

Abstract PhD project: The Technical Language of Decolonization. Developmental Knowledge and International Organization in Africa, 1958-1973

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My PhD project examines modes of creation and uses of developmental knowledge in the African international realm. The investigated time frame spans the era of decolonization and the early postcolonial period. The project focuses on the UN Economic Commission for Africa (ECA), which was founded in 1958. The Commission served as a producer of economic development expertise and as a forum for development-related diplomacy at crucial interfaces of international African politics. Importantly, ECA was also the first continent-wide intergovernmental organization in Africa. As such, it was a site of the renegotiation of relations between former colonial powers and emerging African nation-states. It was also the setting for debates on the shaping of a postcolonial international order in Africa. At the same time, ECA's secretariat tried to establish itself as a relevant contributor to global developmental knowledge, chiefly by means of publishing expert studies.

My dissertation project assumes that developmental knowledge claims served as an important resource in political communication around ECA. Consequently, it seeks to investigate the mechanisms by which ideas about economic development were operative in African political discourse. By looking at ECA debates, the project asks about the role of developmental knowledge in the rearrangement of North-South relations, in the formation of African internationalisms, and in the shaping of (national) statehood.

The production of developmental knowledge in ECA and other international bodies was substantially informed by demands for these knowledge claims to function as policy guidance. Therefore, the project not only aims at reconstructing the uses of developmental knowledge in political discourse and practice; it also considers the influence of institutional and political contexts on the making of developmental knowledge claims. In doing so, the project focuses on the economic knowledge production machinery of the ECA secretariat. ECA staff members were facing the challenge of combining the call for the creation of specifically „African“ knowledge with the universalistic approaches of international development economists.

The empirical base for the PhD project is primarily provided by published and archival documents of ECA and other UN bodies from the period 1958 to 1973 – the latter date indicating the year in which the post-war “development era” was brought to an end by the beginning global recession. The dissertation contributes to the historiography of the concept of „development“, which has been a prominent motif in international politics and especially in North-South-relations over the last 60 years. Also, the project sheds light on the long neglected history of international organizations.