



## CODESRIA MULTINATIONAL WORKING GROUPS

# Theme: *YOUTH AND IDENTITY IN AFRICA*

## Call for Proposals

### Background

The Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa (CODESRIA) invites proposals from researchers for consideration for possible inclusion in its new Multinational Working Group (MWG) on the theme of *Youth and Identity in Africa*. Youth and youth identity is one of the thematic areas at the heart of the current intellectual agenda of the Council; Child and Youth Studies are also established as a core activity in CODESRIA programming. The MWG is the flagship research vehicle employed by CODESRIA for the promotion of multi-country, multi-disciplinary and inter-generational reflections on critical questions of concern to the African social research community. Each MWG is led by two to three coordinators and includes a maximum of fifteen researchers. Three experienced scholars are designated as independent reviewers who serve as discussants during the meetings of the group. The average life span of an MWG is two years during which all aspects of the research process are expected to be completed and the final results prepared for publication in the CODESRIA Book Series. More details on the MWG and CODESRIA's activities are available on the Council's website: [www.codesria.org](http://www.codesria.org).

### The Youth Question in Africa

For about two decades now, CODESRIA has pro-actively invested an increasing share of its resources in the study of various dimensions of the Youth Question in Africa. The terrain of Child and Youth Studies is, however, a truly vast and permanently evolving one, changing almost in tandem with the constant shifts that occur in the contexts and networks that structure the experiences of the youth, the mix of factors and processes that underpin the exercise by young people of their agency, the changes in self-perception and perception of society by different generations of young people, and the gendered and other social dynamics by which similarities, convergences and differences between young females and males in society are played out. These changes have been monitored and analysed to varying degrees by CODESRIA through different programme initiatives undertaken independently and collaboratively over the last decade. Without doubt, some of the results flowing from the studies have yielded very

useful insights, including alternative interpretative frames for understanding armed conflicts in such places as Sierra Leone and Liberia. But there is equally no doubt that much more work remains to be done, especially where the possibility for empirically-grounded longitudinal research can be employed to help further sharpen insights and better inform the policy choices that are made. In the context of the radical economic, social and political changes that have occurred across Africa over the period from the early 1980s when many national economies went into crises that carried huge social and political implications, clear shifts in youth aspiration and identity have taken place which have been the objects of anecdotal observations and passing reflections but not systematic academic analyses. It is this gap in knowledge production on the African youth which the proposed MWG is designed to fill and researchers who have followed the trends in youth aspiration and identity during the last twenty to twenty-five years are invited to submit proposals that could help to deepen empirical analyses of the changes occurring and enrich theoretical discussions on the Youth Question.

The broad-ranging social, economic and political changes that have occurred in Africa over the last twenty to twenty-five years have affected all layers and sectors of African societies but perhaps no group has felt a greater impact than the youth if only because young persons constitute a very high and growing proportion of the populace. The changes that have been witnessed have generated a radical shift in perception and expectation that bear both on the family and the wider society. They have also resulted in a shift in the composition of aspirations and calculation of livelihood strategies. The changes have all added up to generate a complex politics of identity among the youth that ranges from those underpinned by new forms of cultural/artistic creation and representation to those driven by violence and/or crime and those informed by movement-based claims on the political system that speak the language of inclusion and representation or which entail an immersion in new virtual/transnational communities and networks. But these changes have not all or always been defined in clear or articulate political terms, or been grounded in projects of societal renewal and transformation; indeed, many are perceptible only because of their manifestation

in the socio-cultural arena as mediated, for example, by new customs and habits, modes of dressing, musical preferences, eating habits, hair styles, modes of communication, and (leisure) sports that conventional sociological analysis is tempted to categorise as counter-cultural or rebellious. The changes have also embodied and underscored the multiple pressures to which young people are exposed and the multiplicity of identities that they bear.

In the face of the far-reaching changes that have unfolded in the African economic, social and political landscape over the last two and half decades, the challenges posed by the current demographic trends on the continent, the on-going re-definition of the nature of the rural-urban nexus, the accelerated processes of urbanisation that are taking place and which have been accompanied by heightened processes of internal and international migrations, the on-going decomposition and recomposition of "tradition" and the family, the consequences associated with the down-sizing of the state, the erosion of local institutions and processes of policy-making, the technology-driven compression of time and space, and the emergence and spread of virtual communities associated with the contemporary processes of globalisation, it is legitimate to wonder whether the inherited paradigms and tools of analyses on which mainstream Child and Youth Studies have been grounded are still relevant and sufficient for the challenges they are needed to address. Participants in the proposed MWG will be invited to question the dominant concepts and methodologies on the basis of which the Youth Question has been studied thus far and to strive for alternative interpretative instruments that are more attuned to the tasks at hand. They will be encouraged to do so with an awareness that it is no longer enough to seek to understand the youth only in terms of their future but rather to historicise their present which is itself in urgent need of being lived and built. They will also be supported to employ an approach which treats the youth not merely as (passive) objects of history and development but subjects in their own right and in relation to other social groups actively engaged in the making and restructuring of the environment they inhabit.

Of the numerous issues that are deemed to have a major impact on the making and re-making of youth identity in contemporary Africa, none has attracted more interest than the on-going processes of globalisation. The proposed CODESRIA MWG will seek to engage the globalisation-local youth identity formation nexus not because it is the only or even most important historical and contextual factor and process that matters but because in Africa, as perhaps elsewhere, its numerous implications for societies are more clearly visible on the youth. The reason for this may not be too far-fetched: For better or for worse, young people constitute the main segment of society that is most open – and/or vulnerable - to external influences, especially cultural ones. From rap to hip-hop through to cabo-love music, artistic/cultural trends are among the most interesting indicators of the multiple exchanges that are taking place in the contemporary period between global and local values. Reciprocal influences among differing cultures

have been deepening and unfolding at a much quicker pace than ever. A global culture of consumption has emerged through such products as coca-cola, jeans and Michel Jordan sneakers, which are all linking the African youth to youths in other parts of the world from New York and Rio de Janeiro to Moscow, Paris and Reykjavik. In the hands of the youth, the various symbols of their engagement with modernity carry contradictory meanings that are connected to local histories and struggles through which they are formatted and changed in accordance with the exigencies of location and the "traditions" that underpin it. In this sense, rap music from Côte d'Ivoire or Senegal is not a mere carbon copy or crude reproduction of what is being produced in the USA. When it is re-worked according to a particular social context, by adding local elements to it (language, instruments, lyrics, rhythms, melodies and metaphors), rap music not only speaks directly to the local context but also resonates with other genres of youth music within and outside Africa. It is in this sense that it is possible to speak meaningfully of a global culture linking the youth in Adjamé (Côte d'Ivoire) to those in Medina (Senegal), Harlem (USA) and Copa Cabana (Brazil). In all of these artistic/cultural trends, be they African, European, or American-inspired, it is possible to find contradictory elements that reproduce and even celebrate consumer society as much as they critique and contest it with a view to challenging the commercial power and political logic that underpins it. .

New (digital and audiovisual) technologies are also leading to a quest for new narratives (history, experiences and aspirations) that could extend and foster the frontiers of the free imagination of the youth. In this connection, there is a need to pay attention to the role which leisure and culture play in the building of youth identity side-by-side with the daily problems of poverty, corruption, and a boring and threatening present, as well as an uncertain future with which young people have to contend. There is also a need to study African youths and their movements both in their own right and in terms of the ways in which they compare to and possibly serve as models for youth action and associational life in other parts of the world. Furthermore, whether it is the youth movements of the 1970s in Soweto, South Africa, or the Palestinian Intifada of the 1980s, there is an urgent need to come to terms with the fact that the youth is leading struggles and movements of contestation that are characterised as much by their intensity as by the creativity and tenacity that are deployed. It would seem increasingly problematic, even outrightly wrong to read the commitment of the youth and the political struggles in which they engage only through the lens of physical violence or their destructive potential; youth commitment needs to be captured through the perspective of new ways of imagining politics and the specific ways in which young people seek to put their own imprint on the building of a better future for humanity.

Sometimes, youth sub-cultures, be they cultural, religious, political etc., are treated in mainstream analysis as representing a rejection of the legacy of the previous generation, rather than an engagement with the challenges posed by the present. In so doing,

the pressures and exclusion to which the youth are subject are downplayed. It is, however, necessary to revisit the relationship between young persons and adults from the perspective of a balance of power and struggle against exclusion. For example, it would be interesting to examine the extent to which the youth following enjoyed by the new religious sects that have proliferated across Africa is part of a quest by young people for a self-rebirth considering that the new religious movements seem attractive because they offer different modes of being and belonging and contribute to the building of new forms of imagination. The challenge of engaging these issues with a critical perspective that is not captive to the hegemony of received wisdom is not made easier by the fact with which we must also grapple that the youth is not a homogenous group. Indeed, it is a category with various and multiple experiences and expectations. Its heterogeneous nature derives primarily from the gender, class and ethno-regional, religious and other differences that characterise its membership. It would be necessary to attempt to understand the ways in which the heterogeneity of the youth is influenced by processes of change and, in turn, shapes change processes. Young people play a critical role in the production of cross-national links that contribute through various means to the definition of identities beyond their own national borders. It is impossible to understand these cross-border identities without a vision that reaches far beyond national borders.

#### Research thematic fields

The range of issues arising on African youth identity is broad and cannot be exhausted within a single programme initiative such as the proposed MWG. However, CODESRIA would like to invite as many interested researchers as possible to submit proposals that address the following key areas of concern:

- Conceptual and Methodological Issues in the Study of Youth Identity
- Changing Local and Global Contexts of Youth Identity Formation and Transformation
- African Youth in a Comparative Perspective
- Gender in Youth Identity
- Identity in the Changing Patterns of Youth Heterogeneity
- Cultural Production and Consumption among the Youth
- Sports, Leisure and Diet in Youth Identity
- Globalisation in the Re-making of African Youth Identity
- Alternative Youth Lifestyles: Rastafari, *Sapeurs*, "Area Boys", Tstotsis, etc.
- The Youth in the Nation-State Project
- Interfaces between Youth Identity and Citizenship
- The Youth and Inter-Generational Struggles for Space and Power in Africa

- African Youth in Global Virtual Communities
- The Youth and the New Religiosities in Africa
- African Youth at the Crossroads of "Tradition" and "Modernity"
- New Social Movements of the Youth
- Comparative South-South Perspectives in Youth Identity

CODESRIA invites interested researchers to submit research proposals on any of the above mentioned issues, or on related issues that are not explicitly identified in this announcement but are related to the concerns that have been raised. The authors of the selected proposals will be invited to participate in the proposed CODESRIA MWG. Research proposals should include:

- The problematic to be studied
- A clear indication of the purpose of the project
- A comprehensive literature review on the theme chosen;
- A description of the methodology used;
- A detailed work plan;
- An budget estimate;
- A summary of the authors' curriculum.

All proposals should be received by **20 November, 2006**. They will go through an independent evaluation process, the outcome of which will be announced by **15 December, 2006**. The short listed candidates will participate in a launching/methodological seminar, which will take place at the end of **January 2007**. Proposals and all other related correspondences should be sent to:

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