

Empowering African Voices: CODESRIA's Role in Shaping an African Agenda for Knowledge Production

The establishment of CODESRIA's mandate in 1973 marked a significant milestone in the history of African intellectual and academic development. Over the course of fifty years, CODESRIA has not only thrived but also contributed to shaping the intellectual landscape on the African continent. This journey has been a testament to the resilience, dedication and vision of its founders, who navigated challenges and seized opportunities in the evolving landscape of knowledge production and dissemination.

The Council's mandate encompassed the mobilisation of the African social research community, encouraging comparative research with a pan-African perspective, promoting the publication of research output and defending the principles of independent thought and research. Moreover, it fostered cooperation between African universities and research organisations and established international connections, highlighting the institution's commitment to pan-Africanism and scholarly freedom.

We should remember that the establishment of CODESRIA occurred in a complex historical context, when Africa was emerging

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from colonial rule and transitioning to independence. The post-independence period was marked by political changes and the emergence of military and single-party regimes across the continent. These shifts posed challenges to the state-academy relationship and led to a gradual deterioration of academic freedom.

The international context of knowledge production in Africa was characterised by the colonial legacy, which limited the influence of African scholars and promoted external intellectual agendas. The Council was established as a response to these challenges, aiming to champion African scholarship, connect scholars and create a network for the dissemination of information in the social sciences. It also had to navigate issues related to language barriers, geographic isolation and a decline in funding for higher education, which further reinforced its role in fostering academic freedom and publishing African research.

Over the years, CODESRIA has played a pivotal role in advancing the cause of African scholarship. The institution has invested in promoting multidisciplinary and comparative research, nurturing younger generations of scholars and breaking down linguistic and geographical barriers to knowledge production. Its support for scholarly publishing and research initiatives, along with its focus on gender integration, has further enriched the African academic landscape.

Despite the economic challenges faced by African universities in the 1980s and 1990s, CODESRIA's programmes and publications provided an alternative to mainstream knowledge production, offering a platform for scholars to address critical issues on the continent. The Council's commitment to academic freedom, mentoring and connecting generations of scholars has made it a cornerstone in the development of African intellectual stance. I have been a privileged participant of this journey.

My first encounters with CODESRIA date back to the early 1980s, when I embarked on a mission to strengthen Guinea-Bissau's post-independence research institutional set-up. At that time, I sought the guidance

and support of prominent scholars like Samir Amin and Thandika Mkandawire. Their mentorship and the partnership with CODESRIA played a pivotal role in shaping my academic journey and the success of the new institution I was trying to establish in post-independence Guinea-Bissau. As we celebrate CODESRIA's fiftieth anniversary, it is essential to reflect on the organisation's remarkable achievements and its personal significance in my life.

One of CODESRIA's most notable accomplishments is its pioneering role in the production and dissemination of research publications. The organisation has been a driving force behind the creation of journals, monographs and books that have contributed significantly to the understanding of African social sciences. In my own journey, this support was instrumental in the establishment and growth of the National Institute for Studies and Research (INEP) in Guinea-Bissau. I founded INEP in 1984 and was its first director until late 1988. The partnership with CODESRIA allowed us to develop a robust academic publishing programme, with a biannual journal and numerous monographs, that helped INEP become a prominent research institution within Lusophone African countries.

CODESRIA's commitment to fostering a sense of pan-Africanism among scholars is another remarkable achievement. My journey, for instance, was greatly enriched by my connection with Mario de Andrade, the first President of the Angolan MPLA (People's Movement for the Liberation of Angola). Andrade's unique trajectory, as a prominent pan-Africanist and biographer of Amilcar Cabral, introduced me to

a strong network of like-minded individuals. It was through this network, facilitated by Andrade and supported by CODESRIA, that I gained access to a wide-reaching pan-African community. This network became invaluable in my ongoing efforts to contribute to the policy agenda of the African continent in the various leadership positions I have occupied, in international organisations and in academia.

A memorable colloquium on nation-building is etched in my memory, where luminaries like Samir Amin, Thandika Mkandawire, Mario de Andrade and many others gathered in Bissau to discuss a key topic for young scholars in a newly independent country. This event, organised by INEP, exemplified CODESRIA's role in fostering intellectual engagement, not only through formal academic activities but also through critical discussions on pressing issues. On another occasion, I was happy to deliver CODESRIA's prestigious Cheikh Anta Diop lecture, during one of its assemblies, on the trajectory of Mario de Andrade. In fact, I am proud to be the only African scholar who has delivered such a lecture twice.

The organisation's advocacy for the decolonisation of African research has been instrumental in reshaping the academic landscape. My own institution, INEP, benefited from this approach. The principle that consultancy would finance academic research, which we introduced, was met with strong support from CODESRIA. This innovative model allowed INEP to enjoy a high degree of autonomy within the state apparatus, ultimately contributing to the institution's growth and success.

CODESRIA's enduring support for emerging scholars is yet another achievement that has left an indelible mark on my academic journey. This support includes mentorship, research grants and resources to nurture the talents of young African researchers. My professional life began as Mario de Andrade's assistant, acting as his private librarian. His constant support of my career helped me construct what was then considered a unique institutional success story in a poor country, in part due to the pan-African network facilitated by CODESRIA. INEP set the stage for the fruitful academic career of a significant number of individuals.

The collective efforts of individuals like Thandika Mkandawire, Adebayo Olukoshi, Ebrima Sall and Godwin Murunga, among others, have had a profound influence in shaping the African social sciences.

Beyond academia, CODESRIA has played a pivotal role in influencing policy change. The organisation's research findings and evidence-based advocacy have contributed to shaping policies that address critical issues in Africa. My collaboration with Adebayo Olukoshi started when he was leading CODESRIA. I later became his supervisor when he was Director of the Institute for Development and Economic Planning (IDEP). IDEP, created by Samir Amin and affiliated to the Economic Commission for Africa (ECA), which I led from 2012 to 2016, illustrates the ability to bridge the gap between academic research and policy-making. This engagement at the intersection of research and policy has been a driving force for meaningful change on the continent. It is fair to say that IDEP always remained a sister organisation to CODESRIA.

On the editorial boards of CODESRIA publications, as a member of the Scientific Committee and in my role of sustaining donor support for the organisation, I have witnessed the impact of the organisation's achievements in nurturing an extensive network of scholars across the continent. I was happy to launch the *Journal of African Transformation* with Ebrima Sall, when I was at ECA, as a testimony of this recognition.

Research in Africa faces several challenges that need to be addressed while affirming African agency and the right to construct alternative epistemologies. Firstly, there is a historical legacy of Western-centric research paradigms that have often marginalised and exoticised African knowledge systems. Researchers in Africa are grappling with the need to decolonise research methodologies and incorporate indigenous perspectives. African scholars are working to promote the recognition of their own epistemologies, which may differ significantly from Western paradigms, and ensure that

their contributions are valued and integrated into global knowledge.

Secondly, limited access to resources and infrastructure poses a significant hurdle for research in Africa. Inadequate funding, underdeveloped academic institutions and the brain drain of talented scholars to more economically developed regions have hindered the continent's ability to conduct high-quality research. Building research capacity, improving infrastructure and fostering international collaborations are essential steps to address these challenges and empower African researchers to construct alternative epistemologies that reflect their unique experiences and challenges.

Lastly, research in Africa is often driven by external agendas, which can undermine African agency in shaping research priorities and methods. It is vital for African scholars and institutions to take the lead in defining their research questions and methods, ensuring that research serves the needs and aspirations of the continent. African

agency in research is crucial for the construction of alternative epistemologies that are grounded in the realities and contexts of the region, fostering a more equitable and inclusive global knowledge landscape.

In conclusion, CODESRIA's fifty-year journey is a testament to its remarkable achievements and its enduring impact on African social science research and intellectual engagement. Its role in publishing, fostering pan-Africanism, advocating for the decolonisation of African research and for meaningful policy change on the continent, supporting emerging scholars and bridging the gap between academia and policy-making are achievements that are deeply interwoven with my personal and professional life.

As we celebrate this significant milestone, we must recognise CODESRIA's pivotal role in advancing African scholarship. Its legacy continues to inspire, shape and empower scholars and institutions across Africa.

 

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