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WORKING PAPER

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Economic Thinking at the UN Regional
Commission for Africa (UNECA): A Research
Agenda**

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Abstract

This exploratory paper proposes UNECA as a unique site of international and African economic thinking. While Africa is not generally seen as a source of dynamic international economic thinking, this paper presents a preliminary discussion of how UNECA's staff worked out a pan-African conception of economic decolonization that shaped and intersected with the meanings of this idea developed by thinkers and planners in other regions of the world. While historical literature on UNECA is scarce, understanding its work in the context of decolonization can bring greater clarity on what was achieved and what was not, as well as the roots of the apparent failures of economic decolonization and African economic integration. It can also highlight how certain international ideas were implemented, used, and popularized in Africa, and how they in turn influence international economic thinking in the "global north" and other regions. In all, a deeper knowledge of UNECA's work has the potential inform a more complete global history of international economic thinking, especially the history of attempts for worldwide economic equity, and can inform strategies of development and regional economic cooperation in the present.

Keywords

Africa; International Economic Thinking; Decolonization; UN; Development.

Economic Decolonization and International Economic Thinking at the UN Regional Commission for Africa (UNECA): A Research Agenda

In early January 1959, emperor Haile Selassie of Ethiopia stepped up to the microphone to greet a group of statesmen and diplomats who had gathered in Addis Ababa for the inaugural session of the UN Regional Commission for Africa (UNECA), which had been founded the previous year. The five eventual regional economic commissions, of which UNECA was the fourth, were set up under the auspices of the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) in order to promote economic development and integration within their regions. The five commissions occupy spaces that bridge the regional and the international. They each have their headquarters within their region – Europe in Geneva, Asia in Bangkok, Latin America in Santiago, Western Asia in Beirut, Africa in Addis Ababa – seek to employ local experts, and address economic questions that are specific to their region. In Africa Hall, the gathered guests shared a great optimism for what could be achieved. Selassie pronounced, “Africa is potentially rich. She has enormous deposits of raw materials, and the total extent of her wealth is by no means yet known.”¹ In the same meeting, General Secretary Dag Hammarskjöld shared the hope “that this Commission will be vigorous, that it will not hesitate to deal with challenging problems” and will be “focal point where the economic needs of the African people will be expressed and where action designed to meet those needs will be initiated and stimulated.”² With these words the African and international communities inaugurated the new institution, which was the first pan-African international organization, and set in motion a search for better economic futures for Africa.

In this exploratory paper, I propose UNECA as a unique site of international and African economic thinking that helps bridge international and African histories. I start with an overview of the scarce historical literature on UNECA, followed by background information on its foundation and its status vis-à-vis the other UN regional commissions. I will then examine some of the key ideas that were active in the first decade of UNECA’s existence. Exploring the work of the first generation of leaders and planners in UNECA can reveal what was functionally meant by economic decolonization in an institution charged with bringing it into being. It can help uncover the variety of economic imaginaries that animated leaders and bureaucrats across the continent in this vibrant decade, mirroring the extensive explorations of political visions in this era and further complicate the idea that new states faced a simple choice between capitalism and socialism in this era of Cold War. Approaching this unique site, at once fully African and fully international, can shed light on how certain international ideas were implemented, used, and popularized in Africa as its people pursued economic decolonization, integration, and development in multiple ways. As the potential solutions to these common problems echoed around the world, UNECA became a place in which African and international economic thinking would intersect. Understanding these past dynamics can bring greater clarity on what was achieved and what was not, as well as the roots of the apparent failures of economic decolonization and African economic integration. In this way, the past lessons of UNECA can support contemporary attempts to improve economic cooperation regionally and inform strategies of development in the present.

¹ Haile Sellaise speaking at the inaugural meeting of the first session of UN ECA, Annex V of ECA’s report to ECOSOC, Jan 1959. E/3201 E/CN.14/18, p19.

² Dag Hammarskjöld speaking at the inaugural meeting of the first session of UN ECA, Annex VI of ECA’s report to ECOSOC, Jan 1959. E/3201 E/CN.14/18, p21

Missing Histories of UNECA

Despite the significance of UNECA, historical investigations into its work are few and far between. Regular internal reviews of UNECA's activity along with memoirs provide important details of day-to-day work along with operative perspectives.³ Some older pieces from political scientists and scholars of governance convey how the commission was viewed in real time.⁴ More recently, former executive secretary Abebayo Adedeji has written useful accounts of the commission's work that include his own reflections on his time there.⁵ One of Adedeji's pieces was commissioned by The UN Intellectual History Project, which also interviewed him for their *UN Voices* volume.⁶ Surprisingly, however, the volume within the Intellectual History project specifically focused on international economic questions, John and Richard Toyé's *The UN and Global Political Economy*, does not mention UNECA at all.⁷

Much of this commentary is rife with pessimism. Arthur Ewing, a British economist who worked in a number of positions in UNECA until 1968, including as the special advisor to executive secretary Robert Gardiner, wrote in his memoirs in the early 1990s that UNECA had "attempted" to promote import substitution, industrialization, and increase intra-African trade but, he implied, it had not succeeded.⁸ Ewing also noted that the commission "was unfortunate in never finding an Executive Secretary with outstanding qualities of intellect and leadership" that could even begin to mirror the brilliance of Raúl Prebisch and Gunnar Myrdal, the erstwhile leaders of the commission for Latin America (CEPAL) and Europe (ECE) respectively.⁹ Ewing's judgement here dismisses the work of his close colleague, Robert Gardiner, along with that of his successors who surely merit being considered as international economic thinkers. A similar judgement comes from Ekei Umo Ekpenyong, who observed the work of the commission in the late 1980s, concluded that the Commission had become its own bureaucratic bubble, irrelevant to African leaders: "The attitudes of the staff are similar to what one finds in most international organizations. They go to work and leave their offices at the required time ... They do not feel that they are in an organization committed to specific goals or missions. They do not see themselves as champions of any known cause relating to socio-economic development."¹⁰ Even Adedeji wrote that UNECA did not even begin to try to generate

³ UN ECA, *ECA – Sixty Years in Step with African Development* (2019); UN ECA, *25 Years of Service to African Development and Integration* (1983); Arthur F. Ewing, *Journey Towards One World: Memoirs of a UN Professional* (Geneva: Adec, 1992).

⁴ See for instance Isebill V. Gruhn, *Regionalism Reconsidered: The Economic Commission for Africa* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1979); Ekei Umo Ekpenyong, "The Economic Commission for Africa (ECA) and Development in Africa" (PhD dissertation, LSE, 1989); Colin Legum, "Economic Commission for Africa: Progress Report," *The World Today* 17:7 (1961): 299-307; Bahgat El-Tawil, "Statistical Activities of the U.N. Economic Commission for Africa, Addis Ababa," *The Journal of Modern African Studies*, 3: 3 (1965): 437-439.

⁵ Adebayo Adedeji, "The UN Economic Commission for Africa," in *Global Apartheid to Global Village: Africa and the United Nations*, ed. Adekeye Adebajo (Capetown, South Africa: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 2009), 373–98. Adebayo Adedeji, "The ECA: Forging a Future for Africa," in *Unity and Diversity in Development Ideas: Perspectives from the UN Regional Commissions*, ed. Yves Berthelot (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004), 233–307.

⁶ Thomas G. Weiss, Tatiana Carayannis, Louis Emmerij and Richard Jolly, *UN Voices: The Struggle for Development and Social Justice* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005).

⁷ John Toyé and Richard Toyé, *The UN and Global Political Economy: Trade, Finance, and Development* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004). I note that they do not write about the Asian regional commission either.

⁸ Ewing, *Journey Towards One World*, 59.

⁹ Ewing, *Journey Towards One World*, 64.

¹⁰ Ekei Umo Ekpenyong, "The Economic Commission for Africa (ECA) and Development in Africa" (PhD dissertation, LSE, 1989), 91-92.

alternative economic paradigms until the late 1970s; in other words, Adedeji suggests the Commission did not produce any of its own ideas or approaches he was at the helm.¹¹

These pessimistic judgments are dismissive of African ideas and innovations in ways that are unfortunately familiar. Taken together, they reinforce the impression that UNECA was not a site of meaningful international thinking and that it did not have international economic thinkers among its staff. These memories of failure erase the hopes, ambitions and enthusiasms that were evident in the first years of the committee's work and overlook the specific ways of thinking about economic problems that moved through and from UNECA to the rest of the UN system, and to the world.

Setting up the African Commission

The first four regional commissions – for Europe, Asia, Latin American and Africa – were set up between 1947 and 1958 as part of the first post-war wave of the establishment of the UN. The fifth and final commission is for Western Asia, a region encompassing Middle East and Arabic speaking North-West Africa, and was founded later, in 1973. The impetus for the first two commissions, those responsible for Europe and Asia, stemmed directly from the recognized need to give effective aid to the countries devastated by WWII. These commissions were both founded in 1947. The commission for Latin America followed in the following year, but their mandate was more focused on sharing knowledge regionally rather than an immediate emergency need. The idea to establish an African commission was raised at ECOSOC as early as March 1947, as members were in the midst of planning for the European and Asian Commissions. This proposal was made on the grounds that areas of North Africa and Ethiopia had also suffered destruction during the recent war and thus had a similar need for reconstruction. The draft resolution was not approved, however, and although the question of an economic commission for Africa continued to be raised from time to time, the establishment of UNECA took another decade.

The next major step towards UNECA's foundation occurred in 1951 when the UN Secretary-General appointed a group of experts to investigate how to increase economic development in under-developed regions. Their study recommended that an economic commission for Africa be established to provide an institutional base for regional development.¹² The delay in establishing the ECA even after this report was made public was in large part due to strong opposition against it on the part of France, Great Britain, Portugal, Belgium and Spain, who did not yet foresee the imminent age of independence and did not want to provide the continent with a regional commission that would dilute their own imperial authority. The other main reason – or excuse – given for opposition to the ECA was that the continent was too heterogenous and complex for a unified regional commission as if Africa is inherently 'more complicated' than other places.¹³

UNECA eventually was founded at the twentieth-fifth session of ECOSOC, held 15th April to 2nd May 1958, after some debate over membership. Ahead of the meeting, a group of African governments, namely Ethiopia, Ghana, Liberia, Libya, Morocco, Sudan, Tunisia, and UAR (Egypt), and the United Kingdom each submitted a set of draft resolutions. A key way in which the resolutions differed lay in that the African collective proposed that membership be open to African members of the UN "i.e., Ethiopia, Ghana, Libya, Liberia, Morocco, Sudan, Union of South Africa, United Arab Republic and other African countries as they accede to the

¹¹ Adebayo Adedeji, "The ECA: Forging a Future for Africa", 253.

¹² "Consideration of the establishment of an Economic Commission for Africa: Certain questions related to the establishment and development of regional economic commissions" E/3042, 6 February 1958. Reprinted in *Ekistics*, Vol. 5, No. 32 (May 1958), 262-263.

¹³ Adebayo Adedeji, "The ECA: Forging a Future for Africa", 234

membership [of the UN]”, “countries responsible for the international relations of territories of Africa” – by this they meant the colonial powers, which they do not name – along with two superpowers, the USA and USSR, on the understanding that the representatives of the states in the latter two groups would refrain from voting in ways that overrule the former.¹⁴ The UK statement, by contrast, gives a single list of proposed members which names Belgium, France, Italy, Portugal, Spain, and the UK alongside the independent African nations listed above. The US and USSR were excluded, but the draft included the provision that “any State in the area which may hereafter become a Member of the United Nations” could join at an appropriate later date.¹⁵ The final resolution adopted the UK version of the proposal but with the additional caveat that “States which shall cease to have any territorial responsibilities in Africa shall cease to be members of the Commission,” which meant that colonial powers were removed from the commission over time.¹⁶ With this membership structure, UNECA differs from the other Commissions in that the Cold War superpowers were never present and that other developed countries gradually gave up their membership.¹⁷

The most urgent and pressing issue faced by UNECA’s staff at the moment of foundation was decolonization. The Commission was set up just one year after Kwame Nkrumah had assumed power in independent Ghana at start of a decade in which a wave of nationalist and anti-colonial movements in sub-Saharan Africa began to build in intensity and more than thirty new nation states emerged. The decade 1957-68, which would later be known as Africa’s “age of independence,” was a time of great political possibility that was characterized not only by the fact of independence, but by massive political experimentation rooted in African’s ambitions for multiple ways out of empire, and in the restructuring of international political order.¹⁸ But critiques of colonial rule had always included opposition to imperial economic arrangements, and African leaders, like their counterparts in other regions of the developing world, understood that economic decolonization was just as important as its political equivalent if Africa’s people were to experience real and tangible benefits of political independence.¹⁹ In this context, UNECA’s staff sought to address the question of how Africa’s emergent states could decolonize their economies to match their new politics and develop the continent in ways that would benefit the inhabitants, rather than colonial powers.

¹⁴ UN document number E/3093, 61.

¹⁵ UN document number E/3093, 62.

¹⁶ UN document E/3123 (Resolution 671 (XXV) of ECOSOC), 1.

¹⁷ This occurred both willingly and unwillingly: Spain, France, Belgium and the UK all had their membership downgraded to associate status as their former territories gained independence, while Portugal and South Africa were excluded for their refusal to give up their colonial possessions and apartheid policies. By comparison, the USA, France, the UK and the Netherlands were members of the Asian commission, along with the USSR (later Russia and other successor states with Asian territory) and Australia; the UK, USA, the Netherlands, and France are still members of CEPAL. The USA was a member of ECE from the beginning, and all of the successor states to the USSR joined, even those without European territory.

¹⁸ Among others see Frederick Cooper, *Decolonization and African Society: The Labor Question in French and British Africa* (Cambridge University Press, 1996); Chris Vaughan, “The Politics of Regionalism and Federation in East Africa, 1958-64,” *The Historical Journal* 62, no. 2 (2019): 519–40.

¹⁹ Adom Getachew, *Worldmaking after Empire: The Rise and Fall of Self-Determination* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2019).



Image: The UNECA headquarters in Addis Ababa.

Making Economic Decolonization at UNECA

As part of the UN system, UNECA was integrated into the network of international institutions that helped define the twentieth century. It was a site through which both people and ideas moved. Arthur Ewing, for instance, who later wrote so pessimistically about UNECA in his memoirs, arrived in Addis in 1961 from Geneva, where he had been responsible for industry and housing at UN ECE, and in 1968 left for Cambodia, where he worked as the representative of the UN Development Program. Ewing names Myrdal and Prebisch, who were at that time the leaders of the European and Latin American regional commissions, as important theoretical influences for the first generation of UNECA staff – although it is less clear whether these thinkers were significant because their ideas were attractive, or whether their influence was due to their positions in parallel commissions.²⁰ Another important vector of connection was Ester Boserup, a Danish economist who was one of the first employees at the UN ECE, who worked with UNECA to help set up the African Institute for Economic Development and Planning in Dakar in 1965. While there, Boserup carried out research that influenced her seminal work *Woman's Role in Economic Development*, which helped spur the inclusion of women in economic planning worldwide. A similar movement of ideas northwards from UNECA seems to have occurred in the figure of Margaret Snyder, an American sociologist who in 1969 co-founded the African Training and Research Centre for Women at UNECA and was later called to New York to set up the voluntary fund that became UNIFEM, later known as UN Women. In a co-authored book, Snyder and her colleague Mary Tadesse argue that African women at the UNECA-linked centre “created the concept of women’s centrality to development that would later inspire a transnational movement.”²¹ While it is likely that this approach had many origins, exploring the influence of African ideas and experience through

²⁰ Ewing, *Journey Towards One World*, 59.

²¹ Margaret C Snyder and Mary Tadesse, *African Women and Development: A History* (London and New Jersey: Zed Books, 1995), 1–4. Quote p1.

the career of Snyder and others would provide further insight into the circulation of ideas with African and international origins, and the ways in which they came to perform as “African” or “international” in particular institutional contexts.

UNECA’s African staff were part of the generation of worldmakers, that sought a reshaping of international hierarchies, not a narrow independence, and were supported by equally ambitious fellow travellers who shared their vision, for a time at least.²² These economic thinkers were, like the political leaders of this age, ambitious for large-scale political, economic, and social transformation of the continent. They called for Africa to industrialize in order to reduce reliance on imports and generate internal growth. They called for an increased and diversified food production that would further increase national and regional self-reliance while nourishing their population, thought of in terms of human resources. Their work was firmly anti-colonial, driven by ideas of national and economic independence at a time when the majority of potential members were still colonies, and thus, not members at all.

The early years of UNECA saw an emphasis on large scale social, economic, and structural transformation. Plans for industrialization and growth written by Surendra Patel, who worked in the section for Industry, Transport and Natural resources, used optimistic predictions for industrial growth rate per capita of almost 9% to predict that Africa’s GDP per capita could catch up with the western world by 2000. He presented this figure as reasonable on the grounds that this level of growth had recently been achieved by a host of countries, including Germany, USSR, and Japan. (Of course, an observer may note that these three countries were those whose post-war reconstruction efforts had started from the lowest base.) A second justification for his optimistic projection was due to the fact that, as Patel painstaking shows in his plan, the industrial growth rate has historically always increased in successive waves of industrialization and, especially, as industrial development moved from the “the original centers” of Western Europe, to the periphery, which would include independent Africa.²³

The same incredible optimism could be seen even within the relatively smaller confines of technical committees or discrete projects. The members of the housing committee, for example, in their first meeting in November 1964, were sure that the “absolute inadequacy” of current housing was actually a developmental advantage, since it gave Africans the freedom to innovate and rationally plan their housing, unlike other nations that “are prisoners of their own structures [...] tied to heritage of stone.” At the same meeting, the committee members studied reports suggesting that Africa would be self-sufficient in housing materials and construction within a decade.²⁴ Gardiner himself shared the idea that if dams were to be rationally constructed in Congo (Leopoldville), these structures alone would produce electric power equal to that used in western Europe.²⁵ In each of these arenas, the sense is that economic decolonization requires a proto-typical high modernist rapid growth and, moreover, that such a thing is inherently possible. While James Scott has noted that such “schemes to improve the human condition” have repeatedly failed, his analysis is less able to explain why such utopian schemes were so attractive to so many for so long.²⁶ In these examples, we see

²² Getachew, *Worldmaking after Empire*.

²³ Surendra J. Patel, “Economic Transition in Africa,” *The Journal of Modern African Studies* 2:3 (1964): 329-49. His predictions relied equally on an optimistic estimation of a 2% yearly increase in population, which proved rather wrong. He used 2% in his calculations even though the rate was already at 2.5% at the time he was writing in 1964. The real rate rose steadily to 2.86% in 1981 where it hovered until 1987 before falling in the nineties. It returned to the 1964 level of 2.5% in 1997 where it is has hovered since. The population in 2000 was almost 300m higher than Patel had predicted, scuppering once again his hopes for GDP per capita.

²⁴ UN ARMS S-1937-0001-0005-00001, 26.

²⁵ From Gardiner’s speech to sixth session, UN AMRS S-1937-0001-0006-00003, 14.

²⁶ James Scott, *Seeing Like a State: Why Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1998).

that modernist ambitions persisted and became Africanized inside UNECA. Further research offers a chance to tease out the tensions between “international” and “African” approaches to this important idea, and to understand its continued power and impact.

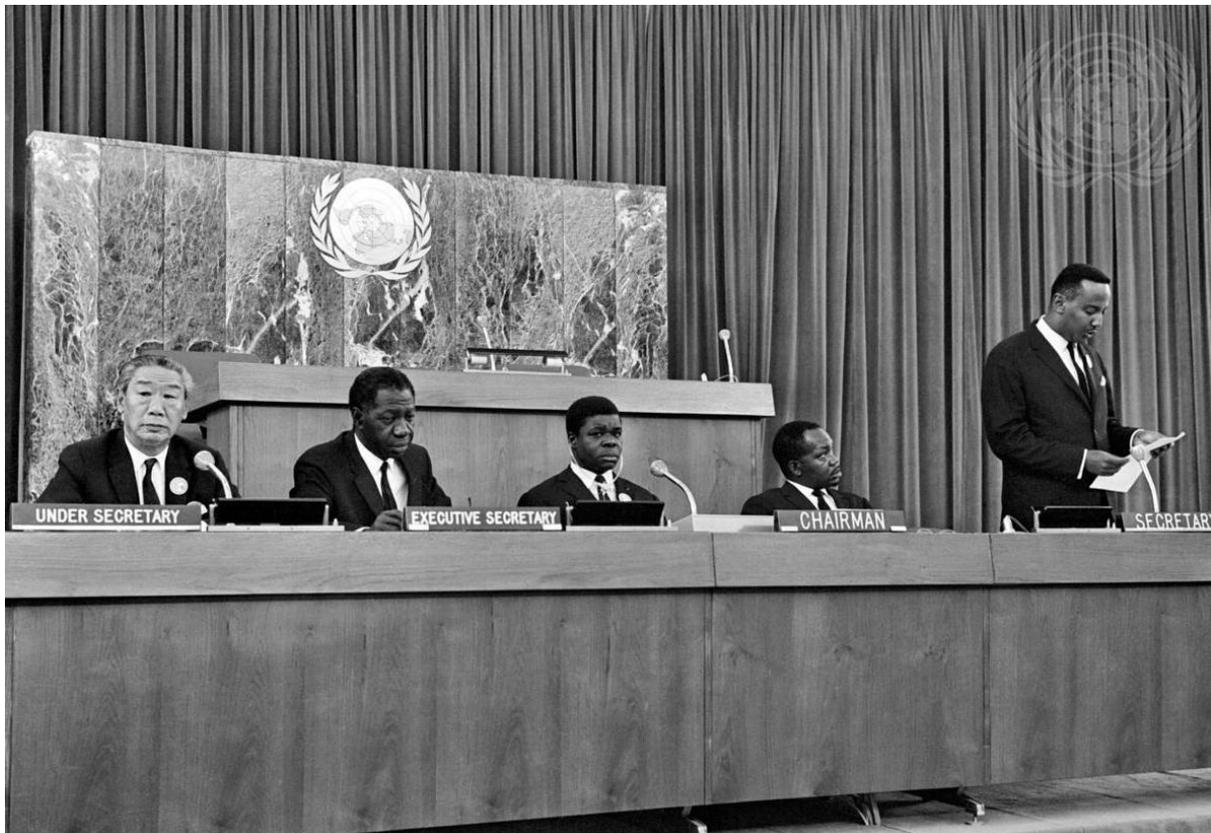


Image: Speakers at the 6th session, 19th February 1964. Credit: UN Photo/JH.

Conclusion

As Gardiner put it in his speech to the sixth session in 1964: “the dangers which threaten the newly-won Independence of most member states are unemployment, continuing poverty and non-fulfilment of the hopes of the masses of our people.” The threat, in other words, was economic. “Rightly or wrongly,” he continued, populations “expected Independence to release forces for the creation of a new era. It is therefore incumbent on us to act with despatch (sic).”²⁷ As Gardiner and his staff jumped into action, they began to formulate an African approach to development that was an expression of economic decolonization. Illuminating the variety of economic imaginaries that leaders and bureaucrats across the continent pursued as UNECA and its staff put economic decolonization into practice can reveal an *African* economic thinking within the spectrum of global economic ideas in the late twentieth century. Examining the diversity of thinking would combat a pessimistic memory of the institution that persists in memoir and scholarly accounts alike. It would help incorporate the region into international histories that tend to include African perspectives only rarely, and only with regard to certain topics. While Africa is not generally seen as a source of dynamic

²⁷ UN ARMS S-1937-0001-0006-00003, 30.

international economic thinking, UNECA worked out a pan-African conception of economic decolonization that shaped and intersected with the meanings of this idea developed by thinkers and planners in other regions of the world, most notably Asia and the Pacific. Indeed, towards the end of the 1960s several of its architects, like Patel and Ewing above, moved with their ideas to other UN institutions elsewhere in the developing and decolonizing world. Later, inequality and global justice, two of the issues at the centre of economic decolonization, became key concerns of UNCTAD and the 1974 New International Economic Order. The prehistory of that moment ran through the joint African and international approaches to development, growth, and integration formulated in the preceding years. A deeper understanding of UNECA's work can reach beyond the history of African decolonization and state-building to inform a more complete global history of international economic thinking, especially the history of attempts for worldwide economic equity, and the alternative vision of globalization those ambitions represent.

