



CODESRIA's Meaning-making Research Initiatives (MRI): A Note

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The collection of articles in this issue of *Africa Development* represent the first outputs of CODESRIA's Meaning-making Research Initiatives (MRI). CODESRIA introduced the MRI in 2017 as its principal tool for generating and supporting research on Africa and its place in the world. This was part of the Council's ambitious programme of revamping its work, commencing with the new 2017–2021 Strategic Plan. As the Council comes to the end of this plan, and while preparing for the next strategic cycle, it is satisfying that the Council is already beginning to publish the peer-reviewed articles from the MRI on schedule and in Africa's premier Social Science journal.

The Council's decision to introduce the MRI as an epistemological and methodological tool for research was prompted by the need to resolve a range of challenges it confronted at programmatic and intellectual levels. Foremost was the imperative to nudge a new generation of emerging researchers in Africa towards new ways of conceptualising research and collecting and analysing data. The MRI aims to privilege the ontological contexts of the researcher and the researched in the process of data collection, analysis and interpretation. The Council's focus, in the context of the MRI, is to support work that deliberately advances beyond the description of Africa and its place in the world, to question, probe and analyse African realities in ways that suggest alternative and interesting ways of understanding and comprehending the continent. The MRI represents a recommitment to a long tradition of critical analysis and theorisation that previously saw CODESRIA contribute significantly to some of the most important debates on Africa and the rest of the world.

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Privileging the task of theorisation and critical inquiry has been part of CODESRIA's longstanding effort to challenge the intellectual divisions of labour that disadvantage intellectuals in Africa. The resulting hierarchies in this division have often been reflected in the quality of proposals and research outputs the Council has received after sharing calls for applications and providing fellowships and grants to different cohorts of applicants to its programmes. Some of the outputs received at the Council tended to be descriptions of various social settings and processes in ways that were marked by rather limited effort by the researchers to probe revealed structures and processes and to ask why things are the way they are and not otherwise. Such work was often marked by a paucity of intellectual curiosity and a limited ability to perceive what is puzzling in social realities. In the Council's view, this work was indicative of the limited ability of the researchers to go beyond describing how things are to imagining and exploring other ways in which they could be. The failure to give meaning-making enough emphasis had obviously diminished the extent to which African voices contributed to how they, as well as non-Africans, understand and make sense of the continent, its peoples, the Diaspora and the world in which they exist. It represented a missed opportunity for some African scholars to participate in the important processes of constructing the fundamental maps through which the world is produced (instead of just perceived and understood) and through which critical issues are defined and interventions fashioned.

The elision of meaning-making was not a choice that African academics simply adopted. It reflected a conjuncture in an African higher education context that had been battered by years of mismanagement and underfunding, a reality whose consequences were reflected both in the flight of able students and faculty to universities in the global North and in the deterioration of the African university as a space for serious and rigorous teaching and reflection. While there remains critical faculty working in African universities, they are few, overworked and overstretched, and increasingly a good many have emerged in institutional contexts that offer little preparation and stimulation for the tasks of relevant and innovative teaching, research and public engagement. The recent expansion of public and private universities has only worsened the staffing and research environment. Mounting student numbers, multiplication of teaching load and supervision at postgraduate levels, coupled with the drying up of research funding, have cumulatively negatively impacted the African university, resulting in a situation where basic training in conceptualising research and finding suitable methodologies for executing the research have taken a back seat in the last three decades.

Periodic training mounted by institutions like CODESRIA continues to play an important role in supporting the new generation of academics in the continent but, again, the reality of the research environment on the continent is such that the interventions by CODESRIA and like-minded institutions are always in competition with other parallel institutions who privilege different lenses through which to study and represent the continent. The MRI is therefore an attempt to bring urgency to the issue, signalling to the researchers the Council supports and the institutions they are affiliated to that better structures and sharper focus are needed to confront the persistent epistemological challenges in the continent. Besides intervening in the training of individual researchers, the Council began a programme of institution-based interventions supporting schools and faculties of Humanities and Social Sciences in the continent to revamp infrastructures for teaching and research, especially at the graduate level.

The adoption of the MRI as the principal tool for supporting research represents an effort to boost the legibility and visibility of knowledge produced by CODESRIA. The use of one well-defined tool instead of the five vehicles deployed in the previous cycle sought to help the scholarly and policy community to more easily discern the contributions of CODESRIA to knowledge about and research on the African continent. As part of the adoption of the MRI, the Council sought to strengthen the capacity of scholars to complete their projects by reinforcing the support that the Council offers them. This reinforcement has included an increase in the grant amounts provided, the inclusion of peers to accompany the researchers throughout the research process, the streamlining and improvement of monitoring and evaluation processes and greater involvement of the Council's training and publications arms in the generation of research outputs. Further, the Council adopted the strategy of releasing calls and launching MRIs only in the first three years of the five-year strategic cycle and leaving the last two years dedicated to completing manuscripts, publication and dissemination. Finally, the Council shifted from requiring a book manuscript from most MRI recipients to asking for the submission of one (for individual grants) or two (for group grants) scholarly articles to the Council while encouraging and supporting researchers to produce additional articles and book manuscripts that they later publish with a journal or press of their choice.

After a wide-ranging multi-stage process of consultations and debate, CODESRIA decided to focus its research for the 2017–2021 period on a set of thematic areas, as explained in the Strategic Plan document.¹ The choice of these themes, it was estimated, would allow the Council to continue promoting basic (academic) research in the Social Sciences and Humanities

in Africa as a contribution to meeting the continent's development challenges. They would focus on the most important aspects of this changing African landscape through appropriately fashioned theoretical, conceptual and methodological resources that do justice to the continent's history, current situation and its ambitions for the future. The articles in this volume, as in the forthcoming one, dwell on the thematic clusters and cross-cutting themes highlighted in the Strategic Plan. They touch on five critical issues: research and higher education; civil society activism and political engagement; popular culture; livelihoods and urban dynamics; and, finally, how information on weather patterns impacts smallholder farmers.

The seven articles in this issue, constituting the first output from the MRI intervention, traverse the thematic clusters on governance, democratisation and citizenship, economies and ecology, and higher education, that are the priority areas identified in the Council's 2017–2021 Strategic Plan. The articles are tied together by a common effort to grapple with what we can broadly speak of as transformation and agency. The first article, by Agyeman et al, addresses the Ghanaian context and reinterprets university–society relations in ways that contribute to a new theorisation of the stake that society, along with all of its hierarchies, has in the governance of universities in Africa. The article re-examines the forms of reciprocity expected from this relationship, with society ensuring the sustenance of the university by providing resources and management skills, and the university in turn satisfying society's development imperatives. The second article, by Hoffmann et al, explores the South African context, focusing on how teacher educators and the way in which they are trained shape their impact on social transformation at the macro level. The issue of social transformation at the macro level also preoccupies the article by Dimé et al, which grapples with questions of political and social agency. The article deals with how youth across Africa are deploying the Internet as a tool for political mobilisation in ways that pose real problems for state surveillance and control mechanisms. In examining the methods of *Y'en a Marre* in Senegal, *Balai Citoyen* in Burkina Faso, and *Filimbi* and *LUCHA* in the Democratic Republic of Congo, the article fleshes out but also interrogates the new ways through which citizens organise and mobilise to contest power, using technology, language and linguistic forms, and symbols.

Tsambu's article continues this exploration of hierarchies, their contestation and subversion, by diving into the thoroughly gendered and hierarchical vagaries of the Kinois music scene in Kinshasa. His specific preoccupation is the precarious location and status of female musicians in this world, their contribution to this musical space, their domination and exploitation as well as the possibility of their exercising forms of agency in it.

The article by Kimani et al deals with similar questions of domination, marginality and contestations over citizenship, in the Kenyan context. It uses language and linguistic practices as prisms to explore contestations over space and economic opportunities in Nairobi's Central Business District between hawkers on one hand and the city authorities and the 'formal' businesses that they approve of on the other hand. This contestation over space and opportunities speaks to broader loaded dichotomies between the formal/informal, legal/illegal, proper/improper through which the forms of marginalisation and struggles for voice that mark the Kenyan context are elaborated and, as Kimani et al show, can be understood.

The article by Mhiripiri et al also deals with the issue of agency, with a focus on the marginal San community in Zimbabwe. It adopts the unorthodox method of exploring what forms of 'self-filming' result when members of a San community are empowered with technological training in and instruments for film-making. In what ways does the medium and the political economic context in which it is immersed shape how the San elaborate, present and perform their ways of life in cultural texts?

Finally, the article by Yegbemey et al addresses similar questions of technological diffusion, with a focus here on its economic impacts. It explores the extent to which weather-related information provided to rural farmers through modern ICT technologies helps them increase yields. Mhiripiri et al and Yegbemey et al's engagement with explicitly rural contexts help balance the heavy focus on urban spaces and actors that otherwise informs some of the papers in this issue. The ability to traverse these spaces speaks to the Council's cross-cutting themes of rurality and urbanity.

These articles testify to the work done in the last three years to revitalise research and speed up production of knowledge and dissemination for the purposes of knowledge and policy engagement. This obviously remains work in progress, as two additional cohorts of the MRI are at advanced stages of completing their work. The Council plans to improve on this progress and ensure that the African voice continues to assert itself in global Social Science and Humanities debates.

Note

1. CODESRIA 2017–2021 Strategic Plan, Reaching New Frontiers in Social Science Research and Knowledge Production for Africa's Transformation.

