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Editorial

This issue of *CODESRIA Bulletin* is divided into two; the first, a completely thematic cluster of essays on RCTs and, the other, a set of

of essays is key to the Council's research agenda. These articles pick up the discussion initiated in *CODESRIA Bulletin* No. 1, 2020 on *Randomised Control Trials and*

Development Research in Africa. That issue of the Bulletin elicited enormous attention and triggered conversations on different platforms from the CODESRIA community and beyond and through private communication from partner institutions. The Council continues to receive correspondence from other organisations in the global South seeking to partner in conducting extended research on RCTs and the appropriateness and applicability of the methodology to development planning in the global South. We get the sense at CODESRIA that there is a desire from our community and partners engaged in development research in the global South to launch a research program on RCTs that constitutes a front for the liberation and/or protection of the social sciences in the global South from the

ravages of unethical experimentation. One pathway to realising this is contained in the call for papers on pages 22 and 28 of this Bulletin.

The articles focusing on RCTs in this Bulletin are an added voice responding to concerns about their use in assessing the impact of development policies, especially

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two essays on inequality and inclusive development (Jimi Adesina) and the final article on "Mandela-wash" that discusses how the statue of South Africa's first black president, Nelson Mandela, has been used to excuse, rationalise or simply clean up abhorrent acts of abuse, injustice and plunder associated with legacies of apartheid (Robin Cohen). The first cluster



This quarterly Bulletin is distributed free to all social research institutes and faculties in Africa to encourage research co-operation among African scholars. Interested individuals and institutions may also subscribe. Contributions on theoretical matters and reports on conferences and seminars are welcome.

in Africa. The articles do also raise the need to liberate the social sciences in Africa more generally, and development planning specifically, from the danger of objectification through experimentation. They caution against the tendency to exaggerate the effectiveness of RCTs research outcomes in development economics. In particular, David Ndi questions the claim, often repeated by *randomistas*, and accepted almost as a truism within their circles, that they have overrun the field of development economics. But in fact, their ‘value,’ he argues, is restricted to the arena of foreign aid programmes. Seye Abimbola cautions against the ‘foreign gaze’ that oversimplifies African realities for the sake of fashioning preferred (instead of relevant) policies. Far from providing “evidence to policy,” Abimbola shows that on thorough inspection, RCTs experiments turn out as tools for restructuring of the governance of social policy interventions in ways that disregard the input of local populations. The issues of what works from such experiments, and for whom, is underscored as an important consideration that is not fully addressed by *randomistas*.

Ndi and Abimbola agree on the broad argument that intellectual revolutions are normally the consequence of fierce contestations. In the case of RCTs, no such intellectual debates have happened to subject the claims of the RCTs proponents to intellectual scrutiny and instal RCTs as definitive methodology in development economics or across other disciplines. In the specific case of performance-based financing that Abimbola discusses, “[u]nderstanding the knowledge and evidence needs on complex interventions and phenomena in terms that acknowledge their complexity should be the starting point of inquiry, and not the conclusion.” For Ndi, the adoption of RCTs methodology with little scrutiny of their efficacy has been unheralded mainly “because development economics as a distinct sub-discipline no longer exists, and in effect, the proclaimed revolution is little more than tilting at windmills.”

Wandia Njoya locates the persisting legitimisation of experimentation in historic Eurocentric assumptions about knowledge production in Africa. She notes the failure in RCTs experiments to seriously consider ethical questions, thus overlooking the principle of “do no harm” that is so critical to research design. The article illustrates that the persistent concerns raised against RCTs have emerged from a politics of knowledge production that, almost *apriori*, influ-

ences or even determines who, how and from where experimentation is done. This is a point that Amma Panin illustrates through an assessment of who researches using experiment in Africa.

Taken together, the articles in this issue signpost the mounting and well-known limitations of RCTs, and the broader political economy that has promoted them as the ultimate methodology for designing poverty alleviation interventions in developing countries. The capacity, or lack thereof, for policies derived from RCTs to contribute to long-term structural transformation of Africa’s economies is highlighted in the articles. Perhaps here lies the significance of Jimi Adesina’s piece in this Bulletin in providing useful contextual analysis about inequality and structural transformation that indirectly illuminates the discussion on RCTs. Above all, this Bulletin raises the question of the ultimate beneficiaries from the RCTs industry with all the essays wondering whether it is not the researchers themselves that benefit immensely from a funding regime that is invested in specific and obvious outcomes. As Abimbola and Panin document, most of these researchers come from or are based in the global North. The communities in the global South are reduced to mere objects of RCTs experimentation and interventions and of policies that ignore local knowledge, preferences, and priorities.

One final thought, the scale of RCTs experiments and the fact they are fragmented over space render the validity of their outputs questionable. The literature suggests that RCTs focus on small-scale and very specific evaluations instead of large-scale surveys that entail multiple and complex dimensions. This is problematic for policy interventions aimed at poverty alleviation. Poverty is anything but specific, local or small scale thereby raising the broad question, addressed in some of the essays here, of what would happen to RCTs outcomes if interventions were scaled up to whole populations beyond the treatment groups.

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