



The 12<sup>th</sup> General Assembly

# Theme: *Governing the African Public Sphere*

Date: 07 – 11 December, 2008—Venue: Yaoundé, Cameroon

## Call for Abstracts and Panel Proposals

The Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa (CODESRIA) is pleased to announce its 12<sup>th</sup> General Assembly which is scheduled to hold in Yaoundé, Cameroun, from **07 – 11 December, 2008**. The umbrella theme around which the Assembly will be organised is: ***Governing the African Public Sphere***. The Assembly is the biggest triennial gathering of scholars drawn from across the Social Sciences and Humanities on the African continent; it also attracts the participation of social researchers from the Diaspora. On the back of the scientific sessions of the Assembly, a meeting of all *bona fide* members of the Council is held to review the functioning of the institution in the period since the preceding Assembly and decide the intellectual and institutional development agenda that would be pursued for the following three years. Scholars wishing to be considered for participation in the 12<sup>th</sup> Assembly as paper presenters or convenors of panels on any aspect of the umbrella theme around which the scientific sessions of the Assembly will be structured are invited to send an abstract of the presentation they intend to make for consideration by the CODESRIA Scientific Committee.

The public sphere comes from a long historical pedigree that goes back to the very beginnings of human political community. Various notions of the sphere have also been in usage in the works of successive generations of thinkers. In more recent times, the concept was to become an object of renewed philosophical and sociological interest particularly on account of its popularisation in the early writings of Jurgen Habermas. However, beyond the initial contributions made by Habermas - indeed, as part of the numerous critiques that were developed of his work - the concept has further undergone considerable refinement and extension that speaks in one and the same breath to the many uses it is now deemed to serve and the centrality of context to its adaptation for local and global deployment. In the framework of the refinement and extension that the concept has undergone, the public sphere has come to be widely employed across disciplinary boundaries to capture the multiplicity of shared, deliberative, inter-locking, and contested spaces and arenas - together with the structures, processes, social actors/actresses and cultures associated with and/or built into them - that bear on the daily lives of the members of a given community, and which are of organic concern to them by virtue of their individual and collective membership of the community. What this implies is that it is not possible to understand the public sphere without grasping the historical contexts from which it emerges and which frame it at different points in time. At the same time, it has to be recognised that the boundaries of the public sphere cannot be meaningfully treated as fixed and immutable. Rather, they are formed and changed on account of a variety of factors that range, for example, from struggles aimed at politicising the private and bringing it into the public domain to the emergence of new social actors and alliances, shifts in technology, and transformations in the structure of the state and the articulation of its role. The interplay of the factors that contribute to the making and re-making of the public sphere has also been central to its extension beyond the fixed, physical boundaries of the Westphalian nation-state to the creation of new cross-border, virtual, and global public spheres. Each of these spheres is animated by concrete interests which emerge in contestation with other interests and as an expression of dissatisfaction with the narrow and narrowing framework of dominant spheres. Also, the perspectives that are canvassed in cross-border, virtual and global public spheres are very often refracted back, in a reciprocal manner, into the national-

territorial public sphere, contributing thereby to its constant renewal.

Scholars have pointed to the many purposes that are served by the public sphere for individuals, groups, and even the state itself. The interests which are borne by the different social actors are as varied as they could be contradictory. The interests are also suffused with relations of power which are refracted into the public sphere, making it a site for the organisation of resistance and renewal as much as it is an arena for the mobilisation of domination and legitimation. This is why it is difficult to seek to understand the public sphere as homogenous, uniform, uni-dimensional and equitable or to treat it as the arena of unqualified "virtue" *vis-à-vis* authoritarian states or unrepresentative public authorities. It is also precisely for this reason that the public sphere cannot be fully understood in its complexities if it is romanticised. Furthermore, there is, historically and contemporaneously, a complex dialectic linking the state and the public sphere which needs to be unravelled as part of any quest for understanding the promise, limitations and prospects of the latter. Furthermore, although as an arena, the public sphere may be open - in theory at least - to all the members of a political community, in practice, access is regulated and segmented along various lines, including class, gender, generational and even ethno-regional lines. Still, it will not be too far fetched to suggest that the state of the public sphere is an important indicator of the overall health of a political community, including the entire spectrum of state-society relations and the problems and prospects of democratisation and development. Democracy and development are integral to the consciousness and aspirations of all peoples and are driven as much by public as by private institutions and players. Yet, the binary opposition of the private and the public in some conceptualisations of the public sphere has proved to be hardly illuminating in the quest for an understanding of the direction of social development.

Engagement with questions that are pertinent to the making and reproduction of the public sphere has been central to the vocation of African researchers and intellectuals. This is attested to as much by the kinds of issues that the academy has been preoccupied with over time as with the commitments that it has brought to bear on them and the resonance which the research outcomes obtained have had with different publics. That this is so should not be surprising given that in a majority of cases, the scientific vocation of the researcher has been defined from one generation to another as including a commitment to a social project with transformatory potentials. Thus, for example, whether as partakers in the ideals of pan-Africanism, anti-colonialism and anti-imperialism; or as organic intellectuals of various social movements; or as joint bearers of the shared quest for democratic development; or, indeed, even as public intellectuals taking on a moral leadership role that entails speaking "truth" to power or advancing a civic ideal; African scholars have individually and collectively addressed themselves to questions that are not only of common interest to the generality of the citizenry but also contribute ideas to the process of the moulding and re-making of the public realm for the betterment of society. There is no better evidence of the consistency and depth of this engagement than an intellectual assessment of the grand questions which have preoccupied the African academy both historically and contemporaneously.

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Yet, for all the instinctive commitment which the African social research community has demonstrated towards the articulation of concerns which feed into the development of the public sphere, the composition and re-composition of its agenda, and the system by which it is governed, empirical data collection and experiences garnered through a socially-engaged scholarship have not been sufficiently and systematically marshalled into the building of concepts, theories and methods that capture the general and specific attributes of the African public sphere as it has mutated over time. In consequence, the task of theorising the African public sphere remains an important one for which original innovative work needs to be undertaken, drawing on existing theories of politics, economy, culture and society in Africa as informed by the historical experiences of the continent. In this connection, an important challenge which is posed is the marshalling of multi-disciplinary insights, including those that flow not only from the Social Sciences but also the Humanities. The investment of intellectual effort which is for called will also contribute in no small measure to rescuing the study of Africa and its public sphere from faulty analogies drawn from a unilinear reading of the history of Europe and the United States. It is hardly necessary here to point to the numerous methodological and conceptual difficulties associated with this analogical approach to building an understanding of the African public sphere; suffice it to note that a cacophony of adjectival characterisations prevalent in the Africanist literature on Africa has left many a student of politics, economy, culture and society unedified and confused. Participants at the 12<sup>th</sup> General Assembly will be invited to correct this state of affairs, doing so at the same time as they undertake a wholesale re-thinking of the African public sphere.

The choice of the public sphere as the umbrella theme for the 12<sup>th</sup> CODESRIA General Assembly could not have come at a better moment. While it is true that an understanding of the nature and state of the public sphere will always be an important preoccupation to address, the current conjuncture in the history of Africa makes the task of focusing attention on the public sphere even more crucial. It is a conjuncture characterised by a host of factors. These factors, several of a contextual nature, include but are not limited to the continuing struggles over the role of the state and the place of the market; the technocratisation of (economic) policy and “agencification” of government; the enlarged, perhaps even determinant role assumed by international financial institutions in domestic economic policy making; the intensified pluralisation of the media; shifts in the demographic profile of African countries that favour children and the youth as a proportion of national and regional populations; changes in the spatial distribution of population that speak, on the one hand, to the acceleration of formal and informal processes of urbanisation and, on the other hand, to intensive internal population movements that pose various challenges; increased organisation and activism for the rights of women and girls, and for greater gender equality; a widespread revival of religion and the emergence of new religiosities; multiple transitions and transformations in the domain of (popular) arts and culture; continuing struggles for the democratisation of national political systems; the rebirth of electoral pluralism and the restoration, nominal or otherwise, of elected national parliaments; an apparent demilitarisation of politics side-by-side with a reinforcement of the security moorings of the state and the expansion of the remit of the policing authorities; the transformation of old social movements and the emergence of new ones as part of a generalised redynamisation of associational life; an increased investment in sub-regional and regional cooperation, integration and even unification processes; an intensified refraction of global influences into the local/domestic arena; and a revival of reciprocal interest and engagement between Africa and its Diaspora.

Within the overall ambit of the scientific theme of the General Assembly, paper and panel proposals are invited on the following sub-themes and any other issues which may not have been touched upon in this announcement but that are deemed worthy of attention:

1. Theories of the Public Realm/Theorising the Public Sphere;
2. The Public Sphere in Democratic and Development Theories;
3. The Making and Remaking of the Public Sphere in Africa: History, Geography and Demographics;
4. Institutions of the African Public Sphere;
5. Law, Politics and Ethics in the African Public Realm;
6. The Media in the Public Sphere;
7. Governing the Public Realm for State and Nation-Building;
8. The Public Sphere as a Site for Negotiating Citizenship;
9. Behind the Public Sphere: Who Really Governs Africa?;
10. ICTs and the Emergence of Virtual Publics in the African World;
11. The Economics of the Public Realm in Africa;
12. Between “Modernity” and “Tradition” in the African Public Sphere;
13. Power, Status and Authority in the African Public Sphere;
14. Resistance and Transformation in the African Public Sphere;
15. Struggles and Successes for Engendering the African Public Sphere;
16. Struggles for the Democratisation of the African Public Realm;
17. The Public Realm and Public Policy in Africa;
18. Public-Private Interfaces in the Public Sphere;
19. Inter-Generational Issues in the African Public Realm;
20. The Popular Arts and Culture in the texture of the Public Sphere in Africa;
21. Orature, Literature, Performance and the Public Sphere;
22. The Languages and Linguistics of the Public Sphere;
23. Religion and Religiosity in the African Public Realm;
24. The Sacred, the Sacrilegious and the Public Sphere;
25. The Making of African Counter-Publics; and
26. The African Public Realm in Comparative Perspective.

All abstracts and panel proposals should be received by the 12<sup>th</sup> General Assembly secretariat not later than Monday, **30 June, 2008**. Authors will be notified of the outcome of the evaluation of their abstracts and panel proposals by the CODESRIA Scientific Committee not later than Friday, **25 July, 2008**. Those invited to submit full papers will be required to send in their first drafts by Monday, **15 September, 2008**. Scientific Committee evaluation comments on the drafts and formal letters of confirmation of an invitation to present a paper or convene a panel will be forwarded to authors by Tuesday, **30 September, 2008**. Final revised papers for inclusion in the proceedings of the Assembly must be received by Friday, **31 October, 2008**. For the authors whose papers are selected, CODESRIA will offer full or partial sponsorship to cover the costs of their participation in the Assembly. All abstracts, panel proposals, draft papers and fully revised papers must be submitted by electronic mail, fax or post to the following address:

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