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INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW
OPEN ACCESS AND OPEN KNOWLEDGE PRODUCTION PROCESSES: LESSONS FROM CODESRIA

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Introduction

It is common in discussions of open access to limit the issue to publications and dissemination. This conflates accessibility with recognition and representation, and supposes that competing and conflicting knowledge systems and ideas would be equally available and affordable if room were created for multiple channels of accessibility. Such enthusiasm and euphoria, while understandable, do not adequately account for the prevalent power relations that structure knowledge production into interconnecting hierarchies at local and global levels.

CODESRIA has some lessons to draw on from its experience of the past 37 years – lessons about the need to privilege and prioritise recognition and representation of the perspectives, epistemologies, and contextual and methodological diversity that inform knowledge production globally and locally; and lessons about the need to widen our understanding and discussion of 'open access' to go beyond just enabling access to knowledge and research results through a multiplicity of dissemination possibilities. It is important to discuss opening access up to different races, places, spaces, cultures, classes, generations, disciplines and fields of study.

This review presents CODESRIA, and its ever-evolving publications and dissemination policy, as a possible model to inform and inspire institutions interested in a comprehensive idea of open access in an interconnected world of local and global hierarchies, where producing and consuming difference is part and parcel of everyday life.

CODESRIA as an Open Access institution from inception

CODESRIA is, by mission, structure and character, an Open Access institution. It was created in 1973, a time characterised by the bipolar logic of a world of dichotomies and the ideologies that sustained them. From politics to culture, through economics and the social, things were often articulated in black and white and in absolutes, informed by meta-narratives of reality and humanity that knew no half measures and provided for none. Even scholarship and theorising were victims of such bipolarity, as they were expected to be either capitalist and pro-western (bourgeois/liberal), or communist and pro-Soviet Union (communist/socialist).

While most of the immediate post-independence era intellectuals in Africa were, broadly speaking, liberals or socialists intellectually (given that most of them were either trained abroad or in African schools largely tailored to reproduce foreign epistemes), they were all too conscious of the fact that the often nuanced and complex African reality was either not captured at all, or, at best, only caricatured by the meta-narratives and teleologies that dominated the scholarship of binaries and zero-sum games of the day.

Although social science is often at the service of ideologies, African intellectuals could tell that the ideologies served by the dominant social science paradigms and practices of the day did not serve the interests of the Africa(s) they knew. It is thus not surprising that among the founders

of CODESRIA were scholars like Samir Amin, who were very active in the quest for a third voice of Non-Alignment, advocated by third world scholars and politicians (Amin, 1985; Ngugi, 1986; Chinweizu, 1987; Mkandawire, 1987; P'Bitek, 1989; Mamdani, 1996; Zeleza, 1997, 2006; Mafeje, 1998; Obenga, 2001; Ki-Zerbo, 2005; Nyamnjoh, 2005).

CODESRIA was thus created as an intellectual space actively to promote, develop and sustain a specifically African dimension of that global quest for a third or alternative voice on world issues. In consonance with this ambition, the organisation tasked itself with the intellectual agenda of bringing about an African value-added proposition in social research, training, networking and dissemination of knowledge produced by African scholars on African issues (Ki-Zerbo, 1992; Hountondji, 1997; Nyamnjoh, 2004a; Zeleza & Olukoshi, 2004).[1]

To achieve this, CODESRIA, in line with its pan-African mandate, adopted, and has improved over the past 37 years, an open access model of functioning that privileges balance and representation along gender, generational, regional, disciplinary and linguistic lines, aimed at representing the realities and complexities of the African continent.

Although its natural constituency is universities and research institutes, CODESRIA draws on and promotes networking among members of various universities and professional scholarly associations, without being constrained and confined by the institutional cultures, bureaucracies and proprietary tendencies of these institutions. Its research and training programmes are organised in collaboration with these institutions and associations through a philosophy and practice of programmatic decentralisation.

On open access to publications in particular, CODESRIA monographs, conference and seminar papers, and non-current issues of journals are available in PDF format for free download from the Internet. Although its book series is not yet available for free download in the same way, its partnership with the African Books Collective in Oxford has bought initiatives such as Print on Demand, Google preview and e-books, while other initiatives such as Creative Commons licensing and CopyLeft are being considered. In addition, the organisation grants easy permission to all those publishers and networks requesting republication of its articles and book chapters for non-profit ends (Nyamnjoh, 2004b).

CODESRIA's governance structures (General Assembly, Executive and Scientific Committees) also are structured with open access in mind, through providing for recognition and representation along gender, generational, regional, linguistic and disciplinary lines in membership and themes. One of the organisation's cardinal principles has been and remains promotion of academic freedom (both from external interferences and internal contradictions amongst scholars and scholarly institutions) and social responsibility of African intellectuals.

It is also in the spirit of open access that CODESRIA encourages inter-generational conversations and networking in the form of collaborative research projects, research training and writing workshops, and mentorship initiatives.

The publications programme, set up to facilitate the dissemination of CODESRIA-supported research and scholarship, aims to, inter alia:

- *Promote greater visibility and accessibility for African scholars within and outside Africa;*
- *Build the capacity of younger scholars to engage in academic publishing through, inter alia, support for writing courses;*

1 See also the various strategic plan documents available on the CODESRIA website, http://www.codesria.org

- *Strive to be of the highest scientific quality, achieved through a rigorous peer review system;*
- *Identify, as much as possible, key institutions in Africa to host the editorial production of some of its journals for a period of time (minimum of 3 years and maximum of 5 years);*
- *Develop and maintain a creative and innovative strategy for marketing CODESRIA publications and research results in order to stay competitive in the aggressive realm of publishing* (CODESRIA, 2005: 5-8).

Publishing informed by African realities

In the social sciences, where objectivity is often distorted by obvious or subtle ideology, African scholars face a critical choice between sacrificing relevance for recognition, or recognition for relevance. The politics of the cultural economy of publishing prevents the bulk of them from achieving both recognition and relevance simultaneously. And those who seek recognition over relevance have only compounded the famine from which Africa suffers – a famine of books grounded in and relevant to the cultures of Africa. Starved of their own culture, people have difficulty garnering confidence and strength (P'Bitek, 1989; Ki-Zerbo, 1992; Mkandawire, 1997; Zeleza, 1997; Mafeje, 1998; Obenga, 2001; Nyamnjoh, 2004a&b; Adichie, 2009).

Even the most non-commercial, 'progressive' or 'independent' publishers and university presses hesitate to promote diversity of content, because they run the risk of putting themselves out of business by venturing away from the standardised, routinised and predictable menus readerships have been socialised to expect. Publishers uncritically recruit reviewers – who are arbitrators of taste, standards and knowledge – regardless of ideological leanings or cultural backgrounds. This implies that publishing is about policing ideas to ensure plurality without diversity in national, regional and global book markets. The future of African publishing must go beyond the market in its fundamentalist sense. Scholarly and other traditions are invented and reinvented. It is the place and duty of scholarly publishers, in and outside Africa, to populate a global marketplace with multiple identities and cultural conviviality and provide space for unique voices (Nyamnjoh, 2008).

Current investments in knowledge and cultural production by Africans are insufficient to ensure production informed by the lived and dynamic realities of Africans. Outside Africa, knowledge of Africa beyond popular stereotypes is poor. Given that perceptions are shaped and reshaped over time and given the importance of cultural diversity in a fast globalising world, conscious efforts should be made to develop policies aimed at eradicating 'cultural poverty' in and on Africa. Such policies should encourage the production and consumption – in Africa and the rest of the world – of cultural products created by Africans, who are crying out for the space and means to tell the stories of African creativity with dignity. This is not achievable in a context where global cultural industries are driven by the desire for profit, with few incentives for ensuring representation of the world's cultural diversity. Publishers could contribute to the eradication of cultural poverty through publication and dissemination of African books as cultural products. Publishers in and from Africa have a long way to go to provide for a rainbow continent.

Marketing and dissemination of CODESRIA publications

Distribution, the weakest link in African publishing, needs creative solutions, through existing networks and other avenues. Harnessing e-publishing and print-on-demand technology will make it possible to publish books that would otherwise be too costly to print in large quantities where markets are not assured. CODESRIA has achieved a lot in the marketing and dissemination of its publications outside of Africa, but much work remains to be done to achieve a satisfactory level of marketing and dissemination in Africa. Thanks to its partnership with African Books Collective (ABC) in the United Kingdom and Michigan State University Press (MSUP) in the USA, the organisation has managed to have almost all of its books available by Print on Demand (PoD). This means that, over and above the initial print run, books can continue to be made available for as long as there is demand for them, thanks to this new print technology spearheaded by companies such as Lighting Source. Currently CODESRIA has over 150 titles available by PoD, and all new titles are systematically available by PoD, while back titles are being progressively included.

Equally, thanks also to the partnership with ABC, CODESRIA publications are now featured under the Google Books Limited Preview Service, which makes it possible to sample sections of books online. There is evidence that these practices lead to increased sales, and together with PoD, should provide a secure source of revenue for the organisation. CODESRIA has also signed up to make books available in the form of e-books, as part of another ABC initiative. At a time of critical financial cutbacks by donors and a global economic downturn, the opportunities offered by these technological developments are most welcome.

The perennial problem of marketing and dissemination within Africa, however, remains. CODESRIA books are chronically unavailable among its immediate social research community where they are most needed. The experiment of establishing distribution agreements with booksellers in different countries has yielded few and mixed results. Where such agreements exist, CODESRIA faces difficulties retrieving the remittances when due, with problems ranging from currency convertibility to dishonesty. While there is a clear need for serious reflection on how best to establish workable agreements with booksellers in all regions or countries where it is active, the organisation could further explore more creative and innovative ways of marketing and disseminating its publications.

Future prospects for scholarly publishing at CODESRIA

CODESRIA has, over the past 37 years established itself as the leading scholarly publisher in the social sciences on the African continent. Ninety per cent of what it publishes is fed directly by the research and activities it sponsors among various social research networks, in universities and research institutes throughout the continent and increasingly in the Diaspora.

However, much remains to be done to promote research and publication in the humanities, as well as to create space for book manuscripts that do not directly result from CODESRIA-funded programmes. It is especially important, if the publications programme is expected to become intellectually (never mind financially) sustainable and competitive, aggressively to attract and maintain the best scholarship, in tune with the vision and mission of projecting African voices and perspectives, regardless of whether or not that scholarship results from CODESRIA-funded research networks.

While every social scholar should be encouraged to imbibe, internalise and reproduce the CODESRIA spirit in their intellectual and research endeavours, the organisation should by no

means be compelled to publish the results of research simply because it funded the research. To create such an impression, or not sufficiently to discourage it, would be tantamount actively to promote mediocrity and a situation whereby people receive CODESRIA funding with no desire to do more than the barest minimum.

To stay competitive and offer intellectual leadership in Africa and the rest of the world, CODESRIA must be at the forefront of quality and critical knowledge production, and this means promoting the best, most creative and innovative scholarship. Fortunately, core donors such as Swedish SIDA and SAREC no longer expect CODESRIA to publish all the outcomes of the various research activities for which they, as donors, provide funding. This is a welcome development that should enable the organisation to explore various possibilities of disseminating its research results in partnership with other African publishers and to use vehicles over and beyond the conventional channels of books and journals that are printed in hard copy.

We may live in a world where what sells is not necessarily what counts in terms of the ideals that led to the creation of CODESRIA and its Publications Programme. However, a purely commercial logic is hardly in the interest of CODESRIA, especially if such commercialisation means that value is going to be conferred primarily, if not purely, by what delivers monetary profits. Thus, if CODESRIA's mission is not to be diluted or sidestepped completely, its publications programme must embrace commercialisation only to the extent that this enables it better to market and disseminate the ideas, knowledge, perspectives, scholarship and scholars that it has over the past 37 years sought, often against formidable challenges and diversions, to promote on the continent and globally.

Conclusion

As an institution that funds, supports and publishes the research of various African institutions, networks and professional associations in the social sciences and humanities, CODESRIA is well placed to inform and draw upon developments and initiatives on open access and opening knowledge processes. Its broad-based intellectual and pragmatic approach to open access is particularly instructive, as the very question of open access should of necessity be informed by a series of other equally, if not more, important questions, namely: open access to knowledge, produced by whom, in what context and with what freedom and resources.

For open access to be meaningful, as we have noted above, questions of content and the epistemological, conceptual, methodological and contextual specificities that determine or impinge upon it are crucial. While CODESRIA's approach is still very much work in progress, there is no doubt it is relevant to the question on how best to build social science and humanities knowledge production in Africa, based on the interconnecting local and global hierarchies that shape experiences, both intellectually and practically. How well this is articulated will determine the future of open access as a critical process in the production and dissemination of knowledge about Africa. ❑

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