

Tribute

Dr Berit Olsson: A Truly Formidable Woman of Courage and Vision



The Council for the Development of Social Sciences Research in Africa (CODESRIA) received the news of the passing on of Dr Berit Olsson, former Director of SAREC, Sida's Department for Research Cooperation on Thursday 31st March 2022. We were happy to have been allowed to send a confidential note of condolence to the family, but given the importance of Dr Olsson to the Council and to the research corporation community, it is my privilege to share this note publicly on behalf of CODESRIA and its community of scholarship.

Dr Berit Olsson assumed the leadership of SAREC as its Director in 1998 and served in that position up to 2008. This was also the year when SAREC, then responsible for improving research capacity in low-income countries, was disbanded in the context of a broader reorganisation within Sida. For the period of her leadership, Dr Olsson developed a close relationship with

Godwin R. Murunga
Executive Secretary
CODESRIA

many organisations and researchers in the global South, this being the reason why she was highly regarded in CODESRIA circles.

The news of her passing on therefore came to CODESRIA as sad indeed. For many years, she worked tirelessly and with admirable commitment to support the relationship that Sida/SAREC nurtured with CODESRIA – and, indeed, many other organisations in the global South, most especially in Africa, Asia and Latin America. These organisations included CLACSO which at the time was also exploring the possibility of developing a tri-continental partnership framework and SAREC was one of the few organisations, alongside Ford Foundation, that helped drive this initiative. This

led to the emergence of a number of South-South initiatives that have subsequently bolstered greater engagement between CODESRIA and other institutions in the global South.

To understand the significance of Dr Olsson's leadership at SAREC to the African research community, the context within which she operated is instructive. The 1980s and 1990s were critical years, marked by a sharp decline in the fortunes of African universities due to the onslaught precipitated by the Structural Adjustment Programmes. The decline that followed had many adverse implications, especially in the realm of funding and research training capacity in African universities and research centers. These affected Africa in ways that were, in a number of instances, new and unanticipated. As the state in Africa divested from funding universities and research in general, education and research in the universities were subjected to the logic of the

market in ways that undermined commitment to endogenous research in developing countries. This logic asserted that investment in education was useless to make unless the rate of return on investment were good. This indeed became the language of the Bretton Woods institutions.

The resulting challenges presented themselves in ways that only a visionary leader could understand. Working with those affected, such leaders would be called upon to embrace suitable interventions to help forestall a full collapse in the higher education and research sector in the continent. Dr Olsson was one such leader, capable of listening to and understanding the new challenges to higher education and willing to work with those affected to facilitate solutions.

Dr Olsson worked closely with CODESRIA and supported the sustenance of independent research work and the renewal of research capacity across Africa through core and ear-marked multi-year support. Through such funding, the institutional health of organisations SAREC funded was enhanced while the research capacities were built. She understood that institutional health was necessary for building research capacity and invested in it. As a result, she became a trusted friend and a reliable ally of the African social science research community represented by CODESRIA and similar organisations.

On numerous occasions, she joined the community in several meetings and keenly listened to presentations and interventions from a range of scholars and policy actors. She was good at thinking through what the best options out

of persisting challenges would be. This gave her a rare look into, and genuine understanding of the challenges African scholars and policy intellectuals were grappling with and their priority concerns. She used these insights to frame SAREC's interventions in a manner that built resilience in the face of adversity, nurtured agency at a time of immense repression, and defended the intellectual freedom of scholars amidst a massive erosion of university autonomy.

Many in CODESRIA community will recall the second last meeting Dr Berit Olsson attended at CODESRIA. At the time, SAREC sought to allocate resources to support gender research in Africa. CODESRIA was invited to prepare a background paper. Soon after the review of the paper, a decision was taken to convene a range of scholars to discuss the content of this proposed intervention. The meeting, held in Dakar in April 2007, was a meeting of minds, bringing together the best of African feminist thinking and contributed to re-shaping CODESRIA gender work to enhance feminist entry points and perspectives.

Dr Olsson's name easily appears alongside most mentions of research, research cooperation, higher education and innovation in Africa and beyond. CODESRIA felt the impact of her leadership in positive and rewarding ways even as she never compromised the importance of accountability and prudence in the use of public funds delivered to the research community in solidarity and enlightened self-interest. One of the lasting imprints she made on the relationship with organisations SAREC partnered with under her leadership was their conscious

empowerment. She encouraged and championed the autonomy of our institutions, aiming that they independently think through their research agenda while being assured of support for innovative and relevant ideas. "I believe that if people [in developing countries] have developed analytical skills and have the tools to analyse," she argued, "they will both be able to better access international research as well as define their research questions differently than those who are based in the north," CODESRIA's autonomy as a pan-African institution was guaranteed so long as the judicious and transparent use of resources was evident. If there ever were allies who also defended the independence and autonomy of African researchers and institutions against donor pressures, Dr Olsson was a fine example.

On behalf of CODESRIA, its Executive Committee and the broader membership, we join in sharing our condolences on the passing of a truly formidable woman of courage and vision. CODESRIA is lucky to have recorded its appreciation of Dr Olsson at the 13th CODESRIA General Assembly in Yaoundé, Cameroon when the Council formally thanked and bid her goodbye pending her retirement.

We wish Dr Olsson's family, especially Björn Olsson and Susanna Mjörnheim, friends and former colleagues at Sida our best in this difficult transition and pray for the grace they need to remember her as she takes her eternal rest.

12th May 2022