

# CODESRIA

## Bulletin

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### Special Issue

## Randomised Control Trials and Development Research in Africa

### Editorial

This issue of the Bulletin returns to ongoing work theorizing Africa's economic development. It zeros in on the debate on Randomised Control Trials (RCTs) in the design of development interventions for and in Africa. A resurgent area of western intellectual curiosity and policy initiative, RCTs recently attracted renewed attention and unexpected validation with the award of the 2019 Nobel Prize in Economics to

sign of development interventions in Africa, and was lauded by the Nobel Committee for thus making a major contribution to poverty alleviation. This catalysed vibrant debates and rebuttal amongst academics, development practitioners and public policy experts that continues to date, including on social media platforms. The debates centred around the merits of applying RCTs to development thinking in the continent. Consistently, interlocuters have sought to contextualise the literature on RCTs within the historical sociology of knowledge production and dissemination, with an emphasis also being placed on the impact on development outcomes.

Beyond whatever signal the Nobel Prize sent for research and development thinking, the theoretical and ideological assumptions RCTs engender remain problematic conceptually and methodologically. Of course, the use of RCTs in the field of biomedicine, for example, carries enormous value and has led to results that sit at the core of scientific advancement. Not so for economics where critics, even when they acknowledge the importance of experimental as opposed to observational approaches, caution against

Esther Duflo, Abijit Banerjee and Michael Kremer. This trio was awarded the 2019 Nobel Prize for their work in adapting the experimental method of RCTs to the de-

the tendency to accord RCTs special status.<sup>1</sup> "Every discipline is constituted by what it forbids its practitioners to do."<sup>2</sup> At its basic, this injunction that is associated

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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.

with Nietzsche, limits and represses interdisciplinary creativity. But there are instances where deployment of methodological tools from one discipline to the other is conceptually dangerous and ethically injurious; the application of RCTs in research used to design development intervention in Africa is a particularly pernicious instance.

For some, the application of RCTs in development thinking in Africa represents the new gold standard in conceptualizing research in economic development. For these scholars, replicating RCTs is good science and positioning outcomes of RCT research to influence the design of development policies is laudable. Those who remain sceptical question the design, validity and impact of the methodology and perceive in it echoes of past experimentations that have only served to distract progressive economic thought in Africa. As Grieve Chelwa and Nimi Hoffmann demonstrate in this issue of the Bulletin, RCTs have significant conceptual and design flaws and can be deficient in addressing questions for which they appear well suited to address.<sup>3</sup> Chelwa and Hoffmann argue that the design of RCTs do not take the holistic context in which the poor live and end up ignoring the range of factors influencing people's choices. Chelwa, in particular, finds the march of development economics into an experimental field absolutely problematic. The implications of using results from this experimental methodology as a basis of designing public policies for poverty interventions are dangerous at best, given the inadequate appreciation of the overall social context, a context that in real life can neither be 'randomised' nor 'controlled.'

These concerns are not new and have been alive in economics for decades. Using Africa to validate or invalidate medical assumptions or development interventions has a well-documented but problematic past. The history of using blacks or Africans as guinea pigs in experimental medical and anthropological research is known. This has previously been the basis for important ethical questions and concerns, leading most research institutions to lay out broad ethical parameters against which approval by Institutional Review Boards (IRBs) for research involving human subjects has to be based. However, even as application of these rigorous parameters continues, the research industry embeds power relations that find other means to legitimize research interventions and outputs even if these do not adhere to standard ethical norms. This puts IRBs squarely at the centre, especially because some have morphed into gatekeepers that authorise specific, well-funded institutions to conduct research in particular places, while preventing research inquiry into other "special" communities. As Angus Deaton notes, even in the US, for instance, "nearly all RCTs on the welfare system are RCTs done by better-heeled, better-educated and paler people on lower income, less-educated and darker people."<sup>4</sup> In this Bulletin, Nimi Hoffmann and Seán M. Muller identify and discuss the ethical

problems and the dangerous policy consequences of RCTs. These are particularly manifest in the alarming revelations in Muller's research on RCTs conducted in the field of education in South Africa.

Interestingly, the trust and legitimacy deficits associated with RCTs seems to be largely dependent on their use. Rosaine N. Yegbemey, in the piece on climate-adaptability in relation to the needs of small-holder farmers in the North of Benin, shows that the application of RCTs methodology did present positive possibilities, providing farmers with climate-adaptability in relations to farming needs of smallholder farmers in the North of Benin the positive possibilities of using RCTs. In this specific case, the application of this methodology has proven effective in providing farmers with climate-related information that is useful in influencing adaptation decisions. On the contrary, RCT interventions have proven ineffective when there are major trust and legitimacy issues among the subjects of their experiment. In her analysis based in western Kenya, Marion Ouma illustrates how cash transfer interventions by a private organization in Nyanza, Kenya elicited more mistrust and resistance compared to transfers done by the government. This resistance to RCT driven cash transfers has also been documented in similar cases in other African countries like Malawi and Zambia.

In brief, articles in this issue of the Bulletin assert the need to deepen intellectual reflection on conceptual and methodological questions relating to the deployment of RCTs in the social sciences. The ethical questions the researchers raise require more than a laudatory response. We thank Nimi Hoffmann for proposing the special issue and her assistance in facilitating the publication of these articles. The French version of these articles will be issued later in the year. May this also serve as a reminder of the invitation to any African academic interested in putting together a special issue of CODESRIA Bulletin to please contact the council.

## Notes

1. Angus Deaton and Nancy Cartwright, "Understanding and misunderstanding randomized controlled trials," in *Social Science & Medicine*, Vol. 210, August 2018, 2-21
2. Hayden White as cited in Keith Jenkins, *Re-thinking History*, London and New York, Routledge, 1991, preface.
3. Deaton and Cartwright, "Understanding and misunderstanding randomized controlled trials."
4. Angus Deaton, Randomization in the Tropics Revisited: A Theme and Eleven Variations, NBER Working Paper No. 27600, <http://www.nber.org/papers/w27600>, p. 21.

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