African scholars finding their voices

The 'voice from the South' is seldom heard in debates around issues directly affecting countries of the global South. How can the southern or developing countries integrate their research into the predominantly Northern and Western national policy debates? *Godwin Onuoha* reports on an initiative that aims to do just that.

In 2011, the Africa Program and the Leadership Project of the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars (WWICS), funded by the Carnegie Corporation of New York, launched a major research effort called Southern Voices in the Northern Policy Debate. This led to the formation of the Southern Voices Network (SVN). The network held its third conference in May this year in Nairobi, Kenya.

Since its inception, SVN has expanded from 12 institutions in six African countries to 20 institutions in 12 African countries, and appears to offer a new basis for hope that African scholars may yet find their voice in debates and policy decisions directly affecting the continent.

This is perhaps the boldest new initiative in recent times, offering African scholars an appropriate opportunity to map the trends and shifts in the production of knowledge on Africa. This is critical in the sense that the SVN is not an African initiative in origin, but an African-driven project, both in its content and direction.

It marks an apparent departure from experiences of the past when the origin, structure, context, content and direction of such initiatives were externally articulated and imposed wholesale on the continent. Therefore, for the very reason that it has African 'ownership', SVN is expected to strengthen the prospects for goal achievement of this initiative.

This does not simply mean denying the validity of a Northern or Western view on Africa but rather, showing that there are different or multiple perspectives to an issue by placing adequate value on local knowledge(s) and discourses, and questioning the dominant paradigms around which we articulate policy and research issues in Africa.

Breaking from the past and re-engaging with the present

The conference focused on how SVN could maximise institutional relationships, increase opportunities for collaboration and critically engage African scholars as active agents so that their voices would be widely heard and would serve to critically influence policy debates in the North.

The process leading to the formation of SVN could be linked, at least in its remote origins, to the period after 11 September 2001, when issues and debates about Africa – considered to be the home of significant Muslim populations (a reservoir of abundant strategic natural resources and a potential site and flashpoint of instability) – came back into reckoning.

In the United States' geopolitical and strategic calculations, this inevitably called for new investments in knowledge production on Africa. Immense efforts were invested in understanding African conflicts and crises with a view to informing US policymakers about developments on the continent, which were eventually translated into policy decisions in the North.

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No Africans in the room

The main problem however, as Steve McDonald of the Wilson Center pointed out in his opening remarks at the conference, was that, 'When the problems and issues of Africa are being discussed and policy formulated with the goal of addressing these issues, there is seldom a single African in the room, much less one who is being asked to define the problem and set the agenda.'

This dominant mood of sidelining alternative perspectives and views has led to the emergence of what McDonald refers to as: 'Often self-appointed analysts and interpreters of Africa to the Northern public'.

The most flagrant example of this in the past six years was the formation of AFRICOM and the securitisation, or militarisation, of US policy on the continent. AFRICOM was a response to US security concerns in the oil-rich Gulf of Guinea, but it perhaps marked the most consequential US strategic engagement with Africa in recent times. This realist and narrow notion of security ignores the fact that foreign and domestic issues interpenetrate, and such issues should not preclude non-coercive and social welfare oriented approaches to security.

'War on terror' or nationalist aspirations?

Recently, the Sahel region of Africa emerged as the new focus in the so-called war on terror. Editorials have been written in Europe and North America calling for a shift of US military focus to the region due to the fact that the groups operating here (Boko Haram in Nigeria and Ansar Dine in Mali) are either al-Qaeda-inspired or affiliated.

No doubt, these groups have been brutal in their operations and have created a general atmosphere of fear and insecurity. But a historically-grounded and context-specific interpretation of the emergence of Boko Haram as the product of a badly (mis)managed 'Shari'a controversy' in the changing political climate in Northern Nigeria between 1999 and 2002, and the Ansar Dine as a Tuareg movement that has spent years fighting, not for Islam, but for the self-determination of the Tuaregs in the Northern sections of Mali, is critical.

In Nigeria, Shari'a has been instituted as a main body of civil and criminal law in nine Muslim-majority (and in some parts of three Muslim-plurality) states since 1999, when then-Zamfara State governor Ahmad Rufai Sani began a push for the institution of Shari'a at the state level of the government. There have been numerous riots following the implementation of Shari'a Law, primarily involving non-Muslim minorities in the states which implemented the system. One such riot killed over 100 people in October 2001 in Kano State – *www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sharia_in_Nigeria*

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Thus, in their origins, these groups have specific nationalist aspirations that have little to do with global *jihad* or a grand ideological appeal to the al-Qaeda brand that has currently characterised the discourse, but more to do with the enduring issues of citizenship, state legitimacy and the broader national question in post-colonial Africa.

Bringing North and South closer

It was against this background that the SVN was established to bring North American and African think tanks together in a particular kind of engagement that offers new or different possibilities for influencing public policy processes in areas of democracy, development and security.

'It is imperative for Northern policymakers… to not only hear, but understand the Southern perspective in order to develop the most appropriate, cohesive and inclusive policy frameworks to address the issues of conflict, state-building, development, security and democratisation,' McDonald said. In his view, this must be grounded in 'fact-based, unbiased, empirical and first-hand reflections on issues of mutual concern that would be invaluable in the conduct of US policy toward Africa.'

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Conclusion

It is pertinent to state that the empirical basis for most Northern policies on Africa is very weak. Much of the knowledge about Africa has been mediated and shaped by development policy communities and aid agencies working under different kinds of pressures, not only to shape the research agenda on Africa, but also to produce specific results.

No adequate or complete knowledge of Africa will emerge unless it is connected to the local knowledge community and the knowledge that is produced locally by African scholars. In all of this, it is important to rethink the relationship between the North and African institutions of learning and research, and to transform the relationship to one that is characterised by a free and autonomous space that will facilitate African self-knowledge (knowledge about itself) and others' knowledge about Africa.

With renewed funding from Carnegie Corporation, the SVN is now able to bring research staff from research institutions across the continent to the WWICS in Washington for a three-month fellowship (on a competitive basis) to pursue research, and build capacities and networks. ■

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