



UNIVERSITY OF NAIROBI



# “Usable past”

The IDS (Nairobi) today and  
thoughts on future research agenda

**Karuti Kanyinga**

Director

Institute for Development Studies (IDS)

University of Nairobi

Email: [director-ids@uonbi.ac.ke](mailto:director-ids@uonbi.ac.ke)

**A speech to mark IDS Founders Day**

**8th October 2019**

**Nairobi**

## Introduction

Early this year, when I was appointed Director of the Institute for Development Studies (IDS), University of Nairobi, three challenges confronted me. These came in form of questions by several friends and former associates of IDS. One, what would I do differently after having served under my able and exceptional colleague, Prof Winnie Mitullah, the then outgoing director - and now on Sabbatical? Two, what happened to the IDS that was renowned for shaping theories of development globally, in the 1970s and 1980s? Three, why does this appointment matter and yet IDS is an integral part of the academy in Kenya, an academy that is no longer influencing change in the society? Some of those who posed the last question would even proceed to argue that public universities are funded by Kenyan tax payers who receive nothing in return.

These questions concerned me because traditionally, the Director at IDS was appointed to provide administrative and scholarly leadership. The director was responsible for mobilising ideas from among the faculty, the society, the industry and even the government, to set up IDS research priorities. Teaching departments had a similar practice.

The last question concerned me more because it implied that the academy – and the university – in Kenya was no longer conscious of the society in which it operated. The claim of the academy's insularity to the needs of the society had been repeated many times in mainstream and social media. It had remained of concern but it had not pained me at a personal level until it was raised with me.

## “Usable past” – a valuable framework

These questions disturbed and pained me but they also implied that those in academia – especially public universities and research institutions like the IDS – had failed to advance the development of the Kenyan society. Faced with this challenge, I began to review theoretical frameworks that would help explain how the past can help to shape the future. ‘Usable past’ has utility in this respect. Scholars like Bogumil Jewsiewicki (1989) and Terrence Ranger (1967) have indeed observed that the ‘past’ is valuable in shaping the present and the future. This framework – employed to deconstruct the challenges of colonialism – focuses on understanding the role of the past in shaping the present context and in predicting the future. It is about learning the past not as an end – not for purely epistemological purposes – but as a means to understanding the present environment and preparing to resolve the challenges of the future. Thandika Mkandawire (2000) indeed uses this lens to

discuss misconceptions of the role of African universities from the outset in the 1960s.

Using this new lens, I decided to review archival records on the origins of not of the IDS in the academy but its ideological evolution, if any, and the challenges it confronted from the early days as an integral part of the university in Kenya. I searched for old records in the University of Nairobi's main library, the Jomo Kenyatta Memorial Library. Unfortunately, the university does not have a museum from where we can learn our history. Neither have departments in the university documented their stories. Regardless, this labour was justified because of the important findings it revealed.

All of us usually repeat the phrase that the IDS was founded in 1965. Period. Previous studies on the IDS do so too (Ghai, 1974; Senga and Migot-Adhola, 1978). But the records from the archives revealed two things. It is true IDS was founded in 1965 but we have been wrong on who the founders were and how the IDS came to be founded. Two, we had forgotten the global security context and the environment on which the IDS was founded.

I began to review past records, especially the minutes of the Senate and the minutes of the academic board meetings of the University College Nairobi (as the it was then known) at the time. I had to laugh at my ignorance of the many historical facts that we have got wrong.

The first significant error concerned the founder members of the IDS. Many of us thought that the famous sociologist, James Coleman, the theorist who shaped the 'social capital theory', was founded IDS. He was not. The founder directors were Benton F. Massell, and our own Kenyan, the renowned historian, Bethwell Alan Ogot. This was on Friday 8 October 1965 at around 2:30 pm. On this date, the Academic Board authorised that the Economic Research Unit within the Department of Economics be transformed into a social science research institute to focus on social development research and cultural studies. The Senate approved the establishment of two divisions (social science and cultural studies) to constitute the Institute for Development Studies (IDS). Two staff members, Massell and Ogot, were appointed as directors of the social science and cultural studies divisions, respectively. This decision was taken while awaiting the appointment of a substantive director to head the IDS. They held office until 1967 when Coleman was appointed as Director.



The second error concerned our failure to understand the security and the political issues that shaped the environment in which the IDS was founded. I guess this environment shaped the orientation of the institute from that period and continues to influence how research in Kenya by Kenyans is carried out. In 1965 when the IDS was established, scholars from the West – US and UK – dominated research. Many had funding from their own governments. This meant that security and commercial interests influenced what they studied and how they studied Kenya and Africa. Although the US 'Project Camelot' – the counterinsurgency research office at the American University focusing on Latin America – had not influenced African studies at the time, it was not lost to many that the priority of some of the research projects largely reflected the security and political interests of the time. This somehow changed at IDS when the Rockefeller Foundation facilitated the appointment of James Coleman as the Director in 1967. From then on, the IDS began to systematically focus on three forms of research: long term research on economic problems in Kenya and the region; research on immediate and pressing policy relevance issues; and provision of advisory services to government ministries.

## Impact on the development space

A review of archival records shows great contributions by scholars at the IDS to economic and political developments in the country. The IDS has been home to several Nobel laureates, including James Tobin, the winner of Nobel Prize in Economics (2000); Michael Todaro, the development economist who authored the Todaro Migration Model; James Coleman, and Bethwell Ogot, the renowned historian; Dorothy McCormick, renowned scholar on small scale enterprises; and Charles Okidi, (recently retired from IDS) who was the first African recipient of the Elizabeth Haub Prize in Environmental Law.

IDS research also shaped many ideas on development in the region. One significant initiative was the Kenya Debate, which focused especially on whether it was possible for development to happen in the periphery. It was inspired by research findings at the IDS by scholars such as Collin Leys, Michael Cowen, Raphael Kaplinsky and others. Another significant initiative was the global debate on the role of the peasantry in Africa's development, and the critique of peasantry studies in Russia borrowed from studies this time by Kenyan young academics who included Mukaru Ng'ang'a, Apollo Njonjo, and Anyang'-Nyong'o, Migot-Adhola, among others. Three, and tied to this, was the debate on Kenya's land question and its implications for the rest of sub-Saharan Africa.

In addition to the above, there were many studies on the employment sector, the question of the wage bill, among others, which informed government thinking and positions on some of these issues at the time. The debate on the jua kali (artisanal) sector by scholars at the IDS saw the government begin to develop policy positions that recognised the need to support the 'informal sector' because of the central role it played in the economy (never mind the threats that latter-day governments and policies have continued to pose on the sector).

## The challenging context

The visibility of IDS studies and contributions to the development space diminished in tandem with the rise of authoritarianism in the 1980s. Reduced government interest in evidence-led policies – and more so its love for the cheering crowd rather than research data – saw many research publications shelved without any outlet into government ministries. Furthermore, government ministries became increasingly reluctant to 'touch' university knowledge because of continued criticism of this knowledge by politicians who often claimed that the university was an ivory tower – disconnected from economic and political realities.

Funding for universities also reduced. As result, the universities lacked the resources to attract the best scholars, and therefore rapidly declined in quality. A decline in standards, quality of publications and even 'quality of knowledge' began to show everywhere. A culture of mediocrity rapidly took root until mediocrity became a 'status'. This decline was reached a notable point in the 1990s when a group of professors allied to the ruling party began writing articles in the media praising everything the ruling party was doing, including arresting people and imprisoning critics on trumped up charges. They would in return be rewarded with high status vehicles – but without the necessary ownership documents.

This decline of the academy reduced its significance in important national debates. Indeed, it also gave rise to the founding of new research institutes within government for the purpose of carrying out research that spoke the language of the government. With increased government funding, analysis of trends in the economy shifted to these government research institutes.

Alongside government institutions and perhaps inspired by the diminishing significance of university based research findings, donors also started to fund the growth of independent think tanks focused especially on producing innovative knowledge and ideas that no one in the public sector could dare speak about.

There was significant change with the coming to power of a new government, the National Rainbow Coalition (NARC), after the December 2002 General Election. But this change did not translate into a 'back to the universities' movement. It is a change that privileged evidence-based policymaking (as opposed to the cheering crowd) but with limited reconnection to the academy. Individual researchers – rather than their departments or research institutes – would be requested to provide inputs by way of research to policymaking processes. This demand for research was not institutionalised, and has remained so to date.

## Addressing the challenges: a thought for the future

We gather here to mark the IDS' founding day and to recognize that the IDS has made important contributions to development debates. IDS' 'usable past' is valuable in shaping our future focus on research. While I do recognise the full weight of the double burden of providing administrative and scholarly leadership (especially in shaping research priorities for the IDS), I equally submit that we are relevant only if we produce research that addresses the challenges of our time. We shall be relevant only if we train young women and men to promote development of the Kenyan society – and the region – to the highest attainable level. This will be possible only if we developed the mind and character of students and enable them to revolutionise their thoughts on how to challenge blockages to development.

We do recognize that poor relations between the government and the academy made it difficult to influence policy debates on development. We also recognise that the voice of the academy – and the noise of research data – have been absent from the development space. Research data is not used in policy making in a systematic and institutionalised manner. But it is our belief that through research, the academy should help to shape the future of the society. This is precisely because the purpose of a university – from Plato's time – has remained the same: to educate the men and women who will promote the development of their society to the highest level possible.

The graduates we train have a responsibility to move the country forward. But for them to effectively do so – and for us to train them effectively – we must reorient our ideological position. We must begin to rethink how we do what we do and raise important and challenging criticism of the environment in which we operate. We must strive for excellence and not allow ourselves to fall into easy contentment and the mediocrity that has become a characteristic feature of many public institutions.

This last point has disturbed me for a long while. The students we train have unique backgrounds: they come from different universities in this region. They all are social scientists but their understanding of basic concepts in their respective disciplines is an issue of concern. I do recall a time when a student would not tell who the bourgeoisie is – the pronunciation of this important term as “bonjenjes” compelled me to think about a different approach to discussing key terms in our development studies classes.

## Our research themes

Let me now turn to our possible future research areas. I discuss these again fully aware that we are embarking on the process to develop our strategy. This strategy will reflect the unique development challenges facing the Kenya and the Africa world in general. The strategy will identify important drivers of change. It is my hope that we shall finalise and launch this agenda on **Thursday 8 October 2020**.

These research themes mentioned here do not fall into neat categories - there is overlap between the themes. Some will drop off as we discuss the strategy. Some new ones will be introduced as we finalise discussions in different spaces . Furthermore, cross cutting themes of *sustainable development*, and *gender, women empowerment, and development* run through all these **four** future areas of research.

### Governance and political economy of development

- Policies, laws, social justice, and development
- Devolution, governance and development
- Peace, security and development
- Leadership and development
- Electoral politics and development
- CSOs, the private sector, and development
- Institutions and institutionalisation of development

### Inclusive development: economic and social dimensions

- Poverty and vulnerability
- Social protection and development
- Politics of growth, equity and development
- Identity and inequalities in development



- Social development (specific reference to health; and education)
- SDGs - tracking progress in delivery

Climate change, natural resources, environment management and development

- Environment and Development
- Political economy of natural resource management
- Climate change policy implementation; sectoral blockages; and transport
- Emerging land and agrarian questions
- Green economy transitions
- Circular economy in Development
- Blue economy and development

Economy, international processes, and Development

- Entrepreneurship and development
- Urbanization, migration and inclusive transport
- International trade, integration and implication for development
- Financial institutions and development
- Economic informality and development
- Employment and labour markets
- Rural transformation and agricultural economies

## Engagement in the development space

In line with our Vision we will continue to engage development researchers, practitioners, and policy makers, among others, to maximise the policy impact of our research and also identify drivers of change. We shall emphasis *collaboration* at all levels and in what we do in order to enrich our work with ideas that related to local realities. We shall *collaborate* in sharing data and sharing lessons and findings in our work. We shall revitalize the research (advisory) board as per the university statutes to enrich our research agenda.

**Public seminars/debates:** Alongside these research areas, the IDS will maintain the public seminar series for purposes of debating topical issues. Practical solutions to some of the development challenges that face the country will be identified



– through above research – and discussed in seminars convened fortnightly and those convened to discuss Working Papers.

Within this arena, we shall introduce annual lectures/debates on the state of development. This could be held every 8 October to mark the IDS' founders day.

**Publication/dissemination of research:** Working Papers series (peer reviewed) as flagship publications of the IDS will accompany each of the research themes and projects to be carried out at the IDS. IDS will welcome multidisciplinary researchers from Kenya, the region and other parts of the world, to submit their papers for peer review before presentation at the IDS seminars and final publication as Working Papers (WPs). The research themes introduced here will also be developed into Working Papers for broader discussion to inform debates on these issues.

**National surveys and innovative knowledge products:** We hope to maintain a culture of conducting regular – or periodic – national surveys on social-economic and political trends. We shall collaborate with others who generate other forms of data to produce joint products. We host the Afrobarometer survey project that measures citizen attitudes on issues of governance and democracy in Africa. This is in addition to our surveys undertaken to inform the World Economic Forum, and County Capacity Assessment under the devolved system of government in Kenya.

We hope to conduct other surveys to inform public debates, policy making and implementation. These will seek answers to complex development problems such as:

- How do we develop institutions that are accountable to citizens?
- How do we ensure that our development process reduces inequality and polarization of society that is evident throughout the world today?
- How do we ensure industrialization leads to growth that creates decent jobs while respecting the environment?
- How do we make research meaningful and relevant to policy development and practice?
- What is the sense of FDI in Africa today?

Other surveys will provide data for innovative knowledge products and quick solutions to everyday questions and challenges such as:

- Why do we have traffic jams when it rains or drizzles in Nairobi?
- Why are Kenyans last minute takers – why do Kenyans present anything at the last minute or day of deadline?
- Why is disaster preparedness and response a challenge in Kenya?

## Conclusion

These are just ideas about our future research agenda. Some will drop out of this list while others will be added. The only idea that will remain on the list is the idea to embed public debates/discussions on key issues facing the country; and ideas about drivers of change. This is being done to ensure that we remain close to the society in which we operate. I welcome you all to help us shape this future and to support us as we walk this journey.

## References

- Bogumil, J. 1989. "African Historical Studies Academic Knowledge as 'Usable Past' and Radical Scholarship." *African Studies Review* 32 (3): 1-76
- Dharam, P. Ghai, 1974. "Social Science Research on Development and Research Institutes in Africa." Discussion Paper No. 197. Institute for Development Studies, University of Nairobi, Kenya. P.11.
- Mamdani, Mahmood, 2016. "Undoing the effects of Neo-Liberal Reforms: the experience of Uganda's Makerere Institute of Social Research," in Halvasen, T, and Nessum, J. (ed). *North-South Knowledge Network: Towards, Equitable Collaboration between Academics, Donors, and Universities*. Cape Town: African Minds.
- Mkandawire, T. 2000. "Non-Organic Intellectuals and 'Learning' in Public-Making in Africa." In Carlson, J. and Wohlgemuth, L. (ed.). *Learning in Development Cooperation*. Uppsala: Nordic Africa Institute.
- Ranger, T. 1967. 'Toward A Usable African Past.' In Fyfe, C (ed.). In *African Studies Since 1945: a tribute to Basil Davidson*. London: Longman. pp17-30.
- Sawyer, A. 2004. 'African Universities and the Challenge of Research Capacity Development', in *JHEA/RESA*. Vol 2(1). Pp. 211-240.
- Senga, W. M and Migot-Adholla, S.E. 1978. 'Social Science Research and National Development in Kenya: the Case of the Institute for Development Studies (IDS)', University of Nairobi. *Africa Development/Afrique et Development*. Vol 3(4). Pp. 123-134.



## **UNIVERSITY OF NAIROBI**

### **Institute for Development Studies (IDS)**

University of Nairobi

P.O. Box 30197 – 00100, Nairobi, Kenya

Email: [director-ids@uonbi.ac.ke](mailto:director-ids@uonbi.ac.ke)

Tel: +254-20-4910000 Ext. 28177

Mobile: +254772114655

Web: <https://ids.uonbi.ac.ke/>