

# Bouquets and brickbats along the road to development freedom and sovereignty: Commentary on 'Rethinking the idea of independent development and self-reliance in Africa'

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## **Abstract**

This commentary reflects critically on the issues raised by 'Rethinking the idea of independent development and self-reliance in Africa' (Nwoke, 2020, this issue of AREF), which offers a timely reminder of the nature, scale and extent of reforms inherent in meaningful development regime change. It suggests ways in which the very useful conversation initiated here can be both deepened and widened. In particular, I make a case for greater consideration of what Büscher (2019) calls the 'environmental dimensions of development', on the one hand, and also of imperialism in its manifestation as neoliberal globalisation, on the other. A key lesson must be that the prospects of the project for radical transformation proposed would be much enhanced by a clearer strategic political direction or orientation, and an equally tactical investment in global networks and/or transnational alliances of solidarity.

**Keywords:** Africa; Development; Autonomy; Radicalism; Alternatives; Environment Solidarity.

## **1. Introduction**

Radical approaches to development thinking and practice in and on Africa come in many and diverse forms, but share a commitment to the pursuit of greater equity and fairness and, ultimately, the emergence of a more just and sustainable continent and world. They are also long and well established and, if our experience at the *Review of African Political Economy* (ROAPE) is anything to go by, in reassuringly rude health. The latter is due, in large measure, to the enviable tradition of robust intellectual debate and principled, if sometimes fiery, dissent among and between radical scholars and activists (Cline-Cole and Zeilig, 2018; Fanon, 1965). Nor should this come as a surprise, for challenging or undermining the status quo, one of the avowed goals of radical change, is at one and the same time a process of collective or group (self-)renewal and an affirmation of personal commitment or individual responsibility (Amin, 1990; Beckman and Ya'u, 2012; Di Nunzio, 2019; Onimode, 2004; Kothari, Demaria and Acosta, 2015). However, if such a claim of shared intent is largely uncontroversial, the same cannot be said of the content, substance or style of interaction around the nature, direction and dynamics of radical change and transformation referred to earlier (Adedeji, 1989; Escobar, 2018). Indeed, little of this is definitively resolved or 'settled', and nor should anybody expect this to be the case (Bangura, 2019a; Potter *et al*, 2012; Thomas, 2000).

It is thus noteworthy that 'Rethinking the idea of independent development and self-reliance in Africa' (hereafter 'Independent development and self-reliance') wears the markers of its origins as a keynote address proudly and resolutely, as it justifiably should, but for both good and ill. This makes it somewhat challenging to assess in its current written form, in addition to leaving me somewhat ambivalent. On the one hand, the paper clearly addresses an issue of abiding interest, even if the overarching premise is straightforward and familiar, although no less valid for that (see, for instance, Agapusi, 2016). Equally, it is aimed at a learned and presumably committed audience, which is being seemingly challenged to (hopefully intellectual/academic/ applied/ activist) action, maybe even in support of the wide range of popular protests and uprisings underway on the continent in opposition to politics-as-usual. On the other hand, as these are not specifically referenced anywhere and the presumed challenge is never framed in overt terms requiring in/direct (audience) response or participation, there is something of a cognitive distance separating thought from action and ideas from their application. And therein lie the roots of my equivocation.

In their separate ways, then, ‘Independent development and self-reliance’, on the one hand, and this commentary, on the other, illustrate particularly well the ongoing or evolving nature of the exchange about the means and method for achieving the shared goal of transformational change. In what follows, therefore, I suggest that, although not for a lack of intent, the gap between ideas and their application is not entirely convincingly bridged in ‘Independent development and self-reliance’. I justify this by showing how and why this might be the case in the four substantive sections making up this commentary.

Following this introduction, the next section briefly summarises relevant aspects of the form and content of the paper under review, while highlighting some notable absences and silences. A consideration of questions of aid and trade, notably the risks they pose to attempts at transformational change, constitutes the section after that, which also cautions against the threat of opportunistic capture of radical initiatives. This is followed by some thoughts on the detailed proposals for the pursuit of African self-reliance and autonomy. Here, I am interested in the overall political orientation of the proposed interventions, what social struggles the latter are likely to set in motion, and what the implications for the effectiveness of a radical challenge to the status quo might be. The final substantive section returns to one of the silences mentioned previously, that of the environmental dimensions of development, which are discussed in relation to global capitalism and uneven development, and with particular reference to social movements for ‘prospering without growth’ (Hanačeka, Roya, Avilaa and Kallis, 2020). Concluding reflections on the real and potential impact and relevance of ‘Independent development and self-reliance’ round off the commentary. Throughout, I try to situate the discussion within relevant broader currents of theoretical and conceptual debate.

## **2. Form and content in ‘Independent development and self-reliance’: Tracing the contours**

The paper’s favoured direct, polemical and provocative style is appropriate; overarching structure logical; and there is a conscious effort at integrating the component parts into a coherent whole. In addition, a clear identifiable thread runs through the entire narrative. The overarching argument develops in a gradual, cumulative and self-reinforcing manner, culminating in the signposting of ‘basic and necessary ingredients of self-reliance that we need to embrace’ (p.164). Yet, the case advanced is also uneven in quality and impact, albeit only partly because rhetorical devices which might be particularly effective when

deployed in the course of an oral delivery are often much less impactful in the cold and unforgiving glare of print. Partly, too, this unevenness appears to be due to limited (and, consequently, limiting) overall ambition. This is perhaps most noticeable in a seeming reluctance to adequately problematise development (see the opening third) and/or critically and overtly engage with issues of (a lack of) African agency (see particularly the latter two-thirds), as well as questions of environment/nature (pretty much throughout).

As Obeng-Odoom (2013, in this journal) and others (Bangura, 2019b; Bernstein, 2006; Hart, 2018; Hettne, 1995; Rodríguez-Pose, 2018; Thomas, 2000) have shown, and not just for Africa, both development thinking and practice are incredibly diverse in form; endlessly varied in outcome; frustratingly complex as structure and process; bewilderingly dynamic in its functioning; and in continuous evolution. And as it is inherently selective and discriminatory, development is always contested. In contrast to the foregoing, 'Independent development and self-reliance' appears to frame development as a shared, undifferentiated, singular and internally coherent enterprise; conflates different types/kinds of development intervention (eg, policy, programme, project are all used interchangeably); and privileges aggregate/amorphous conceptions of 'people', alongside a unitary view of 'sovereignty'. There is thus plenty that is contestable about this particular set of imaginings of development as idea/practice/process/progress (Comaroff and Comaroff, 2012; Horner, 2019; Horner and Hume, 2019; Mitlin, Hickey and Bebbington, 2007; Ziai, 2019).

The reason for this seeming absence of complementarity in the two sets of imaginings appears to lie partly in the scene-setting section, which is arguably the least convincing of any in 'Independent development and self-reliance'. It is problematic in both form and content, but particularly so in the latter. Its stated goal is to advance the cause of 'independent development' as concept and practice as a more Afro-realist or Africa-friendly alternative to historically dominant development discourses and their material and other outcomes. Not surprisingly, market-oriented neo-liberalism, in the form of structural adjustment programmes (SAP), comes in for much justified criticism, both here and elsewhere. Less predictably, and despite acknowledgement of its ongoing importance/relevance for aid/trade/development, contemporary globalisation gets little more than passing mention elsewhere and elicits no attention at all here. Significantly, too, the section in question also favours a history of development in Africa, and African development history, which provide support for its core argument that (externally-driven) aid- and trade-based economic

growth has not led to sustainable, equitable and autonomous development on the continent. In so doing, however, the paper highlights the value of alternative and/or competing histories of development of the kind presented, while also illustrating (both intentionally and unintentionally) how and why such histories are often neither settled nor uncontested (see also Agupusi, 2016; Mitlin, Hickey and Bebbington, 2007; Shivji, 2009).

That the alternative history offered is somewhat cavalier in its treatment of the complex ways in which scale, time, place and space are implicated in development thinking and practice is probably an unintentional illustration. The inexplicable absence of the role/place of continental-level development institutions and interventions (e.g. Organisation of African Unity (OAU)/African Union (AU), New Economic Partnership for Africa (NEPAD), Programme for Infrastructural Development in Africa (PIDA), Agenda 2063) from the narrative almost certainly represents another such unintentional illustration. For while, like development interventions in general, these initiatives have elicited conflicting and contrasting assessments regarding their role and impact, they still represent, for good or ill, an integral part of stories of development in/and Africa.

At the same time, and in contrast, I can only assume that summarising ‘economic growth’ in an ultimately emphatic and dismissive way in a section which sets out to problematise the core concern of the paper as a whole was deliberate and intended to ‘settle’ the question of the political economic limitations of development-as-growth as an end in itself once and for all (‘... growth is not development. You can have...growth without development. But you cannot have development without growth.’; p.154). If so, this tactic would be greatly strengthened by referencing both the long-established (but sometimes murky and still fiercely contested) Limits to Growth debates (see Asafu-Adjaye, 2014; Dalby, 2016; Jackson and Webster, 2016; Laurance *et al*, 2015; Meadows *et al*, 1972; Steffen *et al*, 2015; Sjøvaag, 2016; Yuen and Kumssa, 2016). I return to this in the section on mainstreaming the environment in development below, but note for now that it would be good to see the environment/nature feature much, much more in ‘Independent development and self-reliance’.

### **3. Revisiting aid, trade and mutual solidarity: Holding friends close and adversaries closer still?**

The middle sections of ‘Independent development and self-reliance’ which are devoted to the role of aid and trade in constraining the emergence of autonomous or independent development thinking and/or practice are (more so in treatment of

trade than aid) more assured than their introductory and contextual counterparts. But they also partly share the latter's tendency for homogenising difference (is all foreign aid the same in nature/form and impact?); conflating related but separate themes (bi-/multi-lateral and non-state development interventions, for example); and juxtaposing these in a way which invites comment that is not always forthcoming (how/why have African leaders been 'led to believe' in foreign aid even though it is unlikely to lead to autonomous development?). Thus, they do not only flatten and conflate a range of often very different aid/development instruments, structures and relations, but also seem to assume away all African agency in relation to the latter's existence, functioning and outcomes, in seeming disregard of the historical and contemporary evidence (Adedeji, 1989; Beckman and Ya'u, 2012; Fanon, 1965; Nwoke, 2009; Shivji, 2009).

Consequently, an expanding and increasingly complex, diversified and dynamic aid/development architecture is reduced to a generalised 'system' within which, among other things, aid, donors, recipients and outcomes are all undifferentiated or amorphous 'entities' and aid-development relations are (still?) overwhelmingly state-centred/state centric (but see, for e.g., Richey and Ponte, 2014; Banks and Hulme, 2014; Mawdsley, 2019). In other words, generalisations are nowhere nearly adequately or sufficiently frequently qualified here, something which undermines the credibility and, occasionally, logic of the argument, notably when the coverage of aid is compared to the more narrowly-focused and, on occasion, more nuanced treatment of trade. Not surprisingly, it is the latter rather than former which contains a rare mention (albeit in passing) of the relevance of the overarching political economic context of contemporary globalisation for aid/trade, a subject which was crying out for greater and more sustained attention, both here and throughout much of the rest of the presentation.

Nonetheless, taken together, the sections under review address two of the most hotly-contested areas in the development literature and raise a number of pertinent questions (some unintentionally), even if these are not always (satisfactorily) answered. Prominent among these must be the abiding questions of (i) whether the 'weaponisation' of aid limitations described is inherent in the nature of aid per se or in the structure and workings of particular types of aid-based relationships; and (ii) if indeed such aid 'instrumentalisation' is (also) present and/or (as) pervasive in intra-African and other South-South aid exchanges. Might evidence of/for the type of overweening prejudice implied in

(ii) help to clarify the conundrum in (i)? And would this potentially strengthen the overall case being argued? Also, considering the title and content of the section on aid, particularly when compared to that on trade, might it be worth replacing the emphasis on *an absence* of development (‘foreign aid...has failed to bring genuine development [while] external trade has been intended largely to recolonize the continent’, p.163) with an insistence on *the existence/presence* of a self-reinforcing dependent development which is crowding out the preferred and presumably more progressive independent development being advocated?

The last point is not merely stylistic. If the struggle for true and meaningful autonomous development were to be won, it would have been because the forms of disarticulated development which ‘Independent development and self-reliance’ decries had been successfully subverted by self-reliance, which would also have needed to continue to actively supplant the means, methods and outcomes of uneven and disarticulated development on an ongoing basis (see, for instance, Amin and Manji, 2019). In the circumstances, any presumption of the existence of a tabula rasa for autonomous development and self-reliance to be simply projected on, rather than rigorous pursuit of the complete ‘overthrow’ of a previously dominant form of development, would be a fatal strategic flaw. For, in a context in which it is to be expected that entrenched interests would fiercely resist any attempt to transform the status quo and go to great lengths to defend the basis of their privilege, it is hardly surprising that, as ‘Independent development and self-reliance’ itself notes, some countries end up pursuing ‘not really self-reliance but some measure of self-sufficiency and, perhaps, solvency’(p.163). How best to guard against such hijacking of attempts at transformational change for selfish and/or sectional interests? And are pitfalls of this kind along the road to independent development and self-reliance (entirely) predictable? Neither question is answered in sufficient detail but the paper does go on to allude to the issues they raise in its envisioning of autonomous and independent development as alternative to the status quo (see pp.162-163).

#### **4. (Potential) pitfalls on the road to self-reliance and autonomy?**

‘Independent development and self-reliance’s’ penultimate (and final substantive) section is key to the paper’s overall mission of envisioning alternatives to the status quo, which it entirely justifiably disparages throughout. Here, notions of dependency (D) and self-reliance (SR) emerge as central to the argument being advanced. There is a careful and conscious effort to define them, distinguish them from self-sufficiency (SS) and solvency (S), and set out the parameters guiding

their use: 'self-reliance is [not only] inseparable from economic independence, [it] is the road that leads to economic independence' (pp.163). Indeed, notions of self-reliant and solvent countries used here closely approximate Samir Amin's (2019) formulation of emergent and non-emergent economies, with the pursuit of national economic autonomy being considered central to challenging capitalist expansion and imperial domination in both schemas. Nonetheless, important elements of SR and autonomy/independence appear to rest on premises and/or assumptions requiring clarification.

First, SR and D are conceived as binary opposites, raising important unresolved questions: Is SR with delinking at its core (to be) understood as autarky? If not, might it be considered to involve a certain amount of inter-/mutual-dependency, which does not feature overtly in the discussion, except indirectly in the latter's support for South-South cooperation and, possibly, as an unspecified component of SS? Either way, might inter-dependency offer an opportunity for conceiving of dependency in a more textured or differentiated way than in the somewhat absolutist terms envisaged given, as Amin (2019) notes, that economies and states can be inward looking while being open to the outside world (hence partial or selective closure or delinking)? Furthermore, as one of the most ardent proponents of (African) delinking, Amin remains unconvinced of the prospects of 'a developed national capitalism capable of imposing its active participation in shaping globalization', but is not in any doubt at all that 'imperial powers do not intend to allow any country of the periphery – great or small – to free itself from their domination' (Amin and Manji, 2019). It is instructive therefore that, as a result, he devoted the final years of his life to promoting and working toward the achievement of a broad-based transnational alliance or solidarity of workers and the oppressed, *both* South-South *and* North-South, a task he recognised as time-consuming and requiring strategic thinking and action, but also indispensable to the struggle for autonomy and emergence of truly democratic societies (Amin, 2019; Amin and Manji, 2019). 'Independent development and self-reliance' would do well to devote more space to the application of such insights, notably that solidarity needs to embrace diversity and extend well beyond the state and government (pp.166-167), and equally that effective challenges to the status quo by 'popular' or 'people's' power need to be skilfully organised and assiduously guarded from manipulation/hijacking/capture (pp.164-165; 167).

Problematising issues in the way I hint at above has the three-fold advantage of highlighting the somewhat inconvenient truth that SS interaction could be both inter-dependent as well as (heavily) dependent, given that mutual

dependency does not necessarily connote equality; of reminding us that South-South cooperation, like North-South exchange, can be (and often is) unequal with distinct traits of dependency; and of reiterating that we need to be as preoccupied with the nature/dynamics of exchange as with the identities of the partners to such exchange (Amanor, 2013; Amanor and Chichava, 2016; Scoones, Amanor, Favareto and Qui, 2016; Kamwengo, 2017). Indeed, it is precisely the need for texture, complexity and precision implied here which also makes it advisable for the section as a whole – and its underlying argument – to be premised on something less oblique than the situation of ‘several African countries’ (p.163), a rhetorical device which probably works much less well on paper (where it gives the distinct impression of a ‘strawman’) than it must do when used in the course of an oral delivery. In particular, it raises questions about the representativeness of the unidentified countries mentioned, as well as of the fortunes of countries presumed to have escaped the regressive hand of ‘[dependent] development blueprints’ (p.163) which remain unmentioned. Nor, equally importantly, is the question of what lessons for the pursuit of ‘auto-development’ might be learned from the varied experiences of these different categories of countries exhaustively addressed. Or, to put it differently, what has been (or is likely to be) the nature of social struggles resulting from the various policies and other interventions in question?

On the other hand, there is undoubtedly need for a rallying cry of the kind provided to close the presentation and reinforce the argument it advances throughout – a requirement which is clearly fulfilled in spades here. I am not sure, however, that the presentation format adopted maximises the potential impact of this call to arms. Notably, the ‘ingredients of SR’ identified contain laudable and often radical if familiar aspirations, but lack clear and concrete indicators for transforming good intent into realisable goals. Also, the individual sections devoted to the respective ingredients are treated as largely self-contained, even though there are evident (and sometimes significant) overlaps between their content or subject matter. This is almost certainly the product of a conscious choice to sketch a road map rather than undertake a detailed analysis of the SR landscape/terrain, an entirely reasonable approach to adopt. Yet, such complementarity (possibly even synergy?) could be routinely acknowledged or systematically incorporated as a means/tool for integrating and thereby reinforcing the overall message being communicated. Furthermore, several of the ingredients could do with being interrogated more closely and their deployment further sharpened, particularly because of the need to clarify their

multiple and complementary objectives and the imperative for specifying what Amin (2019) calls 'the orientation of the political strategy [to be] implemented by...state and society' (ie, overall, are we dealing with alternative capitalisms or alternatives to capitalism?). This aside, there is also a crying need for 'Independent development & self-reliance' to demonstrate clearly what value, in the round, it actually adds to a long-established and depressingly familiar litany of woes – in the way that Agapusi (2016), for example, does in relation to the closely related theme of homegrown development initiatives in Africa. To summarise, the section does need to do more than just function as a simple (To Do) list of generally laudable aspirations, or it runs a very real risk of being taken for an exercise in sloganeering.

### **5. Mainstreaming the environment in radical development?<sup>1</sup>**

The most significant real and potential threats or challenges to a realisation of the vision/s of independent development and self-reliance outlined in 'Independent development and self-reliance' are linked in direct and indirect ways to the multi-scalar structures, processes and outcomes which are integral to the closely interrelated and constantly evolving phenomena of globalisation and environment/nature. In this connection, and to take an example involving globalisation, it is worth noting that its significance/relevance is acknowledged even in and by NEPAD, the 'establishment' vision of Africa's most promising routes out of global dependency and marginalisation, although several of its preferred options represent the very antithesis of the ingredients for self-reliance highlighted here, and for which it has been rightly criticised. However, 'Independent development and self-reliance' does not engage with, and make use of appropriate shortcomings in NEPAD as evidence of much of what it decries, and in support of the transformation it proposes. Nor does it seek to overcome a seeming reluctance to interrogate African agency including, among its many expressions, regional integration and globalisation 'from below', as well as popular pro-democracy experimentation, anti-globalisation protests and environmental justice movements (Foster, Holleman and Clark, 2019; Osuoka, 2018; Rodríguez-Labajos *et al*, 2019).

Take a second example, this time from environment/nature. There is now widespread acceptance that the main driver of the ecological/environmental crises which define the 'Anthropocene', a proposed geologic era during which

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<sup>1</sup> This heading is inspired by Cline-Cole and O'Keefe's (2006) 'Mainstreaming the African Environment in Development'.

human society and economy have impacted substantially on the earth's natural ecosystems and geology, possibly irreversibly in some cases, has been the rapid expansion and subsequent intensification of global Capitalism (Foster, Holleman and Clark, 2019). Consequently, although still fairly common, neglect of what Büscher (2019) calls the 'environmental dimensions of development', encompassing socio-environmental and political ecology (including climate change) considerations at all levels from the local via the transnational to the global, has become increasingly difficult to justify in radical or other scholarship (Zalasiewicz *et al*, 2018; Bohle and Bilham, 2019).<sup>2</sup> As Foster, Holleman and Clark (2019) note in a passage which is worth quoting at length:

'Capitalism, or the system of capital accumulation based in class exploitation and conforming to laws of motion enforced by market competition, recognizes no limits to its own self-expansion. There is no amount of profit, no amount of wealth, and no amount of consumption that is "enough" or "too much." In this system, the planetary environment is not viewed as a place with inherent boundaries within which human beings must live, together with Earth's other species, but rather as a realm to be exploited in a process of growing economic expansion in the interest of unlimited acquisitive gain, most of which ends up in the hands of a very few. Businesses, according to the inner logic of capital, must either grow or die – as must the system itself.

Capitalism thus promotes a "madness of economic reason" that can be seen as undermining the healthy human metabolic relation to the environment. The mere critique of capitalism as an abstract economic system, however, is insufficient in addressing today's environmental problems. Rather, it is necessary also to examine the structure of accumulation on a world scale, coupled with the division of the world into competing nation-states. Our planetary problems cannot realistically be addressed without tackling the imperialist world system, or globalized capitalism, organized on the basis of classes and nation-states, and divided into centre and periphery. Today, this necessarily raises the question of imperialism in the Anthropocene.'

To its credit, 'Independent development and self-reliance' (Nwoke, 2020) does raise the question of unequal exchange and imperialism at some length

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<sup>2</sup> A proposal for recognition of the Anthropocene Era/Epoch was discussed by the Anthropocene Working Group (AWG) of The International Commission on Stratigraphy (ICS) at a meeting of the International Geological Congress (IGC) in (coincidentally, given our African focus) Cape Town in 2016, and subsequently passed by a formal AWG vote in 2019 with a view to getting the proposal officially adopted by the ICS. See also the websites 'Welcome to the Anthropocene' (<http://www.anthropocene.info/about.php>) and The Anthropocene Project (<https://theanthropocene.org/>), among others.

and in a variety of ways: it hints at an appreciation of differentiated human experiences of the Anthropocene, and demonstrates a recognition of how the contextual and/or mediating role of states and capitalist markets are implicated in worsening inequality and widespread immiseration. As noted earlier, however, it also advocates a restructuring of extractive economies under neo-liberal globalisation, without attending directly to the implications for unequal ecological exchange and the Anthropocene. Indeed, the recommendations in question are premised on an expansion in, and intensification of, natural resource-based production and consumption, preferably allied to a greater and more audacious application of science and technology, alongside 'aggressive domestic industrialisation' (p.165). Such a vision is entirely justifiable on the material, strategic and political grounds advanced. But this does not detract from the impression that, in its current form, it is arguably too anthropocentric in focus (Rodríguez-Labajos *et al*, 2019).

To be clear, it is absolutely right to seek to replace extractivism of the kind which is being opposed on several fronts in the Niger Delta and elsewhere on the continent (see, for example, the edited collections by Moyo, Jha and Yeros, 2019 and Lang, Claus-Dieter and Regelman, 2018). It is doubly heartening when, as here, what is being challenged is neoliberal capitalism, and the alternative being proposed in its place foregrounds redistribution – of wealth, power, influence and opportunity, at least globally and nationally if not at the community or individual level. It is no less striking, however, that 'Independent development and self-reliance' appears to assume that the entire project of redistribution can be sustained indefinitely on a combination of competitiveness and infinite expansion in resource extraction and economic growth. Furthermore, neither enthusiastic support for 'knowledge-based planning' (p.165) nor professed belief in 'intellectual re-orientation' (p.164) appears to have led to overt recognition of probable *natural* limits to, or inevitable *environmental* consequences from such growth, which is recognised elsewhere (Omilola, 2014). However, given that green economy initiatives are still new, markedly unevenly distributed and limited (albeit increasing) in number in Africa, where there is a constant tension between the drive for economic growth and/or transformation, on the one hand, and requirements for environmental sustainability linked to the Green Economy, on the other, maybe this should not come as a complete surprise (Hamdok, 2015; Omilola, 2014).

At the same time, it is precisely *also* the long-running and intensifying nature of socio-environmental problems associated with 'non-green economy activities'

(Hamdok, 2015) that has long lent credibility to the case for mainstreaming environmental dimensions in radical development (Cline-Cole and O’Keefe, 2006). And, as the intervention of local inhabitants and environmental justice activists and organisations active in places like the Niger Delta remind us, radical approaches to the environment continue to attract ongoing media, academic, policy and political interest (Dalby, 2016; Jackson and Webster, 2016; Kothari, Demaria and Acosta, 2015; Osuoka, 2018). This has seen radical criticism of growth-oriented development emerge to counter its inherent anthropocentrism, notably by highlighting that, in practice, sustainability and green economy/growth interventions aim to ‘save globalized capitalism from its most ecologically and socially destructive consequences by constructing markets in environmental assets and deficits’ (McAfee, 2015). Hence the reassurance to African policy makers that adoption of ‘inclusive green growth’ initiatives can be done ‘without slowing growth itself’ (Omilola, 2014).<sup>3</sup>

For an increasingly vociferous strand of radical opinion, therefore, not only are states, markets and capital, and their obsession with growth and competitiveness, not being made answerable for the ‘ecologically disastrous capitalism’ they have actively promoted, but they are being presented as the best hope for solutions to current crises (BUKO, 2012; Unmüßig, Sachs and Fatheuer, 2012). Consequently, what are considered (potential) transformative alternatives to the actual alternative capitalism represented by sustainability and green growth are being variously identified, studied, debated, promoted and tested. They aim to transform dominant economic and power structures and relations via ‘emancipatory, internationalist and solidarity-based’ means (BUKO, 2012). They thus combine Foster, Holleman and Clark’s (2019) conviction in the necessity for a transformation of global capitalist structures, processes and relations, with Samir Amin’s commitment to realising the emancipatory potential of broad-based transnational solidarity which he considered indispensable to the achievement of such transformational change (Amin and Manji, 2019). But what precise form do these take? And to what extent, if at all, do they resonate with the rethink advocated in and by ‘Independent development and self-reliance’?

Degrowth/post-growth activism and scholarship has emerged as one of the more readily recognisable and better documented alternatives to what it perceives

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<sup>3</sup> Inclusive green growth ‘entails supporting growth that enhances human wellbeing, social equity and shared economic opportunities while still “reducing environmental risks and ecological scarcities, minimizing inefficient use of natural resources and maintaining biodiversity among others”’ (Omilola, 2014).

as neoliberal Capitalism's ecocidal growth and market obsessions (see Kallis, Demaria and D'Alisa, 2014). Debates around the ideas in question, which are still unfolding, make clear that these have emerged primarily in the context of philosophical/ethical debates and as expressions of political/environmental activism in the Global North. At the risk of oversimplifying, given that we are dealing with a multiplicity of ideas, beliefs, practices and world views rather than a unitary body of thought or practice, degrowth/post-growth refers to notions of 'living better with less', and doing so according to values like 'solidarity, harmony, diversity and oneness within nature' (Kothari, Demaria and Acosta, 2015). For Rodríguez-Labajos *et al* (2019, p.175), like the environmental justice movement, degrowth proponents 'warn against increasing the physical size of the economy[,] oppose extractivism and debt-fuelled economies, [as well as] the untrammelled profit motive which fails to incorporate full environmental and social costs. [Degrowth advocates] rely upon social movements...in... challenging power structures.' It is thus a call to radical change which aims to re-politicise the environment in development as part of a wider challenge to exploitative relations under neoliberal capitalism, while promoting greater global social justice and equality, as well as 'self-limitation and voluntary simplicity' (Hanačeka, Royá, Avilaa and Kallis, 2020). In practice, degrowth and post-growth favour a focus on various combinations of local level economy/society/nature, appropriate or tailor-made socio-environmental interventions, bottom-up and top-down intervention approaches, sustainable living and livelihoods, and self-reliance and self-sufficiency, among other things (D'Alisa, Kallis, and Demaria, 2015; Kerschner *et al*, 2018; Rodríguez-Labajos *et al*, 2019).

Despite the undoubted Northern roots of degrowth/post-growth as concept, theory and 'movement', however, some of the ideas about, and inspiration for 'living better with less' and 'prospering without growth' implied here have come from philosophies and worldviews like *El buen vivir* (Latin America), *Eco Swaraj* (India) and *Ubuntu/Umntu* (Africa) (Hanačeka, Royá, Avilaa and Kallis, 2020). Nonetheless, despite a genuine interest in building alliances across the world, degrowth/post-growth as *currently conceived* is little known in the Global South, outside a select group of radical activists and academics, with whom it is already in conversation. Consequently, its appeal in, and appropriateness for, the Global South raise important political, moral, ethical, strategic, equity and other questions, which are currently being as carefully researched and critically debated as (inclusive) green growth and sustainability, with which it disagrees on many fronts (Dengler and Seebacher, 2019; Gerber

and Raina, 2018; Hanačeka, Roya, Avilaa and Kallis, 2020). With reference to Africa, the preoccupations emerging from such investigation, consultation and collaboration seek to ensure that degrowth/post-growth is not just another of those ‘foreign development measures’ decried by ‘Independent development and self-reliance’ (see Rodríguez-Labajos *et al*, 2019). Rather, the aim and hope is that it will eventually reflect the outcome of productive and rewarding collaboration and negotiation between diverse partners with a shared interest in, and commitment to the ‘emancipatory and socio-ecological transformation of the global modes of production and ways of life’ (BUKO, 2012).

Yet, this is far from being a ‘done deal’ (in one sense, and like development more generally, it will never be ‘done’ or ‘settled’), and the eventual outcome, #EquiEnviroDegrowthAfrica for want of a better label, is almost certain to be unrecognisable from degrowth as understood, lived and practised in its Global North heartland. Questions will undoubtedly remain: is it sufficiently radical? Coherent enough? Potentially anthropocentric? Appealing enough? Sufficiently transformative? Green enough? How well does it operate across scales? Adequately subversive? How sensitive is it to difference/diversity? Does it reserve a meaningful enough role for context? And the questions will evolve over time to incorporate new and/or increasingly pressing concerns. But much of what we already know or suspect seems to resonate (in admittedly different and sometimes unexpected ways) with concerns echoed at various points throughout ‘Independent development and self-reliance’, not least the need to challenge the status quo ante; importance of satisfying the basic needs of the populace; attraction of selective delinking; the case for strategic nationalisation; and emancipatory potential of regional integration. In addition, there is consensus around the centrality of politics in development, either as political economy and/or as political ecology, as well as a shared reluctance or inability to rise to Samir Amin’s (2019) challenge for a clear declaration of and unequivocal commitment to a strategic political orientation. Indeed, accusations of anthropocentrism have been levied at both the growth-oriented and degrowth-inspired interventions implicated here.

None of the foregoing is either to minimise their respective shortcomings and inconsistencies, or to overstate perceived similarities and be overly optimistic about the possibility of synergies. It is rather to reiterate an important message: that this commentary shares with ‘Independent development and self-reliance’ to which it is a response, a commitment to radical transformational change; that as a result both can be considered, albeit to varying degrees and in different

ways, to be 'writing from the margins' rather than the mainstream (see Hanačeka, Roya, Avilaa and Kallis, 2020); and that in the long tradition of radical scholarship and activism, the two do not necessarily agree on the most transgressive and transformational means for undermining and replacing the status quo. The struggle continues, then, on the long, tortuous, bumpy and sometimes bewildering road to development freedom, autonomy and self-reliance; a journey which will, I hope, continue to offer opportunity for ongoing and fruitful exchange on how we might best 'localise' (maybe Africanise?) the global to the benefit, first and foremost, of Africa's people and nature/environment, and then leverage this in 'provincializing' the politics and practice of transforming global-local modes of production in emancipatory and environmentally aware ways (see BUKO, 2012).

## **6. Conclusion**

'Independent development and self-reliance' (Nwoke, 2020) is to be credited with refocusing attention on (radical) politics in discussion about development, in particular self-reliant or autonomous development. Taking the paper as a whole, my overriding impression is that there is little doubt that the core issues raised are of continuing relevance. However, the overall value would be enhanced by a particularly clear statement of the analytical contribution the paper makes to long-running but evolving debates, notably whether and how it takes ongoing discussions in new and potentially productive directions. In this connection, contemporary globalisation and environment/nature issues are at the very heart of the concerns raised but are neither factored in any focused or detailed way into the contextualization of the paper as a whole, nor threaded in a systematic or convincing way throughout the substantive sections of the paper. I think, too, that the very brave case made for redistribution of wealth, power, influence and opportunity would be stronger still if/when allied with an equally imaginative consideration of the economic and environmental basis of the growth-inducing strategies and policies earmarked for generating wealth to be redistributed. So, rather than weakening or undermining the case for ongoing critique of uneven development and associated African dependency and marginalisation which the paper makes, incorporating ideas from these and other relevant perspectives should enrich and strengthen the force, conviction and credibility of such critique. And, in providing further complexity, variety and texture, should also reduce generalisation and minimise abstraction.

In the final analysis, and its identifiable strengths and undoubted relevance notwithstanding, 'Independent development and self-reliance' is still something

of an opportunity missed in parts, and thus cause for equivocation. For, what we are ultimately left with is a critique with suggestions of *what* might be done and *why* but not enough on exactly *how* (some of) the recommendations *ought* to be realised or indeed *whether* value added might derive from diverse emergent responses to what are in reality shared political economic, socio-ecological and related challenges.

### **Biographical notes**

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