



CODESRIA SUB-REGIONAL METHODOLOGICAL WORKSHOPS FOR SOCIAL RESEARCH IN AFRICA

2006 Session for Central Africa

Theme: *Fields and Theories of Qualitative Research*

Date: 19 – 23 June, 2006

Venue: Bangui, Central Africa Republic.

CALL FOR APPLICATIONS 2006

One of the major weaknesses of contemporary social research in and about Africa is its lack of careful attention to epistemological and methodological issues. This weakness has made itself manifest at a time when the increasing complexities of the social dynamics that shape livelihood on the continent and the wider global context call for a greater investment of effort in the refinement of the procedures and instruments of investigation and analyses with a view to achieving a more accurate and holistic assessment of rapidly changing realities. But instead of such an investment of effort, we are increasingly witnessing an astonishing neglect or misapplication of theory and method on a scale and with a frequency that calls for intervention. At one level, the neglect that has taken place has comprised a serious trivialisation of basic research protocols and their reduction to a fetishistic evocation of superficial recommendations thinly disguised with ritualistic appeals to rigour that are not reflected in the analyses undertaken. At another level, methodological issues have simply been instrumentalised in ways that ensure that narrow ideological considerations and predetermined outcomes take precedence over science. Furthermore, it is not uncommon to come across studies in which methodological questions are outrightly ignored in the name of an alleged specificity or immediacy that amounts to the exclusion of African social realities from universal debates on the validity of scientific frames of analyses. The result is that in those debates, studies produced on Africa come across as a mix of purely literary discourses without an empirical anchorage or anecdotes hidden under a “scholarly” discourse that is not only pretentious but also vacuous. Consequently, the knowledge produced is bereft of heuristic value and simply becomes an element that, wittingly or unwittingly, justifies a predetermined set of economic, political and social policies. This is clearly not an acceptable state of affairs, if only because it impoverishes African social research. It is, therefore, high time that the social research community revisited and discussed the methodological foundations of cur-

rent knowledge about Africa in order first to put an end to scientific impunity as it manifests itself within and outside Africa, and give a new impulse to the African social sciences through support programmes targeted at younger researchers.

The future of young social researchers begins with an excellent mastery of core research processes and their patient application to concrete situations as demanded by their work in the field, the archives, and the library. Unfortunately, the combination of the prolonged crises in African higher education systems and the poor example set in the writings of an increasing number of Africanists who have succumbed to the temptation to take liberties with methodological rigour mean that younger African researchers are poorly served in matters of training for independent social research. It is for this reason that the CODESRIA Secretariat has decided to convene young African researchers to methodological workshops on epistemological and methodological issues in social research designed to fill the gaps in their formal and informal training. The workshops are meant to serve as a critical space that would offer experience-sharing in the basic epistemological and empirical prerequisites for rigorous scientific imagination. The workshops will not only offer insights into the current state of the art but also provide an occasion for a critical review of contemporary research procedures, tools and theories as seen from an African perspective. The major question which the workshops will address can be summarized as follows: How can the researcher productively establish a link between dominant theoretical approaches and concrete situations in the field whilst simultaneously taking into account the state of knowledge, the techniques to be mobilized, and the evolution of African societies? In answering this question, the workshops will privilege qualitative research methods and tools on the basic premise that the popular tendency to oppose quantitative and qualitative methods

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is due to a wrong assumption that the former offers an exactness and “hardness” which the latter is supposedly too “soft” and “fickle” to match. Without diminishing the importance of quantitative research and methods, participants in the workshops will be encouraged to explore qualitative methods of capturing African social dynamics which do not always or often find expression, fully or partially, in figures and which are, therefore, lost to those who are wedded to rigid and exclusively quantitative approaches.

The 2006 session of the CODESRIA sub-regional methodological workshops will explore the conditions for the employment and validation of qualitative perspectives in African contexts. To this end, the workshops will be open to all the social research disciplines. These disciplines are uniformly confronted with broadly similar difficulties of understanding social reality and the challenges posed by techniques of data collection and analysis, which, on account of their “qualitative” nature, are suspected by some to be seriously lacking in scientific rigour. Each workshop will have the following concerns at its core:

A critical assessment of the distinction between “quantitative” and “qualitative” research with particular attention to the question of measurement in the social sciences. Participants will be taken through presentations and exercises aimed at showing that the mode of processing data that is collected depends both on the field constraints encountered and the paradigmatic options of data interpretation that are available. The procedures for the “quantification” of “qualitative” approaches will also be reviewed through discussions on the distinction between the non-metrical and “comprehensive” presentation of data and the more mathematical renditions favoured by the quantitativists.

A presentation of the methodological principles of “object construction” which enables the researcher to transcend the illusions of immediate knowledge and undertake a hypothetical reconstruction of social reality. This demands that the status of the researcher, as well as the systematic role of theories and tools be subjected to intense epistemological control.

An assessment of various techniques of data collection and “fact-finding” instruments available to the researcher. The usual tools of qualitative research such as interviews, observation, archival studies, and the less usual ones such as photography, will be reviewed, so as to locate their potentiality for construction of successful research projects.

The Central Africa edition of the methodological workshops is designed for doctoral students and young, mid-career African researchers resident in Central Africa. The working languages to be employed during the

workshop will be English and French. The session will be led by a director who will be assisted by a team of three lecturers, all with an acknowledged expertise in the application of social science research methods. Senior researchers wishing to be considered for a role as resource persons are invited to send an application which indicates their interest and includes their current CV and an outline of issues they would like to cover in four lectures of two hours each. The outline submitted should be detailed enough to enable the director of the workshop compile a syllabus for the guidance of the resource persons and laureates. Apart from the actual preparation of lectures and field visits, the resource persons will also be expected to submit a bibliographic list of texts relevant to the theme of the workshop and which can be made available to the laureates.

As to the advanced postgraduate scholars and younger, mid-career researchers wishing to be considered for participation in the workshop, they are also required to submit an application that should comprise the following:

- A letter of motivation which should also clearly indicate the area of research or topic on which they are working;
- A statement of their research project (maximum of three to five pages) stating clearly the problematic that is being addressed, the kinds of field research to be undertaken, the theoretical and methodological framework being used, as well as the methodological and epistemological problems encountered;
- A detailed and up-to-date curriculum vitae;
- Two reference letters, one of which must be from the thesis supervisor and the other from the head of the department in which the applicant is registered. The reference letter from the supervisor is expected to address the relevance of the research project, the state of progress of the research and the theoretical and methodological approaches used, as well as the results expected. The reference letter from the head of the department is expected to attest to the qualities and academic potential of the candidate; and
- A letter confirming the institutional affiliation of the applicant.

Applications will be selected on basis of the innovative nature of the research question being addressed, a commitment to gender balance that is central to CODESRIA’s institutional strategy, and the desire for a geographical diversity that will, in itself, constitute an important aspect of the learning experience at the workshops. Applications must be submitted by **10 May, 2006**. They should be sent to:

**CODESRIA, P.O. Box: 3304,
Dakar, CP 18524 – Senegal.**

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