

Regionalisation in Africa: reflections on an unfinished conversation with Ian Taylor

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Biography

Sarah Whiteford is a public policy practitioner, with research interests in policy discourse and design. Sarah is one of Ian Taylor's former PhD students (2005–2011), and her doctoral thesis examined cross-border micro-regionalism in Ghana and Côte d'Ivoire.

Abstract

This contribution discusses Ian Taylor's article on 'Globalization and regionalization in Africa: reactions to attempts at neo-liberal regionalism' and what it reflects about Taylor's contributions to the study of African politics and international relations for three reasons in particular, namely the re-conceptualisation of regionalism in the twenty-first century, the power and politics of regionalisation and space and, finally, the potential of the applied policy implications of Taylor's research.

Keywords: [Regionalisation](#); [Africa](#); [Neo-patrimonialism](#); [Maputo Development Corridor](#); [New Regionalisms Approach](#)

Introduction

Ian Taylor's scholarship on African politics and international relations was wide-ranging, rigorous and prolific, as is evident within this journal dedicated to the impact and legacy of his research. I met Ian Taylor in 2005 and was one of his many doctoral students in the School of International Relations at the University of St Andrews. He was an incredibly supportive and engaging supervisor, who encouraged me towards a study on regionalisation in Africa, a subject that was entirely new to me at the outset of my doctoral studies.

Of Ian Taylor's many research articles, there is one I recall having a significant impact on my initial understanding and approach to the study of African regionalisation. 'Globalization and regionalization in Africa: reactions to attempts at neo-liberal regionalism' was published in the *Review of International Political Economy* in 2003. In this, Taylor critically analyses the regionalisation project of the Maputo Development Corridor (MDC). The MDC is a trade corridor between South Africa and Mozambique, launched in 1996 as a flagship Spatial Development Initiative (SDI) later tied to the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD). Touted as a means of stimulating growth via infrastructure and capital investment,

Taylor (2003, p. 319) argues that the MDC was an effort by state elites and private enterprises to ‘reconstruct a cross-border relationship and micro-region that had effectively existed since at least [...] the late 1800s.’ As an analysis of a specific regionalisation project in Africa, this article is an interesting precursor to later studies that Taylor would undertake, often in collaboration with other regionalist scholars. In those later works, Taylor delves further into the MDC and other case studies, continuing to explore the success and failure of regionalist efforts in sub-Saharan Africa, from a strong basis in both theory and practice.

I will discuss this article and what it reflects about Taylor’s contributions to the study of African politics and international relations for three reasons in particular: namely the re-conceptualisation of regionalism in the twenty-first century, the power and politics of regionalisation and space and, finally, the potential of the applied policy implications of Taylor’s research.

Regions as constructed and contested

At the time of writing his article, Taylor situated his exploration of the MDC within a growing body of research under the auspices of the New Regionalisms Approach (NRA). Contrasted with a previous paradigm of regionalism that focused on institutionalised, state-centric efforts at cooperation, the NRA emerged not with a unitary definition of regionalism, but rather an appreciation of the multidimensional quality of regionalisation processes taking place towards the end of the twentieth century. The “new” regionalism is multi-actor and multi-level (Hettne, 2000, pp. xx–xxi); it is multi-disciplinary (Schulz et al., 2001, p. 4), and regionalist efforts can attempt to reify or to subvert existing dynamics within a geographic space. Regionalisation is understood as both formal and informal, with macro- and micro-regions constructed in the space between state- and industry-led initiatives, often contested by cross-border flows of people, resources and cultural engagement on the ground.

Taylor establishes his study of the MDC within its historical origins, precisely in order to contextualise the interplay between the informal and formal regionalist efforts occurring at the turn of the twenty-first century. He argues that the contested space of the MDC has its roots in the colonialist incursions into the region several centuries prior, which itself redefined the micro-region. The colonialist transport corridor tied Johannesburg to the sea port at Maputo and influenced the earlier re-construction of the flow of migrant labour and exports, supporting the rise of several industries like mining and agriculture. While Taylor argues that the micro-regional dynamics were dislocated by the rise of the *Frenta de Libertação de Moçambique* (Frelimo) in the 1970s, by the 1990s a convergence of political and international economic factors led to the alignment between the regimes of Mozambique and South Africa, who formalised and institutionalised their joint commitment to the MDC.

While Taylor asserts that the micro-region reflects a high degree of ‘regionness’ – that is to say, significant interconnectedness both social and economic – this plays out both formally

and informally. The illegal and illicit activities that had their origins prior to the formalisation of the MDC project continued to thrive and evolve within the micro-region, with the potential to both contest and reinforce this regionness. The hubs and spokes of illegal activities may adjust themselves to take advantage of the new structures imposed from above, and Taylor suggests that these informal flows may reflect the *real* micro-region.

Regionalisation and power structures

While scholars often explore the phenomenon and dynamics of regionalism (the “what”), Taylor’s approach to this research very much emphasises a focus on uncovering the “why”. His exploration of the power structures and impact of globalisation on elite support/co-optation of regionalist projects and attendant discourses is strongly centred in his paper. Taylor is ultimately arguing that, despite official policy discourses on the aim of the MDC as addressing poverty in the region, the neo-liberal thrust of the MDC structures ultimately creates elite and industrial ‘winners’ at the expense of the masses. In his fieldwork to support this study, Taylor interviewed local women traders who were being displaced by the investments to support the MDC infrastructure, like the N4 toll route. Despite promises of free housing and support made to them by local politicians, these traders were being precluded from a livelihood that they had relied upon for decades. He also explored the rise and persistence of criminal networks involved in weapons and drug trafficking, as well as xenophobic reactions to migrant labour and encampments. Taylor demonstrates that the structures of globalisation lead to a contradiction in regionalist projects like the MDC, namely that integration into the global economy further marginalises the people it ostensibly intends to integrate, and that the formalisation of an economic region may in fact undermine the deep penetration of regionness through the destabilisation of community.

In this regard, Taylor is aligned with colleagues from the school of the NRA. In ‘Global politics of regionalism’, Mary Farrell (2005, p. 2) suggests that two premises underpin a flexible understanding of regionalism: first, that it is ‘a response to globalisation’; and second that it ‘emerges from the internal dynamics of the region, and the motivations and strategies of regional actors’. We see these premises explicitly reflected in Taylor’s study of the MDC in this particular article from 2003, but also later expanded in a collaborative piece with Fredrik Söderbaum that layered in an analysis of neo-patrimonialism. In their chapter on ‘Competing region-building in the Maputo Development Corridor’, Söderbaum and Taylor (2008) delve further into this exploration of elite support for regionalist projects and find that there is a convergence of neo-liberal capitalist aims that serve to reinforce patronage politics to the advantage of state elites. Taylor (2004) argues that neo-patrimonialism is a feature of the state in Africa, with political power wielded less to ensure good administration of policy and programmes to the benefit of the populace, and more as a means of strengthening the position of state elites or weakening the position of their opponents. Ultimately, in advancing the MDC, elites had greater opportunities to reinforce their own patronage networks, while attempting to redraw intra- or inter-state territorial spaces ‘along lines favoured by private

enterprise' (Taylor, 2003, p. 317). These two forces, neo-liberalism and neo-patrimonialism, explain the inherent contradiction between the expressed aims of the MDC project and its outcomes, as well as the ways in which regionalist efforts are contested.

Intersection of politics and policy

In this article and his later study, Taylor emphasises the role of the state and state actors in the regionalisation project of the MDC, towards 'certain directions and in the service of a particular agenda' (Söderbaum and Taylor, 2008, p. 35). These regionalising policies and attendant structures are neither neutral nor merely reactive to the imposition of globalising forces. Regionalisation affords another avenue to advance the political aims of state actors, and involves a dynamism among state institutions and private enterprises, as well as competing regionalist strategies of local actors, individuals, communities and criminal forces. Other scholars have further explored Taylor's conclusions, such as J.J. Hentz's (2005) study of the internal competing forces within the domestic politics of South Africa to illuminate the contested approaches to regionalisation in southern Africa more broadly.

In my own research on African regionalisation, Ian's guidance and advice had an incredible impact even beyond my doctoral dissertation. Following my PhD, I began a career in public service and also pursued further academic study in public administration. Ian kindly reviewed an unpublished research study I had undertaken, examining the penetration of regionalist policies within state institutions in Ghana. Through a content analysis of key policy and legislative documents of two state institutions, I found that both institutions' discourses were reflective of territorial sovereignty more so than regional integration. Ian's guidance on this study challenged me to interrogate why this would be the case, in contrast to the political rhetoric and regional institutional partnerships being advanced by state elites in West Africa. Not satisfied by merely demonstrating what was occurring through a public administration lens, Ian again emphasised the importance of enquiring further about the "why". In our correspondence between November and December 2016, he explicitly asked questions about the role of political will in stunting the deep penetration of regionalism within the state apparatus, suggesting that political culture and neo-patrimonialism were central to this enquiry.

I wish that I had had further opportunities to discuss with Ian this interplay between politics and policy in respect of regionalisation in Africa. His perspective on uncovering the reasons and forces that perpetuate the lack of progress on the regionalisation project in Africa has much to offer researchers in this field of study. The strength and role of African state institutions and their relationship to political elites is an area that would have been particularly interesting to discuss further with him in the context of public administration and policy. Ian's tendency towards a pragmatic study of international relations often revealed challenging conclusions that could be applied to active policy deliberations.

Concluding thoughts

Ian Taylor's contributions to the study of African regionalism helped to advance the New Regionalisms Approach, adding to the empirical evidence on the rise of a phenomenon that did not reflect the institutional regionalism of the past. He did so in several key ways through his case study of the MDC, supporting the growing body of research that demonstrated that regions are constructed and contested, that regionalisation was yet another tool for African state elites to solidify their political power, and that the politics and policy of regionalisation do not necessarily align.

In considering this article and subsequent discussions with Ian Taylor, his commitment to justice and equity in his study of African politics is clear. His critique of global actors and their exploitation of Africa features throughout his research. He is frank, however, in his assessment of the role that African state elites play in the co-optation of regionalist forces to their own ends and often to the disadvantage of those most vulnerable (Taylor, 2004). Exploring the ways in which African regionalisation is designed, institutionalised, rhetorically sold and ultimately implemented is what Taylor's research continues to challenge us to interrogate.

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