



**United Nations
Office of the Special Adviser
on Africa**

CONCEPT NOTE

Academic Conference on Africa 2024

“Power, Justice, and the People:

Human Rights and the Rule of Law for Africa’s Transformation”

3-5 December 2024, United Nations Headquarters, New York City

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

In 2024, we stand on the threshold of a significant milestone — 140 years since the Berlin Conference imposed a new order on Africa, redrawing its borders without the participation of its people and setting the stage for an enduring legacy of exclusion. The conference initiated a period of colonial division, exploitation, and systematic exclusion that have shaped Africa's political and socio-economic realities and have left lasting scars. Even after the formal end of colonialism, the legacy of these decisions persists, as many of the global structures of power, inequality, and economic exploitation remain unchanged.

Unfortunately, the marginalization of African voices in decision-making processes remains stark. The imbalance of power in shaping Africa’s destiny is as relevant today as it was 140 years ago, and nowhere is this imbalance more evident than in the realm of global scholarship.

Almost a century and a half after Berlin, African scholars remain on the periphery of global academic research and policymaking concerning their own continent. Despite being at the heart of many of the world’s development challenges, African academics are often sidelined in shaping the research that informs policies affecting Africa. A recent analysis of articles in top development journals from 1990 to 2019 found that fewer than 16 per cent were authored by researchers from the Global South, while 73 per cent were written by Northern researchers.¹ The disparity is even more stark with respect to African scholars, who have been chronically underrepresented in development-related fields of study.

Even in research specifically focused on Africa, the majority of authorship continues to come from outside the continent. One study examining leading economics journals from 2005 to 2015 found that only 25 per cent of the Africa-focused articles had at least one African-based author. This trend is also evident in the field of medical research, where African contributions are severely underrepresented. African health and medical journals are poorly represented in international indexing services and the continent’s research sector produces less than 1 per cent of global health research annually, raising concerns regarding the limited production, distribution, and

¹ Verónica Amarante, Ronelle Burger, Grieve Chelwa, John Cockburn, Ana Kassouf, Andrew McKay & Julieta Zurbrigg (2022) Underrepresentation of developing country researchers in development research, *Applied Economics Letters*, 29:17, 1659-1664 (Note: The remaining 11% were collaborations by Southern and Northern researchers)

availability of African health information.² This gap was made especially clear in Africa-focused COVID-19 literature, where a large majority (66.1 per cent) of authors were not from Africa.³ The same pattern exists in academic publications focused on politics, society and international relations as they relate to the African continent,⁴ as well as in Africa-focused public health research.⁵

This systemic underrepresentation of African scholars has profound consequences that extend beyond academia. It has direct and severe implications for how development challenges are understood, framed and addressed. Growing evidence indicates that intimate knowledge of and ongoing presence in a country are likely to provide vital insights into the framing of research questions, the formulation/application of methodologies and the interpretation of research results.⁶ The marginalization of African perspectives in global discourse means that the policies designed to address Africa's challenges are often shaped by distant viewpoints, reinforcing rather than dismantling outdated frameworks.

The underrepresentation of African academics in the scholarship that informs development policy contributes to an ongoing imbalance, where non-African, predominantly Western, researchers often have a stronger presence in areas where African scholars bring valuable firsthand knowledge. The underrepresentation of African perspectives in key academic and policy discussions reduces the diversity of global dialogue and limits the effectiveness of policies designed to address Africa's development challenges.

Against this backdrop, the UN Office of the Special Adviser on Africa is convening the 2024 Academic Conference on Africa under the theme *Power, Justice, and the People: Human Rights and the Rule of Law for Africa's Transformation*. The conference aims to bring African scholars and policymakers to the forefront of discussions, fostering collaboration and generating African-led solutions to critical issues surrounding the rule of law and human rights on the continent.

OBJECTIVES

In an effort to strengthen African representation in global development scholarship and ensure that African voices are heard in the debates that help to shape the continent's future, the UN Office of the Special Adviser on Africa launched an annual academic conference in 2023, with the

²Naidoo AV, Hodkinson P, Lai King L, Wallis LA. *African authorship on African papers during the COVID-19 pandemic*. BMJ Glob Health. 2021 Mar 6; *Africa generates less than 1% of the world's research; data analytics can change that -- An in-depth analysis of the continent's research reveals promising developments – and strategies for continued improvement* By Charon Duermeijer, PhD, Mohamed Amir, and Lucia Schoombee March 22, 2018 (<https://www.elsevier.com/connect/africa-generates-less-than-1-of-the-worlds-research-data-analytics-can-change-that>)

³Naidoo AV, Hodkinson P, Lai King L, Wallis LA. *African authorship on African papers during the COVID-19 pandemic*. BMJ Glob Health. 2021 Mar 6

⁴ Briggs, R. C. & Weathers, S. (2016). *Gender and location in African politics scholarship: The other white man's burden*. African Affairs, 115(460), 466–489.

⁵ Ambimbola, S. (2019). *The foreign gaze: Authorship in academic global health*. BMJ Global Health, 4(5), e002068. And Mbaye, R., Gebeyehu, R. & Hossmann, S. (2019). *Who is telling the story? A systematic review of authorship for infectious disease research conducted in Africa, 1980–2016*. BMJ Global Health, 4(5).

⁶ Nunn, N. 2019. "Innis Lecture: Rethinking Economic Development." Canadian Journal of Economics 52 (4): 1349–1373.

aim of providing a platform for African scholarship that addresses the wide-ranging scope of Africa's development, with particular emphasis on the quadruple nexus of development, peace and security, humanitarian work and human rights.

The academic conference brings together African scholars, policymakers, and practitioners from different sectors and disciplines to engage in high-level interactive dialogue on the most pressing issues facing African communities.

The 2024 iteration of the conference will address critical themes, particularly:

Rights and Realities: Integrating Diverse Dimensions of Human Rights in Africa

This session will explore a holistic approach to human rights in Africa by examining the interplay and balance between political, socioeconomic, and cultural rights. Discussions will delve into how these diverse dimensions interact and influence each other, shaping the lived experiences of individuals and communities across the continent. Participants will analyze how political freedoms, economic opportunities, and cultural practices collectively impact African societies and assess the challenges and opportunities in integrating these rights into cohesive human rights frameworks. By highlighting the complex relationships between these rights, the session aims to foster a deeper understanding of how to address human rights issues comprehensively and effectively across diverse African contexts.

Historical Contexts and Contemporary Challenges: The Evolution of Rule of Law in Africa

This session will delve into the evolution of the rule of law in Africa, exploring how historical contexts, cultural dynamics, and socio-political developments have shaped the continent's legal systems. Participants will engage in a robust discussion on contemporary challenges such as judicial independence, legal reforms, and access to justice, highlighting the ways in which these issues are deeply intertwined with historical and cultural contexts. Through a nuanced examination of these issues, the session seeks to uncover innovative solutions and strategies for advancing the rule of law in Africa's diverse and evolving context.

From Theory to Action: Leveraging African Scholarship in Policy Development

This session will explore how African academics and policymakers can better collaborate to integrate the continent's rich academic knowledge into impactful policymaking. Through candid dialogue, this session will identify barriers to effective collaboration and discuss innovative strategies for building meaningful connections that can shape national, regional and global policy. To do so, panelists will discuss: (1) How effective collaboration between African academics and policymakers will ensure the continent's rich academic knowledge is incorporated into impactful policymaking; and (2) What national platforms are in place or can be created to generate ideas and foster connections that can enhance the role of African academics in shaping the continent's future?

FORMAT

The conference will be held in-person at the United Nations Headquarters in New York and will be livestreamed for engagement with audience members in Africa and around the world. The main thematic sessions will be held in the mornings to allow full participation from audiences in Africa.

The *morning thematic sessions* (10 a.m. – 1 p.m.) will generally feature a keynote speaker and a panel discussion featuring distinguished academics and policymakers. This will be followed by interactive discussions with featured speakers and the audience having an opportunity to exchange views on the issues under discussion.

In order to capitalize on the presence of distinguished and well-regarded African scholars in New York, the agenda will also include *additional activities* (typically between 3 p.m. – 6 p.m.) crafted with the intention of creating a bridge and facilitating meaningful engagement between African scholars and key decision-making bodies.

DATE AND DURATION

Tuesday, 3 December 2024 to Thursday, 5 December 2024, from 10 a.m. to 1 p.m. New York local time.