



## CONCEPT NOTE

### **The Intellectual in Africa's Policy Processes** *A Convening in Memory of Prof Abdalla S. Bujra*

**Malindi, Kenya | 7-8 April 2025**

CODESRIA is fifty-two years old. Although it was formally established in 1973, its ideational origins date back to a conference held in Bellagio, Italy in 1964 on 'Economic Research in Africa'. Among the ten directors of African-based research institutes invited, only two were African. The rest were either French or British. The stark underrepresentation of African directors at the Bellagio conference served as a catalyst for a series of meetings by African scholars in the late 1960s and early 1970s, which came to be abbreviated as CODESRIA (Conference of Directors of Economics and Social Research Institutes in Africa).<sup>1</sup> CODESRIA grew beyond meetings to not only acquire a recognisable name and institutional strength in the 1970s and 1980s but also earn legitimacy among African academics and policy actors. Many of these contributed in their own ways to strengthening CODESRIA's intellectual agenda and cementing the value of its knowledge to shaping policy processes across the continent.

Less well-known, yet profoundly impactful in shaping the intellectual trajectories of the Council and policy processes of several institutions, was Professor Abdalla Bujra. Bujra, as he was known in the community, passed on at home in Malindi, Kenya on 8<sup>th</sup> January 2025. His relative obscurity was not because his contributions were not of the magnitude of his peers, but rather because of his self-effacing character. Bujra was one of the last remaining founding members of CODESRIA having served as the second Executive Secretary of CODESRIA from 1975 to 1985. Prior to this, he had worked alongside the founding Executive Secretary, Prof. Samir Amin, to birth the CODESRIA we know today and put in place some of the institutional mechanisms that still define the Council. Together with Samir Amin and Adebola Onitiri, they organised the first General Assembly of CODESRIA in 1973 to formalise the organization. The firm establishment of the institutional framework of CODESRIA, and its emergence as a formidable organisation representing Africa and showcasing the best of its work in the social sciences, germinated and took root under Bujra's leadership.

During his tenure, he spearheaded and worried about growing the organisation based on a principle of institutional autonomy in a context where CODESRIA depended on external funding partners. The Council has embraced this principle based on Bujra's pioneering thinking on institutional autonomy, and subsequent Executive Secretaries of the Council - guided by their respective Executive Committees - have upheld this as the cornerstone of CODESRIA's engagement with

---

<sup>1</sup> The original meaning of CODESRIA was the Conference of Directors of Economics and Social Research Institutes in Africa. As CODESRIA's agenda evolved, it retained the acronym while redefining its full name, first as the Council for the Development of Economic and Social Research in Africa, and finally to its current iteration: the Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa. See the piece in CODESRIA Bulletin, <https://journals.codesria.org/index.php/codesriabulletin/article/view/338/342>.



those who support it. As a result, CODESRIA has developed structures that define its own independent intellectual agenda and can seek support based on this agenda. This autonomy explains why the Council has, periodically, turned away generous funding opportunities whenever potential partners define, in advance, the agenda they intend to fund.

The ability to define its own research agenda lies at the heart of CODESRIA's commitment to basic research and its resistance to research agendas defined in advance by predetermined policy dictates. In addition to prioritising institutional autonomy, Bujra significantly contributed to establishing basic research as CODESRIA's forte and worked deliberately to expand the Council's intellectual agenda. Under his leadership, numerous academic conferences, seminars and workshops were organised across the continent, addressing key themes such as industrialisation, rural development, economic integration, technology, population and democracy. As the intellectual community grew and mobilized, these themes evolved, reflecting the Council's dynamic engagement with pressing scholarly and policy concerns. The Council became interested in conceptualising the social sciences in Africa with an eye to presenting a critique of their Eurocentric foundations, conceptualising and defining the terrain of social science research in Africa, and positioning CODESRIA as the premier institution advancing African voices in the social sciences and humanities in the Continent. By the 1980s, the Council's efforts in advancing the social sciences and humanities were well underway.

The shift in interest towards understanding the evolution and role of the social sciences was in response to the increased mobilisation of the African social science community and the emergence of epistemic communities around specific questions and debates about Africa. This mobilisation was not only about expansion but also about entrenching the community as an identifiable pan-African network. The Council had begun to mobilise different working groups, a process that eventually led, in the 1980s, to the formation of research groups variously named National Working Groups, Multi-National Working Groups and Comparative Research Networks.

The Council's success was also affirmed by the launch and eventual coming of age of *Africa Development*, CODESRIA's flagship social science journal, which is publishing its fiftieth volume this year. Bujra also oversaw the publication of numerous influential books and scholarly works. Coupled with this was a deliberate attempt to deal with the historic fragmentation of African social science communities along narrow national, regional and even linguistic lines. CODESRIA introduced a multilingual publishing approach with translations of its publications in at least two languages spoken widely within Africa's intellectual communities. Translations from English to French and vice versa became almost compulsory at meetings CODESRIA organised. Bujra articulated the vision for publications and translations in his Editorial in the inaugural issue of *Africa Development*. After reviewing the growing literature on the study of the continent, highlighting gaps and numerous weakness that left an intellectual space for *Africa Development* to fill, he justified the need for the Council to focus on the problem of underdevelopment, arguing that existing studies were not illuminating on the fundamental nature of the development process. For him, the ultimate objective was 'to provide an opportunity for African scholars to contribute to the general development of the continent through vigorous discussion of existing development strategies, problems and alternatives'. Speaking directly about the purpose of the *Africa Development*, Bujra wrote, that it would seek to draw attention to the neglected areas of research in Africa and "to provide a forum for African (and non-African) scholars to debate on important issues as well as to make known the findings of their research. In this way, we hope to encourage



more relevant and policy-oriented research within an African perspective. The ultimate objective is to provide an opportunity for African scholars to contribute to the general development of the continent through vigorous discussion of existing development strategies, problems and alternatives. I am an optimist and therefore am sure that this challenge will be taken up by African social scientists.”

By the time Bujra left the service of CODESRIA in 1985, the image of CODESRIA as a pan-African organisation that represented the best of Africa’s intellectual contributions in the social sciences and humanities had taken shape. By establishing this sound basis for institutional practices, Bujra and the colleagues he worked with ensured that African engagement with global discourses shifted away from the colonial and Afro-pessimist pedigree they had largely been based on to a less racist and more political economy-driven orientation.

Abdalla Bujra’s work serves as both an important entry point and a vantage point for examining the role of the intellectual in Africa’s policy arenas. While this meeting is organised to honour his memory and commemorate his contributions, reducing these contributions to personal tributes of his life would be a disservice to his legacy. It is essential to also reflect on the broader context from which Bujra came from at the Kenyan coast, the academic engagements he undertook, the policy interventions he pioneered or led, and the implications of those policies on a range of actors and institutions across the continent and beyond. It is, for instance, useful to reflect on the “alternative to the scorched-earth market liberalization agenda then being pursued by the IMF and the World Bank” that Bujra led. Prof. Chege, in his Tribute to Bujra, argues that the DPFM which Bujra founded and led “took the middle position in the debates around economic liberalisation vouching for “market economies with social welfare benefits for all.” He further noted that in Bujra’s 2005 edited book on democratic transition in Kenya, Bujra advocated ““a struggle from liberal to social democracy””, not the hard-left Maoism of some of his former Dar es Salaam colleagues.” How have the ideas that Bujra advanced panned out in Kenya or Africa more broadly? and what elements of his thinking should we carry forward as we critically reflect on the current global changes?

This convening will therefore be organised around three formats: i) family reflections on Bujra’s life; ii) personal tributes from those who knew, lived with and engaged Bujra; and iii) intellectual reflections on his scholarly/intellectual contributions, culminating in an attempt to tease out the key issues that constitute our understanding of the role of the intellectual in Africa’s policy processes. The programme agenda is organised around these formats but also includes an afternoon visit to Bujra’s place of internment. Participants in the meeting include senior members of the CODESRIA community, former Executive Secretaries, former and current members of the Executive Committee and colleagues from the local Kenyan universities who knew or engaged Bujra in various capacities. We are also privileged to be joined by Bujra’s family including his two sons, brothers and sisters, and friends and comrades from Malindi and Lamu.