

First We End the War, Then We Restart the Factories: The Fifty-First Newsletter (2025)



Samson 'Xenson' Ssenkaaba (Uganda), Matoke Farmer, 2016.

Dear friends,

Greetings from the desk of **Tricontinental: Institute for Social Research**.

In mid-November 2025, at a United Nations Industrial Development Organisation (UNIDO) conference in Saudi Arabia, Basher Abdullah, an adviser to Sudan's Ministry of Industry and Trade, **said**, 'First, we need to end the war. Then, we have to restart the factories'. His comment was about Sudan's appalling **civil war**, but it could have been about many countries in the Global South that are in the midst of either a shooting war or a trade war. For these poorer nations, development has been set aside in favour of more immediate threats. Yet beyond the horizon of guns and extortion lies the need to imagine possible futures.

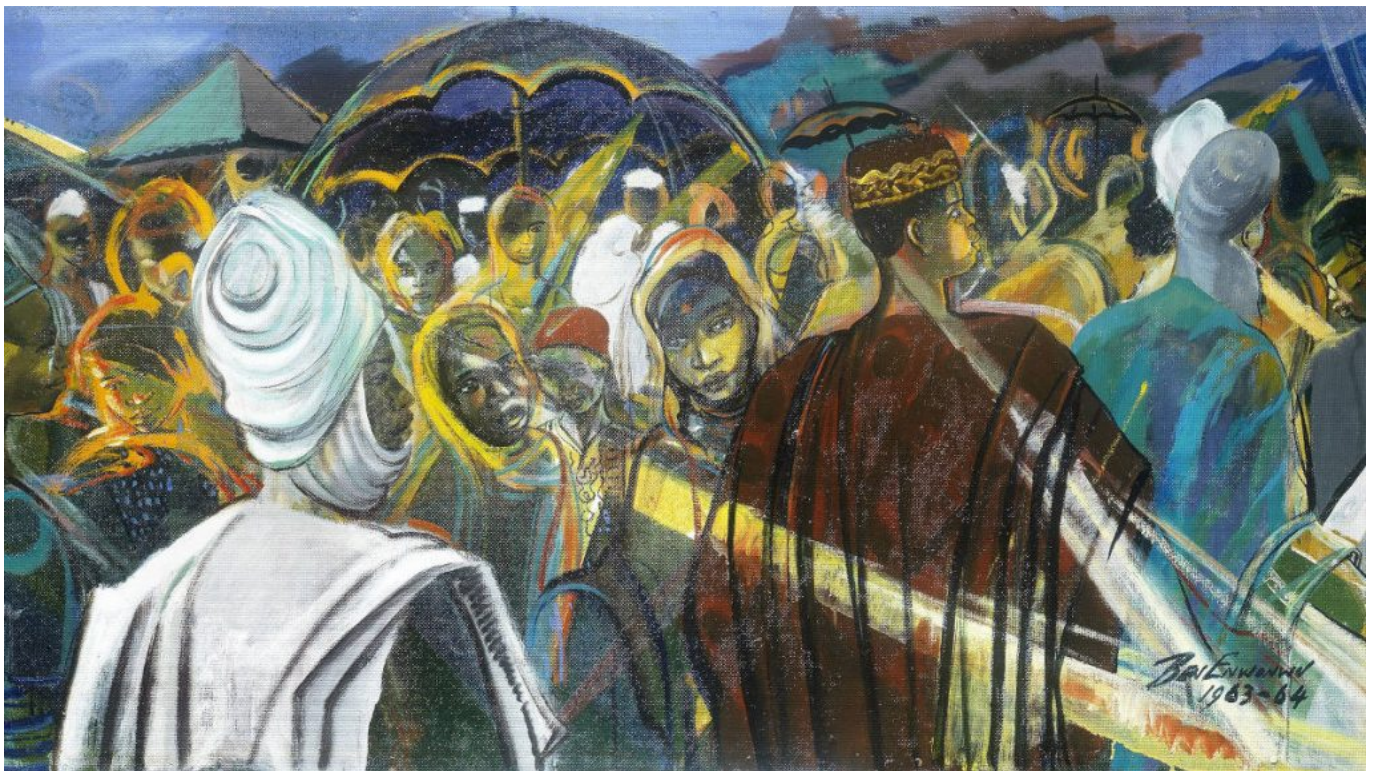
The UNIDO conference acknowledged that industrialisation is 'essential for achieving the [UN's] Sustainable Development Goals' and that to do so 'a new industrial deal' is needed. A UNIDO **policy brief** from April 2025 identifies many obstacles to industrialisation in the Global South, including deficits in infrastructure, limited technological and scientific capacity, a lack of highly trained workers, and weak logistical networks, including digital infrastructure. The brief also notes 'megatrends' that the Global South needs to follow and adapt to, such as digitalisation and the rise of artificial intelligence, the reconfiguration of global value chains, the energy transition, and demographic changes. These trends, the brief argues, represent risks as well as opportunities. But where will the poorer nations get the investment for infrastructure, new skills, and cleaner industries? How will they be able to leapfrog older, more polluting industrial models and integrate into modern production chains?



Gerard Sekoto (South Africa), *Song of the Pick*, 1946-1947.

Conferences like the one in Saudi Arabia rarely reflect on the constraints faced by the poorer nations and the structural deindustrialisation they have experienced. Deindustrialisation in the Global South is neither accidental nor the product of ‘internal inefficiencies’, as International Monetary Fund (IMF) economists **argue**. It is a direct result of the Third World debt crisis that erupted in the early 1980s and the structural adjustment programmes (SAPs) enforced by the IMF and the World Bank over the 1980s and 1990s. In the 1980s, for instance, IMF policies forced tariff reductions that exposed Ghana’s textile and garment factories to cheap imports, causing Accra’s once-thriving industrial belt to **collapse**. In Zambia in the 1990s, SAPs led to the privatisation of industries supplying copper mines, **dismantling** local fabrication foundries, machine shops, and chemical plants that formed the industrial base in the Copperbelt. In Brazil’s ABC industrial **belt** south of São Paulo and in the manufacturing **corridors** of Greater Buenos Aires, debt-era austerity, currency devaluations, and rapid trade liberalisation in the 1980s and 1990s pushed automobile, metalworking, and textile plants to shed jobs, close, or relocate as markets were opened to cheaper imports. Across the Global South, peripheral economies that had begun to industrialise were pushed back into a familiar pattern of exporting raw materials and importing manufactures – the very structure of the neocolonial economy.

There is also scant attention paid to the violence – of wars and sanctions – that destabilise sovereign states and derail the industrial aspirations of the poorer nations. Conflict destroys industrial infrastructure and fragments and demoralises the working class, both of which are essential to development. Only a few countries in the Global South have been able to defend against these assaults on their sovereignty and nurture their industrial capacity. The most remarkable example is Cuba, which has been able to develop its industrial capacity in biotechnology, medical equipment, and pharmaceuticals despite a brutal six-decade blockade – a case of socialist industrialisation under siege. Vietnam is another example: despite being devastated by imperialist wars, it was nonetheless able to recover thanks to state-directed industrial policy that built manufacturing capacity in textiles, electronics, and shipbuilding. The most successful example, of course, is China, which used state planning, decentralised governance, and public ownership of the commanding heights of the economy – including finance and technology – to build an industrial powerhouse and lift 800 million people out of extreme poverty over the past four decades. Taken together, these experiences contradict every neoliberal developmentalist prescription given to the poorer nations of the Global South.



Ben Enwonwu (Nigeria), *Nigerian Symphony*, 1963-1964.

Industrial policy is not merely a technical exercise but a political one. It is about building the conditions for industrial development by asserting sovereignty and the right to development and by building working-class power through class struggle.

A ‘new industrial deal’ cannot be implemented if a country is systematically derailed by IMF-driven austerity, multinational corporations that dominate raw-material extraction and exports, and the violence of wars and sanctions. Together, these forces destroy productive infrastructure, shrink state capacity, and produce a precarious and politically weakened peasantry and working class, undermining democratic processes and making planning impossible. Unless there is sovereignty, there can be no new industrial deal.

Over the past few years, Tricontinental: Institute for Social Research has been elaborating a **New Development Theory for the Global South**. Within this framework, we have identified the following preconditions for industrialisation:

1. **Workers as central planners.** Planning must be democratised, as in the Indian state of Kerala, which in 1996 launched the People's Plan Campaign for Decentralised Planning. Industrialisation cannot be accomplished unless planning includes inputs from workers' and peasants' organisations and other popular bodies rooted in local communities.
2. **Restoring sovereignty.** Wars must end, sanctions must be lifted, and governments must be given the space to build state capacity for long-term planning, including investment in infrastructure, transport, and logistics that can link producers and consumers across regions and lower the costs of development.
3. **Overcoming dependency.** To overcome dependency, state policy must be able to protect domestic industries using tariffs and subsidies, regulate finance through capital controls, and ensure technology and knowledge transfer. This will allow countries to move from raw-material-exporting economies to ones grounded in diversified domestic manufacturing.
4. **Expanding public ownership.** Strategic sectors of the economy – such as land, finance, energy, minerals, transport, and capital goods – must be publicly controlled to ensure that they operate for national development rather than private profit. Public sector firms and institutions, as Meng Jie and Zhang Zibin **showed** with China's high-technology sector, can compete and create a public market that increases efficiencies.
5. **Building South-South cooperation.** Countries in Africa, Asia, and Latin America must increase cooperation – reviving the Bandung Spirit – in order to break the role of Western monopoly firms and structures in the areas of finance and technology.



Chéri Benga (DRC), *Commerçant à la criée* (Auctioneer), 2010.

A decade ago, at the 2015 Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) in Johannesburg, South Africa, the Chinese government and fifty African governments discussed the problem of economic development and industrialisation. Since 1945, the question of African industrialisation has been on the table but has not advanced due to the neocolonial structure that has prevented any serious structural transformation. The most industrialised countries on the African continent are South Africa, Morocco, and Egypt, but the entire continent **accounts** for less than 2% of world manufacturing value added and only about 1% of global trade in manufactures. That is why it was so significant for FOCAC to put industrial policy at the heart of its agenda; its 2015 **Johannesburg Declaration** affirmed that ‘industrialisation is an imperative to ensure Africa’s independent and sustainable development’. China’s industrial capacity would be put at the service of Africa’s need for industrialisation through the creation of joint ventures, industrial parks, a cooperation fund, and mechanisms for technology and science transfer. Africa-China trade has **increased** from \$10 billion in 2000 to \$282 billion in 2023. In 2024, the Chinese government **upgraded** its relationship with African states to ‘strategic partnerships’, enabling greater cooperation. We now have a test case for whether South-South cooperation can engender sovereign industrialisation that breaks with the old patterns of plunder and dependency. Ultimately, African governments, workers, and movements will have to wield these ties as instruments of development rather than allow them to become yet another regime of unequal exchange.



Eliane Aïssou (Benin), Hope VII, 2020.

At stake in all these debates about industrialisation is a simple question: will the resources of the Global South be used to enrich a few or to sustain life for the many? Reading about FOCAC reminded me of Nigerian poet Niyi Osundare (born 1947), whose book *The Eye of the Earth* (1986) includes powerful poems about humanity's relationship with nature. One poem in that collection – 'Ours to Plough Not to Plunder' – became so iconic that it was taught to generations of Nigerian schoolchildren, despite repression under the military government that took power in 1983. Here are the last two stanzas:

Our earth is an unopened grainhouse,
a bustling barn in some far, uncharted jungle
a distant gem in a rough unhappy dust.

This earth is
ours to work not to waste
ours to man not to maim.
This earth is ours to plough, not to plunder.

Warmly,

Vijay