CHAPTER 1

Introduction: Africa, the Global South, Agency and Voices

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Introduction and context

Ideas and practices around the Global South have gained traction in geopolitical dynamics, inspiring novel studies, research and teaching. It has been leveraged to explain major developments in world affairs between the Global South itself and in relation to its opposite, the Global North. As with all new developments at the intersection of praxis, nailing the particularities, implications and trajectories of the Global South is contested, not least because the term is open to wide sets of interpretations. This is true for the entire globe, the southern hemisphere, and, for the present volume, Africa.

The antecedents of this edited volume can be traced to numerous discussions over the past eight years by the African Centre for the Study of the United States (ACSUS) at the University of the Witwatersrand and several of its partners, including Makerere University in Uganda. At the outset, for a curious reader, the basic question is: why would an academic-cum-research centre ideally focused explicitly on the relations between Africa and the US shift gears to expend energy on Africa in the Global South? After all, the US is categorised as belonging to the Global North, and by no means is it in the Global South! This would thus suggest that a Centre for the Study of the US should, in a manner of speaking, 'keep to its lane ' and focus on Africa's engagements with the Global North and, indeed, the great global power that the US is. While research on Africa's engagements with the Global North is well established, far less attention

has been paid to Africa's position within the Global South. This imbalance provides the rationale for the present volume.

The fundamental explanation for this detour is that the more a perceptive intellectual analySes Africa-US relations, the more they are drawn into debates about the competition between the US and countries considered Global South powers: Brazil, China, Cuba, India, Malaysia, Indonesia, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Singapore, South Africa, Vietnam and the United Arab Emirates. In literature and public spheres, claims of varying credulity have been made about the declining power of the Global North/West and the rise of the Global South. China and India are emblematic examples of the 'Global South rise' theory. Africa comes into the picture because it is presumed to unequivocally belong to the Global South.

Look up literature on the rivalry between global powers in Africa and you will not miss the growing body of writings trying to make sense of the great power competition in Africa. However, try to find coherent explanations on why Africa is a Global South region, and you will struggle. To address the gaps in scholarship on Africa's involvement in the Global South, this volume takes a slightly different approach. It focuses on only one set of the global powers, currently assembled under the ill-defined but catchall phrase 'the Global South'. That is, arguments in the book move away from the Global North–Global South debate, unless such debates are linked to a Global South issue. This focus has a backstory from the viewpoint of work at the ACSUS, and doubtlessly many other intellectual enterprises in and beyond the African continent.

For instance, while the focus of the Centre at its inception in 2018 was an endeavour to develop African-generated knowledge on the United States, it became inevitable to consider the question of the competition between the US and China and the implications thereof for Africa. The founders of the Centre would receive inquiries from Chinese, Indian, Russian and other colleagues from Global South academia and policy circles on why the University of the Witwatersrand saw it fit to establish an American Studies centre rather than, say, a Chinese or Indian or Russian studies centre. Intellectuals from the United States and the Global North/West would become enthusiastic whenever the Centre hosted an event dealing with global affairs, the understanding being that it would help

shed light on what Global South powers were doing in or with Africa.

There are examples galore in these respects across disciplines and sectors. Suffice it to use, as an illustration, the digital competition between the US and China that reached a vituperative trade war level in the 2018 –2020 interregnum (see Ayodele 2022). Part of the demand by the President Donald Trump I administration was that leaders and nations around the world desist from using Chinese digital technologies in line with the then US policy of debarring the use of Chinese technologies in the US itself. Our focus dramatically shifted on the fulcrum of the ensuing US digital edicts as African presidents, such as Paul Kagame of Rwanda, Uhuru Kenyatta of Kenya, and Cyril Ramaphosa of South Africa flatly declined to banish Chinese tech firms led by Huawei Technologies from their territories (see Reuters 2019). Our intellectual effort included several in-person and virtual convenings, and the publication of a series of thought leadership articles and academic journal papers over the period. From the tapestry of the analyses, three major views emerged from the writings by the contributors (Africa in Fact 2022): One was that China was a good partner for Africa in terms of establishing digital infrastructure (through state-backed financing of companies such as Huawei Technologies and ZTE), while the US couldn't be dismissed offhand due to the preponderance of its software platforms (such as Google, WhatsApp, FaceBook, Linkedin, etc.). The second was that Africa should not be drawn into the tech competition between the great powers but instead strategise to tap the relative advantages from the US and China to its own interests, many of them spelled out in African national, regional and continental plans. The third was that, while drawing on the positive aspects of US and Chinese technologies, African countries should be wary of the negatives on either side.

The geotech competition is but an example, with an ideologically laden competition also intensifying in merchandise trade, culture, education, critical minerals, artificial intelligence … and more (see Wekesa 2021a; Adarkwah et al. 2025). The import of this seemingly circuitous justification is that Global South countries exemplified by China were (and are) making inroads further into Africa's economic, political and cultural spheres, to the chagrin of Global North powers led by the US.

Yet, it was also clear that the Global South was (and is) itself a general term, emerging and co-opting Africa into an intensifying and escalating geopolitical battle (see Trans 2024).

It was thus important that a more dedicated effort be trained on Africa in the Global South even as the Global North–Global South divide widened and sucked in African countries. In other words, while it is important to analyse the impact of the rivalry between the Global North and the Global South, it is germane for African standpoints to focus on each of these political geographies separately, if nuance in the service of African interests is to be achieved. If it seems like this chapter and, indeed, this book volume are jarringly focused on the Global South in a manner that lets the Global North off the hook, the thematic focus dictates as such.

The Global South Kampala summits

While grappling with an African starting point to the geopolitical competition in Africa, an opportunity arose spectacularly in early 2024. This was in the form of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) and the Group of 77+China (G77) convening of back-to-back summits in Kampala, Uganda, between 15 and 23 January 2024 (see Wekesa and Khadiagala 2024). It was an opening that provided room to focus on the Global South from an African perspective. It was the first time that these Global South institutions convened simultaneously in an African country. Uganda's President Yoweri Museveni was hosting an event during which Global North/West countries, as well as Russia, would be conspicuous by their absence, by dint of not being NAM/G77 members. Was this happenstance or calculated? China and India, two major powers in the other significant Global South formation, the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa), would be in attendance. Heads of State and Government from the 120-member NAM and the 134-member G77 or their representatives would be in Kampala to witness the Global South plant its roots in Africa.

ACSUS partnered with the Department of Political Science and Public Administration at Makerere University to organise a one-day forum on 19

January 2024 at Makerere University. We were certain that the summit presented an opportunity for Africans to delve into and reflect on the epistemic, scholarly, conceptual and methodological significance of Africa in the Global South. Africa was being re-imagined as the epicentre of the Global South through the NAM and the G77 summitry. This was not dissimilar to the summit diplomacy now labelled 'Africa-plus-one summits' that have gained prominence as global powers summon large numbers of African leaders to chart ostensibly collective vistas of bright futures (Soulé 2020; Soulé 2021; Wekesa 2024).

Leaders from around the world were congregating in Kampala for formal, state-to-state discussions and negotiations. We were determined to insert our voices in a non-state-actor fashion at Makerere University, bringing together Kampala-based academics, intellectuals, civil society members and youth. Broadly, it is this thinking that informed the title of the forum: 'Africa in the Global South: Advancing African agency, amplifying African voices', convened on 19 January 2024 (Annet et al. 2024). At the end of the vibrant forum, it was agreed that the stimulating discussions deserved fleshing out in a book project. It would allow for an interdisciplinary reflection on Africa in the Global South through four interrelated questions:

> "What are the 'African positions and interests in the Global South'? What are the 'inequalities and asymmetries in the Global South' from an African perspective? What are the 'comparisons of relations between the Global South and the Global North in an increasingly multipolar world'? More broadly, what does 'the rise of agenda-setting global summits and conferences into which Africa has been co-opted' mean for Africa?"

We sought an inter- and multi-disciplinary enunciation of Africa in the Global South, convinced that the dynamics were too expansive to be pigeonholed into a single discipline. It is for this reason that this chapter does not valorise any single discipline.

These questions ultimately became the issues that contributors to this book grapple with. Drawing on some of the perspectives and discussion

points from the forum report (see Annet et al. 2024) as a launchpad, this introductory chapter considers some of the issues that could guide scholarship on Africa in the Global South. We have largely left the title of this book as it was during the Makerere forum. The title can be treated as keywords for a new strand in Africa's interdisciplinary international study: 'Africa', 'the Global South', 'Africa in the Global South', 'African agency', 'advancing African agency', 'African voices', 'amplifying African voices'. It would indeed appear that this was one of the first major conferences to explicitly focus on Africa in the Global South. Analogously, this is among the first books to offer sustained scholarship on this topic.

While the NAM and the G77 summits were the focal point of our debates, discussions and pontification in early 2024, the trajectory of the present book goes beyond the two Global South organisations. The Global South is a far broader category than just the NAM and the G77, even though they occupy a commanding presence in the Global South. Thus, contributions in this book comprehend the importance of the two organisations while incorporating the multiplicity of ideas and practices that go beyond them.

An African justification

One may question the focus on 'Africa', given the oft-cited diversity on the continent. Yet, as I have argued elsewhere in the Africa–China context (Wekesa 2021b), there is no contradiction in referring to Africa at the continental level (for instance, from the viewpoint of a single landmass represented in global institutions by the African Union), subregional level (from the viewpoint that the regional economic communities constitute the five pillars of the Africa region) and country level (where sovereignty lies). In fact, most critiques of African affairs often cite the fact that the continent is unable to act in unison compared to, say, Europe under the European Union (EU) and East Asia under the Association of East Asian Nations (ASEAN). Moreover, some of the Global South countries, such as China and India, are sub-continent-sized and have populations nearly the size of Africa's entire demography. These and other factors make it rational to treat Africa as one entity, even when we are at liberty to

infuse subregional and national nuances where necessary. Analogously, advancing African interests in the Global South should not be limited to either the continental, subregional or national levels. In fact, it should be action that starts and ends at all three levels, and even further down to the grassroots. Through initiatives such as a borderless Africa, the push for a single African passport, and seamless trade through the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA), Africans can start to re-imagine themselves as African citizens without relinquishing their individual-country identities or their allegiances to sub-regional entities.

Africa in the Global South

A probable starting point in attempting to appreciate 'Africa in the Global South' is to consider the language factor from the viewpoint of how the phrase is used. The term has been interpreted as a catchall phrase, a buzzword, a convenient shorthand and so forth, precisely because it simultaneously means many things at once. Multiple definitions encompass the Global South. They include its being a representation of former third world countries, countries contesting the Global North/West, developing countries, emerging countries or economies, middle powers and southern hemisphere nations (Institute for Social Research 2024; Patrick and Huggins 2023; Kleinschmidt 2018). It is into these conceptualisations that the BRICS, as well as the NAM and the G77, are often coopted as synonymous with the Global South. My reading is that the 'Global South' more explicitly denotes the replacement of the derogatory 'Third World' phrase, a period in which the former 'First World' and 'Second World' categories are no longer tenable.

If ambiguities, imprecisions and amorphousness underpin the term 'Global South', then so is the case with 'Africa in the Global South', in what has been referred to as a meta-category (Haug et al. 2021).

As some have observed, if the Global South exists to challenge the social, political and economic dominance of the Global North, then Africa should be at its core (see Tran 2024). This follows from the fact that the Global North's supremacy in financial markets, infrastructure, industrial capacity and global political power is felt most acutely on the African

continent. Yet Africa is not at the centre of the Global South, precisely because it remains the weakest region in global power terms. This tension provides one of the empirically grounded reasons for proposing the 'Africa in the Global South' construct.

If, indeed, African nations have elected to belong to the Global South, amorphous as it is, they need to demonstrate the dividends thereof (see Khanfir 2025). Yet, several Global South countries have powered ahead in fields like digital economy, infrastructure development, agriculture, the blue economy, cultural industries, global trade, manufacturing and others, leaving Africa behind in just about every economic endeavour. It is in these respects that we talk of hierarchies and binaries between Global South countries (Berger 2020), with Africa at the lower end of the pyramid.

The Global South is not uniform. It is fair to observe that countries such as China and India are in the top tier of the Global South hierarchy (Chao 2024). Countries in the regions of the Middle East and Southeast Asia are not too far below the top tier of the Global South across various matrices (see Ha and Won 2024). Most African countries are farther down the Global South ladder, except, in some respects, South Africa. These categories call to mind Immanuel Wallerstein's world system theory, according to which countries can be categorised into core, periphery and semi-periphery tiers (Wallerstein 2004). If, in the past, core countries were in the Global North, periphery countries in parts of Africa and Asia, and semi-periphery countries in parts of Asia, Europe and the North Americas, this categorisation has been spun on its head. This is because we can talk of core, periphery and semi-periphery countries in the Global South. If the idea of the marginalisation of the periphery and semi-periphery countries were the heart of the world system theorisation, then we should rethink the same marginalisation within the Global South.

The distinctions and asymmetries that have dogged the Global South make the proposition of a 'Global South powers in the Global South' research agenda feasible. From there, African scholars can devise the construct of 'Global South powers in Africa', a potentially beneficial intellectual enterprise. Received wisdom is that Africa is largely characterised by far less power, perhaps with the qualified exception of

South Africa (see Sidiropoulos 2019). In these circumstances, it is not difficult to agree with analysts who aver that Africa is being pulled in many different directions by the Global South powers, each with its own set of strategies towards the continent (see Tran 2024). At any rate, the power relations between the Global South powers and Africa are skewed in such a manner that 'weak Africa' must almost innately bend to the will of the stronger powers. The onus, perhaps, is thus on African scholars, and Africanists more broadly, to provide evidence-based particularities of enfeebled African agency in the Global South.

Perspectives on Global South powers in Africa can vary and change dramatically, highlighting the fact that relations are not static. In a study of the BRICS in African media, Wekesa (2021c) found instances of optimism, pessimism and pragmatism. Optimism constitutes the positive perceptions towards Global South powers, pessimism is about negativity, and pragmatism speaks to a mix of optimism and pessimism. Such findings are testament to the fact that perceptions about the Global South in Africa are not one-size-fits-all. In this, we see a cautionary tale. Treating the Global South as uniformly good or bad for Africa misses the nuanced picture underlying the complexities of such a large geopolitical category.

From roughly the beginning of the twenty-first century and progressing into the decade of the 2010s, narratives emerged extolling an 'Africa rising' optimism, a nod to Afro-optimism with the Global South powers as Africa's benefactors (Coulibaly 2017). The nominal upward development of several African economies was founded on the infusion of capital into ailing African economies then reeling from painful Global North structural adjustment programmes. This new capital was drawn from confident and emerging Global South powers, particularly the Asian giants of China and India, charting the narrative of Afro-optimism (see Adem 2016). From roughly mid-2010s to the present, high levels of optimism have fizzled out, replaced instead by a multiplicity of negative developments that speak to Afro-pessimism (Fioramonti 2017). A Global South company that demonstrates a swing between optimism and pessimism is the United Arab Emirates logistics company DP World, which has invested heavily in African seaports. It is praised for helping African countries to modernise harbour facilities but concerns have also

been raised about its governance approaches (Pecquet 2024).

As some of the global powers in Africa have risen, narratives of favouritism towards them by African leaders have also come to the fore. There are claims galore to the effect that Africa is being manipulated by Global South powers, evidenced in copious media reporting around the continent. Such charges have been wrapped in the frame of 'emerging powers and neocolonialism in Africa' (Langan 2018). Much of this has been around contracting for public goods and services by state and private companies from the global powers. This then constitutes a deleterious dimension of the Global South powers in Africa.

Another layer of focus is what some have referred to as the 'downstairs relationship'; interactions that involve regular citizens from Global South powers and African citizens in several countries (see Alden and Park 2013). In these respects, we can talk of all the people of the Global South as citizens of this amorphous 'nation'. In many African cities and towns today, we see citizens of some Global South countries plying any number of trades; from real estate and construction to running agricultural businesses; from the selling of merchandise to road and aviation infrastructure development. To some extent, such entrepreneurial Global South citizens are helping African countries advance economically. However, many questions have been raised about the favouritism that has been afforded to the citizens of India, Brazil, China, Gulf States, and others in winning contracts, and the ease with which they start and run businesses. Some of these accusations have tended towards corruption made against some African leaders. The legality, transparency and openness of Indian, Chinese and United Arab Emirates businesses in Africa have ended in street protests in the recent past (see Kiriungi and Chibelushi 2024; Martorano et al. 2021; Human Rights Watch 2023). The fact that tensions between the citizens of African countries and companies from Global South countries have often spilled into confrontation evinces a point of divergence in Global South encounters. Even more important is that, many years after independence, nearly all African countries require foreign investment and philanthropy for even the most basic of needs. This is yet another indictment of a lack of agency. It has been pointed out that most African countries have enough wealthy citizens who can take large-scale contracts of the kind that we see

Chinese, Indian, Brazilian and other investors taking up. Agency would be at play if we saw some of the dollar billionaires in African countries take up projects such as road construction and housing, sectors that have been dominated by Global South powers for at least over 25 years now, that is, since the early 2000s.

The rise of the Global South has meant a need for increased attention by African leaders and bureaucrats responsible for foreign affairs. Some scholars hold that Africa's joining of an increasing number of organisations is a demonstration of increased agency and a prominent role to play in global affairs (Lopes 2025). The alternative view is that African countries are beginning to spread themselves too thin in their membership and involvement in Global South organisations, as well as in the summits associated with them (Soulé 2021; Wekesa 2024; Usman 2025). An abbreviated unpacking of this development is worthwhile.

Putatively, all the 54 African countries are members of the NAM and the G77. This is putative because such membership is ill-defined and only gained some measure of credibility when Uganda hosted the summits in 2024. In other words, the membership of African countries in the NAM and the G77 is loose, non-binding, and ambivalent. In the year before the Kampala summits, South Africa had hosted a BRICS summit during which two African countries, Ethiopia and Egypt, joined. Since then, Uganda, Nigeria, Algeria and Zimbabwe have joined what is now known as the BRICS Plus, as BRICS partner countries. Reportedly, more African countries are lining up to join the BRICS. Thus far, we see that African countries are members of three Global South international formations.

At the same time, Muslim-majority African countries in northern Africa and the Horn of Africa are members of Middle East formations such as the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), the League of Arab States (LAS), and the Union for the Mediterranean (UfM). This brings the number of Global South international organisations in which some African countries are members to six, not counting other less prominent ones. Indeed, Gulf States and Turkey have refined push strategies towards the continent in a massive form in recent years (see African Centre for Strategic Studies 2025). In eastern Africa alone, the United Arab Emirates, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Kuwait and Turkey now challenge the previous

dominance of China (even though China remains the country with the highest stock of capital projects). The Gulf Cooperation Council and the League of Arab States are two organisations that provide an umbrella for the socialisation of several African nations in Global South impulses. Importantly, we see that the Middle East, also known as West Asia, is in some respects in competition with other global powers, China and India, for instances with Africa as the stomping ground.

The new push by Gulf States follows East Asian power in Africa. Most, if not all, African countries have signed cooperation agreements with several Global South powers. These include China–Africa, Indonesia–Africa, India–Africa and Brazil–Africa. Each of these relationships comes with periodic summits, jamborees during which the Global South powers articulate their own strategies towards the continent under the guise of mutually beneficial relationships. This plethora of Africa+1 organisations has raised concerns about the capacity of African countries to navigate the intricate agendas of the global powers towards them. One starts to lose count of the Global South formations into which African nations are drawn when one considers the institutionalised Africa+1 summitry and their established mechanisms. Metaphorically speaking, African countries are being courted by too many suitors, to a point where they gaze in multiple directions all at once. Yet Africa should ideally be the one calling the shots in such relations, given its demographic and geographic weight, its national sovereignty in terms of number of states, and its substantial natural resource endowments.

Non-alignment and Africa in the Global South

Non-alignment is a major theme in Global South–Africa relations. However, it raises pertinent questions. What, for instance, is the NAM aligned with, and what is it aligned against? How is Africa aligned with the NAM and G77? What if there are levels of misalignment between Africa and its wealthier Global South partners?

The NAM traces its roots to the Bandung Conference of 1955, with its formative members assuming the position of non-alignment vis-à-vis the dominant bipolar powers of the USA and the then USSR.

The establishment of the G77 in 1964 was predicated on the push for the full decolonisation of world territories then still under the thumb of imperialism. Only a handful of territories in Africa are still under European control, namely the French Réunion and Mayotte, the Spanish Ceuta, Melilla and Canary Islands, the British Saint Helena, Ascension and Tristan da Cunha, and the Portuguese Madeira. The African Union should make up its mind on the territories that are geographically in Africa, but administratively in Europe. This is a subject for another discussion, given that the current chapter is focused on Africa in the Global South. The relevant point for this chapter is that there is a great need to reengineer African priorities in the NAM and the G77, since the continent is under a semblance of self-rule.

Nostalgia is such that instead of forging forward, many of the discussions at the Global South convenings such as the NAM and the G77 focus on the past (Dalay 2025). African member states in the NAM should rethink their stance, given that the communism–socialism versus capitalism–liberalism ideologies of the post-World War era have shifted dramatically (see Serunkuma 2024). African leaders can play a pivotal role in revamping the NAM to align it to current realities because many of the problems that afflicted the continent in the past – wars, diseases and poverty – still exist today, while many NAM member states today grapple with a different set of problems (see Wekesa and Khadiagala 2024). In essence, therefore, the circumstances that informed the establishment of the NAM have changed, but the rhetoric has remained largely the same.

The notion of non-alignment of yore has come under intense scrutiny in recent times. An agential African perspective should consider a strategic dis-alignment approach in which its leaders step back to carefully consider their involvement in the non-aligned movement. A key question in such a strategic retreat would be, 'What are we doing in the non-aligned movement specifically and in the Global South more broadly?' Such reflection would allow for a return to some of the Global South formations with clearer, self-interested points of negotiation.

It would be important that Uganda, presumably representing African thoughts on the NAM, should work in concert with institutions such as the African Union to change the focus of the NAM, from heavy ideology-

driven agendas to positions that advance African economic renewal interests.

African agency in the Global South

What exactly do we mean when we liberally invoke the phrase 'African agency' in discussions and debates around the need for Africa to act rather than be acted on? How is African agency applicable in the 'Africa in the Global South' dynamics? How would African agency be interpreted in the Global South? How would African agency be used in considering issues such as the much-vaunted reform of multilateral and multipolar institutions to more closely reflect African aspirations?

A two-pronged framework can start us off in attempts to make sense of this bifurcated question: The agential potential and agential realities. Applying this framework can yield any number of exemplifications. Two will suffice at this stage: geopolitical competition and demographics. On the geopolitical front, the fact that Africa has become a key theatre of geopolitical competition (see Wekesa 2025) is proof that the continent has latent agential power, whether in terms of its resources or the fact that it is home to the largest bloc of UN member states. One can insert into this many other forces of attraction that draw Global South powers (and Global North powers) to Africa. On the flip side, geopolitical rivalry on the continent is reaching such a frenzied level, characterised as a new scramble for Africa, that African agency is battered into smithereens. This is where a collective approach to African agency becomes essential, rather than one in which individual nations invoke national sovereignty (for instance Scialoja 2025) in dealing with China, India, Indonesia, Malaysia, Brazil, the Gulf States and others.

In the second example, Africa's agential potential can be seen in its population boom, often framed by optimists as a huge youth bulge which is also a dividend (see de Carvalho et al. 2019). The magic figure of an African population surging to 2.5 billion in 2050, representing 25% of the world total, has become omnipresent in most policy, academic and journalistic fare. The narrative is that Africa's population will supersede that of the current single-nation population-based Asian powers of India

and China. Diametrically, however, failure to harness the youth bulge as a resource can lead to a youth burst, the understanding being that restive youth can turn into an adverse force.

From a Global South perspective, many years after Kwame Nkrumah, the first president of independent Ghana, issued his clarion call for African unity (see Kanu 2013), African countries are not working in union in a changing Global South. Nkrumah's brand of Pan-Africanism is today more or less dead, such that the involvement of African nations based on unity is nearly untenable. This is evident in the fact that many of the common positions adopted by the African Union have not been followed through. As Tieku (2014) puts it, the 'out-in' African agency approach, which sees global powers – including Global South powers – define the terms of engagement, often trumps adherence to African positions. Such is the state of dereliction in non-implementation of the African common positions that today many everyday Africans cannot articulate any of the positions. If African agency is the capability of Africans to chart their own course and pursue their own causes (see Murithi 2014), then the phrase begins to run threadbare considering that African interests are driven not just by the Global North powers, but also by some of the Global South powers.

It is indeed probable that Africans could begin to amplify their voices on critical issues, such as the exporting of raw materials and illicit financial flows, with their Global South partners. Increasingly, the policies, treaties and agreements shaping the contours of Africa's engagement in the Global South emanate from the Global South powers. This is what Murithi (2014) refers to as a 'top-down' approach. This would begin to give vent to the notion of the 'Africa we want', as eloquently spelled out in the AU's Agenda 2063 and its ten-year implementation plans.

In the literature, a mollifying narrative is that we can talk of the agency of weak states even as we take cognisance of the agential assets of strong states. From the perspective of Africa in the Global South, African nations therefore have some leverage over their more powerful counterparts (Brown and Herman 2013; Chipaike and Knowledge 2018).

Even as we take critical stances on Agenda 2063, we still appreciate that it is perhaps the best idea that ever came from the AU. Notably,

the word 'agenda' in Agenda 2063 is the essence of African agency. The Agenda talks of an integrated, prosperous and peaceful Africa that acts as a dynamic force in the international arena. These are ideals most people would not argue against. Indeed, from this perspective, it is thought that Africans have quite some agency in world politics, the Global South included. One scholar asserts that 'African actors [have] established a sustained track record of assertive, high-level diplomacy and [that] … the continent has seen long-term economic growth' (Brown and Herman 2013).

Against the multiplicity of definitions of African agency, these ideals should serve as a call to collective, unified action in such a way that everyday Africans buy into and support underlying projects that support such visions. Agenda 2063 is indeed a grand vision. However, grand visions easily turn into grandiose nightmares if they fail to rise to the promise. African leaders are given to lofty narratives of the continent's progress, drawing on Agenda 2063 and regional economic community plans. Such sentiments are often orchestrated by the leaders, leaving the citizens at best second-guessing and at worst ignorant and unconcerned by development agendas.

If African citizens are to be more involved in the African agency agenda, some revolutionary approaches must be considered. This is what Brown and Harman (2013) refer to as a 'bottom-up' approach to African agency. For instance, what would happen if African citizens were involved, in some form or shape, in the election of the Pan-African Parliament? Would that encourage greater involvement of African citizens in the African agency project? Would the involvement of citizens in the election or nomination of the African Union Commission officials make this continental body more accountable?

African intellectuals also often discuss the lost opportunity in focused development that has seen African countries stagnate as their Asian Tiger counterparts progress from low economic bases to global competitiveness (see, for instance, Abdulrasheed and Aminu 2021). The Asian Tigers, namely Hong Kong, South Korea, Taiwan and Singapore, considered models for the Global South, are said to have been at the same level of development as countries like Kenya, Ghana, Nigeria and Uganda

in the 1960s. If Agenda 2063 is to be achieved, there will be a need for African thinkers to carefully consider the factors that propelled the Asian Tigers into 'successful economy' status. It will likely be realised that state capture in Africa has served to constrain the achievement of the kinds of aspirations that read so eloquently in the numerous blueprints that have been produced for decades.

While indeed the blame should to some extent fall on some of the Global South powers and their strategies to exploit a weak Africa, agency demands that the blame should lie with the African Union and the five regional economic communities. A case in point is the Democratic Republic of Congo, where a couple of issues evince Africa's lack of agency. A decades-long conflict in the resource-endowed country recently burst into an all-out conflict in its eastern reaches, drawing in M23 rebels, Rwanda, and, to a lesser extent, Uganda. The most probable effort towards conflict resolution was initiated in early 2025 by the United States through the good offices of a Global South power, Qatar (see Amare and Vandome 2025). Framed as 'transactional', the peace deal is an instance of a great power (the US) working with a Global South power (Qatar) in Africa – a development that can be analysed further on another occasion.

The DRC–US–Qatari peace deal in the DRC is problematic for African agency on several fronts. First, the fact that the African Union (AU), the East African Community (EAC), the Southern Africa Development Community (SADC), and the Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS) have not been able to pacify the DRC is a huge indictment of their agential diplomatic capacities (see Kilian 2025). Second, and perhaps more important in terms of the 'Africa in the Global South' theme, Qatar's involvement is seen as an active pursuit of conflict resolution in ways that shove aside African efforts (Dudouet 2025). It is not an overstatement to say that outside forces have their own agendas in the DRC conflict. The motivations for the Global South powers in the DRC are driven by a proclivity to gain from DRC's vast natural resources, including the increasingly significant critical and rare earth minerals. If you replace the DRC with any other resource-rich African nation, you see the same Global South power calculus in Africa.

In its most glib form, 'African agency' is often bandied about as

'Africa acting' rather than 'being acted upon'. In a related view, African agency is seen as a 'view of international relations that begins somewhere (Africa) other than with the great powers' (Global South powers) (Brown and Harman 2013). A closer look shows that agency should be seen from multiple dimensions. In the Global South perspective, the political dimension of African agency would include African leaders taking more principled positions when dealing with their counterparts. At the same time, African citizens would be exercising political agency if they held their leaders to account on their dealings with Global South counterparts on any number of issues. At the institutional agency level, it is patent that some of the factors that have propelled Global South powers include a keen focus on meritocracy and the development of the critical skills necessary for leadership, governance and technical capabilities in productive sectors. Woefully, Africa lacks and lags in almost all these institutional domains. Economic agency constitutes a critical agential dimension. The paradox is that Africa is wealthy in latent ways but has not mustered the agency to convert potential to reality. It is for lack of agency in the economic dimension that observers often lament the exploitation of African resources by Global South powers.

Amplifying African voices in the Global South

What would be the link between African agency and the amplification of African voices? Amplifying African voices is a key aspect of African agency. In turn, media writ large, including news media, cultural industries and digital tech, constitute the aspects that go into any region's megaphone.

A historical perspective provides an entry point into appreciating the amplification of African voices in the Global South as a segue into African agency in the Global South. African media should be on a par with counterparts in the Global South, *ceteris paribus*. In the context of the New World Information and Communication Order (NWICO) of the 1970s and 1980s (McBride 1980), most countries in today's Global South, then known as the Third World, suffered huge media inequalities with their Global North counterparts. The Third World campaigned vigorously

through the United Nations Educational and Scientific Organisation (UNESCO) for resources to enable equal access to communication capabilities (Cavanagh 1989: 354; Akuta 2001; Wekesa 2023). These included satellite technologies that were critical for the transmission of media content via radio, television and films. The Global North, under US President Ronald Reagan and UK Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, ensured that the UNESCO-sanctioned reform of the global communication affordances did not go beyond the McBride Report, also known as *Many Voices One World* (McBride 1980).

Despite the Global North's opposition, UNESCO was critical to either the establishment or initiation of continental media, particularly the Union of National Radios and Televisions of Africa (URTNA) and the Pan-African News Agency (PANA), for print media. These two outlets have been closed due to a lack of support by African governments. Left with no state-supported continental media outlet transmitting content within and outside the world, Africa, for the most part, relies on external media outlets for international media. The Global South countries of China, India, Qatar and, to some extent Brazil – countries that identified with the struggle for balanced communication – have today climbed up the ladder in terms of projecting their voices not just within their countries and regions, but also to Africa. In terms of communicating African agency via amplification of voices, therefore, Africa has been left nearly mute, and to say that Africa is voiceless is perhaps an exaggeration, but not too far from the fact.

For decades, the most prominent outlets that broadcast from and to the continent were the USA's CNN, UK's BBC, and France's Radio France International. For various reasons, several Global South countries have entered the African media sphere. Chinese media outlets made a massive entry onto the continent in the early 2010s, flexing their muscle by beaming onto the continent through the China Global Television Network, Xinhua News Agency, China Radio International and China Daily (see Wekesa 2017). The rise of Chinese media in Africa means the amplification of Chinese voices in Africa. This is the essence of the public diplomacy and soft power roles of Global South media in Africa

(see Wekesa 2017a; Wekesa 2017b). The Qatari broadcaster Al Jazeera has, since the 2000s, consolidated its presence in the Middle East and expanded its reach into Africa.

Interestingly, these media outlets have been framed as challenging Western dominance in African media. From an African agency perspective, this is a mistaken framing, because Africans would be better off developing their own media rather than choosing between Global North- or Global South-driven media. If the theory of de-Westernisation (see, for instance, Li and Wekesa 2023) underlies the proclivity for the creation of global media in parts of the Global South, then 'de-Global-Southation' is a germane proposition for Africa.

A large factor in the amplification of African voices will have to include innovative ways of creating continent-wide media outlets, even if they are based on the Global North-owned social media platforms. If media in its broad sense is an agenda-setter, then we can conclude that African agendas on the global stage are largely set by outsiders. In the past, these agenda-setters were Global North media outlets. Today, several Global South media platforms have joined in as Africa's agenda-setters. If the media are the framers of issues in the international sphere, then African issues are for the most part framed by global media, including those from the Global South power countries. If the media represents people and issues, the representation of African issues in the international sphere is through the eyes of Global North and, increasingly, Global South power representers. This volume explicitly and implicitly discusses the complexities of the binaries reflected in how other actors perceive the location of Africa vis-à-vis how Africa positions itself in the power shifts and fixes within the Global South.

The chapters in the volume are segmented into three main categories: Intra-Africa-focused chapters; Geopolitics-focused chapters, and Thematic chapters.

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