

## *Walking with Professor ABDALLA S. BUJRA //* *Cheminer avec le professeur ABDALLA S. BUJRA*

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### **Prof. ABDALLA BUJRA, (1938–2025)** **CODESRIA's Towering Pillar**

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**C**ODESRIA is fifty-two years old. Although it was formally established in 1973, its ideological origins date back to a conference held in Bellagio, Italy in 1964 on 'Economic Research in Africa'. Among the ten directors of African-based research institutes invited, only two were African: Professor Adebola Onitiri from the Nigerian Institute of Economic and Social Research at the University of Ibadan (Nigeria), and Professor Omer Osman, then dean of the Faculty of Economics and Social Studies at the University of Khartoum (Sudan). The rest were either French or British. The stark underrepresentation of African directors at the Bellagio conference served as a catalyst for a series of meetings by African scholars in the late 1960s and early 1970s, which came to be abbreviated as CODESRIA (Conference of Directors of Economics and Social Research Institutes in Africa).<sup>1</sup>

CODESRIA grew beyond meetings to not only acquire a recognisable name and institutional strength in the 1970s and 1980s but also earn legitimacy among African academics and policy actors. Many of these contributed in their own ways to strengthening CODESRIA's intellectual agenda and cementing the value of its knowledge to shaping policy process across the continent. Throughout its history, CODESRIA has been led by academics who served in policy circles, including Justinian F. Rweyemamu (CODESRIA's president from 1979 to 1981),<sup>2</sup> and Samir Amin, and the Council has played a significant role in policy debates that have shaped Africa's history.

Less well-known, yet profoundly impactful in shaping the intellectual trajectories of the Council and policy processes of several institutions, was Professor

**Godwin R. Murunga**  
Executive Secretary  
CODESRIA

Abdalla Bujra. Bujra, as he was known in the community, passed on at home in Malindi, Kenya on 8 January 2025. His relative obscurity was not because his contributions were not of the magnitude of his peers but rather because of his

self-effacing character, as both Mahmood Mamdani and Peter Anyang' Nyong'o note in this special issue. Bujra was one of the last remaining founding members of CODESRIA. He served as the second Executive Secretary of CODESRIA from 1975 to 1985. Prior to this, he had worked alongside the founding Executive Secretary, Prof. Samir Amin, to birth the CODESRIA we know today and put in place some of the institutional mechanisms that still define the Council. It was Samir Amin, Adebola Onitiri and Abdalla Bujra who organised the first General Assembly of CODESRIA in 1973 to formalise the organization. The firm establishment of the institutional framework of CODESRIA, and its emergence as a formidable organisation representing Africa and showcasing the best of its work in the social sciences, germinated and took root under Bujra's leadership.

During his tenure, he spearheaded and worried about growing the organisation based on a principle of institutional autonomy in a context where CODESRIA depended on external funding partners. Mahmood Mamdani recounts this role in his homage to Bujra, featured in this issue. It is a principle the Council has embraced throughout its history. Indeed, it was Bujra's pioneering thinking on institutional autonomy that inspired subsequent Executive Secretaries of the Council, under the guidance of respective Executive Committees, to prioritise this approach as the cornerstone of its engagement with those who support the Council.

As a result, CODESRIA has developed structures that define its independent intellectual agenda and can seek support based on this agenda. This autonomy explains why the Council, periodically, has turned away generous funding opportunities whenever potential partners define, in advance, the agenda they intend to fund.

In addition to prioritising institutional autonomy, Bujra significantly contributed to expanding the intellectual agenda of the Council. Under his leadership, more than fifty academic conferences, seminars and workshops were organised across the continent. The details of some of these events are documented in the *CODESRIA Bulletin*, which originally began as the Council's newsletter, *Africana*, before it evolved into its current format. A sample of the critical thematic issues the Council addressed during his tenure include industrialisation, rural development, economic integration, technology, population and democracy.

As the intellectual community was mobilised, the Council became interested in conceptualising the social sciences in Africa with an eye to presenting a critique of their Eurocentric foundations. One of the issues of *Africana* (Vol. I, No. 3, 1980) documents this shift with a series of working papers, including that of Claude Ake on the 'Social Sciences in Nigeria' and a joint paper by Bujra and Mkandawire on the 'Evolution of the Social Sciences in Africa: Problems and Prospects'.

The shift in interest towards understanding the evolution and role of the social sciences was in response to the increased mobilisation of the African social science community – an effort that Bujra actively led. This mobilisation was not only about expansion but also about entrenching the community within a diverse yet pan-African framework. To achieve this, the Council had begun to mobilise different working groups, a process that eventually led, in the 1980s, to the formation of research groups. These were variously named National Working Groups, Multi-National Working Groups or even Comparative Research Networks. By the 1990s, the vibrancy of CODESRIA as a community, which Mshai Mwangola writes about in her tribute here, was due in part to groundwork laid during Bujra's tenure.

Among Bujra's notable achievements was the launch of *Africa Development*, CODESRIA's premier social science journal that is publishing its fiftieth volume this year. He also oversaw the publication of numerous influential books and scholarly works. Coupled with this was a deliberate attempt to deal with the historic frag-

mentation of African social science communities along narrow national, regional and even linguistic lines. CODESRIA introduced a multilingual publishing approach by publishing articles with translations in at least two languages spoken widely within Africa's intellectual communities. Translations from English to French and vice versa became common for CODESRIA publications and in meetings CODESRIA organised.

In this issue of the Bulletin, we republish the Editorial Bujra wrote for the inaugural issue of *Africa Development*. In it, he reviewed the growing literature on the study of the continent, highlighting gaps and numerous weakness that left an intellectual space for *Africa Development* to fill. He justified the need for the Council to focus on the problem of underdevelopment, arguing that existing studies were not illuminating on the fundamental nature of the development process. For him, the ultimate objective was 'to provide an opportunity for African scholars to contribute to the general development of the continent through vigorous discussion of existing development strategies, problems and alternatives'. The key purpose of the journal, Bujra wrote, is to draw attention to the neglected areas of research in Africa and

to provide a forum for African (and non-African) scholars to debate on important issues as well as to make known the findings of their researches. In this way, we hope to encourage more relevant and policy-oriented research within an African perspective. The ultimate objective is to provide an opportunity for African scholars to contribute to the general development of the continent through vigorous discussion of existing development strategies, problems and alternatives. I am an optimist and therefore am sure that this challenge will be taken up by African social scientists.

The journal has lived up to the reputation Bujra envisioned. In recognition of his contributions, the Council honoured him in 1992 with the CODESRIA Distinguished African Social Scientist Award for Institution Building, alongside other luminaries, Govan Mbeki and Prof. Samir Amin. This accolade is a testament of the monumental impact of his leadership and his enduring contributions to African institutions.

By the time Bujra left the service of CODESRIA in 1985, the image of CODESRIA as a pan-African organisation that represented the best of Africa's intellectual contributions in the social sciences and humanities had taken shape. By establishing this sound basis for institutional practices, Bujra and the colleagues he worked with ensured that African engagement with

global discourses shifted away from the colonial pedigree they had largely been based on to a less racist and more political economy-driven orientation. In this special issue of the Bulletin, Michael Chege provides some useful insights into Bujra's contributions to a range of debates that left indelible marks in academia and the policy world. These included numerous engagements driven by a South–South perspective, with inspiration from and collaboration with organisations like CLACSO, embedded in many of the activities the Council convened.

Following his tenure at CODESRIA, Bujra played vital roles as a consultant for African institutions such as UNECA. As many authors in this bulletin point out, Mshai Mwangola and Leonard Mureithi in particular, he also founded the Development Policy Management Forum (DPMF) and helped drive policy initiatives that anticipated the future and infused a prospective attitude to policy-making. At DPMF, where he mentored the next generation of scholars with whom he co-edited several publications, Bujra crowned a career of excellence and dedicated service to African scholarship. A distinguished sociologist, Bujra published extensively on governance and development in Africa. Among his notable works are *The Politics of Stratification: A Study of Political Change in a South Arabian Town* (1971),<sup>3</sup> *Africa and the Future* (1995), *Leadership, Civil Society and Democratisation in Eastern and Southern Africa* (2002, two volumes),<sup>4</sup> *Perspectives on the OAU/AU and Conflict Management in Africa* (2004)<sup>5</sup> and *Democratic Transition In Kenya: The Struggle From Liberal To Social Democracy* (2005).<sup>6</sup>

The CODESRIA community has lost a firm pillar around which our work was built, organised, executed and given historical legitimacy. But Bujra's dedica-

tion, vision and leadership continue to inspire us. This special issue of the Bulletin is meant to memorialise him and keep the record of his work alive. It joins other bulletins that CODESRIA has used as a platform to keep the memory of our founders alive. They include *CODESRIA Bulletin*, Nos 3/4, 2018, dedicated to Samir Amin and *CODESRIA Bulletin*, Nos 3/4, 2020, dedicated to Thandika Mkandawire.

## Notes

1. The original meaning of CODESRIA was the Conference of Directors of Economics and Social Research Institutes in Africa. As CODESRIA's agenda evolved, it retained the acronym while redefining its full name, first as the Council for the Development of Economic and Social Research in Africa, and finally to its current iteration: the Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa. See the piece in *CODESRIA Bulletin*, <https://journals.codesria.org/index.php/codesriabulletin/article/view/338/342>.
2. Served as Permanent Secretary of Tanzania's Planning Ministry (1975) and later as President Julius Nyerere's Personal Assistant (Economic Affairs).
3. Abdalla Bujra, 1971, *The Politics of Stratification: A Study of Political Change in a South Arabian Town*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
4. Abdalla Bujra and Said Adejumobi, eds. 2002, *Leadership, Civil Society and Democratisation in Eastern and Southern Africa : Case Studies from Eastern Africa* (2 vols.), Nairobi and Addis Ababa: Development Policy Management Forum.
5. Abdalla Bujra and Hussein Solomon (eds), *Perspectives on the OAU/AU and Conflict Management in Africa*, Oxford: African Books Collective Ltd.
6. Abdalla Bujra, ed. 2005, *Democratic Transition In Kenya : The Struggle From Liberal To Social Democracy*, Nairobi: African Centre for Economic Growth.





**ABDALLA  
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SURROUNDED BY  
HIS FAMILY