

Historical Thinking and Inter-disciplinarity

We recognize the importance of fostering our research institutions and researchers on the continent; hence our gathering in an organization like CODESRIA. We recognize the great unevenness in the quantity and quality of our institutions: we have 'world class' researchers and institutions but also those that barely manage to stay open. We recognize the extraordinary political and economic conditions under which we have to do academic and intellectual work on the continent. In some places, academics can live on a decent salary; in others, only multiple jobs keep them in a university office. Some can criticize the state without fear; elsewhere, they have to remain reticent or leave their homeland. There are institutions emerging out of conditions of civil war, needing urgent assistance to have them and their researchers re-connect with the scholarly world. Finally, we recognize the brain-drain and the extensive talents in the diaspora. We have to harness, and use to the benefit of the research communities on the continent, those who have left but still remain committed to the development of the continent. My vision would thus entail the following elements:

To begin with, we need an audit or assessment of the social science and humanities institutional and research situation in various parts of the continent. We have to know where the strongest institutions and where the weaker ones are. The stronger ones in a region could be used

Shamil Jeppie
University of Cape Town
South Africa

to provide opportunities to the weaker ones. We have to know in which fields there has been growth or are potentials for growth and where specific disciplines hardly exist anymore. I would be particularly keen to know about the discipline of history and its cognates. We can divide the continent into regional groupings (or linguistically or any other way) in this investigation. The aim would be to know what to concentrate on in which region, in terms of fostering certain disciplines or certain types of research; or whether to intervene at all. This is potentially a labour-intensive and exhaustive exercise. We could begin with a few regional case-studies and collaborate with other pan-African bodies such as the Association of African Universities. Has CODESRIA attempted to work with the African Union and could this be a means to use the AU mechanisms? With some indications of the shape and human profile of the humanities and social sciences, we should be able to project priorities for the longer-term future of our research institutions and, therefore, for CODESRIA itself. Will there be any sociologists or historians in country A in ten years time? What should be done to reverse the situation? More-

over, what is the content of the various disciplines? Are they keeping abreast of theoretical or methodological developments internationally and/or in the global South?

The above exercise will look at personnel or human resources in various disciplines. It will also look at scholarly outputs, productivity, fields of study and so on. It is also crucial to have a good understanding of the actual institutions that make research possible: the research libraries and archives. Thus, we should investigate the quality and accessibility of our research libraries and archives. I know of a few very good ones and many really poor ones on the continent that are not serving the purpose they are meant to serve. Excellent research resources are fundamental to maintaining and cultivating a relevant and high-quality research environment. Therefore, we should try to provide the opportunities for institutions to be able to develop collections and upgrade levels of conservation in and accessibility to archives and libraries. Furthermore, ideas about what an archive means needs to be extended so that much more gets collected and conserved and many more non-official sites, artifacts and collections are included in understandings of it. Virtual libraries are advertised as a means of addressing some of the problems but we have bandwidth problems on the continent. Yet, we need to look at all these options so that our researchers can have access to what is absolutely necessary to work productively.

Furthermore, we should find ways of demonstrating to our governments and others the relevance and importance of the social sciences and humanities for the future of African societies. Development economics and political economy would be the most obvious fields where African scholars could be both constructive and critical. We have to provide ways of promoting these fields to further research agendas that could address African problems with innovative approaches developed out of local realities. A series of training workshops for younger scholars, 'sounding-board' meetings and conferences on pressing themes of economic transformation may stimulate these areas.

Far too often, research on poverty and related topics are undertaken by and for NGOs with no organic connection to the societies in which they are located. But such fields could be even more productive if placed in an inter-disciplinary context. We have to promote inter-disciplinarity; economists could benefit from historians and sociologists and vice versa. We can here also draw in some of the natural

scientists. For instance, on the question of solutions to poverty, the relevance of climate change to livelihoods and agriculture is clear. In the field of history, it is unthinkable to approach materials only as sources of transparent data to string together into a historical narrative. Every step of the way, there are multiple possibilities opened to how to approach materials and, indeed, the whole idea of what constitutes a historical source and archive has been both expanded and problematised. It is therefore important that we push our researchers into the frontiers of historical thinking and inter-disciplinarity.

Also, we should draw on advances already made, in other parts of the global South, in contemporary humanistic research. We could launch a few pilot South-South projects in specific fields. Areas such as how to deal with growing impoverishment and of economic development are productive ones to compare across the South. How to open-up the field of historical studies to greater inter-disciplinarity and new fields of research (medicine, sexuality, etc.) are also

possibilities. Perhaps we need a period of familiarizing more and more of our researchers with the advances in social science research in, say, India and Latin America through a series of short 'encounters' or 'sounding-board' events that could, over time, lead to more fully-fledged research collaborations. This would be a good way to proceed.

Finally, we should continue to innovate in the ways to work with Africans working outside the continent, to strength the research capacities on the continent. On the other hand, we should be using our resources to develop the study of African histories and societies in countries with large populations of African-origin and with a growing number of researchers among them intent on raising the levels of study of Africa. I am thinking here of Brazil where, in 2003, a law was passed so that African history can be taught at every level of the curriculum in that country but where the resources for this is rather undeveloped. CODESRIA could play an invaluable role in this issue and also cultivate its roots in Lusophone Africa.