

AfricaKnows! Conference 2020

Future Trends, grand challenges, and politics of anticipation in Africa (and the role of Interdisciplinary studies in Africa)

Convenors

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Contributors

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Charles O. Okidi, Prof. Dr., Professor at and Director of Centre for Advanced Studies in Environmental Law and Policy (CASELAP); Research Professor, Institute for Development Studies, University of Nairobi

Participants in roundtable discussion

- *Erick Gankam Tambo*, see above
- *Clemens Greiner*, Scientific Managing Director of the Global South Studies Center (GSSC), University of Cologne
- *Tanja D. Hendriks*, see above
- *Samuel Kiiru*, see above
- *Charles O. Okidi*, see above
- *Naomy Wanga*, Masters Student and Research Assistant at the Institute for Development Studies (IDS), University of Nairobi

Panel abstract

Globally, there is much debate about the rapid demographic developments in Africa (population growth, urbanization, youth bulge, migration), the growing demand for food, and the scenarios of African food production (Africa’s own green revolution?) also connected to scenarios of climate change. What are the debates about these linkages in Africa itself, both in academic circles, in think tanks and in public agencies? Are demographic and climate change developments seen as a threat for food security or as opportunities? What opinions exist about the ‘order of priorities’: agriculture first, or mining and industry first? Is Africa seen as ‘different’ from (historical) trends in other parts of the world?

Summaries of presented papers

Preparing for the next emergency: the politics of anticipation and collaboration in Malawi

Tanja Hendriks

Malawi, with a rapidly growing population whose majority is relying on subsistence farming, is heavily impacted by increased occurrence of changes in weather patterns combined with climate change-induced disasters. The Malawi Department for Disaster Management Affairs (DODMA) relies on international donors for funding most of its activities, creating a context of profound dependency which in turn shapes disaster relief governance. Based on one year of ethnographic fieldwork with DODMA civil servants in southern Malawi, the power relations that shape collaborations, anticipation and preparedness for disaster, are examined critically. Hendriks concludes that anticipating potential differences in actors' priorities and a willingness to collaborate across it form a crucial part of mitigation and prevention efforts for future emergencies.

The future of digital technologies in strengthening teaching, research and innovation capacities of African universities in the globalized and North-South collaboration context

Erick Gankam Tambo

Universities in Africa face different challenges, among them overcrowding, lack of infrastructure and human resources, etc. The pandemic has exposed this and provided opportunities to leapfrog classic university development paths using ICT digital technologies to deliver virtual education anywhere at any time. The development of ICT has already considerably influenced how science, especially research, is performed. Furthermore, Technology and Innovation Hubs across the continent serve as informal spaces for innovation and entrepreneurship, a fact which universities have already acknowledged and collaboration has been initiated. Universities have adopted digital technologies during COVID-19 to support teaching, learning, collaboration, and research processes, thereby realizing the potential and benefit of these technologies.

Environmental law has secured its place in Africa

Charles Okidi

The paper discusses the backdrop of activities that culminated into the setting-up of the United Nations agency in Africa. It describes the commitment of 77 African countries in pushing for a more inclusive agenda for the conference on the environment which was to be held in Stockholm in 1972. This push was misunderstood in some quarters and termed as the "Third World War-Environment versus Development". He demonstrates the commitment that Africans had for environmental protection. The paper further discusses modern-day developments such as scholarship in African universities, targeted initiatives, regional and sub-regional environmental treaties, and leadership in scholarship and practice in environmental law.

Knowledge Sites and Configurations in Africa: Implications for Future Public University-Based Development Policy Knowing

Njuguna Ng'ethe and Samuel Kiiru

The paper argues that apart from public universities other players exist in policy making process. It suggests to improve the standing of public universities as one site of public sources of knowing. It acknowledges that public universities are no longer driving the development policy agenda as they should. The future of public universities-based development policy knowing is questioned and suggests they address existing external and internal tensions by relearning and internalizing their development mandates and through engineering new institutional norms and practices respectively for them to get their way back into policy research limelight.

Discussion

In the second session of Panel E30, the panellist joined for a roundtable discussion, which was later opened up for contributions from the audience. They discussed the future trends and challenges in Africa, focussing on interdisciplinary research and North-South collaboration. They made a point that African universities play an important role in addressing and managing the grand challenges of the continent as knowledge sites, and as drivers of development. New technologies and methods of teaching developed under the impact of COVID-19 can help to strengthen the capacity of African universities and to create new opportunities for leap-frogging developments. Panellists appreciated interdisciplinarity as useful for understanding complex challenges, stating that *'Interdisciplinarity should be encouraged so as not to have people work in silos.'*

In terms of North-South relations, it was agreed that it should be based on mutual respect. Presently, researchers from the South face several challenges that affect their work. It was proposed that the capacity of research partners from the South should be strengthened to allow for better collaboration. This led the discussion to existing power asymmetries, exploitation, and dependency in collaboration between North and South, stating that *'relations are structured by inequalities'*. It was noted that research professors from the South have less time to engage in developing proposals and have heavy teaching burdens forcing them to seek consultancy opportunities. This was seen as one existent inequality with an impact on collaboration. To address this challenge, it was suggested to speak out and share experiences to try and leverage technology for this.

Next, the quantity of international collaborative relations to centers and universities in Africa were discussed, pointing to a perceived difference between privileged centers with high international engagement and smaller institutions at the *'periphery'*. It was agreed that some established universities benefit more from research opportunities with institutions in the North, while some panellists stated that sometimes it's preferable to work with smaller institutions as they are less bureaucratic, more cost efficient etc. It was agreed that funding institutions should encourage collaboration with smaller institutions.

The panel further discussed the issue of brain drain and how it has slowed down Africa's development. Some panellists criticised that the best African scholars often relocate to the North and are then hardly working on issues affecting developing countries, while others mentioned scholarship programs which encourage researchers to research on challenge-related topics. It was proposed to *'move from brain-drain to brain circulation and try to see how best we can collaborate. [...] We need to design a new brain circulation model to help the experts [...] work on topics related to the South'*.

When further discussing inequalities in scientific collaboration, it was agreed that these begin already at the proposal stage where the priorities often privilege the North's interests. To address this, *'Researchers from the South should determine their research priorities'*. It was noted that funding comes from the North and that Africa should invest more in research to make more research decisions. Furthermore, *'Research funding models should not follow that of development assistance. This will then ensure that institutions can contribute to the research priorities'* which in turn would lead to a more sustainable collaboration. At the level of researchers from the South, it is important to produce quality input which increases their bargaining power. *'There is also a need for structured mentorship as it gives a long-term perspective on education and career development'*. It was proposed that young researchers from the North need to work with young researchers from the South and acknowledge them in their research publications. In terms of collaborations both between universities, donors and development practitioners, more transparency in relation to power asymmetries between actors would be useful to work across difference. This requires directly addressing the challenges of collaboration, leading to the message *'to keep talking, to keep changing the discourse'*.