.g. socialism, African socialism, consciencism, African capitalism, negritude, Ujamaa, etc – are important as they often marked different socio-political stances with different implications for state-society relations. As far as possible, these will be explored in the project. The overall point that needs to be kept in mind as a frame of reference, however, is that in spite of these often substantive differences of proclaimed ideology, the developmental policies actually pursued were broadly similar or converged on a spectrum.

³ There was much that was lacking in the conception of these policies from perspectives of class, gender, and basic democracy that was pointed out by friendly critics, but these were aimed for improving the basic thrust of the post-colonial project. These critiques are relevant for the current exercise.

⁴ The reasons for these and other failures will be investigated as part of the research to be undertaken.

The IMF/World Bank neo-liberal programmes of “structural adjustment” which were imposed in African countries from the mid-1980s were meant to respond to the crises. In spite of their description, however, these programmes did not aim at adjustment or reform of existing policies, but rather the wholesale replacement of the policies and the related economic regimes.

The ensuing four decades of neo-liberal policy in Africa did not only severely disrupt (if not put an end entirely to) the immediate post-colonial visions and aspirations. They also undermined the capacity of Africans to pursue their own initiatives. Particularly responsible for this are two inter-twined phenomena at the heart of neo-liberal policy in Africa and its failure to meet the objectives then proclaimed for it.

The first has been the effective abdication of policy responsibility and leadership by African leaders and institutions, the corollary of the usurpation of such policy roles by external agents, principally the Bretton Woods twins, WTO, etc. The extended period of policy conditionality-based financing – by the World Bank, IMF and other multilateral institutions as well as bilateral donors – was one in which the final say over the entire gamut of development policy was placed in the hands especially of Western-led and/or dominated institutions and agencies, with African governments effectively reduced to the role of supervising the implementation of such policies within their territories.

As they were compelled to comply with external policy guidelines, African governments became accustomed, at best, to finding ways of accommodating domestic policy impulses and exigencies to and within the overall policy framework set by external agencies. At worst, political leaders/elites, whose interests over time became more closely aligned with the ones promoted by the external agencies, simply abandoned any pretence of articulating a domestic policy agenda in response to broader domestic needs and interests.

Equally perniciously, the institutions of government – that is the ministries, departments and agencies, which mediated the formulation and implementation of policy – became effectively cannibalised into “subsidiaries” of the external agencies. This fate was shared, to some extent, by even those arms of state which are distant from policy formulation and implementation, including parliaments.

As a result, governments in Africa – both in terms of political leadership and institutional set-up – have been disarticulated from, and incapacitated in responding to the exigency of translating domestic impulses, needs, and interests into the guiding frame of policy.

The second, closely interlinked, phenomenon is the fact that neo-liberalism has been a total ideological onslaught on any and all forms of developmental policy, thought and practice that preceded or exist(ed) alongside it. The application of neo-liberal policy was not a process of pragmatic policy making, of selecting what worked and abandoning what did not, guided by some stated and defined goals of social development. Rather neo-liberalism involved the comprehensive denial of any validity of what went before simply by definition and reference to the belief in a set of economic principles derived from the primacy of the market as the interactions of rational calculating individuals. Thus all policies broad or narrow, from macroeconomic to health and educational policy, from conditions of work in factories to the terms in which villagers organised their access to resources – all of this have had to be re-made in the image of the tenets of free market.⁵

In the veritable bonfire of pre-existing or alternative development policy thinking that this entailed, everything African governments did prior to neo-liberalism was cast aside or denigrated. This included every project pursued by such governments; all knowledge, training and skills acquired by cadres of the state from

⁵ In this the neo-liberal project has been so successful that there is a whole generation of African scholars and policy makers whose intellectual horizon does not seem to extend beyond the nostrums of neo-liberalism. In addition one can routinely hear policy makers and politicians proclaim the need of the private sector or the market in Africa in contexts that can only be seen as meaningless if not downright idiotic.

central to local levels; and every institution built and/or institutional practice developed prior to neo-liberalism.⁶

Above all, the specificity of the African socio-economic reality as it emerged from colonialism, in particular the structure of African economies, which formed the starting point for the questions formulated for development, was glossed over in silence or denied any relevance. Africans had (and still have) to be dragged and shaped into the image of the free self-serving, calculating, rational individual of the so-called free market, and all knowledge and institutions henceforth geared to this end.

The combined effect of these two phenomena has been to undermine the place of African initiative, African knowledge, and the specificity of African conditions in policy formulation to address African challenges.

Paradoxically, however, even in the times when and among groups where the neo-liberal faith admitted little doubt, the emergence of such principles as aid effectiveness, programme ownership, and local participation (even where they were more of rhetorical gestures than actual policy changes) were indications that things could be better organised even under neo-liberalism, and that those who were at the receiving end of policy prescriptions deserved a say in how those policies are formulated and run.

In addition the 2008 global financial and economic crisis which arose from the very Western heartlands of neo-liberal ideology exposed the shaky foundations of that ideology and its claim to infallibility.

In Africa, this has been driven home by the recognition that after years of almost uninterrupted dramatic growth (driven by continual rise in the external prices of primary commodities supplied by Africa), African countries are still no better in material terms and no less vulnerable to external shocks than on the morrow of colonialism – a recognition expressed in growing assertions of the need to adopt new ideas of programmes such as Sustainable Development Goals and structural transformation.

What is hereby highlighted is the fact that the issues that confronted Africans and their leaders at the dawn of independence from colonialism still persist.⁷ Understanding these issues, the questions to which they gave rise and the responses that they elicited, however flawed, is thus useful for addressing much of Africa's development challenges today.

By the same token, Africans and their leaders have to rediscover their capacity of initiative that has been eroded under neoliberalism, and affirm themselves and their reality as a point of departure and guiding framework of thought and action about the challenges that they face both as themselves, and together with the rest of humanity in the 21st century.

This project seeks to contribute to understanding the questions of the immediate and still relevant post-colonial past, and to ask what of it still remains relevant for today. In the process, it should help rediscover the sense of purpose with which African people confronted their future as they emerged from colonialism, renew it in the light of contemporary challenges, and mobilise it in the construction of an agenda for an equitable future.

⁶ The examples are wide-ranging. Departments of economics in universities ceased teaching development economics and bowed to neo-classical mathematization of economics. Skilled researchers in institutions like councils for scientific and industrial research, where the institutions have not been closed down, have watched (and some continue to watch) in frustration as their workable and sound innovations to address specific challenges gather dust, while money is spent on sometimes unsuitable imports, all in the name of some hoary theory of comparative advantage. Projects and institutions developed to tap into the aspirations for the rediscovery and modernisation of African culture, knowledge and skills have languished or been abandoned.

⁷ The irony of neo-liberalism is that it did not even try to argue against the relevance of those questions. It just side-stepped them. One may say the now acknowledged failure of neo-liberalism is a revenge of those questions that it tried to ignore.

To keep these aims in focus, this project will be guided by the framework of heterodox and feminist economics (see Appendix).

III. WHAT IS INVOLVED

The project is concerned with policy interventions taken by African governments in the post-Independence period, specifically the period of the 1950s-70s, when newly formed African states articulated political, social, cultural, and economic policy agendas – before the crisis in global economy interacted with the internal institutional and policy deficiencies that created the conditions for the unravelling of these initiatives and projects with the introduction of structural adjustment programmes throughout the continent.

The focus of the project is on development policy, in both its economic and non-economic dimensions and as understood and/or articulated by African governments, policy makers and scholars⁸. Primacy will be given to economic and social policy as the arena in which post-colonial governments, like governments all over, then and now, address ways in which to meet the material needs of society. It will examine the structural conditions, including the institutional set-up, which provided the motive for the ways in which post-Independence African governments, of all hues, framed their economic policy in terms of the central, strategic, directive role of the state not only in the (re-)organisation of economic activity, in relation to mining, agriculture, manufacturing, and other sectors, but also to an understanding of need to provide free healthcare, water, education as necessary to equip citizens to achieve the project of economic independence.

Acknowledging the ways in which social and cultural conditions, aspirations and their expressions were interlinked with and shaped economic policy, the project will, where possible, also examine artistic and other expressions of the sociological and cultural project of African identity, inextricably linked to the establishment of economic identities of African states. This will help in understanding how the post-Independence paradigm was conceptualized – both in the understanding of the situation of post-colonial underdevelopment as a multifaceted process and of development policy as a holistic package of interventions in the economy, society, culture, language, etc. Insights from post-Independence projects of rethinking national and Pan-African identities, particularly through the African novel of the 1960s and '70s, will shape the rediscovery and re-thinking of economic policies just as they shaped their initial formation.

Attention will also be paid to the economic, political and cultural institutions that were built to carry out the development project that was encapsulated in policy.

⁸ To the extent possible the project will explore the influence on development policy of various contested perspectives – for instance development understood as “become developed like the West” (as in modernization theory, which continues with us to this day), as against development understood as having contingent meanings for the betterment and elevation of the peoples of Africa, in Africa’s own ways.

IV. HOW

The project will be organised around a systematic uncovering of information, with the aim of generating innovative thinking and articulating proposals relevant to current policy challenges. Its methodology will include these main activities:

1. Research, according to a diversity of methodologies including collection of anecdotal information, interviews with national policy institutions, discussions with policy-makers;
2. Analysis of policy documents, budget plans, economic and development projects, legislations and other sources of policy-making;
3. Readings and interpretations of artistic and anecdotal sources of information, including art, literature, music, etc. of the time that provides a valuable window into the tension of African societies at the time;
4. Intergenerational dialogues, workshops, and convenings amongst a group of researchers, a working group of advisors, and additional sources of insight including experienced development practitioners and liaisons of post-Independence governments; and
5. Strategies to advance the alternative policy proposals in various African and global policy arenas including through engaging with governments and in alliance with civil society and social movements.

This project will be rolled out for an initial period of two years, and could be extended for further periods depending on outcomes of the first period and funding.

ELEMENTS OF HETERODOX AND FEMINIST APPROACHES

The research and proposals involved in this project will be guided by a heterodox and feminist orientation. A full definition of what this approach means in this context will be completed by the Working Group. As a contribution to this discussion, a few elements of these approaches are sketched below.

Heterodox

Economic analysis is identified as heterodox in two ways: when its analytical content includes the social and the historical; and when its methodologies are open to inductive narratives. The latter characteristic compares heterodox approaches against the mainstream that has favored positivism using abstract mathematical formulation complemented by hypothesis testing using econometrics. In other words, heterodoxy distinguishes itself through its method of argumentation as much as the kinds of questions asked and covered by its analysis. Argumentation in the mainstream relies heavily upon the deductive method using abstract assumptions and then axiomatically deriving conclusions. Among the assumptions that are keys to orthodox argumentation are methodological individualism and the existence of states of equilibrium. These assumptions nullify the realities around political interests and power dynamics that inform individual and social choice.

In the African context, the main challenge for most countries is equitable national development based in human rights. In addressing this project, heterodox economics would not insist on a single, all-encompassing body of knowledge, with the economic discipline in particular as central and dominating, as is the case of neo-liberal ideology. Instead it cross-pollinates, harvesting knowledge about the realities people confront as an integral part of the social and historical characteristics of an economy. This is necessary to understanding how societies can organize to improve the material conditions of production and the betterment of people's lives. Heterodox approaches draw on the expertise of doctors, lawyers, engineers, entrepreneurs, and indigenous/traditional practitioners, in addition to economists, and make this knowledge available to the challenge of building society, building production. This schema involves an approach to economic policy formulation that recognizes various relevant systems and knowledge available in formalized and informalized thought, to help understand how to build societies and in the benefit of people.

Feminist

Feminist economics is classified as heterodox. As in all areas of life, economic policy is also a question of power and domination, as exercised over material, spiritual, and cultural resources. One of the most enduring manifestations of that monopoly of power (together with class domination) is the social and material subordination of women in production and reproduction. Feminist theory attempts to delineate elements of this particular area in conjunction with broader issues of power, in a way that connects feminist concerns to those broader concerns of power but does not reduce one into the other.

Feminists argue that social reproduction is an integral part of the economy necessary for the continuation of societies. They also argue that finance and production are embedded within gendered power relations that are expressed and represented in institutions, systems, structures, practices and discourses that comprise our everyday world. These gendered power relations, in turn, intersect with power relations between and among race, age, income, sexual orientation, and territories that explain to a greater extent how the benefits, opportunities and costs of economic processes are unequally distributed and how inequality is reproduced. These interactions determine the pace and progress of national and human development. A feminist approach imagines alternative mechanisms for going beyond, exploding, transforming those relationships as part of the process of transforming hierarchical power relationships in our economy, including through the redistribution of wealth, etc.