

# CODESRIA

*Bulletin*

Number 1, 2021

ISSN 0850 - 8712

## Editorial

This issue of *CODESRIA Bulletin*, the first for 2021, is released after a year that saw the global structures of knowledge production and dissemi-

nation disrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic. Africa has so far defied the grim predictions that prophesied immense numbers of fatalities on the continent. The spectre of poor Africans dropping dead everywhere has refused to materialise. However, the pandemic is not over yet, and we know that its adverse effects on socioeconomic and political life on the continent, as elsewhere, are already alarming and will be felt for some time to come. CODESRIA has not been spared the impact. The Council's execution of its intellectual activities in 2020 was affected at the level of regular programming, especially given that higher education institutions, which are focal points for most of the Council's activities, were shut across the continent and the cessation of travel allowed for little or no fieldwork for research.

As the world enters into the second, even third, wave of the pandemic, the implications for the academic community and its engagements remain in flux and will shift as new circumstances emerge. The idea of 'waves' provides an important concept for thinking through the pandemic. In its first iterations, the waves were understood primarily in terms of the emergence of the pandemic and its subsequent re-emergence after initial interventions fell short. However, there is a second sense, grounded in more epistemic consider-

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This Bulletin is distributed free to all social research institutes and faculties in Africa and beyond to encourage research co-operation among African scholars. Interested individuals and institutions may also subscribe to CODESRIA mailing list to receive the Bulletin promptly upon release. Contributions on theoretical matters and reports on conferences and seminars are also welcome.

ations, and it refers to the phases of knowledge and policies that sought to understand and drive responses to the pandemic. Happening largely in the background, biomedical scientists have been working to find vaccines and advising on public health protocols germane to stemming the spread of the pandemic. It is expected that as we know more the epistemic basis of the interventions will become clear. What is obvious is that such interventions will require a better grasp of socio-political contexts and therefore necessitate partnerships beyond biomedical science to include the Social Sciences and Humanities in the effort to address the long-term impacts of the pandemic on society. The Council will continue to explore new ways of adjusting to the uncertainty the pandemic has created and to think through interventions to help the continent respond with longer-term knowledge and more effective policies. The emergence of new waves and variants of the virus on the continent mean that the possibility for the resumption of normal social life even in the medium term is questionable, thus necessitating long-term planning for effective knowledge production and dissemination.

The lockdown of the previous year and the consequent inability of people to engage in regular economic activity deepened pre-existing economic crises in several countries. This, of course, exacerbated internal social and political disruptions as well as economic marginalisation. As the pandemic persists, so does its impact on society and especially the poor. Their vulnerability has been highlighted by the initial international response to vaccination, which has been termed ‘vaccine apartheid’, where the distribution of available vaccines is reserved for the rich and largely in developed economies who have refused to temporarily suspend ‘the World Trade Organization (WTO) Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPS) agreement to enable greatly increased, affordable supplies of COVID-19 vaccines, drugs, tests and equipment’.<sup>1</sup>

The context sketched above frames the reflections contained in this Bulletin. The articles in this issue address some of the concerns that emanate from the pandemic, albeit indirectly. The first, by Richard Atimniraye Nyelade and Dunfu Zhang, sketches the historical context of the origins of the notion of social distancing. They view the idea of social distancing as a strategy and illustrate its contemporary applications in the context of the pandemic. While it is perceived as a medical response to stem a pandemic, they document that its origins are rooted in negative racial histories and on stereotypes that include smell. The application

of physical and social distancing today, to scientists who need to travel for research, even on COVID, in different parts of the world, will eventually determine who will be first to produce knowledge about the implications of the virus, how that knowledge will be accessed and at what cost.

The next two articles focus on the work of Walter Rodney and indirectly also concern the historical contexts within which Africa’s current challenges have emerged and ought to be located and understood. Walter Rodney’s book, *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*, was published about half a century ago and showed how Europe’s historical interactions with Africa accounted for Africa’s state of underdevelopment. This underdevelopment has deepened over the years and has become ever more complex and pernicious. Ian Taylor’s piece examines Rodney’s political methodology and Africa-centred epistemology that, in many ways, gave agency to Africans and disputed external prescriptions and methodologies as the only way of thinking about African development. Rodney’s arguments, originally pioneered in the works of Andre Gunder Frank and Samir Amin, were later echoed in Samir Amin’s book *Delinking: Towards a Polycentric World* (1990), which proposed delinking as a strategy to undermine the exploitative tendencies that tied Africa to the global North and gave credence to the underlying Eurocentric framing of knowledge. Indeed, David Johnson’s piece follows a similar train of thought, tracing the historical evolution of Rodney’s ideas and demonstrating how they are useful for the younger generation of Africans and African academics who are confronting old problems in new ways.

This Bulletin also contains two articles on the recent elections in Ghana and the prospects for democratisation in the country. The articles, one by Clement Sef Nyarko and the other by Lloyd G. Adu Amoah, explore the basis of Ghana’s stable, if also occasionally dysfunctional, democracy. Sef Nyarko explains this in terms of political structures that inhibit the emergence of social identities within political parties by punishing self-seeking impulses and practices in political engagements. Amoah, on the other hand, sees this as a broader political culture that was engendered by the 1992 Constitution. He examines the tendency of the two key political parties in Ghana to mobilise for elections only for them to occupy state structures for self-aggrandisement. This, he argues, has turned the parties into ‘election machines’ devoid of any serious focus on improving the livelihood of most Ghanaians. Sef Nyarko argues, in addition, that the task for checking what he appropriately describes as ‘the

Gilgamesh threat' in Ghanaian politics rests with civil society as a catalyst for counterbalancing power.

The last two articles in the issue return to the theme of financing development and democracy in Africa. Richard Itaman discusses the origin and growth of the African Development Bank as an institution for financing development in Africa. He also unpacks the fact that although the bank is supposed to be an African bank for African development, its shareholders are powerful external entities that often work to undermine development interventions in Africa. This is significant, especially at a time when the bank will be required to do more to assist African countries to navigate the adverse economic implications of the current pandemic. In their piece, Jimi Adesina et. al. parallels the concerns over the power wielded by external entities. Their focus is on how aid is increasingly framed to craft conditions for governance in Africa, its deployment—or not—as a conditionality to rein in non-conforming regimes. In some sense, the article raises the important question about the often-

unspoken consequences of the 'Afrophia credentials' of academics and policymakers on intellectual and policy recommendations that rely on aid as a method of 'disciplining democracy', to borrow the apt title of Rita Abrahamsen's 2020 book. It is fitting that the Bulletin concludes with a tribute to the late Ernest Wamba dia Wamba, himself a lucid analyst of African politics who constantly emphasised the notion and practice of emancipatory politics, a politics in which aid conditionality has no place.

### Note

1. <http://www.ipsnews.net/2021/03/end-vaccine-apartheid-millions-die/>

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