

## 22. African perspectives needed on global environmental change research

by

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*Environmental concerns are central to the daily lives of ordinary people across Africa: land grabbing, mining, environmental degradation, commoditisation of natural resources. How can social sciences face up to the challenges of the 21st century? The Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa (CODESRIA) provides insights into the challenges global environmental change research in Africa is facing.*

Environmental issues are taking centre stage in local, national and global discourses and policies. In Africa, the list of environmental challenges is long: the Sahelian drought of 1968-73, drought in southern Africa in the 1990s, famine in East Africa, conflicts over natural resources, natural resources financing armed conflicts, deforestation and desertification, the degradation of agricultural land, biodiversity loss, and the large-scale expropriation of land and natural resources. These issues have catapulted environmental issues into policy and public debates, and have attracted the attention of social scientists in the past few decades.

However, research into global environmental change in Africa has historically been dominated by the natural sciences, with little reference to the social sciences. Consequently, environmental challenges are understood mostly in terms of their technical details and dynamics. Proposed solutions have paid scant attention to the socio-political, economic and cultural dimensions, or to the consequences of and responses to environmental change. Moreover, the little social science research into environmental issues that does exist in Africa relies mostly on Northern paradigms (Salau, 1992).

### **Environmental social science in Africa today**

Settler colonialism, imperial rule, the commercialisation of agriculture and industrial growth have had profound effects on societies and the natural world (Beinart and Coates, 1995). African social sciences and humanities have engaged with these issues to varying degrees. The historical causes of environmental degradation in processes such as colonialism, Africa's participation in the global capitalist system, and the imposition of new land tenure systems have been well researched (e.g. Page and Page, 1991). The ecological

impacts of colonialism, and in particular colonial land expropriation and the introduction of cash crops such as groundnuts, cotton and maize, have been similarly well documented (Franke and Chasin, 1980; Zeleza, 1997; Moyo and Yeros, 2005). Because of its political and social salience, the relationship between land distribution, ownership, tenure and resource degradation continues to be the subject of much social science research in Africa.

Class and other struggles for social change increasingly focus on environmental and natural resource issues. Economic decline – associated with structural adjustment programmes, failed rural development interventions and increasing poverty – have increased the dependence of peasants and small farmers, in particular, on natural resources. This in turn has fostered the emergence of movements that contest the expropriation of natural resources, resist the regulation of natural resources, and fight for women’s rights to own land and access other natural resources (e.g. Moyo, 2002). These struggles for equity and justice are increasingly framing social and political relations, and have forced policymakers to pay greater attention to environmental concerns.

### **Evolving social science research on environmental issues**

Contemporary environmental debates by African social scientists focus on issues such as land and related agrarian issues, the poverty–environment nexus, climate change mitigation and adaptation, the relationship between global political forces and environmental change, environmental security and justice, environmental policy and governance, environmental movements and political parties, local–global interactions, multilateral environmental agreements, and demography.

Climate change now dominates contemporary environmental debates and is shaping development policy. African social scientists, usually in collaboration with scholars from other continents, are now addressing the climate crisis and are focusing particularly on its implications for livelihoods and development. Current thinking continues to be dominated by sustainable development issues, usually viewed from an ecological perspective. African social scientists have been at the forefront of investigating the links between environmental governance, sustainability and livelihoods (e.g. WCED, 1989; Murphree, 1996).

Climate change has also generated an interest in understanding local adaptation strategies, which in turn has rejuvenated interest in advancing scientific understanding of the relationships between African local knowledge and adaptation to global environmental change (e.g. Eguru, 2012).

Most African countries are increasingly focusing their strategies on state and private investment in natural resource extraction concessions (mining, forest and agriculture). Environmental expropriation and the commoditisation of land are taking place on an unprecedented scale; the environment too is being commoditised and privatised as the crisis of neoliberal accumulation of wealth intensifies. Examples include “green grabs”, land grabs, new forms of land and resource expropriation through carbon sequestration, water privatisation, the creation of protected areas on land taken from poor and marginalised people, and the suppression of indigenous forms of production and consumption. Many environmentalists have classified payments for environmental services schemes, such as carbon sequestration (for example REDD+) as a form of “green grabbing”, because they allow land and resources to be taken away from poor and vulnerable people, and ownership is transferred into the hands of the powerful (White et al., 2012; Fairhead, Leach and Scoones, 2013).

Land grabbing is common in different contexts across Africa where governance structures are weak. They can feature incomplete, inequitable and ambiguous policy and legal frameworks; weak and competing jurisdictions of national and local government institutions; limited (and limited use of) land and forest information to guide policy and management; judicial systems that tend to be disconnected from poorly understood customary tenure systems; and limited public awareness, dialogue and participation in decision-making processes regarding the allocation and reallocation of land and resource rights (Murombedzi, 2012). The representation of local interests in developing environmental policies and implementing interventions is increasingly a central issue for social science inquiry in Africa.

### **The way forward and CODESRIA's role?**

Environmental concerns are central to development agendas and to the daily lives of ordinary African people. While there is much research into environmental issues in the humanities and social sciences in Africa, it is disaggregated, piecemeal and generally ancillary to the natural sciences. Even as environmental concerns have been incorporated into social science disciplines, their treatment and place within those disciplines is marginal and sometimes even contested (Foster, 1999). The incorporation of environmental concerns into the mainstream of these disciplines is hindered by the absence of a theoretical model of the relationship between the environment and development. Further, environmental issues remain marginalised in social theory. Despite the centrality of the “environment question” to the development process, society–environment–development interactions remain relatively under-researched within the social sciences in Africa. While social scientists have achieved considerable success in stimulating crossdisciplinary engagement with natural scientists in understanding resource management challenges, environmental issues have not been integrated with social science’s intellectual and research agendas.

A coherent social science of the environment capable of delivering evidence-based research that can feed into African policy processes addressing environmental challenges is urgently needed. Policy responses will only be effective with an African social science perspective. New impetus is also needed to ensure that disciplines are better integrated. The need to develop appropriate paradigms concerning the links between the environment and development also requires deeper recognition.

For the past year, CODESRIA has hosted a research programme examining decentralised forest governance in Africa. It seeks to understand the relationships between forest governance and the democratisation of local government systems. It is also facilitating the development of an epistemological community of young African researchers working on environmental governance. CODESRIA has also initiated training institutes for young researchers in 2013, one on gender and climate change and another on environmental politics and governance.

In the longer term, CODESRIA is developing an environmental governance programme to explore social science perspectives in Africa to help inform theoretical and empirical developments in social science research on environmental issues.

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