

Lessons to Africa from Africa:  
A Political Exchange for Development Alternatives  
20-24 September 2023  
Fiesta Royale Hotel, George Walker Bush Highway, Accra, Ghana

MEETING SUMMARY

Between 20 and 24 September 2023, the Post-Colonialisms Today project– housed at Regions Refocus– and Third World Network-Africa convened a five-day political exchange. The convening took place in Accra, Ghana, and brought together a range of actors from different movements, sectors, and generations who are involved with contemporary struggles for African political and economic agency, and progressive alternatives to neoliberalism in Africa. The convening served as an in-person launch of our Post-Colonialisms Today publication, “*Lessons to Africa from Africa: Reclaiming Early Post-independence Progressive Policies*,” as well as a platform for exchanges around Africa’s contemporary development challenges, from monetary dependence to food sovereignty, agricultural transformation, climate policy, and mineral extraction. A summary of the meeting is below.

## Day One

The first day of the political exchange began with a welcome session (chaired by Crystal Simeoni), in which Yao Graham and Tetteh Hormekku-Ajei explained the program rationale and Anita Nayar introduced participants to the *Post-Colonialisms Today* (PCT) project. Session One showcased the relevance of the post-independence era to contemporary development challenges in Africa through key findings contained in PCT's special issue of *Africa Development*. Journal authors Tetteh Hormekku-Ajei, Jimi Adesina, Akua Britwum, Kareem Megahed, Omar Ghannam, and chair Saker El Nour presented highlights of their chapters on early post-independence ideologies, development planning, and industrialisation. Press attended the session, which served as an in-person launch of the publication.

Later in the day, a conversation between Professor Akilagpa Sawyerr and three of his former students— panellists Yao Graham and Tetteh Hormekku-Ajei, and chair Takwiyaa Manuh— reflected on key strands of PCT's analysis through Aki's work. Tetteh spoke to Aki's analytical contributions, emphasising the relevance of his work on the ruinous effects of structural adjustment policies and the use of bilateral trade agreements to ensure dependency in African economies. As Tetteh put it, Aki told the 'tale of two ISIs,' distinguishing between one form of 'classical ISI' which enhances linkages to TNCs and another which aims to link different phases of the economy and reinvest surplus; after the coup that overthrew Nkrumah, 'classical ISI' took over once again. Yao spoke to Aki's praxis, which is distinguished by a commitment to economic and social justice, and principled leadership. One of Aki's many practical contributions is the research and dialogue process he convened in Ghana to generate an active process searching for alternatives to structural adjustment, which effectively opened up a space for civil society in policy engagement.

In response to Yao and Tetteh's remarks, Aki shared poignant reflections on his work, including how much he has learned from students and former students. He highlighted the importance of professors engaging with the context of the subject they are teaching by going beyond books to understand reality. He also shared his philosophy of looking at the law not as rules but as a superstructure with roots, including the economics behind it. Aki concluded by reiterating the need to share and translate knowledge beyond the university, which was his motivation for engaging with civil society— to ensure that research filters into all parts of society. This is a core goal of PCT.

## Day Two

The second day of the political exchange consisted of thematic dialogues which addressed broader anti-colonial questions connecting to political economy and development.

In Session Three, which was chaired by Heba Khalil, speakers Shadin Alfadil, Mamadou Goïta, and Kareem Megahed reflected on the underlying challenges of building the post-colonial state through the prism of coups in Africa— both current and historical— in their specific country context (Sudan, Mali, and Egypt, respectively). Shadin focused her intervention on the progression of independence movements in Sudan, detailing Sudan's history of coups, the post-colonial inheritance of political instability, the role of universities as sites of contestation, and weak civilian institutions in comparison to military institutions. Mamadou described the geopolitics of Mali through the frame of coups, noting France's continuing interference in Mali, corruption at both political and military levels, the need for structural economic transformation to break from imperial interests, and the current calls to establish an economic and political governance regime that meets the needs of the majority of the population. Kareem outlined the evolution of the military's function under Nasser, Sadat, Mubarak, and the current regime, illuminating the deployment of the army as an arm of the state and the clear role that the army plays in preserving social order and serving state interests. As Yao Graham noted in the discussion following the session, coups have some things in common: they start as conspiracies in institutions when processes within the institutions come under pressure, and they take advantage of the political moment. When coups have their own militaries, they often invoke them as legitimating factors, which leads to authoritarian regimes— this has been the case all over the continent, from Eritrea, Uganda, and South Sudan to Rwanda.

In the afternoon, Session Four explored how the collective agency of social movements, whose interests are marginalised, manifest through the lens of class and gender. Chaired by Ruth Nyambura, Tina Mfanga spoke on popular movements, Akua Britwum on gender, and Godfrey Kanyenze on class. Akua explained how, at different parts of history, women have been mobilised (or immobilised) as drivers of popular movements and the economy, connecting gender tropes of women as 'good wives' and 'good mothers' to liberal feminist frameworks, identity politics, structural adjustment, and the rise of NGOs on the continent. Godfrey pointed out that policymakers do not seem to keep in mind that the economy is about our people, and whatever resources we have should benefit our people: instead, we are left with grafted, regressing African economies in which almost half the population are working in the informal sector and foreign capital owns the means of production. Tina shared lessons for organising popular movements against neoliberalism, including drawing on people's discontent and feelings of unmet expectations, constructing an alternative future that can fulfil people's needs and dreams, offering concrete cross-movement solidarity beyond colonial boundaries of identities, building movements from below, and centering pan-Africanism.

## Day Three

Thematic dialogues continued into the third day of the political exchange. Session Five highlighted the ways in which the collective ideology of society, especially marginalised social groups, was expressed through cultural forms– including literature, art, music, and media– well beyond the formal ideology promoted by states in the immediate post-independence period. Panellists shared lessons from the post-independence era for how to counter neoliberal hegemonic ideology today.

Session panellists Chambi Chachage and Nombuso Mathibela spoke to popular media and music, respectively, while Parselelo Kantai was the session chair and a panellist, speaking to literature. Parselelo began the session by articulating that liberation figures were not only the negotiators of independence and the heads of liberation movements, they were also writers and artists of a kind. This history was pushed to the side as famed African publishing houses and cultural institutions shuttered following neglect from post-independence governments. Today, it is a preoccupation of cultural workers across the continent to situate the continent as a site of cultural production at the highest standards. Nombuso illustrated the importance of looking at cultural production, especially from the postcolonial period: not only was liberation itself a cultural end, but liberation movements often develop their own sonic traditions, which offer insight into the cultural moment they were produced in. As Nombuso elegantly put it, music is a grammar for people trying to exercise their own subjectivities; this kind of cultural memory is invaluable for today's movements. Chambi described cultural forms of resistance and recollection, offering a critique of Nyerere's engagement with cultural production and suggesting that state leaders today can counter colonial legacies by embracing liberation movements' cultural production and weaving these cultural artefacts into the fabric of the nation. This is a direct form of resistance since cultural production was purposefully co-opted by states at different times to ensure they could follow through on their practical obligations, including a transition to structural adjustment.

The day ended after lunch when participants broke off into separate groups for the afternoon.

## Day Four

The fourth day of the political exchange began with reflections on the group activities followed by strategic presentations by Omar Ghannam, Yao Graham, Saker Elnour, and Tetteh Hormeku-Ajei on industrialisation, the mineral economy, agrarian reform, and finance, respectively.

Omar began the panel by discussing the legacies of colonialism still visible 50-70 years after independence in African economies, from the purposeful creation of industrial value chains to ensure that the least valuable products were produced in Africa to patterns of wealth accumulation and competition on the continent. Omar proposed various policy strategies that African countries can use to secure industrial (rather than solely political) independence and address these legacies, including investing in solar energy, creating value chains to ensure cooperation rather than competition between African countries, and improving transportation links between different parts of the continent. Yao elaborated on the structural dependence of Africa on raw materials, locating the mineral economy in relation to the new scramble for minerals of importance to the energy transition. Yao emphasised that trade and investment regimes are essential arenas for energy transition and reiterated the importance of African cooperation in the context of taking ownership over mineral exports, but noted that there are a few things missing to enable this: (i.) relationships between movements (climate justice and energy transition) and (ii.) institutional infrastructure (institutional capacity and knowledge needs to be built concerning, for example, what types of minerals we have, geological information, R&D needs, linkages and diversification, local enterprise ownership). Saker anchored his contribution by naming the colonial hierarchies which define how we relate to one another and think of the web of life, from food and crops to nature, land, and the sea. In this vein, he identified the two causes of the 2008 food crisis as the degradation of resources (caused by the disengagement of the state) and the rise of export-led agriculture. Saker pointed out that while land reform is undeniably necessary, we need to be sure that attention is paid to who controls the land in order to bring about true change; to get to the point of land reform, urban and rural struggles need to be linked, so that a coherent social movement is possible. Tetteh highlighted the role of the state in financing development, from funding national airlines to nationalising the mineral economy and including small scale farmers in the drive to increase productivity. Tetteh tied the panel together by highlighting that the ultimate goal of African states should be to close the loop of wealth creation for ourselves to stop wealth from bleeding out, drawing our attention to the importance of incorporating social goals into economic development processes.

## Day Five

The fifth and final day of the political exchange began with a session compiling the thematic strategies discussed in the group reports (in the above matrix). Participants gave additional suggestions to PCT for research, alliance building, and political education based on the past four days of discussion and on overlaps they identified with their own work. A recap of this discussion can be found below.

Research	Alliance Building	Political Education
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Neoliberal turn: commodification of culture. Expressions of protest culture are getting commodified. Within that commodification, what happens?</li> <li>● Reconceptualization of finance, microcredit.</li> <li>● Develop an archive of not just written materials but also music and different types of sources that are useful for PCT research and available to the public.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Correlate with other movements contributing PCT's analysis, helping to conceptualise research, etc.</li> <li>● Scout universities for student leaders, outspoken students.</li> <li>● Facilitate cultural exchanges across the continent.</li> <li>● Recognise the spectrum of actors that generate ideas for change (including NGOs, grassroots movements, academics, etc.).</li> <li>● Feminist space for conversations about the post-independence era.</li> <li>● Collaborate with artists.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Political education needs to be anchored in contestation. PCT can do this- anchor in the contestation. Disassembling facade of unity- being honest about what's happening.</li> <li>● Storytelling. Disseminate elder film series (oral and video) as part of the transmission of our historic understanding.</li> <li>● Exchange experiences between anti-imperialist student struggles from 70s-80s to today.</li> <li>● Translate PCT materials into sonic space- liberation radio, guerilla sound.</li> <li>● Translate heavy economic findings into digestible materials that communities on the ground can understand- play a mediating role.</li> <li>● Convene to mark the centenary year of Cabral's birth in September 2024.</li> </ul>

Just before lunch, a final closing session tied a bow on an incredibly thought-provoking and meaningful five days. Chairs Anita Nayar, Tetteh Hormekue-Ajei, Saker El Nour, and Omar Ghannam held a space for participants to express their thoughts and extended their sincere thanks to participants. Finally, all participants broke for lunch and shea shopping.