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**Peter Kofi Da Costa's Leadership of
Africa's Knowledge Revolution from
the Side-lines**

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ALC Peter Da Costa Memorial Lecture Series

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Inaugural *Peter Da Costa Memorial Lecture*

KEYNOTE

Peter Kofi Da Costa's Leadership of Africa's Knowledge Revolution from the Side-lines

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Preamble

1. This lecture was initially planned to take place in June 2020 when the ALC was to launch its tenth anniversary with a Lecture dedicated to *our own* Peter Da Costa. This decision was taken by the Board of Trustees in September 2019 following an initial brainstorming, even while awaiting the recommendations of a sub-Committee tasked with exploring how best to honour Peter's memory. Things were raw for all of us; they still are, even after a period of reflection and of coming to terms. That we would commemorate Peter at our June gatherings was a given. This decision was taken long before the time of COVID-19.
2. By the time ALC Board of Trustees eventually reconvened in July 2020 rather than at our yearly selection meetings in April and June, this *Lecture* had assumed even greater significance. It would be an annual event with the first lecture taking place on the anniversary of Peter's passing. Today, 18th August 2020 marks exactly one year of his passing. COVID-19's emergent legacy made it possible to hold this as a virtual event with the participation of people – the diversity of Peter's family, *ALC people*, and friends – located in four regions of the world. This would have been a mean feat to achieve had this lecture occurred face-to-face in Nairobi.
3. This inaugural Peter Da Costa lecture presents Peter's life through the prism of the place – the African Leadership Centre – to which he contributed a significant amount of his spare working moments as well as his personal time and attention in the last 7 years of his life – even while on his sick bed. It also contains the perspectives of someone who knew him for the better part of 15 years. I recognise that many people present here knew him for much longer – his closest friends and his family – and some knew him for practically all his life. As such, what I offer you today is a knitted understanding from one of several scenes in Peter Da Costa's life.
4. Peter was a real find for the ALC. His philosophical and intellectual DNA and that of ALC's were identical. The ALC is the theatre in which his philosophy and intellectual application would come together for experimentation. The method of application was only emerging and had not yet fully formed when Peter passed. Clearly, our job in the next period is well cut out for us.
5. In the rest of this keynote, I present my understanding of Peter Da Costa's work. I attempt to translate some of his ideas into questions that are embedded in practical realities for today's Africans; and shed some light on the fit of these ideas with ALC's vision and mission. The rest of my talk is structured as follows:

Part I: A bird's eye view of Peter Kofi Aboagye Da Costa

Part II. What influenced Peter Da Costa's African Knowledge Revolution?

Part III. What are the components of Peter Da Costa's African knowledge revolution?

Part IV: Concluding remarks: Peter Da Costa's impact on the ALC

I. A bird's eye view of Peter Kofi Aboagye Da Costa

6. From 2012 until the time of his passing, Peter da Costa was a Member of the Board of Trustees and a Mentor at the ALC. He served as Vice-Chair of the Board and was one of 5 members of the Centre's Executive Committee in Nairobi.
7. **Personal reflection:** I shall begin by sharing an excerpt from my tribute to Peter Kofi Da Costa during the memorial held in London on 4 September 2019.

We have lost our Juggernaut of JUNE; But how could he be lost?

...What shall we do now, that Our Juggernaut of JUNE is gone?

Even tempered but forceful in his conviction

*His voice of **Justice** in reasoning was a powerful influence –*

*He would wade in when deciding the fate of the next generation
at the African Leadership Centre that he so loved;*

*His **Unflinching** love for Africa and what it could become,
powered his passion in all spaces*

*His **Nurturing** presence was a source of assurance to friends,
colleagues and mentees alike;*

To one group he was ever present in times of need;

To others his electrifying intellect left an indelible mark

*His emphasis on **Excellence** of evidence defined his professional spaces*

8. I shall now base my analysis of Peter's contributions on two sources. The first is his own narration of his intellectual and practical pursuits succinctly captured in a two-minute video that is available, thanks to Flora and William Hewlett Foundation. The second derives from my observations from his interventions at the African Leadership Centre.
9. The transcript of the video offers a capsule summary in Peter's words about his own path:

I was born to parents from two different countries in Africa, who met when they were students in England during the colonial era. So, I am very much a product of a Western system of knowledge. I was brought up in West Africa and the UK. I have always wanted to find out a little bit about how knowledge works and the power dynamics around knowledge.

I always felt instinctively that it is an unequal world where science is accepted if it comes from certain parts of the world but that everyone else, including people from where I come from, are recipients of certain types of knowledge and not really actors in actually shaping it. This led me to study philosophy in the university because I wanted to be able to debate on equal terms.

And then I went on to become a journalist because I thought that by being a journalist, I could actually tell the story of communities that generally don't have a voice. At some point, I discovered that journalism is an imperfect science because you only tell the story on the day that you have the space to tell the story. And on the next day you tell another story. So, do people exist when you are not telling their story?

So, I moved to more of a communication type mode, working with communities with policy actors to try and have more of an interactive engagement, to be informed by what people do and what they say as opposed to just write about them. And that led

me into working as a policy communicator as well as getting into research communication.

At some point, I wanted to know more about the evidence so I went and did a PhD in Development Studies and I have been working ever since with research to policy and at the nexus between research and policy influence uptake. So, I find myself in a space where I am constantly working with researchers and also trying to grapple with why research has relevance and ways to make research relevant.

II. What shaped Peter Da Costa's African Knowledge Revolution?

10. I argue that Peter Da Costa led a knowledge revolution framed by a particular worldview and position in relation to the politics of knowledge.
11. **On the politics of knowledge:** Rebalancing the unequal power of ideas and knowledge was important to him -- Peter grasped the realities of our time. He had a consciousness about the politics of knowledge, which relegates Africa to the periphery of global power. Today's call for the decolonisation of knowledge and particularly the decolonisation of the academy is precisely what Peter's philosophy sought to address. I feel sure he would have had much to say about the prominence of the Black Lives Matter discourse at this time.
12. To be clear, many others have spoken very loudly about the overwhelming dominance of Western knowledge systems and Eurocentric education in particular. The presumed universality of Eurocentric education and the faulty assumptions about what constitutes objective reality and valid knowledge has captured the minds of Africans and truncated progress for our region. Many in our generation and in the generation after us are trapped by a mindset that sees everything Western as holding more validity than our own lived realities and knowledges. Colonised power has been found to make victims of those who sustain it as well as those are captured by it – the intended objects.
13. The exclusionary Eurocentric education, which dominates Western knowledge systems was not far from Peter's consideration. This is not because he necessarily wanted to supplant it, but because he believed Africa's own knowledge systems should be in conversation with, and talk back to Western knowledge and assumptions, for the sake of our own freedom and development. The underlying power inequalities can only be redressed by talking back authoritatively on the basis of our own realities. We have too freely embraced Western expectations and inclination to study Africa as it ought to be rather than how Africa actually is.
14. The {partially} captured minds of African experts within Western institutional contexts is a subject that was at the core of Peter Da Costa's PhD thesis. According to one of his friends and colleagues, Chidi Anselm Odinkalu of the Open Society Justice Initiative, Peter's thinking on development in Africa, was crystallized in his PhD work at SOAS titled *Rule of Experts? Decomposing Agency and Agendas in Africa's Development Regime...* It was a masterful treatment of the things that are engaging different parts of our Network now...

15. I capture here some excerpts from Peter Da Costa's thesis:

...My aim is to explain how experts, their institutions and interactions shape policy discourses, and how they both reaffirm and contest dominant development thinking.

While the idea of indigenous African expertise is considered an important prerequisite to advancing 'African ownership' – an increasingly insistent discourse in the aftermath of several decades of development failure – disaggregating 'African' expertise from the wider global pool of experts that has 'professionalised' development (cf. Cooper and Packard 1997, Chabbott 1999) may be considered futile. This is because so many experts working on development in Africa, whether African or not, trained in many of the same universities and share a common epistemology.

On the face of it, African experts harness the techniques learned in universities in the metropole to adapt dominant global development ideas and approaches to local African realities. In translating the global into forms that can readily be applied and accepted in local contexts, African experts are therefore 'sub-hegemonic' – meaning they support the hegemony of external development ideas. According to this reading of 'ownership', the role of African expertise in the global division of labour is to adapt and retail policies crafted externally, and in the process making these policies more acceptable to African governments.

...At the heart of my inquiry is the notion of 'African-ness' as a socially constructed identity among experts. My focus on Africa's trans-national development regime is aimed at elucidating the ongoing process of identity construction, evident in the deployment of Pan-Africanist discourses as well as in the emergence of expert-led continental initiatives and arrangements. My claim is not that African experts working trans-nationally are asserting their African identity as a contrast to Western or global models of development.

Rather, a key plank of my argument is that, in as much as experts may deploy their African origin as a device to assert their legitimacy in leading the quest for technocratic solutions to African development challenges, the education of these experts in Western academies plays no small role in conferring legitimacy on these African experts. As such, 'African-ness' is deployed in tandem with the assertion of another identity, that of membership of a global community of accredited development experts.

16. In a sense, Peter's work, profoundly challenges those of us [myself included] who studied in, and now work in Western academies or in Western directed development agencies or even non-governmental organisations. We must develop an even greater consciousness about the ways in which we might be contributing even if inadvertently to slowing our continent's progress because of our captured or colonised minds.

17. **Translated in the context of our practical realities today:** The unquestioning acceptance of any knowledge system, not least that which served to subjugate African societies, invariably restricts progress; it relegates relationships and processes of developing our collective integrity to the shadows; and renders us less visible and less successful in the realisation of our collective vision. At the same time, it privileges a select few and sustains exclusionary power dynamics.

18. Rather than a plurality of ideas and knowledges, which can truly enrich ways of knowing and of being, we tend to cultivate only one way. This creates unfortunate dualities of being one person by day and another by night; being considered legitimate in one space and rendered invisible in another. Invariably, what is good for Mary is not good for Mohamed and vice versa. And we set one standard for Kamau and another for Adjua. It is so easy to construct only one way of life as valid when the other ways of life have been written out of history, of existence – in one clean swoop.
19. The dualities that sustain exclusion and undue privilege tend to thrive when we present only that which has been legitimised as valid knowledge under faulty assumptions and under rules that were made for another place and in another time. We research and write endlessly about institutions, many of which are mere shells and not fit for purpose. And of the people who run those institutions, we ask irrelevant questions and think little about the selectiveness of their representation and reach; or about how we can rescue the rest of our society from their claws. Think, for example, about those lawmakers who enact laws that suit their own selfish ends, while those laws that will liberate the suffering majority, do not see the light of day.
20. So, we research and project only that which is considered worthy in the dominant spaces that are legitimised by a narrow worldview. We shun what appears unseen and unheard, as irrelevant even when they give real meaning to the lives of so many. Even African researchers who should know better would say a research topic is not “sexy”. That is what the embrace of other knowledges to the detriment of ours has done. It reduces us even in our own eyes, divides us and strengthens the power of inept leaders, and dehumanises us. Ironically, this is true for the coloniser and the colonised alike. And we have seen how the responses to COVID-19 have laid all of this bare.
21. It is no wonder that when the colonised mind awakes, it realises that it was not even a part of the story that they wrote; and that we have been telling other people’s stories and leading the lives that were designed for us, the design of which we had no part. If we have a fighting chance to write a script, tell a story, paint a picture – it must be the true script, full story or the full picture; or it is not worth doing. This applies to all of us, individually and/or collectively – at all levels of society.
22. That is why Peter da Costa’s mind was alive to the unequal and colonising politics of knowledge in which ‘science is accepted as valid if it comes from one part of the world but not from another’. He was conscious of our own colonised minds too as so-called experts particularly when we work within certain Western institutions. His mission through his pursuit of a career in journalism, to ‘tell a story about communities that generally don’t have a voice’ was relevant then and even more so today. This is a sure way to unlock the door to our own knowledge systems.

23. Peter's career path as a journalist, researcher, and policy communicator is instructive about the multiple and overlapping pathways through which knowledge is acquired and communicated for change. In essence, a knowledge revolution was in the making. It has the potential to open the door to, and project Africa's knowledge systems.

III. What are the components of Peter Da Costa's African knowledge revolution

24. Peter's knowledge revolution consists of three crucial components: Bringing all forms all knowledge to bear; ensuring that data and research communication conveys meaning and value; and the exercise of leadership from the side-lines.

FIRST COMPONENT: All knowledge can and should be brought to bear: Peter communicated the knowledge revolution that would help the next generation of African scholars, analysts and activists confidently embrace a plurality of ideas and knowledge systems in which African-led ideas and systems can have prominence on the global stage. For Peter, all knowledge can be brought to bear; not just what is considered academically relevant knowledge. When and how they are brought to bear are crucial factors.

25. In my view, this has some deep connotations. Emotions, sentiments, instincts, humour and prejudices, for example, rarely have space in social science research. They are relegated to the realm of irrelevance, intangibles or footnotes and at best, tucked away in specialised disciplines. Yet, in reality, we rarely record human encounters in Africa or indeed world over, without deeply emotional, sentimental humorous and even judgemental content. And they do not occur in silos but are often co-constituted. Invariably, one artificially separates actions and activities that are parts of our daily realities and sometimes central to who we are, what we value, experience and aspire to, from the core of what we study, interpret and seek to improve.

26. As far as Peter was concerned, we need to rely more on our own evidence base including using evidence that derives from our values and experiences. He was unapologetic about the need to integrate different forms of evidence into what we quantify and place value on, even when that evidence seems intangible. This means generating evidence from our realities, such that values and intangibles co-exist and in conversation with the tangible elements of those realities. This is at the crux of the knowledge transformation work that Peter introduced to the ALC.

27. One of the places where this was most apparent at the ALC, was in the candidate selection process at the Centre. Right from ALC's inception, we were deliberate in our intent: we seek to build a new community of leaders who would create a space for transformative discourse on peace, security and development in Africa. We were especially focused on developing the talent of a next generation of African scholars, analysts and activists in this space particularly young women and men who,

generally, have had no voice in formal (peace and security) leadership spaces notwithstanding that they have so much to offer.

28. In this regard, we recruit ALC Fellows on the basis of academic excellence and commitment to a set of core values in a bid to prepare next generation analysts and activists for the work of transformation. These core values include:

- African-led ideas of change
- Pursuit of excellence
- Independent thinking
- Youth agency
- Respect for diversity in all its forms
- Integrity

While we developed a methodology for recruitment which included separate tests of the candidates' commitment to these values, the outcomes were sometimes heavily skewed in favour of candidates that had mastered specific academic methods and presentation techniques. We were thus faced with serious questions:

- a. How do you measure a person's values and potential transformative character?
- b. How do you value the intangibles that are evident markers of an individual's influence alongside standard measures of academic performance without skewing the outcomes in one direction only?
- c. If excellence in commitment to the core values of the ALC matter just as much as academic excellence, how do you ensure that equal value is placed on these during selection?

29. In the selection of ALC Fellows, Dr. da Costa was adamant that the intangible, nuanced elements that reflect the potential of a candidate to transform their space ought to be translated into commensurate quantifiable ranking alongside tangible evidence of academic performance. The work of quantifying the intangible attributes as well as the measurable markers of academic achievement when ranking the performance of ALC candidates was not yet undertaken at the time of Dr. Da Costa's passing. This work will form an integral part of the methodology development for ALC's mid-generation review. The ALC Data laboratory, which Peter was very excited about will be a repository for this work.

30. SECOND COMPONENT: Data and research communication must convey meaning and value: Communicating data and research in our own way, with clarity and brevity and using relevant visible markers of the norms of a group, institution or society while projecting this in the highest quality, is an important legacy from Peter's mentoring of Fellows, staff and Associates alike. Communicating research and data in a "Voice", "format" and "style" that conveys the true meaning and reflection of participants' contributions, is an important part of doing research with integrity. When those voices are relegated to the background and the ideas and worldviews that shape their contributions are erased – and even more – when the product of the research is inaccessible, the invisibility of a community is sustained.

31. Ensuring that data tells the full story and that the real owners of the issues at the core of the research see their realities in the story that is told and their messages conveyed, even if any underlying problem is unresolved, is an important element of research communication. The succinctness with which Peter communicated his life story in the two-minute video transcribed for this memorial is an example of the authenticity and simplicity with which all knowledge could be communicated.
32. All of this is a work in progress at the African Leadership Centre. Peter's mentoring ideas shaped the development of the ALC African Radio as was his support for understanding research uptake. Different ways of communicating knowledge are being tested. ALC African Radio and the transformation of the ALC Datalab will be important outcomes in this regard.
33. **THIRD COMPONENT: The practice of leadership from the side-lines:** Peter's knowledge revolution was a quiet one which leaves a trail of influence perhaps because of his approach to leadership. The real coup was this: in an environment where the mainstream view of leadership is that of individuals located at the top of vertical hierarchies, who typically occupy formal positions of authority, Peter adopted a sharply different mode of operation. This made him a perfect fit for the ALC vision and mission. Position based power was not so important to Peter Da Costa. He often shied away from being the centre of attention when it came to formal leadership spaces. As Patrick Smith indicated during Peter's memorial in London in 2019, Peter could have held public office in Government if he wanted. But this was never his desire. Rather, he influenced from the side-lines and was highly effective.
34. Operating from the side-lines seemed a preferred strategy. It enabled Peter to influence, motivate, facilitate, inspire and serve as an impartial (not neutral) interlocutor, akin to what a Linesman or Assistant Referee is in soccer – which Peter loved so much as a Liverpool fan.
35. Expert power was important to Peter even though he was conscious of how this too could become hegemonic if it is not directed toward the path of transformation, to deliver collective agency for Africans. He was a visible team member who provided leadership through his expert power. He readily deployed his expertise for problem-solving and he generated ideas to support people and organisations alike.
36. Peter had referent power in abundance. This enhanced his transformational leadership style and ensured that his influence was not restricted to one institutional or organisational space. He connected with people across disciplines, across Africa and other regions of the world. His worldview provided a point of orientation for his engagement across an extensive network. He was able to exchange influence with a broad constituency of actors. He inspired confidence and provided moral support to colleagues, family and friends. He readily challenged organisational norms where he felt they were problematic; and encouraged all of us to embrace creativity and innovation. He was concerned with the personal and

professional development of colleagues and mentees alike. And he was consistent in doing this over the years. In essence, he developed leaders.

37. So, Peter da Costa's African knowledge revolution looks like this: a research agenda that is underpinned by a worldview of clearly defined African knowledge systems, deployed in conversation with other knowledge systems; communicated through an ensemble of accessible formats that project African voice and agency; and applied through collaborative social action = transformative change. **This is NOT the task of one group or one centre alone, it is collective working across the continent that matters. Our collective buy-in to this agenda, might just in time, ensure that Peter Da Costa's knowledge revolution is sustained.**

IV: Concluding remarks: Peter Da Costa's impact on the ALC

38. The logic and instinct of the ALC is to develop transformed people who will in turn produce knowledge to transform their communities, organisations and society. From the outset, its founding members agreed to build a new community of leaders generating cutting edge knowledge for peace, security and development in Africa.
39. When Peter da Costa joined the ALC Board, it felt like we were complete. He lived and shared ALC values unreservedly. Addressing the unequal power dynamics around knowledge in which all concepts seemed to be based on received wisdom from outside was something that connected us in addition to projecting the voice of next generation leaders. How do we make knowledge forms that depict our realities become valid knowledge? How do we communicate it to ourselves and to those we deem vital to our common progress? The need to project the voices of young Africans and the provision of a platform that would showcase their contributions and apply their knowledge and ideas of change drives our collective effort. Peter felt at home and often spoke fondly about his love for the ALC and how inspired he was by our Fellows.
40. I would like to close just as I started, by reading another excerpt from my tribute to Peter at his memorial in London, last September 4th:
... Our Juggernaut of JUNE is not lost; He only changed his location
*I look around and see your legacy everywhere:
In the community of friends that you united;
In your family that has joined your network of friends;
In the future that you asked Yassine and Jarra to contribute to building
Through the ideals you held true that will live on through shared values
Friend, Brother, Colleague, we will MISS you dearly...
We will remember you in the different faces of JUNE that you embodied –
metaphorically and literally
Your "Just" reasoning will echo in our board room;
We will heed your call to count first, what matters most.
The future of Africa that you nurtured and defended will reward your memory...
Travel well to your next location, Our Juggernaut of JUNE*



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The **African Leadership Centre** (ALC) was established in Kenya in June 2010 as an initiative of the Conflict, Security & Development Group (CSDG) at King's College London. Its overall goal is to build a new community of leaders generating cutting-edge knowledge for peace, security and development in Africa. To that end, it works to build the capacity of individuals, communities and institutions across Africa which can contribute to peace and stability.

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