

New Directions and Priorities for Research in Africa: Some Think Pieces

Extending the Frontiers of Social Science Research and Bringing Social Research to Public Issues

Background

CODESRIA's main mandate is to promote social science research in Africa. The Council does this through a broad range of programmes aimed at supporting research, strengthening the capacities of African researchers and research institutions, publishing and disseminating the results of research, advocating for a socio-political and economic environment that is more conducive to social science research, and defending academic freedom. Being a membership organization, in order to fulfill its mandate, CODESRIA has had to be responsive and accountable to its constituencies. It has also had to be proactive in its attempts to serve the African social science research community, and the larger African 'development community' that the research community is both part of and accountable to. In the 39 years of its history, CODESRIA has played a leading role in setting the agenda for research on the African continent, through a participatory process, and the Council successfully developed programmes and instruments that enabled it to intervene on priority issues for the continent in ways that complement and move forward the work of African universities, research institutes and centers, research NGOs and other knowledge producing institutions on the continent.

Changing Context

The problems that those who met in 1973 to set up CODESRIA tried to address through research were those of the absence of freedom for Africa, the poverty, dependence and low level of development of the continent and, as a consequence of these problems, the marginalization of Africa and Africans (including the scholarly community), in global affairs, all of which were largely due to the centuries of domination and plunder that Africa had been subjected to through colonialism, trade (including trade in humans), and

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other mechanisms through which natural, human and intellectual resources of the continent were taken away, forcefully or otherwise, thus leaving the continent's people poorer, poorly governed, and deprived of independence and freedom. Policy making for development, regional integration and greater freedom and international presence was not only difficult, but also not really informed by African research. Many of the leading higher education institutions such as Dakar University and Makerere University had hardly ceased to become extensions of French and British universities, and the curricula and research were dominated by Western paradigms, concepts and theories. African scholarly voices were hardly audible at the global level. The geopolitical fragmentation of Africa, together with the multiplicity of boundaries of a geopolitical, linguistic and disciplinary nature, made it impossible for there to be an integrated, self-aware, pan African scholarly community that could effectively produce knowledge and interpret social realities in Africa and in the world around us from African perspectives, and inform public decision making (including at the regional level) with the research it is doing.

The context in which CODESRIA will be celebrating its 40th anniversary (in 2013) is characterized by a number of contrasting phenomena and contradictory trends indicating both the persistence of huge challenges and the emergence of new ones, on the one hand and, on the other hand, many positive developments and the availability of many opportunities.

Internationalization in higher education (HE), and the infusion of a market logic in the sector, the commoditization of higher education services, and the marketization of the social sciences themselves have reached unprecedented levels (Zezeza); the gulf between world class universities and the vast majority of the universities in Africa – whose numbers are growing very rapidly with the creation of hundreds of new public and private universities — is huge. As the leading universities such as Harvard and Oxford are trying to find ways of consolidating their positions at the top of the global HE pyramid in the face of China's attempts to 'buy' the best professors and researchers for its universities, the risk that many African universities will become mere consumers of course modules and course materials developed elsewhere is very real (Mustapha). This poses enormous challenges for social science research in Africa, and for CODESRIA in particular; one possible consequence is a widening of the "knowledge divides" highlighted in the World Social Science Report 2010.

The African community of scholars has grown, with a much broader and more diversified institutional base that includes many more public and private universities and other research institutions, but also more think-tanks and research networks; and many more researchers and public intellectuals. Beyond the numbers, the African social research community is also more self-aware, more self-confident, and less "defensive" in its relationship with the rest of the global scholarly community (Mkandawire; Macamo); It has succeeded in "bringing the production of knowledge about Africa back into the continent" (Boulaga) and, in so doing, "the division of labor once criticized by Paulin Hountondji that pitched empirical material collected in Africa against theorizing

carried out in Europe has been made to loosen its grip on African studies. Many African scholars established themselves in the eighties as competent theoreticians and are widely quoted in relevant fields” (Macamo). However, the dominant epistemological order still favors Western scholars and the study of Africa (including by African scholars themselves) is still dominated by theories and paradigms developed in Europe and North America (Mudimbe; Zeleza). Furthermore, as some of the “competent theoreticians” from Africa are nearing retirement, the emergence of new “competent theoreticians” has been more difficult, partly because many African universities are struggling to maintain high standards despite the massification, loss of good academic staff to the rising numbers of private universities, brain drain, the consultancy syndrome, and lack of resources for academic research.

Africa is a politically fragmented continent in which the institutions of many of the states are, in some strands of the literature, classified as “fragile”¹. The splitting of Mali into two during the first quarter of 2012 and occupation of more than half of its territory by forces whose commitment to democracy or to the territorial integrity of the country is questionable, the conflicts in Darfur, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Cote d’Ivoire and in other countries are all indications of political fragmentation, itself often being a consequence of the denial of the rights and freedoms and insecurity of citizens.

What Mkandawire calls the “unholy trinity of poverty, ignorance and disease” (Mkandawire) that all African nationalists have been seeking to eliminate is still a major challenge. Decades of structural adjustment and neoliberal globalization have significantly reduced the developmental role of African institutions, particularly the African state, and liberalized trade in ways that make the prospects for industrial development seem dimmer. The extreme vulnerability to global and local hazards that Africa is facing; and the asymmetries in power, wealth and influence make the challenge, for African countries, of having to develop under less than optimal global conditions no less formidable today than it was nearly 40 years ago.

We live in what Amin calls a “polycentric” or “multi-polar” world (emergence of the BRICS, etc. see Amin), a world that is very

different from the world of the Cold War years. Some of the emerging powers are actively engaged in what has been called a “new scramble” for Africa and African land, mineral, and intellectual resources; at the same time, the engagement of China, and the BRICS with Africa has also created policy space and led to the significant developments in infrastructure that have been going on over the last ten to twelve years.

Climate change is a major global challenge. However, responses to the challenge have also entailed the commoditization of part of the commons, such as forests, and the transfer of costs to the South, paying little attention to issues of sustainability and the involvement of local communities in the South in the programmes that are supposed to mitigate the adverse effects of climate change and facilitate adaptation.

However, since the beginning of the New Millennium, some African economies have also been among the fastest growing economies in the world (UNCTAD Economic Development in Africa report 2012; UNECA-AU 2012; IIAG Report 2010). The challenge, of course, is for growth to translate into genuine, sustainable development and the increased well-being of all the peoples of the continent. There has been significant progress made in terms of infrastructure development and provision of education and health services. Life expectancy has been increasing. There are many positive new developments in and around the African Union (AU), and the African Regional Economic Communities (RECs), indicating awareness of the need for, and renewed interest in moving towards greater regional integration. There has been great progress towards the institution or consolidation of democratic governance (the Arab Spring; Ghana; Senegal; South Africa; Botswana...) and, in a few cases even, democratic developmental governance (as in Cape Verde; and Mauritius). Growing citizen awareness and engagement, particularly of the youth, as could be seen in movements ranging from the Arab Spring, to the *Y'en a Marre!* [We are Fed Up!] Movement led by young rap musicians and journalists that played a major role in the struggles for peaceful and democratic change in Senegal in 2011 and 2012. The ICTS revolution and the creative use of new technologies and social media in trade, industrial and agricultural development, research, teaching, etc. and in social and

political action have also created new opportunities for research in and on Africa.

The context in which CODESRIA operates in the second decade of the 21st Century is therefore quite different from that of the early 1970s when the Council was set up. However, the challenges of deep and massive poverty, extreme vulnerability to global and local hazards that Africa is facing (i.e. those of having to develop under less than optimal global conditions) and the fragmentation of research may have taken new forms, but they are no less formidable today than they were 39 years ago. Put differently, the existence of CODESRIA is as justified today as it was when the Council was just being established. If anything, new challenges have emerged that make the need for a robust pan-African research Council and a networked research community that transcends disciplinary, linguistic, gender, generational, regional and other barriers to knowledge production, as important for the African social science research community today, as it ever was.

Over the years, CODESRIA has also grown and gone through deep transformation which, in effect, is a demonstration of its capacity to adapt and renew itself, and renew its programmes and operational mechanisms. The CODESRIA journey has, of course, not been smooth all the way. The Council has also had, on a few occasions, to live through difficult times. The turn of the Millennium was one such period, which was followed by a period of recovery, consolidation and renewal. The last five years have been years of further consolidation and renewal for CODESRIA. It was also during these years that the world was shaken by a financial crisis whose repercussions were felt by all African countries, and by the research community itself. The crisis therefore became a major issue for both research and policy that CODESRIA has tried to address in various ways.

Interpreting the CODESRIA Mandate: Stages in CODESRIA's Development

CODESRIA was first a council of directors of social science research centers and institutes in Africa. Membership was later extended to deans of social science and humanities faculties of African universities. Until 1992, when the 7th General Assembly amended the Charter to allow

individual membership, CODESRIA membership was exclusively institutional. This broadening of the constituency and the membership of CODESRIA was a reflection of the growth and diversity of the social science research community, and the multiplicity of sites of knowledge production as well as the mobility of the researchers.

The 7th General Assembly also changed the name of the Council from 'Council for the Development of Economic and Social Research in Africa', to 'Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa', in acknowledgement of the importance of covering all the social and human sciences if there has to be a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of social realities and development.

Basic research has been, and still is the main type of research that CODESRIA is engaged in. However, policy oriented research gradually became more important in CODESRIA programming. Over the years, research themes and the range of potential users and audiences of research have also become much more diversified, and the near exclusive focus on issues related to the state, both as a research object and as a potential user of research gradually shifted as the demand for research-based explanations of the challenges and complexities associated with globalization, governance and development – emanating from social movements and civil society actors – became more pressing. The range of issues covered by the 2007-2011 Strategic Plan is a good illustration of the different ways in which CODESRIA has been trying to respond to the complex demands coming from its various constituencies.

From within the research community itself, successive generations of scholars have been joining CODESRIA programmes in growing numbers, both as part of an almost normal career development process, and as a result of the crisis of higher education. One impact of the crisis of higher education in Africa has been the weakening and impoverishment of research and of outputs from research carried out in many universities. CODESRIA's research training programmes have therefore been among the Council's fastest growing programmes, partly in response to the growing demand for training and mentoring from the third and fourth generations of scholars.

Addressing the policy challenges of the African continent directly has always been seen as important. However, it is in the New Millennium that the effort to engage the policy communities became more important, and more systematic. This came at a time when the social sciences were increasingly challenged to demonstrate their 'relevance' (that was mainly defined in market terms), and when major shifts were also going on in the donor community.

Re-thinking Development, and "Running Where Others Walked"

The main objective of the Strategic Plan for 2007-2011 was to move CODESRIA forward, towards realizing its vision of becoming one of the first rate social science research institutions in the world. The research part of the Plan was under the umbrella theme of *Re-thinking Development and Reviving Development Thinking in Africa*. Research training and capacity enhancement were geared towards enabling various sections of the CODESRIA community (particularly the younger generation of scholars) to participate in the re-thinking of development and revival of development thinking, particularly through greater mastery of social science concepts, theories and paradigms, and of social science research methodologies, scholarly writing skills, etc. and encouragement to engage in critical thinking.

During the Plan period, a broad range of new and 'old' research themes were explored, dominant theories and paradigms challenged, and serious attempts made to begin to systematize and highlight Africa's contribution to the development of the social sciences and humanities in Africa. Part of this was done in partnership with other institutions of the Global South or of the North.

For a time, the identification of priorities for research and institutional development was carried out by the General Assembly; and the Secretariat, under the guidance of the Executive Committee, developed programmes for the Council based on the priorities identified by the General Assembly. The process was later improved with the preparation of proper strategic planning documents.

Earlier this year, CODESRIA also went through an evaluation process. Although the main focus of the evaluation was the 2007-2011 period, the evaluation dealt

with a number of strategic issues that CODESRIA has been trying to address over the years. The report of the 2012 evaluation also under-scored the importance for CODESRIA to think about the outcomes/impact that CODESRIA research has had, not only on teaching and on scholarly debates but also on policy processes, on social movements. It therefore examined the relationships that CODESRIA has developed with the African Union, the UNECA, African RECs, and the social movements as a first step towards ensuring that the research and publications do have an impact. All this is in the spirit of 'Results Based Management' that is now increasingly being taken for good practice in organization management, including the management of scholarly institutions.

Preparations for a new strategic plan began way back in 2009, with a brain-storming workshop on 'New Directions and Priorities for Research', held in the context of the transition that had just occurred at the level of the Secretariat. In July 2011, the Executive and Scientific Committees held a one-day joint workshop on the priorities for the 2012-2016 strategic plan period. This was followed by a two-day Secretariat retreat in August 2011 in order to further reflect on the medium- and long-term research and institutional development priorities of the Council.

The theme of the 13th General Assembly of CODESRIA (held in Rabat, Morocco, in December 2012) was: 'Africa and the Challenges of the 21st Century', with particular focus on constraints and opportunities. Most of what would be the strategic issues for research over the coming years were discussed. (See CODESRIA Bulletin, 1&2, 2012).

Development remains a key concept in the thinking on social transformation that translates into greater freedom and enhanced well-being of the peoples of Africa. The understanding of development that has now become widely shared among members of the CODESRIA, and African research community is the result of a combination of post-structuralist, ecological, gender and southern critiques of the dominant modernization and development paradigms, and years of re-thinking development both as a concept and as a socio-historical process. As Amin has argued, development, for us, is not so much about "catching up", but "an

invention of another kind (...), a process of inventing a new civilization" (Amin), a civilization that is founded on core universal values, and is necessarily human and humane, democratic, "ecological", and based on rights, justice and equity, particularly gender justice and equity. Put differently, development is "a response to the many challenges the continent has faced over the years and still faces today" (Mkandawire).

However, there has also been, and there still is today a widely shared conviction among African nationalists, scholars, policymakers and activists, from the early days of independence to now, that in the search for responses to the many challenges facing Africa, *time* is of essence; i.e. that the responses have to be found *urgently*. In a speech he gave in the early sixties, Mwalimu Nyerere said that Tanzanians and other Africans "have to hurry up". Nyerere is also quoted saying that Africa will have to "run while others walk" (cited in Mkandawire). This contrasts with the notions that "there are no shortcuts to progress" (Hyden), and "no short-cuts to democracy" (Copans). The Burkinabe historian Joseph Ki-Zerbo also reminded us more than two decades ago that there is no "read-made development" (*développement clefs-en-main*) that could be bought or easily transferred from one part of the world to another, and that the key to development is in the people, their cultures, values and worldviews (*développement clefs-en-tête*; Ki-Zerbo).

The great interest in what is going on in China, India and Brazil that exists today among many African scholars, policy makers and development practitioners is partly due to the fact that China and other countries such as India and South Korea (and, to a lesser extent, Brazil and Turkey) seem to have found the answers to some of the problems of mass poverty and development that Africa is facing and,

in the process, demonstrated that it is indeed possible to accelerate the development process. Therefore it is important for African research examine ongoing attempts as well as alternative pathways towards social transformation and development, and the successes and failures, not only at the level of individual African countries, but also at the level of the Regional Economic Communities, and at the continental level. One of the major challenges, it could be argued, is certainly that of understanding how Africa could move out of the margins or periphery onto the centre stage in matters of global trade, knowledge production, development and global governance without compromising the rights and core universal principles and democratic values that we share. The question of how to overcome the obstacles and take advantage of the opportunities for democratic governance and sustainable development that exist under the current global system has for a long time been a major subject of research; so is the understanding of the challenges and opportunities for sustainable democratic development associated with global environmental change;

Under the framework of the new strategic plan, research will seek to uncover and understand the strategies for developing Africa in sustainable, ecologically and gender balanced ways through which citizens become empowered, and states become capable and effective, but also accountable to their citizens (Olukoshi, Ouedraogo & Sall).

The following have thus been identified in the 2012-2016 Strategic Plan as themes and issues on which CODESRIA research should focus:

- Higher Education, the ICTS and Internationalization: The changing landscape of higher education and research; neo-liberalism, its evolution and African responses to it;

- Climate Change, Resources and Development: The new scramble; agrarian transformation and agricultural development; value addition and industrial development;
- Politics and Governance: Human Rights; Citizenship; Social movements and New Forms of Civic Engagement; Peace, Security and Rule of Law;
- Gender, Youth, Culture and Transformative Social Policy;
- Regional and Continental Integration, Mobility and the African Diaspora
- Contemporary Forms of African Engagements with the Rest of the World: African encounters with globalization; the study of other regions of the world; South-South Relations; the emerging powers; and the comparative study of historical experiences of development and governance;
- Thinking About the Future: prospective studies; planning, and ways of dealing with uncertainty in Africa.

These themes and sets of issues form the core of the research agenda for CODESRIA under the 2012-2016 Strategic Plan. They are the main themes around which the main research programmes will be developed. Ongoing research programmes on higher education leadership, gender, children and youth, environmental politics and governance, etc. will be revamped and new ones developed. Many of the research vehicles (such as the national and multinational working groups and comparative research networks) will be improved and maintained, but there will also be new kinds of research activities.

Note

1. The notion of state fragility is highly contested; The European Report on Development 2010, for instance, classifies 27 out of the 53 African states as "fragile".