

CODESRIA at Fifty: What a Journey!

Introduction

February 2023 marked the fiftieth anniversary of CODESRIA, the Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa (the Council). As far as I can tell, the Council is Africa's premier social science research council and the oldest surviving pan-African social science council. The anniversary offers up a moment to celebrate the impact that the Council has had on the social science landscape of the continent and to pause to take stock and reflect on its vitality going forward.

The 'myth of origin' of what we know as CODESRIA traces its antecedents to the Council of Directors of Economic and Social Research Institutes in Africa. It is claimed that in the late 1960s the Rockefeller Foundation convened a meeting in Bellagio, to which several directors of African national, economic and social research institutes were invited. These participants returned to the continent determined to self-organise and coordinate their activities autonomously. Around 1972, the coordinating chair of the group of directors of research institutes, Professor H. M. O. Onitiri, Director of the Nigerian Institute of Social and Economic Research, spent a sabbatical year at the United Nations Institute for Economic Development and Planning (UNIDEP). Its director was Samir Amin. The discussion

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between Onitiri and Amin led to the Council being anchored at UNIDEP.² This origin may partly explain why, until 1992, formal membership of CODESRIA was institutional, made up primarily of African economic and social research centres and institutes. Whatever the validity of its origin or antecedents, the Council in its modern form was established in 1973, with Samir Amin as its first Executive Secretary and Jacques Kazadi Nduba Wa Dile (the Zairean economist) as its first President. Samir Amin's executive secretaryship was part-time, since the directorship of UNIDEP was his primary job.

In addition to getting the Council going, Samir Amin negotiated the diplomatic status of the Council with Leopold Sédar Senghor, the president of Senegal at the time. It is a measure of Senghor's commitment to creating a space for the autonomy and freedom of African social science intellectuals that the government of Senegal, under his presidency, granted the Council diplomatic status.³ (It is also why, as rickety as the vehicles

of the Executive Secretary of the Council may be at times, they carry the CMD licence plate – Chef du Mission Diplomatique – Chief of Diplomatic Mission). Subsequent generations of members and beneficiaries of the Council owe Samir Amin a debt of gratitude for the special status that the Council enjoys in the Republic of Senegal. Amin served as Executive Secretary of CODESRIA until 1975, still on a part-time basis.

Following the demands by the UN authorities in New York, the nascent organisation that had been harbouring within UNIDEP had to make a clean break away from it. Abdalla Bujra, a Kenyan sociologist, navigated the Council out of UNIDEP and into its autonomous existence. He would serve from 1975 to 1985 as the first full-time Executive Secretary of the Council. From its initial flowering to 1995, the Council was known as the Council for the Development of Economic and Social Research in Africa. Three presidents served at the Council with Bujra. In addition to Jacques Kazadi's overlapping tenure, they were Kankam Twum-Barima (the Ghanaian agricultural economist), Justinian Rweyemamu (the Tanzanian development economist) and Jacob Mwanza (the Zambian economist). At that time, Bujra established *Africa Development* as a scholarly journal. It was also under Bujra that the first 'national working groups' were launched as a core research vehicle of the Council.

Many of us in my generation became aware of CODESRIA during the tenure of Thandika Mkandawire, who was the Executive Secretary from 1985 to 1996 (having initially served as acting Executive Secretary in 1985). The Council took shape under Thandika in its current format – its sprawling publication programme, a plethora of research activities, vigorous debates within the pages of *CODESRIA Bulletin*, its mobilisation of the African social science community on what Archie Mafeje called the ‘Big Issues of the Day’, and its interventions to support new generations of African social science researchers in the face of the public funding crisis of the African higher education sector. Claude Ake (the Nigeria political scientist), Taladidia Thiombiano (the Burkinabe economist), Ernest Wamba-dia-Wamba (the Congolese historian-philosopher) and Akilagpa Sawyerr (the Ghanaian legal scholar and jurist) served as presidents during Thandika’s tenure as Executive Secretary.

In the period since 1996, the Council has been served by four executive secretaries – Achille Mbembe (1996–2000), Adebayo Olukoshi (2001–2009), Ebrima Sall (2009–2017) and Godwin Murunga (2017 to the present). Over the same period, the following have served as president – Mahmood Mamdani (1998–2002), Zenebeworke (Zen) Tadesse (2003–2005), Teresa Cruz E Silva (2005–2008), Sam Moyo (2008–2011), Fatima Harrak (2011–2015), Dzodzi Tsikata (2015–2018) and the current president since 2018, Isabel Casimiro. The election of Zen as the first female president of the Council in 2003 marked a significant shift in representativeness within the Council. Five of the last six presidents have been women.

In 1995, the Council adopted the current iteration of its name – Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa – while maintaining the CODESRIA acronym. Similarly, with the amendments to the CODESRIA Charter of the same year, the president ceased being ‘President of the Executive Committee’ to become ‘President of the Council.’

The Encounter: A Biographical Note

My encounter with the Council started in 1989 when I applied for the CODESRIA-Rockefeller Reflections on Development fellowship programme. At the time, I was teaching at the University of Ibadan. I had just returned from a conference in Nairobi on a research project on the theme of African Perspectives on Development, where we had presented the first drafts of our contributions to the research project. These were later published as *African Perspectives on Development* (Himmelstrand, Kinyanjui and Mburugu 1994). I stopped by the office of John (Johnny) Ohiorhenuan, a remarkable mentor and economist at the Department of Economics at the University of Ibadan. During our discussion, Johnny drew my attention to a new call for applications for a fellowship programme at CODESRIA, funded by the Rockefeller Foundation. This was the Reflections on Development fellowship, which provided opportunities for laureates to spend six months in a research institute outside their usual base and reflect on a theme of their choosing in the field of development. Johnny suggested that I should seriously consider applying for it. I had never heard of CODESRIA. Although the Nairobi-based research project had stirred in me several issues I

would like to pursue beyond the project, I felt totally inadequate applying for such a prestigious fellowship, which offered USD 25,000 in grant for each laureate. I was barely in the second year of receiving my doctoral degree. Johnny, a respected mentor, was a laureate of the inaugural round of the fellowship. He insisted that I should apply.

I got to work on the application and sent it in ahead of the closing date. Several weeks later, I received a letter formally confirming that my application was successful and that I was a recipient of the fellowship grant. This was followed by an inception workshop in Kampala, and then my fellowship period, which I spent at the United Nations Research Institute for Social Development (UNRISD) in Geneva, the meeting at the Bellagio Centre, where the laureates presented their reports, and finally the conversion of my report into a book, *Labour in the Explanation of an African Crisis* (1995). In the process, I got to meet Micere Mugo, Mahmood Mamdani, Thandika Mkandawire and my host in Geneva, Dharam Ghai. In many ways, this initial encounter would boost my career and lay the pathways for future research endeavours and encounters.

At the 1992 General Assembly of the Council at Novotel in Dakar, Senegal, I experienced an intense rush of adrenaline. It was the biggest and most pan-African intellectual gathering that I had attended till then. It was inspirational as much because of the lively debates at the different sessions – plenary and parallel – as the optimism underpinning the gathering. Against the prevailing subversion of African intellectual and policy agency and the turgid pessimism that enveloped discussions about

Africa, here was Africa's biggest gathering of its social science intellectuals debating the same set of issues with vigour and positivity – not avoiding the challenges of the moment but confronting them head-on. I had found my pan-African intellectual home. It was a home adorned with the splendour of the diversity of our humanity on the African continent.

The General Assembly was also the point of encounter of a different type. After having 'met' several scholars through their works, I now met in person the people whose works had inspired me since my undergraduate days. Among them was Archie Mafeje, who turned out to be quite human and humane and did me the honour of autographing his book, *The Theory and Ethnography of African Social Formations* (1991), a copy of which still graces the shelf of my library.

In addition, the 1992 General Assembly witnessed the arrival of a younger generation of African intellectuals at the Council, CODESRIA's Second Generation. It was a group who forced onto the agenda the issue of individual membership of the Council to replace the old exclusive institutional membership, and got it adopted.

For me, what the Council offered was a community steeped in intergenerational engagement and dialogue. The longevity of its leading members – from Samir Amin to Archie Mafeje, Thandika Mkandawire, Fatou Sow, Zenebeworke Tadesse, Mahmood Mamdani and Akilagpa Sawyerr – meant a veritable mentorship by stealth, which has been a core part of the functioning and cohering of the Council. In a context where we bemoan Africa's brain drain crisis,

Bachir Diagne once noted that 'CODESRIA does not suffer brain drain' – its members were there for the long haul. If there was a face you could guarantee would be at a CODESRIA General Assembly, it was that of Samir Amin. Only death prevented Samir from being at the 2018 General Assembly.

An Evolving and Responsive Social Science Council

From its beginning, the Council has sought to be a nimble organisation that responds to the prevailing challenges of the social science community in Africa and the continent's policy demands. It has strived to address the 'Big Issues of the Day'. Below, I touch briefly on a few of these and the professional challenges that the Council has met with commitment.

At the Council's inception, development challenges were of primal importance and relevance within the African social science community. Through its research programmes and particularly the national working group projects the Council mobilised the community to respond to the intellectual and policy challenges of development. Many of its leading lights were themselves actively engaged with 'thinking development' from the perspective of the global South, Africa and its specific countries. Samir Amin's position as the director of UNIDEP and his broader critical engagement with development concerns, under conditions of global capitalism, was informed by the emancipatory imperative of development within the framework of the Bandung Conference (1955). Scholars such as Justin Rweyemamu were intellectually engaged with the imperatives and challenges of industrial development and tackled policymaking within their

national contexts. These early works should serve as a resource for a new generation of African scholars seeking to navigate the development challenges that our continent continues to face.

As the continent braced itself against declining development performance in the late 1970s, the Organisation of African Union (OAU) released its blueprint for rejuvenating Africa's development, The Lagos Plan of Action for the Economic Development of Africa: 1980–2000 (OAU 1979). The World Bank would publish the Berg Report in 1981 (World Bank 1981), which would serve as the template for the fundamental macro restructuring of the African economies under the neoliberal agenda of stabilisation and liberalisation. The following years would witness the full-blown deployment of the Structural Adjustment Programme. From the Lagos Plan of Action to the Berg Report and structural adjustment, the Council responded in a diversity of ways. The pages of *Africa Development* and the *CODESRIA Bulletin* were devoted to robust and critical engagements with the documents and the emerging neoliberal counter-revolution. In 1985, the Council organised a major conference on Structural Adjustment in Africa, at the Ahmadu Bello University in Zaria, Nigeria. These interventions advanced not simply critiques of structural adjustment but offered alternatives. Many of the critiques of structural adjustment and the existential threat that it posed for Africa's development prospects were first articulated at the conferences and other interventions from the Council.

The early debates on democratisation in Africa, against the backdrop of the one-party state

and military rule, were driven within the Council by competing visions and rationales. The *CODESRIA Bulletin* was a platform of vigorous debate between the contesting perspectives on democracy. The ultimate question was whether democracy was desirable because it would stimulate development or that it should be valued for its intrinsic qualities. The debate culminated in the theme of the February 1992 General Assembly, *Democratization Processes in Africa: Problems and Prospects*. The General Assembly served as an impetus for further debates and several publications from the Council. In the context of a new wave of military coups d'état on the continent, it would be useful to revisit Thandika's arguments on the danger of 'choiceless democracies' (which hollow out democracies), the absence of deliberative governance and making democracies the handmaiden of neoliberalism. To support continuing critical reflections on democracy and governance, the Council established its annual Governance Institute, in 1992.

A major shift in the work of the Council in the 1990s arose from the struggle for the gendering of the social sciences in the African context and for gender equity in its governance processes. Drawing on the intellectual and organisational works of the Association of African Women for Research and Development (AAWORD) and its members, the intellectual work of the Council was robustly critiqued by AAWORD and other feminists in the Council. The result was greater attention and integration of gender concerns in the work of the Council, as well as a major publication, *Engendering African Social Sciences* (1997), co-edited by Ayesha Imam, Amina Mama

and Fatou Sow. The volume has been described as 'one of the most pioneering works in the field of gender and social sciences in the Africa context, and remains an authoritative text. It is an extensively researched and forcefully argued study offering a critique and directions for gendering the social sciences in Africa.'⁴ Nonetheless, a proposal at the 1995 General Assembly to have all applications and publications vetted for gender sensitivity was rejected by the assembly. This was primarily on the grounds of maintaining the epistemic openness of the Council. However, the Council continues to encourage epistemic sensitivity to gender concerns. And in 1996, the Council inaugurated the CODESRIA Gender Institute as part of the decision reached at the 1995 General Assembly 'to integrate gender research and methods into the mainstream of the Council's work'. The institute has run on an annual basis since 1996.

By the late 1980s, persistent violation of academic freedom had become a primary concern for the Council. Intellectuals lived under the constant threat of harassment, arrest, imprisonment and even assassination by state and non-state actors for no other reasons than the performance of scholars' intellectual duties. Many across the continent faced travel restrictions. The debate within the Council revolved around whether intellectuals should be demanding 'special' rights within the wider political atmosphere of authoritarianism and intolerance that underpinned the restrictions. Some argued that the right to academic freedom, rather than being special, is essential for the successful performance of scholarly work.

The outcome of the debate within the Council was the November 1990 symposium in Kampala, Uganda, on Academic Freedom and Social Responsibility of Intellectuals. This produced the Kampala Declaration on Intellectual Freedom and Social Responsibility, which was adopted on 29 November 1990. Together with other international affirmations of the right to academic freedom, such as the Lima Declaration of 1987, the Kampala Declaration upholds the rights as well as the social responsibility of intellectuals. It declares intellectual freedom as a 'fundamental right'. This includes the right to protection from harassment or intimidation 'for reasons only of his or her intellectual work, opinions, gender, nationality, [and] ethnicity', and the right to 'freedom of movement within his or her country and freedom to travel outside and re-enter the country without let or hindrance or harassment' (Kampala Declaration 1990). The declaration also affirms the right to form autonomous organisations and to the autonomy of institutions, and sets out the state's obligation to guarantee, affirm and protect the rights outlined. Equally important is the insistence of the declaration on the social responsibility that intellectuals bear not to be complicit in the violation of the intellectual freedom of others. They 'have a responsibility to promote the spirit of tolerance towards different views and positions and enhance democratic debate and discussion' (Ibid.).

The Kampala Declaration would become a seminal text and intervention in protecting intellectual freedom on the continent, with its provisions adopted in the constitutions of some African countries. To support the advocacy and implementation of the declaration's provisions, the

Council established the Academic Freedom Project and created a fund to assist academics who were facing harassment.

A different set of agile responses of the Council to the conditions of the African social science community includes programmes to support a new generation of social science scholars in the context of significant defunding of the higher education sector within the framework of the Structural Adjustment Programme. Among these is the Small Grants for Thesis Writing, and the Methodological Workshop programme. The decline in public funding for higher education has made the conditions for the continuation of the scholarly community dire. The Small Grants programme, the first such initiative, was set up in 1988 to provide financial and bibliographic support for students registered at African universities towards completing their master's and doctoral dissertations. A complement to the Small Grant programme is the Methodology Workshop programme. Again, this was in response to the crisis of solid competencies in methodology, which was increasingly evident from the write-ups the Council received.

In response to the depleted capacity of several university libraries to provide up-to-date literature for their students and staff, another initiative, the CODESRIA Documentation, Information and Communication Centre (CODICE), would acquire literature in each grantee's field of research and mail the stack of materials to them. The funding component of the grant was intended to defray fieldwork expenses and the cost of producing the dissertations. Several funding institutions and agencies around the world would later adopt this initiative.

The Council remains Africa's premier social science body in providing a range of programmes, funding national and multinational research projects, and offering various publication outlets – from the *Bulletin* to scholarly peer-reviewed journals, a working papers series (that sets out the cutting edge of intellectual debates and maps out research programmes), and the CODESRIA Book Series.

A Social Science Home for All

One narrative touted about the Council is its association with left-wing scholarship. This confuses its commitment to an Africa-focused and Africa-driven orientation with an ideological situatedness. The Council is oriented towards the agency and autonomy of Africans to determine their future. If the CODESRIA 'myth of origin' is to be believed, it is the same commitment that inheres in the 'nationalist orientation' to policymaking best articulated by the thoughts and writings of Mwalimu Julius Nyerere. While the Council is animated by African agency and autonomy, its selection process for inclusion in any of its programmes or activities has been driven by an independent evaluation of applications and manuscripts. This remains a central ethical approach to its works. This insistence on epistemic openness is at the heart of the Council's operations. Indeed, as I mentioned earlier, the rejection at the 1995 General Assembly of the proposal to have all applications and submissions to the Council vetted for their gender contents was not based on a dismissal of the salience of gender discourse. Instead, the argument that won the day was to avoid a prior imposition of a particular epistemic take on the social sciences.

To the Next Fifty Years: Challenges and Opportunities

The fiftieth anniversary of the Council is a moment for the unabashed celebration of an organisation that has weathered the storm and stands tall as Africa's most consequential social science council. The longevity of the Council is, in great measure, a testament to the determination and incredible sacrifice and commitment of those with responsibility for its stewardship. It has resulted from the dedication of its members, its funders and the support of the government of Senegal.

The following fifty years will require no less a measure of commitment and dedication by those charged with the Council. It must remain nimble in responding to the continent's challenges and those of its social science community. As the funding landscape shifts, the Council must pay greater attention to securing its funding base. This is an existential matter. The Council needs to reinvigorate its Endowment Fund. With the decline in donors' commitment to core funding, the Council must secure its capacity to respond to emerging challenges and opportunities within the African social science community. Most salient are the issues that are least attractive to funding agencies, in the short run.

As one generation hands over the baton to the next, we should all commit ourselves to a CODESRIA that does not suffer brain drain but remains steeped in intergenerational and interdisciplinary engagement and dialogues. The following fifty years require us to rededicate ourselves to the vision and commitments of the earlier generation that bequeathed



CODESRIA to us. It is our home; its flourishing should be our mission and collective aspiration.

Notes

1. Jimi Adesina served on the Executive Committee of CODESRIA from 2002 to 2008. He was Chair of the Programme Sub-Committee of the Executive Committee from 2005 to 2008.
2. Personal communication – Akin Tade Aina on discussions with HMO Onitiri.
3. Personal communication (conversations over the years) with Thandika Mkandawire.

4. Endorsement blurb for Engendering African Social Sciences (1997).

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