CODESRIA: Four Decades Promoting Social Sciences Research

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Historically, the particularities of the higher education system in Africa have always conditioned the production of knowledge in the continent (CODESRIA 2007:2-5). CODESRIA addressed the shortcomings that resulted from this fact and adapted itself to the changing conditions in African universities. From the 1970s onwards, when the Council was established, political instability, economical crises, and the rise of autocratic interference from governments left Africa with narrow-minded and under-financed universities (Beckman et al. 2007:11-12, CODESRIA 2007:2-5). Later, a shift towards a purely commercial

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logic in the academic milieu also had a negative impact on the production of knowledge in the social sciences (CODESRIA 2007:2-5). The Council mitigated these problems with a diverse offer: basic formation courses and summer schools in research methods and writing skills, post-graduate scholarships, and exchange programs (CODESRIA 2007:11-13).

At the time of its creation, the founders of CODESRIA felt that another kind of issue also had to be dealt with. The locally rooted production of a meaningful body of knowledge about Africa was being threatened, they reasoned, not only by the decadence of the main African universities, but also by the adoption of Western imported epistemologies that didn’t do justice to the complexity of the daily life on the continent (CODESRIA 2007:22). CODESRIA thus promoted the production of “integrated, holistic knowledge about social realities in Africa” mainly by stressing in its research programs the importance of qualitative methods and historical contextualization (CODESRIA 2007:5). At an epistemological level, the linguistic divisions across the African continent also posed serious difficulties to widespread collaborations between scholars. Nevertheless, such a broad collaboration was accomplished by adopting four working languages: English, French, Portuguese and Arabic (CODESRIA 2007:33). CODESRIA now produces ten peer-reviewed journals, an annual average of 30 books and 20 monographs, and has become a quickly growing online repository of postgraduate theses (CODESRIA 2007:11, CODESRIA 2009).

While some historical, epistemological and linguistic problems and barriers have been addressed and lessened by Council policies, some new or recurring challenges still encourage a new generation of
scholars to contribute solutions (CODESRIA 2007:13-24). One of them is the expansion and rapid development of information technology. While new technologies make possible the growth of distance-learning in Africa and facilitate the collaboration between African scholars and Africanists elsewhere, they might also promote an undesired artificial homogenization of knowledge (CODESRIA 2007:17). Can CODESRIA once again provide a solid example, this time in the promotion of e-learning and responsible cyber research?

Another recurrent problem is the lack of financial support (Beckman et al 2007:39-40, CODESRIA 2007:39). While the quest for funding is one perpetually linked with scientific endeavor, the members of the Council fear that today’s active social scientists in Africa will abandon their academic pursuits in favor of more financially rewarding short-term consultancies (CODESRIA 2007:14). While the type of knowledge produced by consultants appeals to donors interested in short term returns and narrow fields of research, it is not the outcome of the holistic methods promoted by CODESRIA. Will this foreign-induced cash-and-carry research ethos pervade all the African academic scene, or will the joint efforts of scholars throughout the continent allow them to guide the research agenda concerning Africa (CODESRIA 2007:22)? During the next few years CODESRIA will surely employ its resources and influence to promote the second outcome.

REFERENCES CITED

ENDNOTES