

Research, Knowledge and Policy

Introduction

The scope, opportunities and challenges in social science research and policy-oriented work in Africa are immense. It is a difficult enterprise to single out which ones should be accorded greater priority. This is why strategic plans of social science institutions are indispensable as guides and road maps. The 2007-2011 CODESRIA Strategic Plan provides an important point of departure.

Changing Context and Focus

The world in which 21st century Africa finds itself in is not quite the same as the bi-polar world of the 1970s when CODESRIA was founded. It is now a world prone to periodic crises and turbulence. Globalization might have led to greater integration of economic, trade and cultural aspects but it has also resulted in marginalization and vulnerability of most developing countries. Crises that have been generated by globalization, such as the current financial and economic crisis, and before it the 2008 food and fuel crises, cannot be predicted with certainty. While precautions can be taken against them, most developing countries, including those in Africa, are often caught unprepared. This is similarly the case with contemporary epidemics, such as HIV-AIDS.

However, the periodic crises add on to long-standing structural issues, such as what has been termed the development impasse, dependency and internal conflicts, such as civil wars. The combination of these crises and structural deficits leads to various results, such as the dependence by almost half of African states on official development assistance (ODA) or simply 'foreign aid' to support their national budgets. Other manifestations of the crises include a weak agricultural base which leads to dependence on food imports and aid. Internal conflicts generate their own negative impact on development, state capacity and social cohesion. Resources which ought to be invested into the development process are poured into armaments, armies and destruction of infrastructure and disruption of services.

The social sciences in Africa are expected, not only to conceptualize this litany of

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crises and structural issues but also to contribute to their resolution. The priorities need to be plausible and pragmatic. Not every research or policy theme is of equal value or urgency. In our view, amongst the pressing priorities are those that relate to:

- **Agrarian and Industrial Transitions:** The development impasse will only be broken if there is a successful and sustainable agrarian transition that results in increased productivity, food self-sufficiency and overall accumulation that leads to investment in significant industrialization (note that between 70 and 80% of Africa's population is in the rural sector). Africa's resources should be largely benefited/processed on the continent to add value to them as well as to exports. Without these twin transitions, the development impasse will not be broken.
- **The Human Skills and Livelihoods Base** (ranging from literacy and skills for employability to basic health and nutrition): Literacy and basic education require significant investments. Without a strong education base, development will remain elusive.
- **Governance, Peace and Security:** Governance in the shape of sustained democratic transitions that draw from representative and legitimate political systems are indispensable for a viable social contract, peace and stability. As long as the democratic transitions remain reversible (in the form of coups and dictatorships) and unsustainable, conditions of stability and peace will also remain elusive, thus impeding the development process.
- **Regional and Continental Integration:** The majority of African states are small (some have less than 1 million inhabitants) with limited markets and resources. They would stand to benefit

from an equitable integration process at regional and continental levels.

These four themes could form the core of a priority research and policy agenda.

Relevance and Impact on Policy and Society

CODESRIA's comparative advantage lies in its significant contribution to higher education and academic research in Africa. While higher education institutions have experienced a crisis in most countries on the continent, CODESRIA has provided a useful service in sponsoring research, nurturing young scholars and providing research funding and fellowships to senior scholars.

However, given the enormity and complexity of the above-mentioned crisis, some of the following questions could be asked:

- To what extent does CODESRIA-sponsored research have an impact on policy at various levels (national, regional and continental)?
- Should research be undertaken and applied so that it has such an impact?
- Is it adequate for research to be disseminated in such form as theses, reports, journal articles or monographs? Is knowledge fully utilized if it is confined to these formats? Or should knowledge also be processed into policy briefs, policy papers and strategy papers?

In a continent with such limited resources, including research and policy expertise, it could be argued that there is an element of waste if knowledge remains confined to the academia. For instance, regional institutions such as Regional Economic Communities (RECs), and continental ones such as the African Union Commission, regularly address key issues and themes like food security, employment, social policy framework, migration and health strategy, to mention a few. These themes are taken up at experts meetings, ministerial meetings and even Heads of States summits. It should be one of the aims of a pan-African organization like CODESRIA to contribute its knowledge

and expertise, and that of its networks, to these regional and continental debates and forums. Most of such debates result in specific policy strategies or frameworks. Regional institutions such as ECOWAS and SADC, and continental ones like the AU Commission would welcome inputs and contributions from CODESRIA.

In addition, these institutions have compelling needs, such as policy analysis, monitoring and evaluation to which institutions like CODESRIA could contribute by identifying expertise from its networks and rosters to carry out these out these tasks. In view of the limited capacity in Africa's national, regional and continental institutions, it is a form of waste of resources if such organizations

as CODESRIA, with an extensive knowledge base and academic networks, cannot develop (amongst their niches) one for policy-oriented research. Just as we observed above that there is need for a beneficiation of raw material resources on the continent itself to add value to them, so also is there need to beneficiate knowledge to add value to policies, strategies, programmes and capacity of African institutions. In our view, this is currently a missing link in most countries in Africa – the link between research, knowledge and policy.

Parallel Processes or Synergy?

Drawing from the above observations, despite past constraints, institutions of learning and research in Africa should seek innovative ways in which they can

share their resources (knowledge and expertise) with state and civil society institutions. There is no single model under which this can be done. Some experimentation may be necessary. But the current parallel or silo processes are expensive and unsustainable in the long term. Possible synergies should be explored whereby CODESRIA's research and academic resources could be made 'user-friendly' to RECs, AUC, CSOs, etc. In turn, opportunities could be explored whereby these same institutions could be facilitative to the work and agenda of institutions such as CODESRIA. The crises in Africa are so immense and the resources to address them so limited that synergies and economizing of resources should be sought at every opportunity.