FOREWORD

Africa in the Global South: Depth as a Prerequisite for Action

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African agency represents an intentional thrust to shape global political, economic and social outcomes in a noisy democratic space that promotes pluralism and international cooperation. It articulates a philosophy that is not new, but one that has long been a fundamental pillar of Pan-Africanism. Policymakers casually use the term in speeches and policy documents to indicate that African agendas are being set at home and abroad. Scholars draw on African agency to justify teaching, research and knowledge generation founded on Afrocentric epistemology. Public intellectuals, among them civil society activists, think tankers and journalists, invoke African agency as justification for advocacy on a diverse range of African problems.

African agency also offers validity to a wide range of causes for a continent grappling with the challenges we face today. Its usefulness can be seen, at the very basic level, in its wide usage. African agency mobilises Africanists from all walks of life around a set of concepts and practices that centre African thought systems. It is useful because it not only diagnoses African challenges but, more importantly, proffers pathways to redressing them. African agency can be seen at play in several initiatives at continental, sub-regional and national levels, especially in the 'age of externally imposed policies', in which Africa's growing geopolitical power and its choice to define its own priorities and mobilise resources are anchored in the African Union (AU) Partnerships Policy.

However, problems arise when policymakers echo African agency in their speeches and policy documents merely as lip service rather than as a genuine intention to live by the ethos of the concept through deliberate,

redemptive action. African agency becomes hollow if scholars use it only to pontificate rather than as emancipatory scholarship that links theory to practice. Public intellectuals who invoke African agency but fail to show tangible outcomes, for instance, in terms of change in governance structures, are engaged more in decibels than in results-oriented action.

Moreover, African agency is such a lumbering term that its concept and application have run threadbare in more ways than one. This is where this edited volume comes in. Emerging from discussions between colleagues at the University of the Witwatersrand in 2022 during the US–Africa Leaders Summit, this book is part of a dedicated project aimed at advancing African agency and amplifying African voices. Doing so requires rescuing the term from its incipient misapplication. Nuance, however, can be achieved only if and when the term, its conception and, significantly, its application are grounded in specific contexts. One such increasingly important context is the geopolitical category of 'Africa in the Global South'.

In this book, readers will be reminded that Africa is part of the Global South, yes, but also a unique entity within a category that encompasses rising global powers such as China, India, Brazil and the Gulf States. African agency is often, and correctly, understood vis-à-vis the Global North. This, however, tends to gloss over African agency in a much broader global context. African agency in the Global South must therefore take cognisance of Africa's shared characteristics with all Global South countries, while at the same time recognising that few, if any, African nations have the economic wherewithal to match the global powers within this formation. It is only when this fact is candidly acknowledged that African agency can be exercised within the Global South.

As readers will see in this book, the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA), launched in 2018 and operationalised in January 2021, is an example of African agency. Yet intra-African trade, which the AfCFTA was intended to boost, remains low, at 16.7 per cent in early 2026, against the anticipated 58 per cent.[1] Advancing African agency requires a closer look not only at internal factors – such as non-tariff barriers – that militate against Africa trading with itself, but also at the strategies employed by some of the Global South powers. The argument that the neo-imperial

structure of global trade is partly to blame is an important one to consider. It is noteworthy that most of the global powers in the Global South play by the same neoliberal trade rules that Global North countries have leveraged to their advantage. The current era of resource imperialism amply demonstrates this reality.

One of the strengths of Africa is its geographical, economic, political and cultural diversity. However, the potential for this diversity to be leveraged for Africa's progress has remained latent. In fact, in some instances, this diversity has served as an Achilles' heel, creating discordant voices rather than the unified voice of a well-conducted orchestra. This analogy features across the book, offering pathways that can help amplify Africa's voice in the Global South and indeed globally. To this end, African agency can be rolled out in the form of cultural diplomacy, thus helping shape the continent's socio-political relations within the Global South. In the process, African agency would also ensure that African women are full participants in the renewal process, rather than add-ons to global reform agendas.

African agency should also go beyond Africa's membership of formations such as the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) and the Group of 77 (G77), which bring together global powers as well as developing nations, many of them categorised as low-income. If a new multipolar world is being defined and negotiated, then member states belonging to the African Union should be strategic in leveraging Global South organisations as a collective to advance this agenda. Global powers in the Global South should demonstrate by deed that they understand Africa's need for a more equitable global governance architecture. Africa should also join forces with other developing countries, particularly from Latin America and Asia, to demand that global powers in the Global South demonstrate that they are desirous of an equitable global governance system. Fittingly, this is a major strand of thought in this book, linking the theorisation of Africa in the NAM and G77 to tangible, practical steps to advance African interests in the Global South.

Discussions around a shifting global order have rightly factored in geopolitical fragmentation, or what Canadian Prime Minister Mark Carney has called a global rupture. This is a time of deep uncertainty

in global governance, fraught with risk. Rather than the Global South offering a coherent set of solutions to the stalemate in multilateralism, each of the powers within the South is pushing for self-serving multilateral reform agendas. As argued throughout this book, African agency would therefore be predicated on Africa generating its own ideas to navigate the unpredictable circumstances now unfolding. This would include analysing the interests of Global South powers and negotiating with them from an African standpoint.

Received wisdom holds that certain global public goods can only be provided by Global North powers. Scratch the surface a little, and the evidence suggests that in some sectors, Global South powers are ahead of their Global North counterparts. Aspects of the digital economy are an example. China and India are global leaders in a wide array of digital innovations. They have leveraged their digital assets to structure asymmetrical relations with Africa, for better and for worse. African agency is when African actors leverage their relations with Global South powers to advance in the digital technology sectors. Rather than lamenting digital capitalism and digital colonialism, African states can study the strategies that countries such as India and China used to climb the digital value chain to secure their own digital sovereignty. This discussion is gaining traction in debates about Africa using its critical minerals to become a manufacturer of digital products.

In some respects, Africans have much to learn from Global South powers even as they tap indigenous knowledge. In the health sector, for instance, some of the Global South powers have done exceedingly well. This was evident during the COVID-19 pandemic when countries such as India, China and Brazil managed to innovate and ramp up the production of personal protective equipment and vaccines, using local knowledge and resources. African agency is when Africans borrow ideas from elsewhere, domesticate them and even improve upon them. Africa has great potential in the health and medicine sector, given its natural endowments in fauna and flora that form the ingredients of medicines and therapies. African agency is when African scientists look carefully at how some of the Global South powers have utilised indigenous resources to climb the ladder of medical manufacturing.

This book is one of several initiatives focused on African agency amid mind-bending changes in the way humanity is governed. This book provides perspectives on Africa in the Global South, perspectives that will be useful as much for intellectuals in universities and think tanks as for policymakers, lawmakers and international organisations. The wider series of activities, including public engagement, research, publication and advocacy, extends beyond the Global South. We want to ensure that African interests are secured in the renewed push for United Nations reform. Strengthening Africa's influence in the reform of the United Nations Security Council and global financial architecture, for instance, will be difficult but not insurmountable. It can be achieved by building and coordinating coalitions of stakeholders for a multipronged campaign. In many respects, these efforts should be directed towards enhancing the capacity of African institutions at all levels. This calls for a reimagined Pan-Africanism. It also calls for understanding and embracing the mantra voiced by Kwame Nkrumah more than 65 years ago: 'We face neither East nor West; we face forward'. This forward-looking Afro-possibilism, articulated in the past, remains highly relevant to our current situation and aspirations. [2]

I hope you will read this book not only as a means of apprising yourself of new thinking about African agency, but also as a means of taking agency into your own hands and contributing to the notion of agency in action.

Endnotes

1 TRALAC. 2026. TRALAC Daily News. [Online]. Available at: *https://www.tralac.org/news/article/17118-tralac-daily-news-22-may-2026.html* (Accessed 7 July 2026).

2 Nkrumah, K. 1960. ADM positive action conference for peace and security in Africa. [Online]. Available at: *https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/7/72/Positive_action_conference_for_peace_and_security_in_Africa.pdf* (Accessed 9 July 2026).