Abolition, Development, and the Sub-Saharan African Spring

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Abstract:

This paper interrogates the resurgence of development discourse in the wake of the 2024 "Sub-Saharan African Spring," a continent-wide wave of mass protest movements that briefly unsettled dominant narratives of African progress. It argues that the rapid return to development-as-usual—particularly following the Trump Administration's retrenchment of foreign aid in early 2025—signals not only a political shift but a deeper ideological foreclosure: the suppression of African self-determination by a centuries-old, colonial-capitalist paradigm. The paper begins by tracing the historical construction of development as ideology, from its emergence in the post-WWII liberal international order to its epistemological grounding in modernization theory and imperial civilizational hierarchies. It then examines how this ideology has entrapped African states since independence, through elite-led state-building, neoliberal structural adjustment, and contemporary NGO-led paternalism, all of which depoliticize and marginalize popular agency. In response, it proposes an abolitionist framework—anchored in refusal, imagination, and coalition—as essential to sustaining the radical democratic possibilities opened by recent protest movements. Finally, it reimagines the role of the African intellectual as a grounded participant in everyday struggles, offering one entry point into the broader abolitionist project of reclaiming African futures.

Introduction

There are moments in the long preserve of history when the world is forced to reckon with the unsettling potential of flux—this is one such moment. Barely halfway through 2025, we have already witnessed a breakneck reordering of global political and economic affairs. Startling geopolitical realignments, existential assaults on national and international institutions, an enduring resilience of authoritarian regimes, and a grotesque transnational disregard for human life—the list continues. To call this precariousness exhausting would be a generous understatement. And yet, it is with a kind of wearied momentum that the world lurches from one spectacular rupture to the next.

One such rupture—now conspicuously absent from international discourse—is the "Sub-Saharan African Spring," a wave of mass protests that swept across the continent in 2024. At the time, it was hailed by some commentators as the cusp of a seismic shift akin to the Arab Spring of

the 2010s.[1] Protesters, many of them youth, took to the streets to reject business as usual—decrying corruption, unsustainable debt, environmental degradation, and systemic exclusion. Each success enlivened the others: the perseverance of the Nairobi #RejectFinanceBill coalition in June poured into the Nigerian #EndBadGovernance movement in August. Revolutionary fervor blazed through anti-corruption protests in Uganda, pro-democracy demonstrations in Zimbabwe, anti-perpetuity action in Togo, and anti-galamsey mobilizations in Ghana.[2]

Even with its limitations—chief among them a tendency to caricature the exceptional nature of these protests and imply that African protest democracy is anything but a living tradition—the Sub-Saharan African Spring briefly interrupted the prescriptive paradigms through which African progress has long been defined. Millions marched, most under the weight of state-sponsored repression, in a thunderous rejection of learned helplessness and, by extension, of the colonial-racist-capitalist ideologies underpinning the civilizing mission, the aid-industrial complex, and the *anti-politics* development apparatus they birthed. In the space that would result from the upending of structures, these refusals, specific and poignant, begged a reckoning with urgent the question: "What now?"—a question posed inward and full of possibility. It was here that the work of imagination was to begin.

Yet, in a sign of the times, this important discourse has dimmed beneath the avalanche of global upheaval that has become synonymous with this year. Taking its place at the political roundtable on African affairs has been the subject of development in the absence of foreign aid, motivated by the Trump Administration's retrenchment of USAID on January 20th.[3] This shift in attention—from the streets to the spreadsheet—represents more than a change in subject matter; it reflects a return to an old, familiar logic. The development paradigm, with its deeply entrenched assumptions, once again dominates how Africa is seen—and how Africans are encouraged to see themselves.

Against the impulse to stumble from one shock to the next in the frightening uncertainty of this moment, we must be wary of how easily we slip back into the language—and logic—of

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[1] Shola Lawal, "Is Africa Experiencing a Protest-Led Revolution?," Al Jazeera, August 12, 2024, https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2024/8/12/is-africa-experiencing-a-protest-led-revolution.
[2] "African Protest Politics – Coincidence, Correction or Contagion? | ISS Africa," ISS Africa, 2024, https://issafrica.org/iss-today/african-protest-politics-coincidence-correction-or-contagion.
[3] atripp, "Trump's Dismantling of USAID Offers a New Beginning for Africa," Atlantic Council, February 24, 2025, https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/africasource/trumps-dismantling-of-usaid-offers-a-new-beginning-for-africa/.

development as ideology. This paper traces the ideological roots of development as a project fundamentally antithetical to Africans' self-determination, arguing that the resurgence of the development paradigm in the wake of the Sub-Saharan African Spring risks foreclosing a vital opportunity to reimagine the continent's political future. In response, it proposes an abolitionist framework—grounded in refusal, imagination, and coalition—as necessary to sustain the emancipatory potential ignited by recent protest movements.

I. The Invention of Development

Development has been a major ideology of our times—perhaps the *defining* one of the postcolonial world. Though it may now seem an unquestionable organizing principle of global life, it is a remarkably recent invention, neither innate to human societies nor universal in its logic or appeal.

Development as ideology was distinctly forged in the aftermath of World War II, a period marked by the collapse of European empires, the rise of U.S. global hegemony, and the intensifying Cold War. In this context, development became a convenient and malleable framework to stabilize and rationalize the emerging liberal international order.[4] It functioned as a post-imperial doctrine that redefined colonial paternalism in modern, managerial terms—shifting from the civilizing mission to developmental stewardship, from outright conquest to strategic investment, from overt domination to institutional tutelage. As colonial powers formally exited the stage, the development paradigm allowed global elites to reassert control over the economic and political trajectories of newly independent nations under the banner of progress.

As with most enduring ideologies, development draws its staying power from its ability to naturalize relationships that are, in fact, deeply historical, contingent, and contested. To do so, it relied on a classificatory vocabulary that described the world in terms of *developed* and *developing* nations, categories that were meant to reflect immutable truths about civilizational maturity, economic rationality, and political competence.[5]

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[4] "Development Ideology: Its Emergence and Decline [with Comments] on JSTOR," Jstor.org, 2016, https://doi.org/10.2307/20025217.

[5] Fernando Correa Prado, "The Ideology of Development, the Marxist Theory of Dependency, and the Critique of the Popular-Democratic Strategy," *Latin American Perspectives* 49, no. 1 (October 15, 2021): 138–52, https://doi.org/10.1177/0094582x211043182.

Its epistemological scaffolding borrowed heavily from modernization theory, which posited a linear trajectory from "traditional" to "modern" society—a vision rooted in Eurocentric assumptions that equated progress with Western norms. This framework cast subsistence economies, non-Western governance, and local knowledge systems as backward, obscuring their complexity and value. Progress was not a neutral goal but a refurbished Enlightenment ideal, echoing colonial logics that framed cultural difference as a temporary deviation from an inevitable path toward universal sameness. As Sutton et. al. write in *Development Ideology: Its Emergence and Decline*, development ideology drew upon the dichotomy of "civilization vs. barbarism" typical of 19th-century British imperial thought, on its way to becoming the moralized project that we know today.[6]

In light of its ideological predecessors, it is therefore no coincidence—as Prado describes in *The Ideology of Development, the Marxist Theory of Dependency, and the Critique of the Popular-Democratic Strategy*—that development ideology gained traction in the wake of colonization as a kind of universal "geoculture", precisely when a new rationale was needed to sustain global political and economic hierarchies.[7]

II. The Development Trap: From the Past to the Present

For many Africans, independence carried immense promise. Years of humiliation were meant to give way to a humanizing project of self-determination. And yet, in many ways, that promise remains unfulfilled. The Sub-Saharan African Spring served as a potent reminder of this unfinished project, with many likening the scale and fervor of the protests to the mid-20th century independence movements that swept across the continent over half a century prior.[8] Indeed these moments do not stand apart; they are bound together in a continuous, unfinished struggle for dignity, waged by Africans who have endured centuries of domination through slavery, colonization, and structural dispossession. The paradigms of development through which this pursuit has been framed and executed since independence, however, continue to betray the

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[6] "Development Ideology: Its Emergence and Decline [with Comments] on JSTOR," Jstor.org, 2016, https://doi.org/10.2307/20025217.

[7] Fernando Correa Prado, "The Ideology of Development, the Marxist Theory of Dependency, and the Critique of the Popular-Democratic Strategy," *Latin American Perspectives* 49, no. 1 (October 15, 2021): 138–52, https://doi.org/10.1177/0094582x211043182.

[8] "African Protest Politics – Coincidence, Correction or Contagion? | ISS Africa," ISS Africa, 2024, https://issafrica.org/iss-today/african-protest-politics-coincidence-correction-or-contagion.

objective by systematically excluding Africans from the processes of imagining and co-creating alternatives to their enduring status quo.

The inaugural leadership of nascent African independent states quickly adopted the paternalism of the colonial state in their developmentalist approaches to national self-determination. Following the departure of the European colonialists starting in the late 1950s, this small elite class of foreign-educated leader-intellectuals monopolized the formidable task of transforming brutalized colonial societies into functioning reimaginings—either in the form of African territorial states, regional nationalisms, a Pan-African unified bloc, or something else. Not unlike what some anticipated to result from last year's revolutionary movements, the structural distress of the independence movements created a vortex of imaginative possibility that required collective world-building efforts to anchor visionary ideals in material realities. Instead, the elites in power distanced themselves from the masses and transfigured the goal of self-determination into a statist project.[9] The African state, heavily disadvantaged by its lack of a self-sustaining economy and with pressing expectations to prove its legitimacy justified authoritarian tactics and heavy borrowing to fund progress and prestige projects, which, ultimately, led to state collapse in the 1980s economic crises. "African people lost out both on [real] development and democracy."[10]

The second assault of unwieldy development paradigms arrived in the packaging of neoliberalism and Structural Adjustment Programs. Colonial control returned not only to marginalize African people but also to batter the concept of a legitimate African state, which until the instabilities of the 1980s had at least remained intact. Foreign consultants and institutions took control of African policymaking and the African state was vilified as corrupt and incompetent. Free-market policies devastated African economies by cutting social spending and forcing African states to integrate into the global economy on deeply unequal terms. Local industries weaned to an aid dependency, and the passions of self-determination that had fueled the independence movement were eroded as Africans were rendered and led to believe themselves as passive subjects of poverty-reduction strategies designed by external actors.[11]

The potential for democratic and people-led development was forgotten as aid and development paradigms calcified in domestic and global consciousness with regard to Africa. The

[9] Shivji, Issa G. *The silences in the NGO discourse: The role and future of ngos in Africa*, 2006.
[10] Shivji, Issa G. *The silences in the NGO discourse: The role and future of ngos in Africa*, 2006.
[11] Shivji, Issa G. *The silences in the NGO discourse: The role and future of ngos in Africa*, 2006.

space in which African countries could imagine economic growth was narrowed to how much aid they could negotiate and how much foreign capital they could attract. And in this development, African people were regarded insofar as subjects of foreign NGO-led activism.

The violence of this development ideology resonates today. Africa—and the "global south" broadly--is pathologized and framed as "underdeveloped" or "developing," the concepts implying that Africans are inherently deficient, and therefore, without question, in need of saving, even at the expense of their autonomy and agency. The development paradigm does not interrogate the "common sense" theoretical assumptions under which it operates, which originate from a neoliberal agenda for global imperialism. "It discourages [any] historical and social theoretical understanding of development, poverty, discrimination, [...] and compartmentalizes life such that invariably one not only loses sight of the whole, but even the capacity to think holistically."[12] And through a corporatized approach that rewards short-termism and marketable tableaus, the international development industry perpetuates an activism-over-theory kind of thoughtlessness. Shivji captures this perfectly with his incisive critique of NGO discourse:

> "In the African setting, any discussion on colonial history invariably elicits the standard response: Let us stop blaming the colonialists! How long shall we continue lamenting about colonialism? Thus, history is reduced to, and then ridiculed as, a 'blaming exercise'. And yet, [...] colonial and imperial history is at the heart of the present African condition. History is not about assigning or sharing blame, nor it is about narrating the 'past', which must be forgotten and forgiven or only remembered once a year on remembrance or heroes or independence days. History is about the present. We must understand the present as history so as to change it for the better. Per force, in the African context where the imperial project is not only historical, it is the present. Just as we cannot 'make poverty history' without understanding the history of poverty."[13]

And perhaps the most insidious aspect of this anti-democratic paradigm of development is the unfettered attack on the minds of Africans. That progress is angled outward in such a way that African countries are viewed to be developing to a "global north" standard perpetuates the false illusion that African societies are incompatible with modernity as they are now. True democracy—as opposed to the plaster electoral democracy that the West imposes on Africa as a measure of stability—and human rights are deferrable to an ambiguous future in which development will be

[12] Shivji, Issa G. *The silences in the NGO discourse: The role and future of ngos in Africa*, 2006.
[13] Shivji, Issa G. *The silences in the NGO discourse: The role and future of ngos in Africa*, 2006.

achieved: this is a real challenge. Especially when several African leaders, hungry for power, use this logic to justify suppressing dissent and impeding the maturation of democratic institutions.

In such instances, the argument put forth is that, amid "pressing challenges," efforts to create more just societies are not only impractical but also virtually absent. Yoweri Kaguta Museveni, who has been the president of Uganda for 38 years, frequently cites the need for security and economic development to justify curbing political freedoms. At a campaign rally in 2016, for example, as he sought a fifth consecutive term in office, he said, with no effort to conceal this entitlement: "Those who say 'let him go, let him go', they need to know this is not the right time [...] this old man who has saved the country, how do you want him to go? How can I go out of a banana plantation I have planted that has started bearing fruits?"[14] Teodoro Obiang Nguema Mbasogo of Equatorial Guinea, who has ruled since 1979, also claims that the country's unique challenges necessitate a strong, centralized authority which only he can provide, unlike his competitors: "Some preach that there should be change [...] we have to see the changes that they want to produce. We do not know if they are for the benefit of the people, or if it is to create a catastrophic situation."[15] These are a few examples of a broader trend that erases the ongoing efforts of local communities engaged in participatory worldmaking, mutual aid systems, and local governance that could serve as the foundation for scalable democratic models.

The development ideology has essentialized itself in African national strategies and international relations, effectively marginalizing African people from the project of self-determination and narrowing the space for imagination regarding what African alternatives can be. The momentum that the Sub-Saharan African Spring brought offered an opportunity to re-energize the broader movement towards dignity and democratic models of progress. For this to happen, there need to be deliberate strategies to reconsider and ultimately abolish the current development model, prizing a collaborative imagination for alternative and more inclusive theories and practices of progress. Seeing as one of the paramount challenges that mass movements face is their inability to form a cohesive vision to sustain momentum, organizing around a clear theoretical

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[14] Tisdall, Simon. 2016. "Uganda's President Epitomises Africa's Perceived Democratic Deficit." The Guardian. The Guardian. January 12, 2016. https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/jan/12/uganda-president-yoweri-museveni-epitomises-africas-democratic-deficit.

[15] "Equatorial Guinea Leader Poised to Extend 43 Years in Power." 2022. AP News. November 20, 2022. https://apnews.com/article/africa-equatorial-guinea-malabo-government-and-politics-teodoro-obiang-nguema-mbasogo-f221186f2e29fc68e4371a13835e1918.

framework of abolitionism would allow what remains of the Sub-Saharan African Spring to sustain itself and create epistemic communities that will, over time, result in sustainable structural change.

III. Abolish Development

"*It is existentially petrifying to imagine relinquishing the organized poverty we have in favor of an abundance we have never known and have yet to organize.*"[16]

The call to abolish development is provocative, without question. The current global racist-capitalist accumulation model of development, though deeply flawed, provides a lifeline to many in Africa who are under assault by state violence, endemic conflict, poverty, food and climate insecurity, debt crises, human rights abuses, and the effects of neocolonialism. To invoke abolitionism in such precarious conditions might sound like something straight out of a conservative right-wing protectionist playbook, perhaps all-too-familiar in the current political moment.

And yet perhaps this very moment is the most damning indictment of the development paradigm—mere months into the Trump Administration's decision to cut key aid commitments and the impact has been devastating for many in Sub-Saharan Africa.[17] The current development paradigm is so deeply intertwined with the political whims of foreign powers, leaving the recipients of aid and development perpetually at risk of losing them, that any form of self-determination remains unimaginable. In contrast, the abolitionist view calls for a radical rethinking of the development framework itself, emphasizing the need to eliminate the very notion of development that relies on power imbalances and perpetuates dependency.

William Easterly captures this dilemma with striking clarity in *The Ideology of Development*:

> "The opposite of ideology is freedom [...] Free societies and individuals are not guaranteed to succeed. They will make bad choices. But at least they bear the cost of those mistakes, and learn from them [...] That stands in stark contrast to accountability-free Developmentalism [...] The opposite of Development ideology

[16] Lewis Sophie (author). *Abolish the family Lewis Sophie (author)*. Verso Books, 2022.
[17] Majd Al-Waheidi, "'You Can Now Die': The Human Cost of America's Foreign Aid Cuts in Africa," NPR, March 13, 2025, https://www.npr.org/2025/03/13/nx-s1-5316282/usaid-aid-funds-economy-africa.

> is not anything goes, but the pragmatic use of time-tested economic ideas [...] by individuals, firms, governments, and societies as they find their own success."[18]

To abolish development, then, is to ask: What would it mean to not need development at all? It is to imagine a world in which progress moves beyond the folly of developmental scientism and the economic growth 'city on a hill,' to make room for something else—something possibly better. Like any present or past abolitionist movements—the abolition of prisons, of police, of slavery—the abolition of development is a worldmaking endeavor. It creates space for the imagination to flourish and for the construction of truly African alternatives—radical, democratic transformations in which those whom structures must serve are involved in the dreaming and making of them. Abolition is not a deletion of infrastructure, but the presence of other, more just ways of protecting social tissue. In the words of Ruth Wilson Gilmore, "Abolition is presence, which means abolition is life in rehearsal."[19] It is certainly not an immediate fix, but "a collective act of creativity, without end."[20] Therefore, to call for the abolition of development at this moment is to invite all those involved in revolutionary movements across the continent to think beyond the narrow language of reforms to governments and economies—both of which remain within the orbit of the doctrine of development, which tends to include within itself ways to reproduce the status quo. And rather look towards the language of abolition as a concrete political metaphor that forces them to think about what is too violent to continue and make room for alternatives.

In a roundabout way, those who will defer this imperative will argue that African countries cannot possibly abolish development now—that there are too many pressing needs to consider in lieu of imagination. This is rooted in the assumption that abolition is somehow a secondary need and is indulgent. And yet, abolitionist interventions and alternative making already exist across the continent, and are being done by those most oppressed by the status quo. An interview with Sabatho Nyamsenda,[21] a socialist intellectual in Dar es Salaam, revealed that the most marginalized of society: the wage workers, the women, and the unemployed in Tanzania are the ones leading the *revolution*. He referenced the Bus Drivers' Association in Tanzania (Umoja wa

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[18] William Easterly, "The Ideology of Development," Foreign Policy, October 13, 2009, https://foreignpolicy.com/2009/10/13/the-ideology-of-development/.
[19] Gilmore, Ruth Wilson, Brenna Bhandar, and Alberto Toscano. *Abolition geography: Essays towards liberation*. London: Verso, 2023.
[20] Lewis Sophie (author). *Abolish the family Lewis Sophie (author)*. Verso Books, 2022.
[21] Nyamsenda, Sabatho. Interview by author. June 21, 2024

Madereva wa Mabasi Tanzania—UWAMATA), a voluntary initiative, that organized a series of strikes across the country in 2015 in response to bus owners dictating unlivable wages. From this effort, the drivers managed to strategize and establish a cooperative bus ownership model, rejecting the precarity of labor conditions dictated by private ownership.

Sabatho also spoke of urban women street vendors in Dar es Salaam who, after suffering from high interest rates from microfinance institutions, created alternative financing models, also through cooperatives. "How they were able to come to the conclusion that they need to own the means of production without having read any socialist literature is fascinating," he said. These examples offer a powerful critique against the flawed determinism of many theoretical models of progress. In Sabatho's view, this lumpen-proletariat revolution contradicts the proletariat-led socialist revolution theory. It is also consistently at odds with the predominant assumptions of our current paradigm of development. Alternatives created by the poor are consistently in friction with the framework in which "the 'poor', the diseased, the disabled, the AIDs-infected, the ignorant, the marginalized, in short, the 'people', are not part of the development equation, since development is assigned to private capital which constitutes the 'engine of growth'."[22]

Rwanda offers another compelling, though complex, case of what might be called an aspirational abolitionist approach to development. It is not presented here as a perfect embodiment of abolitionist praxis, but rather as a site of ideological resistance within constrained global structures. The Rwandan state has not escaped the structural realities of international aid, centralized governance, or global market entanglement—indeed, it remains reliant on all three. Yet, what distinguishes Rwanda is its deliberate reorientation of the terms of engagement with these systems. The nation's post-1994 genocide against the Tutsi recovery illustrates a refusal of the inferiority complex often embedded in the development paradigm. Rather than embracing dependency or externally dictated models of progress, Rwanda has strategically cultivated a national ethic rooted in *agaciro*—a concept that translates roughly to dignity or self-worth. Programs like *gacaca* (community justice), *umuganda* (collective work), and other "homegrown initiatives" demonstrate how indigenous knowledge systems have been mobilized as instruments of national rebuilding.[23]

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[22] Shivji, Issa G. *The silences in the NGO discourse: The role and future of ngos in Africa*, 2006.

[23] King, Regine, Suzanne Dudziak, and Charles Kalinganire. 2014. "North–South Social Work Partnership: Strengthening the Development of Social Work in Rwanda." Transnational Social Review 4 (2-3): 137–51. https://doi.org/10.1080/21931674.2014.950110.

These practices, while state-coordinated, stem from pre-colonial traditions that center collective responsibility and localized justice. In this way, they resonate with abolitionist ethics: the emphasis on presence rather than absence, on community care rather than carceral or extractive logics. To the extent that abolition demands we reject imposed hierarchies and build from community need, the Rwandan example offers valuable insights. It shows how national consciousness and historical narrative can become tools for mass mobilization and local reinvention—even within the structures that abolitionism often critiques. The contradictions in the Rwandan example indeed must not be glossed over. And while Rwanda is certainly not a blueprint, it is a rehearsal—a living, imperfect attempt to create space for a different political psychology and imagining futures rooted in dignity rather than dependency.

IV. The Role of the Intellectual

At this juncture, it is important to acknowledge that the abolition of development is a broad and tremendous project which demands labour of equal measure. The discussion below does not claim to map the entirety of that effort, nor does it offer a singular path forward. Born out of generous, care-filled conversations with several Pan-African intellectuals held between June and July 2024, what follows is one beginning, among many possible beginnings, focused on the place of the intellectual within this wider project.

Abolitionism requires constant critical analysis of existing systems and a bold re-imagining of alternatives. In this, the intellectual is essential as someone who communes with the civil disobeyers, the pockets of resistance, and the mass protestors to document the social pulse, question, and expose deeper logics of inequality and control. In this regard, the intellectual must necessarily ground their labor in the everyday struggles of the people, in the fashion of Paulo Freire's educator intellectuals, who are co-learners along with the masses and facilitate the oppressed in articulating their shared realities.[24]

And just like abolitionist practice, intellectual labor is deeply ordinary. There is a fatalism that accompanies the ways in which African history is narrated, particularly the history of "great men." The intellectual forefathers—Kwame Nkrumah, Julius Nyerere, Patrice Lumumba, Amílcar Cabral, and others—are deified to the effect that all intellectual work is measured against them. This deification creates a false illusion that intellectual labor is out of reach for ordinary people,

[24] Freire, Paulo. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Translated by Myra Bergman Ramos. New York: Continuum, 1970.

and it suggests that revolutionary thinking and worldmaking must emerge from a small group of exceptional leaders. This notion is further reinforced by the idea of education—formal education—as a privilege, which is extended to people through more development. As a result, less developed societies often internalize the belief that only the few who can afford this education are capable of critical thinking, artistic expression, and intellectual production, while they themselves are not.[25] But as Stefan Collini points out, the intellectual is not a fierce prophet but rather a "connected critic" who is like everyone else except that he devotes himself with passion to truths that we all know."[26]

It is within this framework that the African intellectual, called to abolitionist work and revolutionary practice, is situated. The intellectual is not confined to the academy or formal institutions of knowledge production. They can be a producer of written or oral knowledge, an interpreter of social realities, an activist, a journalist, a community organizer, a cultural worker. The question then becomes, how does this intellectual assist the movement in creating alternative worlds upon which to direct their energies? There are several examples that can offer instruction:

1. Rethinking knowledge production and addressing disjointedness in resistance

Sabatho Nyamsenda tries to think differently about knowledge production, which in most cases has been top-down, from intellectuals who are trying to teach the people how to do the revolution. Departing from this tradition, he engages directly with the masses to study their acts of resistance and understand how people who are impoverished and overtaxed manage to survive. One of his intellectual contributions has been to compile a collection of essays in Swahili, written or dictated by the marginalized class in Tanzania – boda-boda drivers, bus drivers, urban vendor women – narrating their experiences of exploitation and how they are actively trying to respond to them. The resulting book was circulated across the country in different labor organizations in an effort to address the disjointedness of the resistance and create a consciousness of the shared struggles as well as offer opportunities for localized loci of resistance to learn from one another's strategies.

Another interesting approach that Sabatho has considered for popular engagement is the concept of "peasant ideological schools." One example is what he calls a "working-class TV" on

[25] Sandhu, Angie. *Intellectuals and the people*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007.
[26] Sandhu, Angie. *Intellectuals and the people*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007.

YouTube, dedicated to amplifying the voices of the people through a widely accessible medium. He also suggested a working people's congress and learning visits between existing workers' associations and cooperatives as something to think about in dealing with the issue of intellectual and strategic disjointedness.[27]

2. *Fostering community agency*

Then there is Richard Mambala, a British-born Tanzanian author, social activist, columnist, and academic whose experience with Uraghbishi, or "Animation," reflects a transformative approach to community development. The program of Uraghbishi, native to Tanzania, aims to change citizens' attitudes and perceptions about development by encouraging them to participate and collaborate with leaders in identifying, analyzing, and addressing the challenges and priorities in their communities. Richard describes Uraghbishi as the opposite of traditional mobilization; instead of simply directing the community, the program emphasizes listening to its members, asking questions, and empowering them to make their own decisions. The belief is that people in their communities know what they need, which often does not align with national priorities. The program trains individuals chosen by their communities in participatory action research. These community members conduct research in their own wards and then come together in village meetings to evaluate the priorities of different groups. They form action committees to address these priorities and provide feedback to the district about their findings. According to Richard, this method has proven effective at igniting people's desire to engage in their own development processes, countering the discouragement often caused by externally imposed frameworks that undermine the community's self-confidence in their ability to take action for themselves. Uraghbishi also offers space for discourse and critical consciousness to question the flaws in government, making room for collective action directed towards demanding accountability from leadership.[28]

3. *Consciousness-raising*

[27] Nyamsenda, Sabatho. Interview by author. June 21, 2024
[28] Mambala, Richard. Interview by author. June 24, 2024

Another compelling example comes from Rebecca Ngyumi, the Founder and Executive Director of the Msichana Initiative, a local NGO in Tanzania focused on empowering girls and advocating for women's rights. Ngyumi believes that building a movement requires individuals to recognize their shared oppression. As she puts it: "You only can meet people at the level where they need you." This necessitates creating spaces for discourse, where participants can create a shared understanding of common struggles and come to the realization that resistance is not only possible but essential. Her work at Msichana is focused on enhancing the infrastructure that allows women's rights movements to convene, reflect, and rejuvenate. She also works particularly to facilitate cross-generational collaboration to encourage the exchange of strategies and experiences that strengthen the movement.[29]

4. Towards critical pedagogy in education

Finally, Professor George Meyiri Bob-Milliar, a professor of African Studies at the Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology, is acutely aware that traditional education often fails to nurture critical thinking and the ability to question existing power structures. In response, he introduced a course on Nkrumahism, state-building, and ideology, which initially met with resistance from colleagues skeptical about the relevance of teaching Nkrumah's ideas in contemporary contexts. Moving beyond the conventional top-down approach to pedagogy, Professor Bob-Milliar has adopted a Freirean critical consciousness pedagogy in his teaching. His course focuses not on glorifying Nkrumah but on engaging students in a rigorous examination of his contributions and shortcomings in relation to their experiences in Ghana. Students are encouraged to assess the historical implications of Nkrumah’s ideas through questioning, debate, and challenging assumptions, embodying what Bob-Milliar describes as "education fit for purpose."[30]

Final Thoughts

At its core, this paper has argued that development—as constructed through colonial logics, neoliberal interests, and epistemological erasure—is incompatible with the kind of radical

[29] Gyumi, Rebecca. Interview by author. June 26, 2024

[30] Bob-Milliar, George. Interview by author. June 13, 2024

self-determination that African people have long fought for. To abolish development is not to reject the aspiration for thriving societies, but to free that aspiration from the ideological apparatus that has long distorted it. Development ideology reduces complex histories and collective desires into technical problems, solvable through teleological logics. It transforms political struggle into policy compliance and imagines African futures only within the constraints of what is legible—and permissible—to global capital. In contrast, abolition demands a commitment to the here and now—to the everyday labor of imagination, resistance, and co-creation already unfolding across the continent.

The movements chronicled here—from mass demonstrations, to the strikes of UWAMATA bus drivers, to indigenous ethics in Rwanda, *Uraghbishi* in Tanzania, Msichana Initiative's feminist consciousness-raising, *working-class TV*, and radical pedagogies in Ghana—are not anomalies. They are rehearsals of a different world. So too is the reorientation of the African intellectual toward grounded, collaborative praxis. In them lies the seed of an emancipatory grand strategy to reclaim agency and restore dignity as the organizing principle of progress. The Sub-Saharan African Spring—with its fervor, its clarity, and its courage—extends an invitation to imagine boldly. If we are to honor that call, we must resist the temptation to retreat into the perilous comforts of what is familiar, even in these most uncertain times.

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