

Africa on the march

Professor Jo Beall



Jo Beall is professor of development studies. Between 2004 and 2007 she was director of DESTIN, the Development Studies Institute within LSE. She is on leave of

absence from LSE and is currently at the University of Cape Town. Professor Beall previously taught at University College London and University of Natal (now KwaZulu-Natal) in South Africa where she holds an honorary professorship. A political sociologist, her teaching is focused on development policy and management, local governance and the social dimensions of development. Research interests include urban development and local governance, particularly in war torn cities and 'fragile' states.

Professor Thandika Mkandawire



Thandika Mkandawire holds LSE's first chair in African Development. A Swedish national of Malawian origin, he was director of the United Nations Research Institute

for Social Development (UNRISD) from 1998 to 2009. He is an economist with many years' experience in the promotion of comparative research on development issues. He studied economics at Ohio State University and the University of Stockholm and has taught at the Universities of Stockholm and Zimbabwe. He holds a Doctorate in Letters from Rhodes University. From 1986 to 1996, he was executive secretary of the Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa (CODESRIA) based in Dakar, Senegal. Prior to taking up his appointment with UNRISD, he was a senior research fellow at the Centre for Development Research in Copenhagen.

In September of this year **Thandika Mkandawire** will become the first holder of LSE's new chair in African Development. It was a proud moment for **Jo Beall**, who has worked tirelessly to help establish the chair. She has recently left LSE on leave of absence to take up a deputy vice chancellorship at the University of Cape Town where one of her responsibilities will be internationalisation. When their paths crossed in March the two academics took the opportunity to discuss the new post – and what it means for LSE.

Jo Beall: One of the most extraordinary moments in the history of LSE was when Nelson Mandela spoke here in 2000. He gave a powerful address, in which he recognised the pivotal connections between LSE and Africa and the potential to build upon these to help forge an African renaissance – one built upon education. You are someone who has long championed the cause of education in Africa – what attracted you to LSE at this point in time?

Thandika Mkandawire: Since 1998 I have been director of the United Nations Research Institute for Social Development and from 1986 to 1996 I was executive secretary of the Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa (CODESRIA). In both of these posts I was acutely

conscious of the need to develop educational opportunities within Africa, in particular research capacity. There is a vibrant but underfunded community of African scholars whose work needs both supporting and disseminating more widely and this is something I hope to help facilitate through this new chair.

It is early days but the chair should create the opportunity for more post-doctoral and lecture-ship posts for African scholars in Africa, visiting scholar fellowships at LSE and a greater range of postgraduate scholarships, research collaboration and summer schools in both. There is a great deal of goodwill in LSE towards Africa and many existing research projects across the School. I hope to harness that goodwill, expertise and potential to the benefit of both African academics and LSE.

JB: Why do you think African research has not been sufficiently disseminated?

TM: To my mind there is a big hole in our knowledge of Africa, one that African scholars are seeking to fill. But conditions have been extraordinarily difficult. Universities have not been sufficiently funded, or indeed valued. In part this reflected the desire to support primary school education – to focus funding on the youngest and poorest – but it also reflected a lack of confidence during the 1990s in the power of the state to bring about change.

The extraordinary impact of the credit crunch, the questioning of market values and new championing of Keynesian economics, makes it easy to forget how dominant neoliberal orthodoxy has been for the last two to three decades and how it permeated the policies of international development agencies and finance institutions.

During this time many African countries have had to implement economic policies designed specifically to weaken national development strategies. This has been to the detriment of African universities and scholars.

JB: Throughout this time you have worked as a development economist. During much of this period it seems to me that development economics has been portrayed as an unfashionable pursuit. Do you share that view?

TM: I certainly do. For two decades, starting from the mid-1970s, the status of development economics in both academia and policy circles was not enviable. I have researched and written extensively on this subject and one only has to look at the titles of some of the articles published in the late 1970s and 1980s to appreciate that all was not well. To name but a few: Dudley Seers' 'The birth, life and death of "development economics"', Albert Hirschmann's 'The rise and decline of development economics' and Deepak Lal's 'The poverty of development economics'.

During this time the discipline of development economics was hounded out of economics departments, development finance institutions and journals. Pioneers were forced into a defensive posture as they fended off accusations of providing the intellectual scaffolding for *dirigisme* and for policy strategies which had failed, as well as being characterised as downplaying the role of the market.

JB: You have certainly written very eloquently on this subject, and have talked of the 'Spartan certainty' of the ascendant neoliberalism leaving no room for the specialised knowledge of the problems of development. Are you more optimistic today?

TM: I am. Long before the recent credit crunch, neoliberalism was on the wane and widely contested. The collapse of important Asian economies in 1997 dealt a serious blow to those who believed uncritically in rapid and unfettered financial liberalisation.

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But we must not underestimate the problems we now face. Tragically, the years of neoliberal triumphalism saw poverty and inequality continue to grow. Poverty alleviation currently occupies a central place on the development agenda. But we must guard against a single-minded focus on poverty reduction at the expense of a serious consideration of income distribution and social equity.

In another significant reversal of previous policies, there is now a much more important role for the state. But this concession comes after years during which there has been a devastating weakening of state capacity. There is therefore a danger that states in parts of the developing world will now be expected to do too much too quickly.

Finally, recent years have witnessed attempts to rethink global governance and to create a more stable international economic environment. In most cases, however, this seems a patchwork affair. Suggestions for remedial action are tacked on to a system that is not being fundamentally analysed or challenged. If real progress is to be made, questions of distributive justice and social policy must become an integral part of the debate on development – not simply an add-on to be considered when existing economic policies prove inadequate.

JB: The new chair has been placed in DESTIN, the Development Studies Institute within LSE. How significant is that for you?

TM: Because the chair is in DESTIN, the holder is in a strong position to work with partners in Africa and around the world to increase the visibility of Africa within teaching and research across the social sciences and within the global political and policy arenas.

JB: I am conscious that since the Rwanda Climate Change Forum organised by LSE in September 2008, there has been growing interest and excitement around the possibilities of LSE and Africa. These have come from the academic community, from LSE governors, alumni and other individuals, and from corporate and Foundation partners. The School's African Initiative, with the appointment of you as chair, can now gain momentum. I wish you well. ■

The conversation between Professor Jo Beall and Professor Thandika Mkandawire was summarised by Claire Sanders.



Claire Sanders

is head of communications at LSE and commissioning editor, *LSE Magazine*.

LSE African Initiative

The chair in African Development will play an integral role in the School's developing LSE African Initiative. This is an exciting collaborative endeavour with partners in Africa and around the world, which will engage with African institutions and scholars collectively to develop connections, encourage accessibility and promote international knowledge exchange.

The African Initiative will encompass summer schools, scholarships, a multi-layered research programme and a series of events at LSE and in Africa. This long-term collaboration will inspire and support generations of students and scholars who will themselves effect global change.

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