

Editorial

CODESRIA at Fifty: Surviving the Storm

The 16th CODESRIA General Assembly is set to take place from Monday, 4 to 8 December 2023, marking a pivotal moment in the history of the Council because it also commemorates its fiftieth anniversary. Founded in 1973, CODESRIA has grown immensely and blossomed into a premier social science research institution in Africa, significantly shaping African intellectual thought and re-asserting African voices in global discussions on a range of key thematic areas. It has become the reference institution for many on the continent, nurturing scholars and bestowing upon them a standing in academia that surpasses most others.

The fifty-year journey to transform CODESRIA into a standard-bearer for African intellectual production has not been easy. Unique challenges have emerged, stemming from the tribulations one encounters when seeking to build a research organisation in Africa. Unlike other places in the world, the continent has not prioritised creating conducive environments and frameworks for nurturing institutions of science, in particular, and knowledge production, in general. For those, like CODESRIA's first Executive Secretary, Samir Amin, who shouldered the responsibility of giving birth to this institution, using existing networks and personal relationships, including the 'old boys' network', may not have been a preferred choice but was perhaps the only suitable option available to them.

There is no doubt, however, that the challenge of institutionalising CODESRIA, avidly undertaken by, among others Abdalla Bujra and Thandika Mkan-dawire, was facilitated by their resolve and commitment. This was a commitment of founders, of creative thinkers who not only understood the short-term need but could at the same time forecast a longer-term agenda. They encountered and survived a range of storms, some natural and others man-made, some internal and others external to the continent. The institutionalisation of CODESRIA was unimaginable to some, since

a huge cohort of African students had been trained abroad, thereby convincing the doubters that the task of creating an epistemic community was possible only via training in Western institutions of learning.

Thus, the idea of a Council founded, organised, managed and run by Africans often felt like an impossibility. Nonetheless, CODESRIA has skilfully navigated a complex terrain, facing hot and cold wars waged by so-called 'friends of Africa' who self-identified as specialists and experts in African studies and whose journey of discovering Africa and claiming 'spheres of influence' over different countries or regions was threatened by the vigorous and unapologetic perspectives advanced by scholars convened by the Council. CODESRIA's pivotal work on a democracy, for instance, that advanced the state–society relationship as critical to thinking about power and politics in Africa, was finely framed in Mahmood Mamdani's *'A Glimpse at African Studies, Made in the USA'* (Mamdani 1990: 7–11)¹. On issues of development, one can contrast the work on the democratic, developmental state to the epithet-filled analyses framed using notions of neopatrimonialism.

A critical part of the challenge was ideological. The founders of CODESRIA envisioned a decolonised idea of Africa liberated from colonial influences and defined rather by a pan-African agenda woven by cross-cutting solidarities that transcended racial, gender and class distinctions. This vision of Africa clashed with prevailing perspectives within African studies that prioritised a colonial library and divided Africa cartographically into the south and north of the Sahara. In other words, the history of CODESRIA to date has been the history of a clash between an invented Africa and an Africa of the lived experiences of many Africans. CODESRIA has positioned itself to understand the lived experiences of Africans and committed to interventions that give voice to those experiences.

It is for this reason that the convening of the 16th CODESRIA General Assembly alongside the ‘celebration’, to borrow Ayi Kwei Armah’s fine phrasing, of its fiftieth anniversary represents a major milestone.² If one of the ambitions of CODESRIA’s founders was to support the emergence of a vibrant community of scholarship that gave voice to the lived experiences of Africans, then the Council has made significant strides in making this possible. Along this journey, it became evident that CODESRIA could never thrive if it was the sole luminary in a vast continent of perpetually curious people holding rich knowledge traditions of enviable value. The founders understood that CODESRIA needed other scholarly networks not only to complement its work in knowledge production but also to position Africans as key players in the continent’s policy engagement initiatives.

In pursuit of this goal, the Council hosted a few institutions in its secretariat. It also deliberately offered support to several academic networks in Africa, aiming to enhance their reach, complement the Council’s work and facilitate the urgent task of growing epistemic communities in Africa. The Council might not have come to the task of building an epistemic with the intentionality required of that exercise, but an epistemic community started emerging on a range of key thematic questions. Indeed, the Council’s leadership and key members also took the opportunity to facilitate the founding of sister organisations. Regrettably, not all of these organisations survived beyond three decades, reflecting the historically low life expectancy of African social science and humanities organisations. That CODESRIA has survived to its fiftieth year stands as a significant milestone.

CODESRIA has nurtured a community of scholarship whose work has been evident through the various programmes it runs. This impact is also evident in the vibrancy of its membership and the generational succession processes to which it gave birth. Despite the challenges, the Council has endured, a testament of the unwavering commitment of its members and the institution’s tradition of adopting self-correcting measures during difficult times. This resilience has been particularly evident in periods of adversity, proving instrumental during the onset of the pandemic and the various intrusive audits mandated between 2020 and 2022.

The Council, therefore, has every reason to celebrate. The best platform for this celebration is the 16th CODESRIA General Assembly, a platform that has grown into the largest gathering of the African social sciences communities every three years. In this General Assembly, we have brought together close to 350 delegates from at least 42 countries within Africa and beyond and it is my distinct honour to welcome our diverse community to Dakar, Senegal. It is also our honour to host a range of partners, the diplomatic community in Dakar and university leaders who accepted our invitation.

To kick off this engagement, the Council has prepared a special issue of the *CODESRIA Bulletin* for the 16th General Assembly and another one for the fiftieth anniversary. The variety of reflections in No 3/4, 2023 reflect on the history of the Council and provide testimony to the trials, travails and tribulations of growing a knowledge institution while also celebrating the triumphs. For No. 5/6, 2023, various contributors illuminate the theme of the Assembly, using case studies drawn across the continent. We hope that this collection of articles will give readers a sense of the journey travelled and the ideas that will illuminate this Assembly.

Notes

1. Mahmood Mamdani, A Glimpse at African Studies, Made in the USA, *CODESRIA Bulletin*, No 2, 1990, pp. 7–11.
2. As cited in Mshai S. Mwangola, Nurturing the Fourth Generation: Defining the Historical Mission for Our Generation, *Africa Development*, Vol. XXXIII, No. 1, 2008, p. 7.

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