CONFERENCE REPORT

RETHINKING AFRICAN DEVELOPMENT: BEYOND IMPASSE, TOWARDS ALTERNATIVES

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Established in 1973, CODESRIA, the Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa, is the pioneer and premier African social science research organization. Its founders envisaged it as a force to transcend the dispersal and fragmentation of knowledge production on the African continent, to foster a Pan-African community of scholars, to provide an autonomous space insulated from donor and other pressures, to break down gender and generational boundaries in the academy, and generally to strengthen African higher education and develop the skills and capacities to further the cohesion, well-being, and development of African societies. Among its many achievements the Council has, since its genesis, produced pamphlets and working papers, six academic periodicals, and more than 250 books. It awards grants for PhD research and supports a variety of national, regional, and transnational research programmes and projects. Its research agenda is shaped by its membership, delegates from which meet triennially at the General Assembly, the biggest gathering of its kind in Africa, to present papers, elect an executive, and discuss the future direction of its research activities. The ultimate aim is to create a research agenda that produces theoretical and empirical knowledge dealing with and accounting for African realities, grounded in a commitment to Pan-Africanism and democracy. The 10th General Assembly was held in Kampala, and the 11th, reflecting a deliberate policy of rotating through Africa's regions, in Maputo.

The scientific sessions of the 11th Assembly, entitled '*Rethinking African Development: Beyond impasse, towards alternatives*', comprised six plenary sessions, 24 parallel panel sessions, and two special lectures, with around 150 papers being presented in all. The tone for the sessions was set in the opening plenary by CODESRIA's executive secretary, Adebayo Olukoshi, who, in a paper titled 'Africa in search of development: what went wrong?', gave a qualified defence of the African post-colonial state and urged that development be rethought through a notion of 'citizenship'. Carlos Cardoso

argued for a return to the thought of Amilcar Cabral for inspiration, while Aminata Diaw discussed the unique ways in which Senegal has negoti-ated the contending pressures of individualism and communalism. In the next plenary session, 'Rethinking development and democracy', Yusuf Bangura discussed recent and ongoing research into ethnicity and demo-cracy in Africa, while Abdul Raufu Mustapha critiqued culturalist read-ings of the African state, exemplified in this instance by the work of Patrick Chabal and Jean-Pascal Daloz. Approaches such as theirs, he opined, laid the foundation for a re-colonization of Africa. Concerns about the possibility of re-colonization were a recurring theme of the conference, expressed not only in repeated denunciations of imperialism and neo-imperialism but in a pointed attack, in a keynote address, on the work of Stephen Ellis!

Further plenary sessions reflected CODESRIA's ongoing commitment to a transformation of the continent: 'Alternative socio-economic frames for African development', 'Gender and feminist alternatives for African development', 'Harnessing social policy for popular transformation', and 'Facing the intellectual challenges of alternative development in Africa'. In addition to the plenaries, there were parallel working sessions on themes including 'Theory and knowledge in the quest for development alter-natives', 'Re-inventing the state for African development', 'Gender in the quest for alternatives in African development', 'Regional cooperation and integration in the quest for alternative development strategies', and 'Harnessing Africa's wealth for the continent's development'. Inevitably, the current authors were only able to attend a fraction of the papers given, but, of the papers we did hear, our common perception was that very few of them were presenting original research based on fieldwork, and that, far from broaching alternatives, most papers remained wedded to either neo-Marxist or liberal ideas. There was much fulmination against structural adjustment and globalization but little constructive criticism beyond exhortations to strengthen civil society or empower women — ideas that are already part of the development mainstream. Indeed, few papers seemed to have really come to terms with the emergence, for better or worse, of a new poverty agenda in Africa over the past decade, a develop-ment that is surely in need of independent research. We were left wonder-ing whether the papers presented in Maputo represented the acme of research CODESRIA supports or whether their nature partly reflected the General Assembly's dual purpose: as a scientific forum and an elective body.

All the sessions were conducted in simultaneous translation, and though there were often glitches in the translation technology, the inclusion of Portuguese marked a welcome innovation in CODESRIA policy. These minor technical hitches were the only bugbear in a conference that was

smoothly conducted, lavishly catered for, and hosted by the impressive Joaquim Chissano International Conference Centre. In an era when the African academy in general has been subject to such swingeing cuts, it was heartening to attend a conference that was well organized and adequately funded — largely by Scandinavian donors.