Comments on the Report on Membership and Governance

My comments are those of an ordinary individual member of CODESRIA, who has been grateful to be able to attend a number of CODESRIA research workshops as well as at least three General Assemblies so far. My comments are also those of someone who has been immensely inspired by the work of CODESRIA, the scholars who make up its community, what it has stood for, and what it inspires in a younger generation amongst whom I number myself.

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The report of the Committee is welcome and contains a number of important recommendations. As the Committee has described it, CODESRIA has gone through a number of changes over the years, including the change in the meanings of the acronym itself. These changes have been in response to issues as they arose and were the products of critical self-assessment. In my estimation, while many other continental organi-sations and networks have floundered, CODESRIA has gone from strength to strength, and much of that has to do with the calibre of the leadership, and the capacity for critical self-reflection and renewal over the decades. The ability to stand back, and assess the organisation, its strengths and weaknesses, and to develop credible and strategic changes in a consensual and democratic manner has enabled the organisation to weather some difficult periods organisationally and politically. These significant changes have come about when assessed against the broad aims of the organisation – which are, it seems to me, to provide intellectual leadership and insight onto various questions that have animated African societies, and to do so in a way that builds on a pan-African vision of thinking Africa, as part of the world and also as a unity with many diversities. Each assessment so far has been undertaken in relation to what form best corresponds at specific moments to the broad overall goals. And each change has addressed these. To its credit, CODESRIA's membership has always understood the need for a tactile, dynamic organisational form that was weary of becoming a sluggish orthodox bureaucracy slow to respond to the shifting socio-political and economic contexts in which it operates, at a continental and global level.But each assessment and their solutions can over time lead to unintended consequences. If not checked by critical self-appraisal from within the community, these can create organisational stasis, crises and eventually loss of stature and purpose.I concur with the general observation of the Committee that the organisation is in some respects at its strongest, but that it also might be at one of those strategic turning points, where reforms might be required to best consolidate its past, and enable the future carrying out of the Charter's aims.

There are two key issues that, as I understand the report, need to be realigned to bring the form and the function of the organisation into synchronicity in the most optimal manner- that is intellectual leadership on the one hand and representivity on the other. Both endeavors have been important to the creation of a truly Pan African community of scholars, linking North and South, and honouring the linguistic lingua francas as best as possible. Both were strategic political choices. The translation of these into an organisational form has been the issue that has constantly been grappled with- how best to create a Pan African community of scholars that nurtures the most insightful, critical perspectives on African societies by African scholars themselves? The provision of this scholarly and intellectual mission must be unambiguously central to what the organisation cultivates, stands for, and is known

for. Younger scholars have been animated by, and inducted into the world of scholarly and intellectual production because they have often been captivated by the quality of the scholarship and debates that was produced by scholars in CODESRIA. Scholars from within CODESRIA were writing the most critical and insightful work and had something distinctive to say that commanded attention, thought and engagement. The organisation can name with no element of exaggeration an enviable pantheon of world renowned political and development economists, historians, sociologists, political scientists, philosophers, literary scholars and anthropologists.

They are all known for thinking Africa in distinct and original ways, in theorising and conceptualising the continent and the world in non-derivative forms, and for attending to the questions that concerned African societies the most. The organisation and its community is known for being responsive to the demands of what it means to be a scholar of Africa in Africa, and for being able to eschew dogma or uniformity in the answers to that question.The question we have to ask frankly of ourselves is, does the current form of regional representation best cultivate these merits of the organisation? It seems to me that the Committee is correct to suggest that as a starting point we need to reconsider the way leadership is elected so as to maintain the illustrious record of the way leadership is provided. These can be done in ways that do not sacrifice representation.

My three observations arising from the Committee report, would be:

(i) I concur that that the regional caucuses and the choice of members of the executive committee from regions in the current manner does not work adequately. Changing the election of the EC along the lines suggested by the report need not sacrifice diversity and representation overall in the organisation. The core activities of the organisation, driven by research thematics, if properly constituted, establishes *in practice* a better way to achieve the goals of representation. These are already expressed by composition and constitution of the multinational and national working groups, and the training institutes and workshops. The research networks that address the thematics will, by their nature, cross borders, and cross linguistic boundaries, blend generations and genders. They will be constituted in ways that are attentive then to representation and diversity but they will be driven by a research question. The best kind of representation might then be in the actual research and writing, rather than from the previous solution of having regional representatives on the EC, who might be inclined to exercise their mandates as regional rather than continental ones.

(ii) The organisation might best be driven by three year cycles of a *fewer number of research questions* and thematics, with shorter more immediate responsive ones being added at the discretion of the Executive Committee. I suggest fewer and more focused research questions and themes, because as the Report notes, the African research environment has expanded greatly since CODESRIA came into being. There are more universities, more independent research institutes and more think tanks. The opportunity is now there for CODESRIA to not have to attend to every question and issue, but to attend to those that others who are, for example,driven by immediate policy concerns, are not able to attend to. These allow us to nurture and bring to fruition longer, more critical and indepth research projects, such as historical research, or more abstractand trans-disciplinary ones, like the theorsation of our societies, whether it be their economic life, or their key concepts such as democracy, citizenship, justice, culture and aesthetics, wars, secularism, spirituality and religiosity, 'tribe' or race. Working to compliment the more immediatist developmental and policy oriented research of many other research institutes and think tanks might be the unique space that CODESRIA offers to a community of scholars over the long term. For example, it was the long duree perspectives cultivated by CODESRIA that has given us the remarkable insights on dependency theory, of non-Europhone intellectual worlds, of colonial citizenship and subjects and the making of genocides and civil war. Greater depth in thinking a problem rather increased expansion in solving all problems might be both possible and politically necessary at this strategic juncture driven by short term solutions.

(iii) I support the election of an Executive Committee weighted towards the senior standing of the member as a scholar committed to the goals of the Charter, and with a track record in this regard. The EC should provide the intellectual leadership of the organisation. It should therefore be made up of scholars who carry with them the appropriate level of seniority while at the same time paying attention to a mix of regions, languages, genders and their dynamic energy. But the bias must be towards the merit and standing of the individual as someone who can offer respected collegial intel-lectual guidance to the rest of the scientific community, and who reflects that in their work, conduct and person as embodying the aims of the Charter. If so constituted, I would agree with the Report, that the need for a Scientific Committee would no longer be clear. The organisa-tional and intellectual leadership of the EC would then work with the Secretariat in a seamless and complimentary manner, with less potential for ambiguity in roles, more so complicated potentially by the exis-tence of the Scientific Committee. My observations are in no way a comment on the current state of these relations, since I am not in a position to comment on them, but rather about the form which might best avoid potential problems that could arise where there are ambiguities in the roles of committees, or potential sources of conflicting authority.

I wish to thank the Secretariat for distributing this important report, as well as the thoughtful comment by the EC on the report, and for inviting us all to be a part of this significant debate and conversation. No doubt from this transparent exercise the organisation will once more prove its dynamism and capacity for wisdom that inspires the rest of us to follow its lead.