

A Strategic Partnership Between CODESRIA and the African Studies Centre (Leiden)

In May 2005 CODESRIA and ASC entered into a strategic partnership in order to promote understanding and goodwill among scholars in general and within African Studies in particular, and as part of a desire to strengthen scientific ties, as well as to broaden faculty, student and policy-makers' experiences and horizons.

Although organisations of a different nature, CODESRIA being a network for the advancement of research and the ASC a research and information centre, their missions show considerable similarities and invite so to speak both organisations to collaborate. CODESRIA formulated its mission as to promote the development of social research in Africa; to defend the academic freedom of African scholars; to overcome all barriers to knowledge generation and dissemination; to strengthen the institutional basis of knowledge production in Africa; to advance the frontiers of multi-disciplinarity in social research; and to increase the representation of African scholarship outside Africa. ASC Leiden's mission is: to be a scientific institute that generates and collects scientific knowledge about Africa through fundamental and policy-relevant multi-disciplinary research on socio-cultural, economic and political phenomena; to contribute by its dissemination to better insights into historical, contemporary and future societal processes in Africa; to promote the global advancement of African studies and play an active and inspiring role in the national and global network of Africanists, with special attention to collaboration with and capacity-building of African institutes and researchers; and to exchange insights on societal processes in Africa with policy-makers in particular and the general public at large.

CODESRIA and the ASC intend to deepen their existing relations in the sphere of scholarly co-operation in African Studies and to develop new relations on the principle of mutual benefit and full reciprocity, in particular with respect to research and documentation. Both parties will promote joint research and

training projects, including as appropriate an exchange of staff; the development of relationships between their libraries and documentation centres, including through ICT, and to establish a regular exchange of their publications; to organise joint

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annual awards for MA and PhD theses in African Studies; to mutually support their publication series and to consider the editing of joint publications; and to consider the possibility of jointly organising conferences, symposia, seminars and workshops. It was agreed that both organisations would undertake joint activities to raise funds for the activities planned.

Research on Africa occupies an important place in many research institutes and universities in the Netherlands. However, the ASC is in the only research centre where so many researchers on Africa are concentrated, and from such a wide variety of disciplines. This combined with its library and documentation centre, makes it a unique and important centre of research on Africa. Within the Netherlands, social-science research on Africa is closely linked with all kinds of policy and development issues. Until recently it had mainly a rural orientation but an urban orientation is now gaining importance. Natural resource management, agriculture, sustainable development and livelihood strategies of the poor used to be important themes, followed by politics, ethnicity, religion and history, social differentiation and transformation processes, including gender and health care. Interest is now gradually concentrating on conflict, HIV/AIDS, poverty, youth, migration and climatic change. Culture, i.e. language, arts as well as the role of culture in development, is an important but diverse theme. Economic issues like trade and finance, law and demography receive less attention.

Research at the ASC itself is organised into three theme groups. Theme group 'Agency in Africa' has the view that understanding large-scale transformation processes requires a focus on agency in Africa, an approach in which the local actors' understanding of their circumstances is crucial. Their perceptions, ideas, emotions and even fantasies are taken into consideration. This theme group aims to study the processes of meaning and signification in which agency transpires, in the decisions and choices that people make and the hopes and desires they express. The research concentrates on investigating how these processes have a bearing on all kinds of political, economic and social changes in their livelihoods, or to what extent they are affected by these changes. The approach is both empirical and reflexive. The theme group's research focuses on three fields of study: mobility; power, contestation and confrontation; and issues of knowledge and reflexivity. The second theme group 'Culture, politics and inequality' aims to examine the political, economic and socio-cultural dynamics that generate new formations of political power and of communal, ethnic, occupational or political identities across Africa in the light of long-term historical, economic and social background factors. The term 'formation' points to the dynamic and processual aspects involved, including human agency. In this respect, it is of continuing importance to examine informal aspects of economic power and political governance in Africa, as well as the contexts of globalisation in both the politico-economic and cultural sense, as these impinge upon the very ideas of nation, state, society and social order. Conceptually and theoretically, the terms for the study of politics, conflict and national, ethnic, occupational and other social identities have to be rethought and redefined. The emergent new frameworks of local economy, society and identity in Africa will be studied at the level of national elites, urban society and rural life. The third theme group 'Economy, Ecology and Exclusion' puts issues of economy, ecology and exclusion at the core of its work. In general, the economic

and ecological context at the global, regional as well as local levels in which people have to operate in Africa are marked by a high degree of variability and uncertainty. Variability is a complex issue closely intertwined with poverty and exclusion. Exclusion can be seen as a result of these fluctuating economic and ecological conditions. It takes place at various politico-geographical levels and in a variety of socio-economic spheres and affects different social categories in different ways and to varying degrees.

Obviously the ASC maintains institutional ties with many other organisations in the Netherlands, in Africa, in Europe and elsewhere. The various institutional ties differ in content and character. Some are only directed towards specific research or library activities, others are broader. Some are more strategically oriented, i.e. at the level of the institute, directly linked to the core of its mission and initiated for a longer period. Others have more limited operational objectives; for example, all members of the research staff carry out their activities in Africa in close cooperation with colleagues from local universities or research institutes and sometimes with staff of non-governmental organisations and national or local government officials. These operational activities are often embedded in institutional agreements between the ASC and the organisations concerned.

At present at ASC, a number of institutional cooperation agreements with individual research institutes and universities in Africa are in effect, providing the framework for the collaboration of ASC staff and their colleagues in Africa in research and training, often with an element of research capacity building. Moreover, the ASC supports the development of book collections of a number of African libraries through the exchange and yearly shipments of publications. The strategic partnership with CODESRIA creates a long-term and comprehensive framework for the ASC for research and library cooperation in Africa that provides a more solid input in its strategic agenda and stronger feedback

on its activities than the common individual and operational types of cooperation—which are considered useful in their own right and will of course also be continued.

At this point it is useful to consider in particular cooperation in the field of research. The research institutions in Africa in collaboration with research centres outside Africa have an intrinsic interest in promoting a new vision of Africa and avoiding stereotypes. Over the past years there has been continuous debate about African Studies and the value of area studies concentrated in centres like the ASC. African Studies have come under the spotlight as a result of conjectural pressure emanating from the increasingly marginal role of Africa in the new global geo-political constellation since the Cold War. A second source of pressure on African Studies and social science in general is the anxiety about the academic foundations of the discipline, i.e. the failure of theoretical approaches in social science to deal with African realities, the impact of theoretical currents like post-modernism and post-structuralism leading to a 'crisis' in social science, and the question of who speaks for Africa, and on what terms.

Africanists have to continue what surely must be at the heart of any study of African societies, namely careful empirical research carried out in collaboration with African and international colleagues, while being mindful of Africa's situation in the world. The questioning of African Studies also provides opportunities. It offers a possibility for students of Africa to learn about a specific part of the world from a concentration of specialists from different disciplines, as opposed to individual scholars grouped in disciplinary departments. African Studies must remain important because Africans constitute one eighth of the world population and are also increasingly present in diaspora communities in other parts of the world. Whatever the rest of the world feels about Africa, the continent must never be

allowed to fall outside the scope of sensitive academic inquiry.

CODESRIA and ASC agree to discuss and share their visions on African Studies to promote intellectual development and the generation of new knowledge with respect to Africa. Both organisations aspire to determine a limited number of research themes, which have the potential to shift the terms of the scientific debate. Such research programmes will start with stocktaking exercises using the wealth of available information and will then try to push scientific frontiers ahead. One such research programme could be on alternative statehoods or alternative systems of political organisation. Another potentially pioneering theme could be the revision of Africa's position in the world economy. A format is in development for mutual research agenda setting, through participation in agenda setting meetings, seminars or conferences. From these agenda setting exercises common research programmes or projects will be defined. These could function within the existing structures of CODESRIA and ASC but could also mean the establishment of new CODESRIA transnational working groups and ASC's participation in those groups.

CODESRIA and ASC agree on the importance of empirically based studies, with a scientific and policy relevance; research should be open for collaboration between African and non-African researchers, i.e. the research programmes of both institutions under the terms of the cooperation are open to all researchers, and will aim at intellectual exchange, the renewal of the scientific debate and redefinition of concepts and theories to explain and analyse new developments in Africa.

Reciprocity constitutes the important underlying principle of the strategic partnership between CODESRIA and ASC and its contribution to African Studies. Reciprocity—working together and learning from each other—is in a nutshell how we will put into practice our cooperation.