

Editorial

This double issue of the *CODESRIA Bulletin* is the final one for 2020. The issue marks the successful implementation of a decision to increase the number of issues of the bulletin annually from four to six. This increase has been complemented by the introduction of The CODESRIA Bulletin Online which solicits and publishes articles on time-sensitive issues needing immediate intervention by the Council. In 2020, the Council published ten articles on the online version of the Bulletin.

This double issue focuses on the situation in Mali, a country that has faced decades of violence and instability since gaining independence from France in 1960. Since January 2020, Mali has witnessed a series of attacks by various “Jihadists” groups and internal political instability that finally led to a coup and the overthrow of President Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta in August 2020. The decades of violence and instability in Mali have often drawn the intervention of external actors in ways that have raised the significant question of the nature of the state in Africa and its social contract with citizens. This is of concern not only to Mali. The articles in this Bulletin clearly illustrate that in a world that is increasingly interconnected, where an eruption in one corner easily becomes a reverberating disruption elsewhere, we cannot but see the recent coup in Mali as a national crisis with wider regional consequences. By far the most important dimension to this is that Mali has been a playground of numerous foreign interests that at times trump those of regional and local actors. The contentions between European powers on the one hand and ECOWAS and AU on the other hand is a case in point.

Mali is an important player in the design of the security of countries of the Sahel, which has been a centre of attention for a while for several reasons. For many, it is difficult to see the challenges in Mali outside the context and history that defines the region. Further, the attention Mali has attracted mimics in many ways the ‘norm’ Sahelian countries experience in their relations

with external actors, driven largely by security concerns, and who perceive the region strictly through security lens. The intensity of this security gaze in and around the region has, as a consequence, hidden more than it has revealed about the rich history and cultural diversity of the region. By subsuming the region under this one lens, the agency of people who live here has also been questioned, sidestepped and in many cases dismissed as irrelevant to the story of the Sahel. It is almost as if Mali, as with the rest of the Sahel, is important to everyone else except those who actually belong there.

Yet Mali, and the Sahel in general, has a deep and enviable history as well as a rich civilisation. The Sahel has been the centre of pre-colonial civilisations, empire building and state formation processes whose existence is often erased or ignored in security-centred analyses. The rich legacy of this past is a plethora of traditions and cultures, many of which enjoy continuity into the present. This has also been accompanied by advances in learning and documentation produced, in part, by extended movements and interactions of people in the region.

Perceived historically, attempts at territorialising the Sahelian experiences into six colonially defined countries have been challenged and followed with tendencies towards de-territorialisation and, with this, an accumulation of eclectic ways of life at once united by language and culture but also disrupted by war, conflicts and slavery. This is the reason the Sahel is a bridge. That the region is located in an area of adverse climatic conditions has not helped matters. The ecological framework has influenced human agency here in ways that differentiates it from the rest of Africa south of the Sahara, while also positioning it as a connector to the Maghreb and North Africa. In other words, the Sahel has emerged, contrary to Eurocentric thinking, as a zone of continuities rather than dis-junctures.

The richness of Mali has shaped histories and images of Africa specially because of its enviable tradition of literacy and the arts that is today the minefield of later-day ‘missionaries’ and ‘explorers’ who have thrown caution to the wind to claim ‘discovery’, yes, discovery of rich libraries. In the search for new ‘discoveries’ in the Sahel, the tendency to proceed with limited, often just token, inclusion of those who inhabit the region has persisted. It was with the aim of rectifying this and claiming an African stake in the rich heritage the region carries for the continent, that CODESRIA, in collaboration with Human Sciences Research Council of South Africa (HSRC), supported the study on Timbuktu which resulted in the publication of an edited volume by Shamil Jeppie and Souleymane Bachir Diagne titled *The Meaning of Timbuktu* in 2008.

The Council is convinced it is time to entrench the African stake in the Sahelian story and to do so by prioritising the agency of those who live and experience the Sahel. This special issue is a fine start. With the able guidance of guest editor Amy Niang, an academic with enormous interest in and an established record of publishing on the Sahel, this special issue of the Bulletin provides updated and provocative thinking on the situation in Mali and the Sahel, and suggests policy relevant ideas needed for re-imagining the region. The contributors have a record of commitment and investment in research and policy work in the region, and CODESRIA hopes this becomes an opportunity for a fresh dialogue that challenges existing assumptions and opens new vistas of work beyond the security narrative.

Preparatory to the possibility of a long-term project on the Sahel, CODESRIA has paid attention to the region as a melting pot of traditions, cultures and histories that have survived centuries of geographical adversity, and even generated histories that were a response to, and a manipulation of, those adversities. The Sahel has been a point of convergence and divergence, a bridge between distant spatial realities. Understanding this diversity and its implication for human creativity, including for the arts and humanities, has become a priority for the research project the Council aims to pursue.

In 2021, the Council, working in collaboration with the Beirut-based Arab Council for the Social Sciences, will pursue some of the questions and research directions/paths contained in this special issue. We hope that this collaboration will create opportunities for researchers within the Sahel to reflect on the evolving situation in the region and foster renewed engagement between researchers in the Sahel and North Africa. The research project will, in many ways, pick from and continue from where the Timbuktu study cited above left. In so doing, the Council will be well on its way to revitalising research for select tertiary institutions in the Sahel that have been undermined and depressed by a combination of challenges at the political and economic levels.

Godwin R. Murunga
Executive Secretary,
CODESRIA

&

Ibrahim O. Ogachi
Acting Head of Publications
and Dissemination,
CODESRIA