

Editorial

Crisis and Innovation

Africa has been given different derogatory names by the West. It was at one time called the Dark Continent! In the year 2000, the *Economist* in a major article came out screaming “Hopeless Africa”. It had its own motivations and evidence: “At the start of the 19th century, Freetown was remote and malarial, but also a place of hope. This settlement for destitute Africans from England and former slaves from the Americas had become the main base in West Africa for enforcing the British Act that abolished the slave trade. At the onset of the 21st century, Freetown symbolises failure and despair. The capital of Sierra Leone may be less brutalised than some other parts of the country, but its people are nonetheless physically and psychologically scarred by years of warfare... Indeed, since the difficulties of helping Sierra Leone seemed so intractable, and since Sierra Leone seemed to epitomise so much of the rest of Africa, it began to look as though the world might just give up on the entire continent.”

Really? This was ‘afro-pessimism’ at its worst, when most reports on Africa published in the Western media were very gloomy, to say the least. These days, it is not unusual for one to read articles in leading European and North American newspapers and magazines, as Martin Hall has shown, that depict Africa as *the* continent of the future. The question as to how Africa ended up in what was said to be a “hopeless” situation a decade or two ago (with civil wars raging in several countries) is ignored. Yet that is one of the questions that CODESRIA has attempted to answer through its research programmes and its Policy Dialogue Series. In one such dialogue held in Abuja in October 2005, One of the main questions posed to participants was: “How did Africa divert itself from its noble ambitions and its societal projects of yesterday to arrive at a situation where more than half of Africans live amidst violence (physical, structural and symbolic) and poverty?... The list of actors and factors responsible for Africa’s misfortune is long, very long, and goes from imperialism that manifested itself recently in structural adjustment programme, to bad governance.”* The truth, however, is that Africa has been and still is a continent of hope.

In the lead article of this issue, Martin Hall of the University of Salford, UK demonstrates that far from being “a hopeless continent”, Africa is resourceful, resilient and creative. In fact, the current tide in the global economic wind is a clear indication that the continent’s future is far brighter than that of the West. This is evidence that some commendable steps have been taken towards improving people’s lives, and taking advantage of the diverse business opportunities that abound in Africa. However, the hope of the continent lies on incremental innovation, one that drives economic growth and breaks existing monopolies. Such an effective innovation, according to Hall, is often a

long series of small advances that together constitute a pathway which will eventually triumph over spectacular assertions, whether in the form of new paradigms such as the Bottom-of-the-Pyramid or summary dismissals of an entire continent by an ‘outsider’ like the *Economist*. We now need to consolidate the gains, and put Africa firmly on the road to peace and prosperity.

Helmi Sharawy, in his article on Nasser and African Liberation, shows the importance and the need for oral history through his personal narratives on the actual actors in the history of African liberation movements, thus helping to fill some of the gaps in the written history of Africa. Oral history is also important in capturing social and cultural histories of societies in periods of social transformation because there are many stories going on at the same time to the extent that many might be left unrecorded. The complete history is thus eventually told by a combined effort of those who were involved. The personal narratives fill the many gaps that are sure to occur within official documents that may be biased by the interests and policies of the people in power. Going by his own experience in Egyptian politics, Sharawy shows that official history is often subjected to processes of de-construction and re-construction of facts to suit the changing moods of the main actors in power, or those who follow them. Thus, the multiplicity of narratives and personal recollections may help in putting certain events in broader perspectives, rather than a cause for confusion as some may think.

Ali El-Kenz, in his piece on the Algerian War and the independence of the country, reminisces on the struggle that gave birth to the independent nation, a struggle that took a historic turn on 1st November 1954, when the Algerian national liberation movement launched an armed struggle against the French colonial administration. In a juxtaposition of the paradoxical significance of November 1 for France and Algeria, he salutes the courage of those who dared to break all limits of negative predictions and pessimism to give Algeria a new birth, a new beginning, filled with hope and endless possibilities. He invokes the spirit of November, the month of Algeria’s independence, as that of a bright new horizon that will unfold more clearly with time.

Another very interesting contribution to this issue is that of Craig M. Calhoun, President of the Social Science Research Council, New York. In his article on the contemporary global crises and future transformations, he predicts an eventual total collapse of US hegemony. He is of the view that the US is likely to be the most powerful country in the world for some time but weakening gradually; and a key question is how the US will respond to this gradually weakening grip, especially with the emergence of China as a potential world power, possibly over-

taking the US very soon. Nations do not progress by chance but rather by careful planning. The reality of the world today, Calhoun argues, is that there are shifts in power and influence, and the major shifts are towards a number of different countries which will not be capable of monopolizing it; countries such as China and India, Iran and Brazil, Russia, and South Africa, might soon join Europe and the United States as world powers. As the world realigns itself, we in Africa need to reaffirm our commitment to our continent and people, and confront the bitter truth of our time in which the foundations of many of our states are shaky and the dignity of our people is barely guaranteed in the face of ferocious global competition for resources – including our own. That is the condition for Africa to take its rightful place in the international community.

When a great scholar decides to get involved in armed struggle, especially in present-day Africa, it must surely raise some questions in the academic community. This was the case when Professor Wamba dia Wamba, who decided to dump the gown for the gun when he decided to get involved in the Congo crisis. In an interview with CODESRIA, Professor Wamba hinged his dabbling in politics on the civic obligation that academics owe society, which makes it imperative for them to go beyond theoretical analyses to actually getting involved in the dynamics of implementation of those analyses. To him, this is the only way through which scholars can influence policymakers. It is also a good way to mobilize for development. This, of course, is debatable. But it helps in explaining why a high profile academic decided to lead an armed struggle.

In the last issue, we reported briefly on the 2010 Distinguished Africanist Awards won by N'Dri Assie-Lumumba and Tukumbi Lumumba-Kasongo, both professors at Cornell University, USA and committed members of CODESRIA. N'Dri Assie-Lumumba is a member of the Scientific Committee of CODESRIA and Tukumbi Lumumba-Kasongo is one of the managing editors of *the African Journal of International Affairs*, a CODESRIA publication. Above and beyond that, every time an African scholar is honored, the entire African scholarly community should celebrate with him/her.

Also reported in the last issue of this Bulletin was that former CODESRIA president and currently Director of the Makerere Institute of Social Research, Professor Mahmood Mamdani, had been honored by both Addis Ababa University and the University of Johannesburg which conferred on him honorary doctorates. Included in this issue are full texts of the speeches of the three eminent professors delivered after the awards by New York State African Studies Association, and the University of Johannesburg, respectively. Mamdani's speech at Addis Ababa was published in the last issue of the Bulletin (pages 48-49).

Concluding this issue, as usual, are echoes of the activities of CODESRIA Programmes at the Secretariat during the second half of the year 2010.

*See Olukoshi, A., Ouedraogo, J.-B. & Sall, E., 2009, *Africa: Reaffirming our Commitment*, Dakar: CODESRIA.

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