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The Global South Amid a Century-Defining Transformation

An African Reflection on Samir Amin's Delinking Agenda

THE GLOBAL SOUTH AMID A CENTURY-DEFINING TRANSFORMATION

An African Reflection on Samir Amin's Delinking Agenda

BY EDDY MALOKA

Samir Amin (3 September 1931 – 12 August 2018) was a prominent African scholar who, along with his intellectual fellow travellers in the world-systems school, analysed the global system from the perspective of the Global South. Amin was not only a towering figure in academic scholarship, but also a militant political activist, deeply engaged in struggles to realise the vision he championed in his writings. His world-systems theory, framed through a centre-periphery analytical lens and a *longue durée* historical perspective, helps us to comprehend how the conditions faced by countries in the Global South have been historically reproduced, positioning them as dependent peripheries within the global system. This theory showed that the socio-economic challenges of these countries are not natural occurrences or the result of divine intervention, but are symbiotically linked to the enrichment of the developed North.

Amin did not stop there. He posed a crucial question: what is to be done? His response became his famous concept of delinking, which he defined at length as follows:

> The crisis of development, within the general crisis of the world system, has led to the questioning of development strategies 'open to the exterior' and based on deeper participation in the international division of labour. In this context, the expression 'delinking' has gained currency and is more widely used each day. As is often the case, the wider usage has been accompanied by a gradual debasement of its meaning. The expression has generally become a virtual synonym of absolute or relative 'autarky', that is withdrawal from external commercial, financial and technological exchanges.
>
> We have in the past supported and continue to support the thesis according to which the relative term 'under-development' is the obverse of 'development', that is, the one and the other are two sides of the – naturally unequal – expansion of capital. Development of the countries on the periphery of the world capitalist system must therefore come through an essential 'rupture' with that system, a 'delinking' or refusal to subject the national development strategy to the imperatives of 'worldwide expansion'. But the meaning we give to the concept of 'delinking' is in no way synonymous with autarky. The meaning is as follows: pursuit of a system of rational criteria for economic options founded on a law of value on a national basis with popular relevance, independent of such criteria of economic rationality as flow from the dominance of the capitalist law of value operating on a world scale.[1]

Amin's concept of delinking has already attracted significant scholarly attention, and I do not intend to rehash that discussion here.[2] What intrigues me instead is the predictive power this concept has demonstrated since Amin introduced it in his book in the mid-1980s. Two of Amin's predictions are of particular interest. The first is reflected in the title of his book, *Delinking: Towards a Polycentric World*. Forty years ago, Amin foresaw the fractured world we are discussing today. He predicted that such a world would emerge when countries in the periphery began to pursue independent paths of development, envisioning a polycentric world order as a better future for the Global South.

The second prediction concerns the former USSR, the Soviet Republics, and China. He wrote:

> The USSR would not accept a 'reintegration' that threatened its internal political system. China would not accept a 'reintegration' that threatened its pursuit of independent development. By contrast, the Eastern European countries might, if circumstances allowed, 'cross over to the West.'

What Amin predicted has indeed come to pass. The collapse of the USSR at the end of the 1980s was followed by an aggressive effort to integrate the newly independent states into a Western-centric global system. Russia was among them, but in recent years it has drifted away from that path. Instead, it has joined a growing number of countries seeking an independent trajectory, separate from what is now referred to as the collective West.[3]

Amin also anticipated China's current position and success:

> China would not accept a 'reintegration' that threatened its pursuit of independent development.[4]

Amin argues elsewhere that China adopted a hybrid strategy: selectively delinking from the global economy while also opening itself up to integration into the Western-centric global economic system.[5] China's success today is due in large measure to this dual approach. Delinking has allowed China to pursue an autocentric economic strategy focused on developing the country's productive forces. By contrast, many developing countries, including many African countries, have pursued a one-dimensional strategy of wholesale integration into the global system, limiting their autonomy and denying them the benefits of delinking for an autocentric development strategy.

The central element of Amin's concept of delinking is the development of a country's productive forces. The political agenda of the state, whether capitalist or socialist, is a separate matter. Amin explored the idea of the 'emergence' of the Global South from this perspective. He emphasised that this emergence should not be superficial: its essence is determined by how effectively the emerging country can compete in the global economy.

Amin argues that emergence should not be measured solely by long-term growth in GDP or exports, nor by achieving a higher GDP per capita, as defined by the World Bank or aid institutions influenced by Western powers and conventional economists. For him, true emergence involves more than economic indicators – it requires sustained growth in industrial production within the state and a strengthening of the capacity of these industries to compete globally. Importantly, Amin excluded extractive industries, such as minerals and fossil fuels, from his definition of emergence. In countries rich in these natural resources, he argued, rapid growth can occur without fostering productive activities that benefit the broader economy. Furthermore, the competitiveness of productive activities should be assessed as an entire productive system, rather than through isolated units of production.[6]

Sovereignty

Amin's concept of delinking is particularly relevant to developments now unfolding in Africa. Across the continent, countries are exploring innovative ways to coexist with the Western-centric international system while also pursuing an independent path. This shift is informed by over 60 years of independence, during which it has become clear that integration into the global system has not fulfilled its promises, and that the economic model imposed on African nations has not succeeded.

This new approach is framed as a pursuit of sovereignty rather than delinking, a term that carries negative connotations in diplomatic language. It is not presented as antagonistic towards the West, except in a few isolated instances. Rather, it is viewed as essential to Africa's development and its quest to rise from the periphery of the international system. In this African context, sovereignty does not strictly follow the Westphalian concept, which focuses on geographic borders; instead, it emphasises a broader vision that is neither inward-looking nor narrowly focused on national interests. This renewed commitment to achieving sovereignty is manifest in several ways:

- Almost all African countries now have a national vision accompanied by a medium- to long-term development plan. This trend emerged in the 2000s and includes programmes such as South Africa's *National Development Plan 2030*, Senegal's *Vision 2035*, Uganda's *Vision 2040*, and Egypt's *Vision 2030*.

- There is growing recognition of the importance of strong state institutions, including the public service.

- Infrastructure development has become a primary focus, with countries actively working to build roads, dams, and other essential infrastructure.

- Industrialisation, along with initiatives such as beneficiation, aims to liberate Africa from its position as a dependent exporter of unprocessed raw materials in the global economy.

- In this context, the demand for sovereign control over natural resources has emerged as a rallying cry.

- There is also increasing recognition, in the post-USAID moment, of a reality that has long been evident: donor-funded development is not a sustainable path forward. Countries need to find innovative ways to mobilise development capital, primarily from domestic sources.

- In certain regions of Francophone Africa, this era of self-discovery and emphasis on asserting sovereignty over choices and destiny has sparked a resistance to the lingering neo-colonial influence of France. French military bases are being closed, the influence of French embassies is being reduced, and the role of French businesses in local economies is being curtailed. This spirit of resurgence is evident in countries such as Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, and Senegal.

- At the regional level, the African Union and Regional Economic Communities (RECs) are working towards deeper integration, with a focus on cross-country infrastructure projects and increased intra-African trade, notably through the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA). Regional development financial institutions, notably the African Development Bank and African Export-Import Bank, are also aligned with this agenda: realising the vision of an Africa that pursues an independent development path, supported by fully sovereign states with a dynamic and self-sustaining socio-economic base.

This is promising. However, Africa is only at the beginning of its journey towards a sovereign approach to development, one that aims to lift the continent out of its peripheral status. There is still a long way to go, and Africa is likely to remain on the periphery of the international system for at least another generation. Achieving full sovereignty through delinking is not feasible in the short term; it is a long-term process that will take decades. This journey may also encounter opposition from external forces along the way. Long-term planning is therefore essential for any country seeking to delink.

Africa's development planning has shifted from a focus on short-term interventions to a more sustainable long-term approach, marking a positive trend. This approach has changed significantly since the continent gained independence.

- In the 1960s, after independence, centralised planning was prevalent, with 32 countries implementing national development plans. However, these plans faced implementation challenges and political turmoil.

- The 1980s and 1990s saw the rise of neoliberal Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPs) from the Bretton Woods institutions, aimed at promoting privatisation and economic stability. Unfortunately, these reforms led to job losses, while growth averaged only 2.1% annually.[7]

- By the early 2000s, Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSPs) succeeded SAPs, focusing on welfare improvements and debt relief. However, PRSPs often lacked credibility because of their reliance on external influences and their neglect of essential productive sectors.

- Today, a new era characterised by National Development Strategies (NDSs) is emerging. These strategies emphasise long-term growth, job creation, and sustainable development, while encouraging collaboration between the public and private sectors and actively involving civil society.[8]

During my years at the African Peer Review Mechanism (APRM), we established a community of practice to support African countries in development planning. For this initiative to succeed, countries must aim not only to enhance their productive capacities but, more importantly, to secure full sovereignty in determining their own development paths. A strategy that is subordinate to external interests will not help Africa escape the periphery; instead, it will reinforce the continent's status as a dependent region.

Finance. The critical issue is how to secure the financial resources required for Africa's development. Where will these resources come from? The push to mobilise domestic resources is promising, but is it yielding the expected results? This challenge also applies to the African Union, particularly its ambitious *Agenda 2063* initiative, and to the Regional Economic Communities (RECs). The ongoing dependence of these organisations on external financing for their programmes undermines the goal of African sovereignty in determining the continent's destiny.

Leadership. The mindset and focus of African leaders are crucial to this process. Are they genuinely committed to achieving African sovereignty, or are they more concerned with reinforcing their standing within the international system? This is an essential consideration, since the objectives of full sovereignty cannot be met in the short term. Leadership must align with the delinking objective and be committed to its realisation; it must also be united around this goal. Consensus among political leaders of different political persuasions on the long-term objective is crucial to preventing domestic opposition that could hinder implementation. Delinking efforts must also enjoy popular support and legitimacy within the country.

Public goods and services. It should be clear by now that emerging economies in Africa must urgently stengthen their institutions and infrastructure to unlock their true long-term growth potential. What, then, is the current state of public service in Africa? The landscape of public service in Africa is still evolving. Ongoing reforms, especially professionalisation, are a major priority. However, efforts to enhance service delivery face significant challenges, including corruption, shortages of skilled personnel, and outdated public service systems.

In summary, for African countries, delinking, or sovereignty, must include the following key components:

1. Continuous modernisation through a dual strategy that combines integration into the global economic system with delinking, thereby giving countries the space for an autocentric approach to developing their productive forces independently.

2. Ensuring self-reliance in strategic and sensitive sectors.

3. Addressing vulnerabilities to build resilience against reprisals, such as sanctions.

4. Engaging with like-minded countries for peer learning, experience sharing, and mutual support.

Conclusion

I have used the analytical framework developed by Samir Amin during his long intellectual career, primarily from the 1970s to the 1990s, to reflect on current global shifts from an African perspective. My argument is that Amin's delinking agenda remains relevant and is a cause that Africa must pursue. While significant progress has been made since the 2000s, Africa is still in the early stages of achieving sovereign development.

In 1983, in the former French colonial territory of Upper Volta, Thomas Sankara took power and began to build a project for his country's sovereignty and liberation. One of the first things Sankara did was to change the name of his country to Burkina Faso, the Land of Upright People – a fitting name for a country seeking dignity and development. Soon after taking power and beginning a project of sovereignty, Thomas Sankara phoned Samir Amin in Dakar, Senegal, for advice. Sankara wanted Amin to travel urgently to Ouagadougou to hold talks with him. Amin came and met Sankara, about whom he later said: 'He was a personality that immediately struck me as very likeable. I felt very comfortable with him and, if he hadn't been a head of state, he would have become a friend without a problem.' Sankara said to Amin: 'You have told us that we must have the courage to delink. Before we could gather that courage, the French have taken the lead and delinked us. What shall we do?'. Amin did not know what to say, and later recounted, 'I had not imagined that the question of delinking would first arise with a country as poor as Burkina Faso.'[9] But that is precisely where the issue was raised, and that is exactly where it remains on the table: in the Alliance of Sahel States (AES), landlocked and poor, yet seeking sovereignty through delinking. Sankara's project was brought to an end not because his country, or his ideas, were impoverished, but through a violent coup. 'His murder overwhelmed me', Amin recalled.

As the balance of global power shifts away from the so-called collective West in favour of the Global South, the social sciences may need to reassess the usefulness of existing theoretical frameworks. World-systems theory will also be affected; its centre-periphery structure may require adjustment. As the Global South strives to emerge as a global force and exit the periphery of the global system, it is, paradoxically, also undoing itself. In the long term, the Global South will cease to exist in its current form. The traditional distribution of countries between the centre and the periphery will undergo significant change.

Asia has risen. In the spirit of Bandung, this greatly benefits the Global South and has created space for Africa to rise too.

Notes

1. Samir Amin, *Delinking: Towards a Polycentric World* (London: Zed Books, 1990), 62.
2. For a fuller assessment of Samir Amin's work, see his last interview with Tricontinental: Institute for Social Research published as *Globalisation and Its Alternative*, Notebook no. 1, 2018, https://thetricontinental.org/globalisation-and-its-alternative/.
3. Samir Amin, *Maldevelopment: Anatomy of a Global Failure*, trans. Michael Wolfers (London; Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Zed Books; Tokyo: United Nations University Press, 1990), 226.
4. Amin, *Maldevelopment*, 226.
5. Samir Amin, 'China 2013', *Monthly Review 64*, no. 10 (March 2013).
6. Samir Amin, *The Implosion of Contemporary Capitalism* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2013), 43.
7. Vijay Prashad and Grieve Chelwa, *How the International Monetary Fund Suffocates Africa* (Johannesburg: Inkani Books, 2026).
8. For this historical summary, see Carlos Lopes, '50 years of Development Planning in Africa: Retrospect and Prospects', speech delivered at the 50th anniversary conference of the African Institute for Economic Development and Planning (IDEP), *South Bulletin 74*, 5 July 2013, https://www.southcentre.int/topics/sb74/.
9. The story was widely known as Samir Amin told it on many occasions. But it is recounted here by Mahmood Mamdani, 'Samir Amin Was a Personage', *CODESRIA Bulletin*, nos. 3 & 4 (2018), 15.

About the author

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