

Challenges Facing Africa and those Facing the Social Sciences

This brief note considers the challenges facing Africa, the challenges facing social sciences and priorities for CODESRIA. It mainly focuses on the challenges facing Africa and identifies those challenges or problems as different manifestations of the continent's underdevelopment. It links CODESRIA's past with its future commitment to contribute to the resolution of Africa's problems by providing quality research that influences policy making for the betterment of continent. So, there is need for emphasis to be placed on development research. With the intention to set out CODESRIA in a new direction in order to better serve the continent and contribute to the resolution of its problems, this short note takes five inter-related issues of priority significance for discussion: 1) the development challenges facing Africa; 2) the development issues and the re-organization and consolidation of themes; 3) policy relevance; 4) issues of methodology; and 5) partnership, policy relevance and networking.

Challenges Facing Africa: Manifestations of Underdevelopment

The 2007-2011 CODESRIA Strategic Plan provided a wide coverage of almost all issues and dimensions. After narrating and describing the way CODESRIA has functioned to achieve its goals of serving African social science researchers and the continent for the past few years, it sets out ambitious goals for the future. In addition to expanding its activities, the attempt to carve out a new direction for social science research in Africa was the major feature of that strategic plan. The

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shift from mere cross-disciplinary dialogue to multi-disciplinary development research undoubtedly marked a turning point in CODESRIA's long history of serving the continent.

Various African problems which represent challenges to social science researchers are, in fact, different manifestations of the same problem of development and underdevelopment. Thus, most problems facing the continent are organically inter-related and not easy to separate from one another. Poverty, inequalities in access to resources, conflict, forced population movements, bad governance, corruption, environmental degradation, authoritarianism, lack of grassroots participation, militarization, waste of resources on military and security spending, spread of infectious diseases, food insecurity and malnutrition are all intimately interconnected and inter-related; manifesting the undercurrent malaise of underdevelopment.

All these issues are covered, in that strategic plan, under the sub-title Research Themes for 2007-2011, set to be covered in future research activities. The research themes seem to be numerous and finite resources dictate some kind of prioritization that could imply omission, addition, reorganization and consolidation. As commitment to addressing the continent's problems; particularly those facing the marginalized, is one major guide for CODESRIA's future research activities,

then no better organizing principle than development and underdevelopment challenges to consolidate, reorganize and prioritize research themes.

Development Issues

If the development challenges facing the continent could be the fixing principle for selecting and prioritizing themes, some topics within themes could either be omitted for the time being or given lower priority. Some other suggested additional research topics relevant to Africa's development challenges could be considered.

- a) Rural and urban poverty, poverty and health, food security, education;
- b) Hunger, famine and food security;
- c) The informal sector and urban livelihoods (providing employment and income for millions of poor urban Africans);
- d) Conflict and drought driven population movement (displacement and displaced conditions);
- e) Agrarian forms, agrarian transition and transformation;
- f) Participation, grassroots organizations and training in democracy;
- g) Indigenous African mechanisms for reconciliation and conflict resolution;
- h) Forms of tacit resistance to authoritarianism;
- i) Forms of decentralization, indigenous local structures and modern government;
- j) NGO's and Development;
- k) Information Technology and Development;

- l) Forms of public spending and development (expenditure on the military, the security machines, health, education, water, etc.);

While this would consolidate CODESRIA's shift in the new direction that would enhance its relevance to the continent's problems, emphasis in research on development issues simultaneously would add more to CODESRIA's capacity to influence policy making.

Policy Relevance

In Africa, as elsewhere in the periphery, a gulf ensues between most social researchers, social science research and policy making. Most policy makers ignore critical social science research, and while the best quality of social science research is critical social science research, unfortunately this same attribute which gives critical social science research its distinctive character; and value is what draws a gulf between it and policy making. Political conditions either forced many to isolate themselves from political processes or politicians ignored critical social science research because it does not fit into their political agenda and political frames. With all attendant difficulties, the involvement of African scholarship and, subsequently, African research in African development problems – that is, research on African development issues that suggests practical alternative solutions to pressing African problems – is likely to make such research a good candidate for influencing policy making.

Although politics and power relations are the root of African development problems and the adoption of certain policy options depends on power configuration. Subsequently, critical social science research (forms of the state, power, class interests and relations for instance) is mostly unlikely to influence current policy directly but could inform actors, agents and forces of change and map out alternative development paths for the future. However, some forms of development research that deal with urgent African problems and towards which policy makers in African states might feel less apprehension (e.g., indigenous African mechanisms for reconciliation and how these could be re-fashioned to resolve current African conflicts) could make some influence on current policy making. Thus, different forms of research on different topics appeal differently to

policy makers. Because of its importance for relevance and for meeting the challenge, for CODESRIA, of providing viable practical solutions to the problems facing Africa, the modalities and the ways in which the gap between research and policy making could be bridged without compromising commitment to principles need to be contemplated, discussed and perhaps be made subject for research.

Methodology

Related to the above two issues (development and policy relevance) is the question of methodology, which perhaps needs more discussion and consideration. Assuming that an appropriate theoretical methodology suitable to African conditions and African reality is developed and adopted, there is a need to place emphasis on micro-level empirical field research that captures Africa's complex reality and the diverse forms in which the same development problems unfold or manifest themselves in different parts of the continent. The necessity of micro-level field research is imposed by the complexity and heterogeneity of forms that defy generalization and perceived conceptions.

Micro-level field research raises the problem of empirical methods for discussion in terms of choice of the qualitative versus the quantitative methods of data collection and analysis. Developments in the sophistication of quantitative methods accumulated over the years, compared to qualitative field research, have produced innovative and elaborate criteria of measurement indicators to approximate socio-economic reality. Although qualitative research methods have only recently started to gain increasing importance, they are perhaps the most appropriate to investigating Africa's realities, particularly in the initial phases of research. Considering the majority of communities on the continent as being communal rather than individualistic (and for which the extended family, reciprocity and mutual support are highly valued), the quantitative methods and the measurement criteria developed elsewhere may not be suitable. Tailoring quantitative indicators developed elsewhere in the light of the particular African reality under consideration, which qualitative field research methods could uncover and capture, provides opportunities for innovative development research and understanding African realities from the

bottom up. The importance of this arises from the need to avoid over-generalization, capture African reality that in many instances challenge straight-jacket theorization – African reality as it exists, not as theorized. This is key to addressing the continent's development problems and issues to remain relevant. While qualitative and quantitative methods are not necessarily mutually exclusive and, in fact in many instances they could complement one another, there is a need for more discussion and perhaps training in empirical research methods.

One example to support the argument for studying African reality at the micro-field level and from the bottom up is the tribe and the way it has been rejected by social scientists and Africanist social scientists for genuine ideological reasons. The fact is that the tribe has not gone away simply because social scientists did not accept it as a category for analysis. Instead of understanding what the tribe is and what tribal identities mean in different African contexts; why tribal identities have persisted; what socio-economic contents do tribal identities embody; why the tribe has not vanished despite decades of nation-state building and advocacy of national identity; and why the tribe has remained, and under what conditions, as a robust, mostly covert, rallying force for many Africans communities. The study of tribal loyalty and identity, whether parallel to or a competing force with the state and national identity, has been neglected for quite some time and treated as if it does not exist. But the tribe has potentially resurged in many parts of the continent – in forms of internal conflicts – more deadly and tragic than inter-state ones. Studying the tribe through thorough micro-level field research, understanding the conditions for its persistence and exploring ways to defuse the conditions for its existence would have done good to the continent and its people.

One more point to add on appropriate empirical research methods is the question of policy relevance. Apart from stating the obvious – that the nature of the topic dictates the kind of data needed for analysis and subsequently the methods to be adopted for data collection – pressing development topics and research methods that capture reality at the micro level are more likely to appeal to policy making for adoption. Policy options recommended on the basis of thorough

scrutiny of reality and on issues relating to the marginalized and their livelihoods would most likely get acceptance, if not from governments, perhaps from many other actors, act and work with the poor and marginalized, with whom partnerships could be forged to better serve the continent and its people.

Policy Relevance, Partnerships and Networking

In and outside Africa, there are numerous organizations that deal with development issues and development problems in Africa. Many international inter- and non-

governmental organizations on the continent are directly involved in tackling the problems of poverty, food security, conflict and conflict resolution, mass displacement, democratization, human security and environmental degradation, to mention only a few areas. There is scope for CODESRIA's already established relations with international organizations, in and outside the continent, to be made more effective through partnership based on mutual concerns related to development problems, policy oriented research and the dedications to improve the livelihoods of the marginalized. Building

on CODESRIA's extensive web of connections, such organizations could provide avenue to influence policy actions that impact on the lives and the livelihood of millions on the continent. Moreover, such organizations could form a valuable capacity building resource base that further empowers CODESRIA and reinforces its ability to meet its goals. This issue could also be a subject for further discussion, to come up with practical ways of how priorities could be set to meet these organizations's action-oriented research needs without compromising CODESRIA's commitment to producing quality research.