



Thandika Mkandawire: a doyen of African economic development

*The Star opinion article
31 March 2020*

The incomparable pan-Africanist economic development thinker, teacher, mentor, friend and father has taken his last breath. Having started his career as a journalist, he rests at eighty years of age as the most renowned economist originating from Malawi. A discussion pertaining to Africa's development cannot hold without reference to his many publications, lectures, speeches and conversations shared with many for hours at times over a beer or wine even in pubs with loud music. Fortunate are those whose lives crossed paths with this intellectual giant who lived life to the fullest.

I write a brief commemoration of a life well lived, an African scholar who contributed towards rewriting the African narrative, a thinker whose rigor inspired us, a dancer whose moves we attempted, a friend to his students and those he mentored, an involved father and grandfather and a husband. It has been a privilege to experience him with his family, friends, mentees and even strangers.

Mkandawire has played a pivotal role in my academic career; my accomplishments in the past decade are attributable to him. A conversation shared with his son, André, in 2016 sparked the need for a biographical book on the works and times of Mkandawire. I first encountered his works in the early 2000s, while studying public policy following my PhD in economics. I initially assumed him to be a woman and wrote to "her" about "her" remarkable publications, wishing they had been included as literature for economic studies when we studied economics. It later turned out, as he narrated the story to a group of us five years ago, that many South Africans assumed he was a female because of his first name that can be read as "Thandeka".

As fate determined, I happened to be in London around the same time he was just taking up the African Development Chairship at the London

School of Economics (LSE). What was intended to be a quick lunch, became a two-hour long discussion that would lay the foundation for the makings of a close relationship. During my tenure as the head of the Thabo Mbeki African Leadership Institute, he served as a member of its International Advisory Council. Always calm even during the storms and comforting when the seas unravelled: a lively, jolly, sociable and very accessible distinguished professor. Ambassador Vusi Madonsela once described Mkandawire as having the “ability to communicate complex ideas in a very accessible way – even bordering on wit and ridicule – is quite phenomenal and in many ways, unparalleled.”

His humility too was unparalleled: he shared his draft papers with many and engaged with every input and critique robustly. He was never too busy to develop emerging scholars. He has penned many a recommendation letter in support of developing scholars. One of his letters landed me a research grant. He would surprise me at times: I was reading your paper you wrote in the 1990s. I could have never thought that what I published then was worth his time and that he voluntarily read what I wrote then. He wrote a blurb for one of my books on South Africa and contributed a chapter in my 2018 edited book on Africa’s inclusive development and we got Samir Amin to write a Preface.

As a scholar and an intellectual, what better way to know Mkandawire than to examine his publications and writings. The overarching theme in Mkandawire’s work has been *development*. He published extensively on social policy, developmental states, regional integration and economic development as well as various macroeconomic and political economy issues. He wrote extensively on nation building, the national and social questions, social cohesion, social compacts/pacts, nationalism, pan-Africanism and other phenomena usually outside mainstream economic thinking.

He looked at all these themes from a developmentalist perspective. His writings focused on development’s critical role in Africa, and seeking a better understanding of the constraints affecting Africa’s development, while ensuring that inclusive development takes place. Inspired by the 1955 Bandung Conference, he insisted that we needed to better understand the “nationalist developmentalist framework” instead of merely dismissing it as some did. For him, it was aimed at nation building and socioeconomic development for Africa. The greatest take away from his work is that development is important and that context matters.

He challenged neo-liberal perspectives and wrote extensively critiquing Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAPs) and other schools of thought that have either oversimplified the African development challenge or misunderstood it. He emphasized the importance of non-economic factors in studying economic development, hence his stance that social and economic policies should talk to each other instead of being disparate policy interventions. He unpacked social policy in terms of its various functions and roles so we could better understand its critical importance for development. To be sure, social policy has to do with policy interventions in the public sector aimed at directly improving wellbeing in a society.

There are many important lessons from Mkandawire's perspectives regarding Africa's development. Among these is a need to be thorough in our efforts aimed at understanding developmental challenges facing Africa. He cautions against the comparisons we make between Africa and other parts of the world (especially the West). Through his works, we also learn of different conceptions of development. Speaking of developmental states, as an example, inclusive development is at the centre. His views align with the late Claude Ake who viewed development as "the process by which people create and recreate themselves and their life circumstances to realise higher levels of civilisation in accordance with their own choices and values – development is something that people must do for themselves."

Mkandawire has made many important intellectual contributions that have shaped the thinking of governments, the academy and even in politics. Through his writings, he has played an impeccable role in South Africa's development discourse. In South Africa, he has not only shaped policies but also institutional reforms – this is probably the case for many other countries. Mkandawire's works and ideas, often paraphrased, are found in various documents of the African National Congress and the government. His works are in the curricula of many universities the world over. He is cited in dissertations and theses of students and young graduates all over the world. He is in books and journal articles. He has touched many scholars, activists and government officials in special ways.

It can be argued that the adoption of the developmental state approach in South Africa in the mid-2000s was also shaped by Mkandawire's emphasis regarding social policy. The issue of social and national questions – that social policy has a profound role to play in addressing both the national question and social policies – has been topical in South

Africa. Undoubtedly, Mkandawire has been very prominent in South Africa particularly when looking at literature on developmental states and on social policy. Many of us who were in government in the 1990s and 2000s have been influenced by Mkandawire, even those who have never met him.

Justice cannot be done to Mkandawire's great works and intellectual prowess as well as policy contribution in shaping the developmental agenda of Africa in a tribute opinion piece. We need more books on him. At least more journal papers and essays. We must keep his legacy alive, as in similar attempts with the works of the late Samir Amin and Sam Moyo as it has been done for the late Guy Mhone and other illustrious intellectual figures who have shaped how we think of economic development in Africa - most importantly how do we achieve inclusive development.

So many moving messages of condolences all over social networks. Mkandawire touched many people. In a Facebook post reacting to the sad news Muzi Maziya, a former colleague at the erstwhile National Institute of Economic Policy, said: "a giant African intellectual has departed...What a pity Mkandawire leaves us now at a time when what started as a global health crisis has turned into a massive socio-economic and labour market crisis that needed his attention. He would have been one of those we turn to so to escape the impending hardships."

What a loss indeed. But Mkandawire played his part and played it well.