

Keynote Address to CODESRIA's 30th Anniversary Summit
Conference
Dakar, Senegal: 10th December 2003

Some Reflections on the Evolution of an African Institution, an
African Social Science Community and a radicalized Social Science in
Africa
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Introduction

The story of CODESRIA is a story of the Institution itself and its leadership, of the growth of a radical African Social Science Community, and of the Historical Context – both ideological and theoretical – in which CODESRIA evolved and developed. To weave this complicated process into a tapestry which tells a clear and comprehensible story, is a difficult if not impossible task. But it is a story which must be told, even if imperfectly, so that the social science community at large, especially the younger generation, can reflect on both the achievements and failures of CODESRIA. For CODESRIA as an Institution created by the African Social community, with little help from African Governments, and no help from the Private Sector, or the WB and IMF, has achieved a great deal. It also made mistakes from which lessons can be learnt. But this is a special occasion of reflection rather than for glorifying our achievements or crying over our mistakes. Hence the story which I will tell today will be more reflective rather than the recounting of a very fascinating career and growth of this magnificent African Institution and those distinguished leaders who had the honour to develop, lead and guide the Institution. It is a great honour for me have been asked to be the story teller (because others present here could do a better job than me), and it is my duty to tell this story as honestly and as objectively as it is possible. My great fear however is that I might disappoint your high expectations. In which case I apologize in advance.

But where do I start? January 31st, 1973? Surely not! CODESRIA has taught me to respect historical processes – which do not have neat starting points. African social science research, in the narrowest meaning of this term, had its “beginnings” in 1964, in Bellagio, Italy. 1973 formalized the transformation of an on-going process in African social science research, into a qualitatively different and more dynamic process which has developed to present day CODESRIA and which we are celebrating. Even the acronym CODESRIA did not start in 1973.

So what is the significance of 1964 and Bellagio in Italy?

In 1964, the Rockefeller Foundation organised an important seminar at its Bellagio Villa in Italy on the theme of Economic Research in Africa. The purpose of the seminar was to review the type of research that had so far taken place and to discuss future direction in the context of post-colonial Africa. There were 10 directors of research institutes participating, two of whom were Africans (from Nigeria and Sudan) and the remaining eight British and French. The organisers were, of course, Americans.

After this seminar Prof. Onitiri took the initiative to form the first pan-African social science organisation which was called the *Conference of Directors of Economic and Social Research Institutes in Africa* (CODESRIA). By 1967, Prof. Onitiri was able to hold a CODESRIA conference at NISER, Ibadan, with an increased participation of African Directors of research institutes. Cooperation among research institutes was a central theme of discussion at the Conference. A Standing Committee was elected from amongst the Research Institutes with Prof. Onitiri as its Chairman. Prof. Onitiri continued to run CODESRIA from NISER and for the next three years began to set up a Depository Centre (a Data Bank).

In 1971 a Conference was held in Nairobi and chaired by Prof. Dharam Ghai, then Director of IDS. The theme of the Conference was "*Economic Cooperation and Integration in Africa*". At the Conference, Mr. Samir Amin was elected Vice-Chairman of the Standing Committee, and IDEP designated as the official CODESRIA Depository Center (CDC). At the same time a Secretariat for the CODESRIA Depository Center was formally established to be based in IDEP. Mr. Amin then proceeded to set up the CDC at IDEP and appointed Mr. Abangwu of Nigeria, then a lecturer at IDEP, to be in charge. In 1971 CODESRIA did not have a Charter and the Nairobi Conference decided that the Standing Committee should work on one. In the meantime, Samir Amin in his letter of acceptance to host the Center, had pointed out that certain changes in the Center would be necessary - "I do not believe that a mere cataloguing of research activities in member Institutes is all that is called for....", and that the publications of the Center should be "analytical rather than on a

cataloguing basis, and which would incorporate fundamental research results (original and print), conducted in member and other Institutes, Departments and Research Centers on the African continent"(6). I believe that the idea of change expressed here was the seed and the basis of transformation from the old to the new CODESRIA which took place on 31 January 1973(7).

At this point in this very brief background a few comments are called for:

(i) The setting up of the old CODESRIA by Prof. Onitiri and his colleagues was a nationalist's reaction to the direct control of African research institutes by former colonial powers. Also it was a strategy of positioning themselves to face the obvious American interest and intervention in African social science research and higher education;

(ii) The American ideological offensive in Africa had seriously started in the late 1950s through contacts with nationalist and trade union leaders. In selected countries there were offers of scholarships to the US on a large scale. And immediately after independence, there was the famous policy of "institution building" of higher education by the two major private American Foundations - Ford and Rockefeller - which financed the construction of buildings, provided equipment, American scholars and financed the training of African professors as well as of research. The Bellagio Seminar was thus part of the wider American offensive to inform themselves of what the Europeans had done in the field of social science research and to assess and possibly control the direction it was likely to take. The Bellagio seminar gave them a panoramic view of the social science in sub-Saharan Africa based on the wealth of experience of European research leaders of the then most important research institutes in Africa.

(iii) The Bellagio seminar, on hindsight, and from the African point of view, symbolised the three way but unequal struggle which, in all its essence, has remained with us to the present day. The struggle was primarily between the Americans and the Europeans. The Americans coming into a new situation (post-colonial) with the help of a strong resource base and organisational skill were trying to establish their hegemony in social science and higher education in general. On the other hand the Europeans, also facing a new situation, were trying to retrench themselves by maintaining their hegemony and control of the institutions of higher education, but without the financial and resources of the Americans, nor their organisational skills. The Africans - the third and weakest party in this struggle - at best tried

to establish their presence, but in general simply tried to survive the two forces, wary of the familiar and rather curious of the new.

(iv) The period immediately after independence ushered in the era of "international" social science in Africa. Hitherto, whatever established social science existing in Africa, was within the suffocating confines of the colonial context - almost entirely a tool of the state and controlled by it, and generally inaccessible to the Africans. Before and just after Independence the African nationalist movement was well versed with the tradition of the non-establishment and radical writings of Garvey, Du Boise, Padmore, Fanon, Nkrumah and other writers. But this literature was generally suppressed by the colonial powers and continued to be "underground" literature even after independence. Post independence and the the international recognition of African state, brought in the Americans, the UN, and the continuation of the European social science tradition and influence in the new institutions of higher learning being established by the independent African states. Thus in 1964 and long after that, many African research institutes were headed by Europeans or newly arrived Americans.

The ideological war amongst the cold war blocks which was spilling beyond Europe. The impact of this war was the steady penetration into African higher education of the "other social science" from the socialist block and other Third World regions. The "socialist social science" mixed or merged with the radical non-establishment and often suppressed writings of the African Diaspora and African Nationalist. The impact of this last factor is hard to assess, but one recognisable result was the dynamic growth of the "radical" or "progressive" social science in Africa in the late sixties and early seventies. By the early 70s, two important centers of radical social science had emerged – IFEP in Dakar under the leadership of Samir Amin and the University of Dar es Salaam where various tendencies of radicalism – Socialism and Marxism – were competing for the intellectual hegemony of the University and the social science community at large.

The transformation of the old CODESRIA and the birth of the present CODESRIA

In 1972, Prof. Onitiri took his sabbatical at IDEP and his presence there, in cooperation with Samir Amin, greatly facilitated the evolution of CODESRIA. By November 1972, the old CODESRIA had received a small grant from the World Bank for its Secretariat, and a promise from the Ford Foundation for a grant to support its Data Bank and workshops. Sometime during 1972, Samir Amin and Prof. Onitiri, for reasons yet to be disclosed decided to change the character of CODESRIA. Towards this end Samir Amin prepared for a founding conference of the new CODESRIA, the conference theme being "*Africa and the EEC*". The Conference was held at IDEP from 29-31 January 1973. On 31 January, the Conference constituted itself into the founding General Assembly, passed CODESRIA's Charter, approved 8 research themes and elected its first Executive Committee.

I personally believe that the "radicalisation" of social science emanating from Dar es Salaam and Dakar, was at the time, the necessary context which influenced and enabled Samir Amin and Onitiri to come to some understanding and to change the character of the old CODESRIA in early 1973. The prevailing debates at the time amongst radical intellectuals constantly condemned elitism and argued for democratisation of the States and their institutions. The pre-1973 CODESRIA was considered as a "club of Directors" and thus an elitist organisation. The Charter of the new 1973 CODESRIA made R.I. and Faculties as members thus giving the right to all researchers in the Universities to participate in CODESRIA'S activities. Hence democratisation was therefore considered an essential step to progress. Thus Democracy became a central problematique in the evolution both of CODESRIA as an institution, as well as in what later came to be known as the CODESRIA "mindset".

Clearly the old CODESRIA was conceived as a Depository Center - to collect, catalogue and disseminate information on Social Science research. The transformation in January 1973 ,was a fundamental change in the character and orientation of the institution, as will be seen below. This point cannot be overemphasised.

Before I move to a discussion of CODESRIA's struggle in the development of a critical social science, it may be useful at this point to briefly start looking at some of the real and objective challenges facing CODESRIA at the time of its transformation in 1973.

The first challenge it had to face was to set its house in order.

Samir Amin was the Director of IDEP, which was a UN institution. He had accepted to host the old and later the new CODESRIA at IDEP. He thus became the ES of CODESRIA which however was effectively being run, from IDEP, by its fulltime Coordinator – a Mr. Abangwu – who had continued the program of the old CODESRIA. The first publication of CODESRIA in 1973 was the African Research Annual, prepared and published by the University of Boston. The second major activity was a conference on Population Dynamics which was effectively organized and funded by the Population Council of America. And the money contributed to the old and new CODESRIA for the Data Bank and other activities, was largely banked in the personal account of Abangwu at Barclays Bank London. Thus the new CODESRIA had started badly – continuing the very activities, which it wanted to change, and establishing a reputation of dishonesty and lack of accountability – contrary to its democratic vision. Samir Amin took responsibility to host and develop an institutions with a noble vision but was soon facing a nightmarish situation. He had to put CODESRIA's house in good order. Fortunately the EC of CODESRIA was made up of highly experienced and mature scholars who agreed with Samir Amin's suggestion of reorganizing CODESRIA. The plan was to recruit a fulltime ES for CODESRIA and establishing it as a separate legal entity but to be housed in IDEP. IDEP was to finance CODESRIA's Secretariat on loan to be repaid when CODESRIA had raised enough resources. The use of UN funds to fund a non-UN organization (CODESRIA) gave fodder to the anti-Communist UN buearacrats in NY who ruthlessly used this situation to attack and undermine Samir Amin. The UN pressure on Samir continued until his resignation a few years later. But this situation presented a serious dilemma and challenge to CODESRIA.

In 1975 the EC of CODESRIA appointed a fulltime ES of CODESRIA who took over all the legal responsibility of CODESRIA. More importantly the ES faced the double challenge of raising funds for CODESRIA and also considering physically moving from IDEP. At this point CODESRIA was poor, no legal status in Senegal, bad reputation with the Donors and was being chased fro IDEP by the NY buearacrats. At this point the IDRC offered some

limited funding for the Secretariat but on condition that COD. Physically moved out of IDEP. Samir gracefully advised acceptance of this offer and helped convincing the Senegalese Government to provide CODESRIA with a rent free building and a legal status as an International Organisation with Diplomatic Status. By 1977, CODESRIA had obtained some limited funding, a legal status and a building to house its offices. From this point on CODESRIA had put its house in order but was essentially on its own with no institutional backing. To embark on its ambitious programme, it had to raise funds, a major challenge, and at the same time overcome the monumental difficulties facing the proposed programme.

The second challenge was the monumental difficulties of mobilizing the then nascent and fragmented African social science community

The third challenge was the raising of resources during that period..

The fourth challenge was to resolve some of the contradictions in its objectives – for example lobbying African Government for both funding and to accept COD's approach to development which was contrary to the government's own development strategy based on the advice of vast numbers of advisors and technical assistants from Europe and America

The fifth and most important challenge was COD's mission to develop and disseminate critical social science in Africa in the face of a massive opposition from African Governments, their advisors, and the hegemony of the Euro-American conventional social science

The transformation from the old CODESRIA to the new or present day CODESRIA represented a fundamental shift in the orientation of social science research in Africa. It was a shift from what was and still is considered as "orthodox or conventional social science" to what we then and hopefully still call "radical or critical social science" in Africa. While conventional social science was dominant in all Universities and their Research Institutes, and was supported by African states, the former colonial powers, as well as the newly arrived Americans, critical social science was at the core of the mission and vision of the young, fragile and resource poor CODESRIA. Its most important asset was the commitment of its leadership

and almost missionary zeal of those who ran the institution. They strongly believed that conventional and establishment based social science was not relevant or appropriate in explaining or changing for the better the African condition. Hence in the view of the CODESRIA leadership, there was a need for a radical and critical social science in Africa to be pioneered by CODESRIA – against overwhelming odds.

In the 1970s, when the cold war was hotting up, the term “radical” was equivalent to today’s “terrorism or terrorist”. Yet CODESRIA took the challenge to openly sponsor and support “radical social science” in Africa. However the term “radical” was soon replaced by the term “critical” which has survived until today.

In this address I will try – hoping that you will bear with me – to look at three issues. Firstly how far has CODESRIA succeeded in establishing a critical social science in Africa? Secondly what impact has this critical social science had on the African condition – since a fundamental aim of CODESRIA was not simply to produce knowledge for its own sake, but to produce relevant knowledge which was intended and expected to change for the better the conditions of the African people?. Thirdly have the real and objective conditions of the African people changed (forward or backwards) from what they were in the early 1970s when CODESRIA was established?

It is useful to note here that (a) the aim of the Belagio seminar was to assess the state of “*economic research*” in Africa; (b) the 1971 Conference of the old CODESRIA was on “*Economic Cooperation and Integration in Africa*”, and (c) the founding conference of the new CODESRIA in 1973 was on the “*Africa and the EEC*”. Thus throughout this period, economic growth and Africa’s economic relations with Europe were at the core of Africa’s social science research. This focus on economic growth or *Economism*, as it became known later, continued to dominate the new CODESRIA until the early 1980s.