

# The Relevance and Timeliness of Delinking

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*Demba Moussa Dembélé*

'One central question preoccupied me intellectually more than any other: why is the history of capitalist expansion that of its polarisation on a global scale?'

*Samir Amin*

Professor Samir Amin passed away on 12 August 2018, at the age of 87. For over 60 years, he was at the forefront of the intellectual and political struggle for the emancipation of peoples oppressed by capitalism and imperialism. The publication of his book on delinking was an illustration of the audacity that was typical of Amin's thought.<sup>1</sup> The call for delinking was in contradiction with the global trend dominated by the rise of neoliberal ideology, led by the United States and its proxies, the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF). Amin's call for delinking has particular resonance today, with the decline of the Western economic and financial hegemony and the collapse of the neoliberal paradigm, which has led to a crisis of legitimacy for the globalised capitalist system, including in Western countries. The coronavirus pandemic and its consequences have intensified this crisis of legitimacy, particularly in Africa, where more and more voices are calling for a paradigm

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<sup>1</sup> Amin, Samir (1990). *Delinking: Towards a Polycentric World*. London: Zed Books.

shift breaking with the policies of the past and promoting an endogenous development model.

## **The General Context of the Appeal**

The call for delinking was made in a context marked by the failure of 'development aid' policies and attempts at self-centred development in the countries of the South. The call also stemmed from Samir Amin's personal experience in policy-making.

### **A Changing Global Context**

In the 1970s, in the Pearson Report, produced by the Commission led by former Canadian Prime Minister Lester Pearson, the United Nations described the failure of the first 'decade of development'. This failure was illustrated by the low level of resource transfers from developed countries to newly independent countries. It was at this time that the proposal to transfer 0.7% of the gross national income (GNI) of developed countries to 'underdeveloped' countries was formulated.

Another significant development in the global context at the time was the failure of the New International Economic Order (NIEO) launched through the United Nations. This failure was the result of fierce opposition from the core countries, notably the United States and the United Kingdom.

### **The African Context: Failure of the Lagos Plan of Action**

For Samir Amin, the failure of the NIEO confirmed the insurmountable obstacles thrown up by core countries against any attempts to 'catch up'

within the system. There were some exceptions, however, such as China and India. In Africa, the failures of attempts to 'catch up' prompted the Economic Commission for Africa (ECA) and the Organisation of African Unity (OAU), the predecessor of the African Union, to propose the Lagos Plan of Action (LPA) in 1980. The plan aimed to

strengthen regional and continental integration and laid the foundations for the industrialisation of the continent. It was torpedoed by the Berg Report (1981),<sup>2</sup> commissioned by the World Bank. This report paved the way for the structural adjustment programmes.

On a personal level, Amin had experienced attempts to 'catch up' in his native Egypt, and especially in Mali, where for almost three years he participated in the development of public policies designed to promote a self-centred system. All these failures had reinforced Amin's conviction that the road to development for the countries of the periphery was through delinking.

## The Call for Delinking

In addition to an analysis of the global and African context, the call for delinking was grounded above all on the polarising nature of global capitalism, consisting of a centre and peripheries.

The centre consisted of 'historically constituted' countries with a 'national bourgeois hegemony' and a 'national capitalist' state.

The bourgeoisie and the bourgeois state are here inseparable [...] The bourgeois state is national when it masters the process of accumulation, within the bounds of external constraints to be sure, but where these constraints are strongly relativised by its own capacity to react to their action, or even to participate in their shaping.<sup>3</sup>

The peripheries are countries that do not have local control over the accumulation process, which is influenced by external constraints. In the light of this analysis, it can be said that the 'underdevelopment' of the peripheries is the direct consequence of their adjustment to the accumulation needs of the centre.

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<sup>2</sup> World Bank (1981). *Accelerated Development in Africa. An Agenda for Action*. Berg Report. Washington D.C.:The World Bank

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

## The Concept of Delinking

Contrary to the superficial view, delinking does not mean 'autarky' or withdrawal from the rest of the world. According to Amin, delinking aims to align a country's external economic relations with the logic of its internal development priorities. Particularly in the areas of foreign trade and capital movements. Delinking is thus a precondition for a self-centred strategy to lay the foundations of development for peripheral countries. It implies the definition of criteria of economic rationality based on internal constraints and social relationships rather than on those linked to the global system.

## The Significance of Delinking in Samir Amin's Thought

The theme of delinking recurs constantly in Amin's later works and position papers. This is due to two convictions he held.

The first was the importance he assigned to delinking in the battle against the imperialist system: 'delinking of the countries of the South paves the way for the deconstruction of the prevailing imperialist system'.<sup>4</sup> In other words, delinking policies in the South are a key factor in the decline of the capitalist/imperialist system. This is because Southern countries' conquest or recovery of sovereignty over their own resources would lead to the loss by the core countries of cheap access to the resources of the periphery. This would inevitably bring about a crisis in the system that could contribute to its downfall. Amin's second conviction was that delinking would also lead to a break with the Eurocentric world view. In his opinion, capitalism 'is itself inseparable from the European conquest of the world. It is inseparable from the Eurocentric ideology, which is, by definition, a non-universal form of civilisation'.<sup>5</sup>

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4 Amin, Samir (2010). *Ending the Crisis of Capitalism or Ending Capitalism?* Kapstadt/Dakar/Nairobi: Pambazuka Press & Fahamu Books.

5 Amin, Samir (2012). *L'implosion du capitalisme contemporain, automne du capitalisme, printemps des peuples?* Paris: Les éditions Delga.

Thus, delinking was not limited to the economic aspect alone but also contained an ideological and political dimension. This two-pronged approach, combining economic and intellectual struggle, is what made the work of Samir Amin so unique. Even within Marxism, he distanced himself from a certain orthodoxy that he deemed too Eurocentric.

#### Summary of Samir Amin's analysis:

- WORLD SYSTEM = Centre/Periphery polarisation
- CENTRE: Accumulation process under the control of internal forces (state and national bourgeoisie)
- PERIPHERY: No local control of the accumulation process, which is shaped by external constraints
- DELINKING = External relations subordinated to the internal accumulation process
  - Control of foreign trade policy
  - Control of capital movements
- DELINKING = Prerequisite for the development of self-centred initiatives
- SELF-CENTRED INITIATIVES = Control of the accumulation process (industrialisation)

#### What Forms Should Delinking Take in Africa?

We proceed on the assumption that anything that strengthens ties between African countries, on the one hand, and between African countries and the Global South, on the other, can contribute to the delinking process.

## Conquering/Reclaiming Sovereignty

One of the main lessons of the coronavirus pandemic is that Africa must rely on itself first. Vaccine apartheid has exposed the selfishness of our traditional 'partners'. This painful lesson has led to a growing number of calls for African countries to assert their sovereignty in several key areas: monetary, food, pharmaceutical, energy, etc.

### Monetary Sovereignty

In West Africa, the adoption of a single currency, replacing the franc of the *Communauté financière Africaine* (CFA) and the seven other Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) currencies, would mark a major step forward in the integration process. In particular, it would be a historic development for the countries using the CFA franc. However, the ECOWAS currency never seems to see the light of day. It was thought that the end of the tunnel was in sight, after the decision of the Abuja Summit in June 2019. However, the tactics deployed by West African Economic and Monetary Union (WAEMU) countries, particularly Côte d'Ivoire, in collusion with France, run the risk of torpedoing the project. In addition, Covid-19 has challenged the convergence policies and pushed back the deadline to 2027. Given the current unstable situation in the region, it is not certain that even that deadline will be met.

At the continental level, the African Union has a common currency vision, with the creation of an African Central Bank (ACB) and an African Monetary Fund as its first step. More than 40 central banks are involved in this project, whose secretariat is located at the Central Bank of West African States (BCEAO) in Dakar. However, once again, it is impossible to say what the real timeline for the creation of the ACB will be.

### Food Sovereignty

The coronavirus pandemic and the war in Ukraine have revealed Africa's high level of food dependence. According to UN Trade and Development (UNCTAD), in 2020, more than 80% of African countries' imports of basic foodstuffs came from outside the continent, amounting to approxi-

mately \$60.5 billion in value.<sup>6</sup> The lessons learned from the two events cited above have reignited the debate on food sovereignty in Africa. It is entirely possible to achieve it. Africa holds 60% of the world's arable land and some of the world's largest rivers and waterways. The problem is the lack of political will on the part of the continent's leaders. In 2003, in Mozambique, the African Union adopted the Maputo Declaration, urging countries to devote at least 10% of their national budgets to agriculture each year. However, to date, only eight countries have honoured the Declaration.

### **Pharmaceutical Sovereignty**

In the health sector, Africa's dependence is even more pronounced, particularly in the pharmaceutical field. The continent imports 97% of medicines and pharmaceutical products it needs, the value of which exceeded \$20 billion in 2018. Africa has the means to develop its own pharmaceutical industry. Some countries have chosen to partner with pharmaceutical groups from the North to build local industries. But the best solution would be to create African pharmaceutical industries through sub-regional cooperation. This would help boost local research and innovation, create jobs for professionals in the sector, and thereby mitigate the brain drain.

### **Energy Sovereignty**

The same applies to the energy sector. Africa has abundant energy reserves, including fossil fuels and wind, solar and hydro power. However, these resources are either under-exploited or exploited by foreign companies. Delinking in this area would consist of committing to the domestic exploitation of these resources to reduce and ultimately end the continent's foreign dependence. Another important consideration in this area is the harnessing of Africa's plentiful renewable resources. Admittedly, massive financial resources will be required to achieve the various forms

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6 UNCTAD (2021). *Reaping the Potential Benefits of the African Free Trade Area for Inclusive Growth, Economic Development in Africa Report 2021*. New York/Geneva: United Nations.

of sovereignty listed above. However, armed with political will and a clear medium- and long-term strategy, it will be possible to meet these goals, which are crucial for the future of the continent.

### **Accelerating Regional and Continental Integration**

The conquest or recovery of sovereignty should be envisaged in the context of regional and continental integration. In May 2013, the African Union adopted Agenda 2063, as a 'blueprint for Africa's structural transformation' in which regional and continental integration are to play a key role. At the continental level, the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) became operational in January 2021. African countries seem to have high hopes for the AfCFTA. These hopes are supported by the findings of certain studies by international organisations, which cite a number of advantages of the AfCFTA. Yet these projections should be greeted with caution, even scepticism. As it is currently framed, with its focus on trade, the AfCFTA is more likely to further integrate Africa into the system than to contribute to the delinking process.

### **Rebuilding Developmental States**

State rebuilding and the return of planning are indispensable components of the delinking process. The rehabilitation of the state is vital to Africa's successful industrialisation, which is one of the key goals of delinking. Effective harnessing of domestic resources cannot be achieved without a competent and committed state. The failure of neoliberal policies has led to calls for the rehabilitation of the state in Africa. In 2007, UNCTAD recommended the reconstruction of developmental states in Africa along similar lines to those in Southeast Asia.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> UNCTAD (2007). *Economic Development in Africa. Reclaiming Policy Space: Domestic Resource Mobilizations and Developmental States*. New York/Geneva: United Nations.

The ECA followed UNCTAD's lead in its 2011 report, in which the role of the state was deemed essential to the continent's development process.<sup>8</sup>

### **Financing Africa's Development**

A fundamental aspect of the delinking process is to create the conditions for Africa to finance its own development by relying on domestic resource mobilisation. This position has been advocated by the African Union, which urged the continent to 'take full responsibility for financing her development' to achieve Agenda 2063. Africa has ample capacity to do so. Unfortunately, it loses tens of billions of dollars each year in illicit financial flows, as indicated in UNCTAD's 2020 report, which puts the average annual capital flight from Africa at \$88.6 billion. UNCTAD stresses that Africa could curb illicit financial flows through close co-operation among African countries, fight against corruption and international tax cooperation with developed countries.<sup>9</sup> In addition to domestic resources, there are other sources of financing available to Africa within the framework of policies aimed at breaking away from the system.

### **Reparations for the Ecological Debt**

Africa must demand reparations for the ecological debt arising from the systematic plunder of its natural resources. The legitimacy of this claim is reinforced by the current context of the fight against climate change.

### **Cancellation of the Illegitimate Debt**

Another source of financing is the cancellation of the continent's illegitimate debt. To this end, an international audit of all African debts should

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8 ECA (2011). *Economic Report on Africa 2011, Governing Development; the Role of the State in Economic Transformation*. Addis Ababa: ECA.

9 UNCTAD (2021). *Tackling Illicit Financial Flows for Sustainable Development in Africa, Economic development in Africa Report 2020*. New York and Geneva United Nations.

be demanded in order to identify the illegitimate component of these debts and demand its unconditional cancellation!

### **Repatriation of Stolen Assets**

Enormous wealth has been stolen from African countries, with the collusion of Western banks. Africa must demand the repatriation of these ill-gotten gains, with the cooperation of the United Nations system, which has set up mechanisms for such purposes.

### **Migrant Remittances**

These remittances are an important source of funding for several countries. On average, Africa is estimated to have received \$32 billion per year between 2010 and 2018. It is essential to find ways to make remittances an effective instrument for financing development.

### **Strengthening South-South Cooperation**

Samir Amin attached great importance to solidarity between the countries of the South in their struggle against the core countries. Nowadays, South–South cooperation is one of the main focuses of international relations. This type of cooperation allows for opportunities that are less costly in all areas and more respectful of the sovereignty of African nations. Africa today has multiple opportunities to reduce its dependence on the core countries and thereby increase its scope for action in the design and implementation of its development policies.

## **Conclusion**

While delinking could be considered a ‘utopia’ at the time of Samir Amin’s bold call in 1986, it has now become a very real possibility, with the proliferation of increasingly favourable factors. That is why Amin so rightly said: ‘More than ever, delinking is on the agenda of what is

possible'.<sup>10</sup> However, delinking is not just an economic struggle but also an intellectual and political one. It means reconnecting with the ideas of African thinkers and those in the diaspora. In other words, reclaiming the thought of Samir Amin, Cheikh Anta Diop, Kwame Nkrumah, Julius Nyerere, Nelson Mandela, Amilcar Cabral, Thomas Sankara, Patrice Lumumba, Yash Tandon, Walter Rodney, and many more. It is only under those conditions that the African Union's Agenda 2063 can be successfully achieved: 'building the Africa we want'<sup>11</sup> (AUC 2014).

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<sup>10</sup> Amin (2012), *op. cit.*

<sup>11</sup> African Union Commission. (2014). *Agenda 2063: The Africa We Want*. Addis Ababa, May

