

CODESRIA's 30th Anniversary Celebrations

Central Africa Sub-Regional Conference

Douala, Cameroun, 4 – 5 October, 2003

Call for Abstracts

The Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa (CODESRIA) is celebrating its 30th anniversary this year. It will be recalled that the Council was established in 1973 out of the collective will of African social researchers to create a viable forum in Africa through which they could strive to transcend all barriers to knowledge production and, in so doing, play a critical role in the democratic development of the continent. As part of the series of events planned to mark the anniversary, five sub-regional conferences are being organised in Central, East, North, Southern and West Africa. These sub-regional conferences will be followed by a grand finale conference to be held at the Council's headquarters in Dakar, Senegal, in December 2003. The Central Africa sub-regional conference will take place in **Douala, Cameroun, on 4 and 5 October, 2003**. The theme of the conference will be: **Central Africa: Crises, Reform and Reconstruction**

The period since the 1960s in Central Africa has been marked by a continuous search for the most effective framework for the establishment of a representative system of government that can serve the goals of nation-building, the needs of the citizenry, and the autonomous development of the state. It is a search that has not at all been easy on account of the complexity of competing domestic and external interests at play in the struggle for the control of a zone generally considered to be so strategic as to constitute the very heart of Africa. The geo-strategic advantages enjoyed by the sub-region, coupled with the immense mineral wealth it harbours, as well as its huge hydro-power and agricultural potential, have made it important in the reflections and calculations of the pan-African movement as an indispensable factor in the achievement of continental unity and development. For these same reasons, the sub-region has been high on the agenda of imperialist interests intent on gaining access to and controlling its vast wealth. Sufficient evidence of both historical and contemporary nature exists to indicate a clear correlation between the persistent political instability in the area and the unceasing colonial and neo-colonial machinations for the control of its resources. As an evidence of this chronic instability and the huge toll it has exacted, one only needs to recall the number of military coups, successful or unsuccessful, that the sub-region has known; the civil wars already fought in the area and those under way; the number of United Nations peace-keeping and other diplomatic missions that have been constituted so far; the widespread availability of light weapons for the prosecution of conflicts; the repeated cases of massacre and genocide inflicted on civilians; the massive refugee problems arising from conflicts in the sub-region; the humanitarian emergencies that have been thrown up; and repeated experiences of invasions by mercenaries and foreign armies, among others.

Looking back into history, it is certainly relevant to recall that Central Africa witnessed some of the most brutal and oppressive forms of colonial exploitation played out in Africa, nowhere more so than in The Congo where the Belgians imposed a veritable reign of terror. The determination of the colonial powers in Central Africa to safeguard their interests and influence through various neo-colonial machinations, including the promotion of different divide-and-rule tactics, and the reduction of the area to a playground of the superpowers at the height of the Cold War, meant that across the sub-region, the transition to and after independence occurred in highly conflictual contexts. These contestations, which were to be woven into the fabric of domestic politics, had the consequence of weakening state and governmental capacity over time. They also took their toll on the economy and the environment for policy-making. Political authoritarianism, always a key feature of the state system dating from the colonial period, was reinforced as an important element in the strategy for the retention of power by different sections of the political elite. Within this framework, the project of nation-building that was at the heart of the nationalist independence project suffered as many setbacks as the challenge of state-building necessary for the advancement of the post-independence process. Similarly, the inability to respond to the challenges of managing multi-ethnic societies was compounded by the failure of political society to evolve adequate rules for governing itself and exacting accountability from its members. As the gap between state and society widened, the hope for the construction of a framework for citizenship that accommodates the diversity of the peoples and recognises their mobility across inherited colonial boundaries also diminished. The state upheld its rule through the deployment of violence and patronage; disaffected groups were themselves to take up violent forms of responding to their disempowerment. In consequence, Central Africa has not only known some of the worst and most prolonged forms of political instability in Africa's post-independence history; the region has also experienced a series of genocides, of which the 1994 events in Rwanda were simply the most spectacular and tragic but by no means the last, as recent on-going events in the war ravaging the DRC indicate.

Engaging with and re-reading the experience of Central Africa has become an absolute necessity for the African academy and the 30th anniversary conference of CODESRIA offers an opportunity to launch the appropriate reflection. Scholars wishing to participate in this exercise are invited to take stock of the experience of prolonged crises in the sub-region with a view to fostering a better understanding of their origins and dimensions, identifying the various on-going projects of reform and the direction of the current reconstruction process. Papers on the following aspects will be encouraged within this broad framework: the historiography of Central Africa since the colonial period; the geo-strategic resources of Central Africa and the historical and contemporary players staking their claims over these resources; colonialism, (customary) law, and violence in the sub-region; the emergence and nature of the nationalist project in the sub-region and the factors that militated against its full realisation; the sources, nature and dimensions of the crises of the state and state-building in Central Africa; the critical domestic and external actors and factors in the changing political economy of Central Africa; popular forms of social provisioning/coping strategies evolved by the working poor in the face of the prolonged crises of the state and the economy; the changing context and boundaries of identity formation, dissolution and recomposition; the quest for the realisation of full citizenship rights in Central Africa and the constraints posed by the inherited boundaries of politics and governance; the sources, direction, and consequences of population movement in the Great Lakes area; struggles for democratisation and the content of the quest for democratic renewal in the sub-region; changing inter-state politics and alliances in Central Africa; experiments in post-conflict reconstruction; and the quest for a regional framework for the resolution of the crises of identity and citizenship in Central Africa.

Researchers interested in participating in the conference are invited to submit abstracts of their papers to the CODESRIA Secretariat by **15 August, 2003**. The authors of abstracts selected will be notified by **20 August, 2003** and they will be expected to send in their full papers by **20 September, 2003**. All abstracts and full papers should be addressed by post, e-mail or fax to:

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