

MICHIGAN STATE UNIVERSITY

The African e-Journals Project has digitized full text of articles of eleven social science and humanities journals. This item is from the digital archive maintained by Michigan State University Library. Find more at:

<http://digital.lib.msu.edu/projects/africanjournals/>

Available through a partnership with



Scroll down to read the article.

THE CENTRE FOR DEVELOPMENT STUDIES AND THE MASS DEMOCRATIC MOVEMENT

Mike Sutcliffe

Introduction

On June 4 1990, the National Coordinator of the Centre for Development Studies (CDS) informed the various structures of CDS that he was suspending all activities and freezing all bank accounts pending a meeting of the board of trustees, the University of the Western Cape and representatives of the Mass Democratic Movement. In the heat of the moment this seemed to be a rather drastic decision. However, in hindsight it was probably the most effective way to try and rein in a bureaucracy that had become unmanageable, and a process that had become unworkable.

The suspension of the activities of CDS allowed a wide variety of views on CDS to be given publicity: comments, criticism and the like. With the advantage of hindsight, however, it is difficult to understand why CDS actually provoked such heated debate. In fact, the criteria by which we usually judge research organisations indicate that this was a rather minor institution. For example, CDS only employed a handful of full-time personnel (no researchers) and its total expenditure for the previous three years' worth of activities was a relatively small R300,000.00. This contrasts, of course, with press reports at the time which quoted figures of R28 million.

The explanation for the national expression of concern by progressive activists and researchers, is probably quite complex. It would, of course, include:

- subjective reasons: such as the fact that some researchers had failed to receive funding for their projects and they blamed this on CDS, or they had not got their air tickets on time for a workshop; or
- objective reasons: such as the fact that CDS was the only national project which held out hope for a structured and accountable relationship between researchers and the MDM.

However, and possibly most importantly, CDS did touch the lives of the widest variety of individuals and organisations, possibly unheard of before:

Academic staff from the Universities of Western Cape, Cape Town, Witwatersrand, Natal, Rhodes, Durban Westville, Fort Hare, Unitra, Unibo, Unisa and even OFS were involved in one way or another. So too were community based, service and professional organisations: NADEL, NAMDA, CAHAC, NECVC, BESG, DAG, PLANACT, DHAC, SAHWCO, Social Workers' Forum, Civics, etc. COSATU and UDF were also consulted regularly and were involved at both a national and a regional level.

Given the breadth of the organisations represented then, it was clear that an issue

as radical as the suspension of activities without the provision of resources for basic and policy research and training programmes, would lead to frustration and anger. Moreover this anger was exacerbated, given that many researchers and activists had made a substantial investment in developing structures and research proposals, the results of which would not be realised. The suspension effectively closed the first chapter in the life of CDS. My paper tries to understand this history with a view of drawing out some lessons we have learnt from the experience. At the outset it is important to state that this paper reflects my own views, as a participant and observer in the CDS process. It does not deal with two important aspects of the CDS during the period in which the ANC was banned. These are CDS's relationship with organs of the liberation movement and the growth and development of a duplicate research structure outside South Africa (South African Studies Project: SASPRO).

The heightened political consciousness and struggles of the 1980s created the context within which the organs of people's power began to address the possibilities of a transition to a non-racial, democratic, united and non-sexist South Africa. Whilst still operating within a context of the four pillars (mass action, armed struggle, international pressure and building the underground) the African National Congress broadened its realm of operations in order to counter the state and business' new-found notion of a Post-Apartheid South Africa.

One of the important dimensions of this broadening was to begin to engage with researchers around the question of developing the capacity to undertake and do policy research. Recognition was made, of course, of the enormous damage done by Bantu Education: very few African, (male or female) researchers existed in South Africa. Those academics at ethnic institutions were usually forced to be teachers rather than researchers and the result was that the racial composition of the progressive research community was a mirror-image of apartheid.

While some of the origins of CDS began in the early 1980's, it is useful simply to draw on some of the international and local initiatives which helped give rise to the birth of CDS.

The conference held at York University and entitled 'The South African Economy after Apartheid' proved to be something of a watershed. Including only anti-apartheid researchers, academics, consultants and observers of various political persuasions, the conference presentation covered a wide variety of policy formulations and sectors of the economy. Over 70% of the mainly South African participation consisted of white men, underlining the extent to which women and blacks have been oppressed. Moreover, most papers focussed on 'white' South Africa, underlining the extent to which the bantustans and front line countries were regarded as secondary aspects to the formulation of post-apartheid policy. A fairly wide ranging set of papers detailed: (i) the conditions under which the majority of South Africans live, (ii) the complexity of the economy (iii) the nature and form of organisations within South Africa, and (iv) the question of transition in South Africa. While the conference didn't come to grips with any 'solutions' to redress the effects of apartheid, it did allow for reflection on the nature and character of the questions which should be asked.

A second conference, far more focussed but with participation from all over the world, took place in Beijing, People's Republic of China in early September 1986.

The third meeting, which really set the pace was the workshop in Amsterdam (10-13 December 1986) entitled 'Research Priorities for Socio-Economic Planning in Post-Apartheid South Africa'. Organised by SAERT, the workshop made a significant contribution in setting out research areas as a preliminary contribution towards a more comprehensive research and training effort required to facilitate transition. Areas included: Income-distribution/poverty; Alternative industrial strategies; Health and welfare; Development planning; Women; Education; Employment; Environment and planning; SADCC; Agriculture; Labour; Legal issues.

In late 1988, a meeting in Harare, convened by the ANC examined the role of research in a post-apartheid society. The workshop provided the final impetus to move the various regional projects onto a national agenda to create the Centre for Development Studies. The main purpose of CDS was: (i) to create the conditions under which policy research might be enhanced, (ii) to undertake policy research, and (iii) to link the internal policy research with a similar external initiative (later developed and called SASPRO).

Bearing in mind that the ANC was banned and that CDS had to operate under a veil of secrecy as to its real intentions, it would be useful to provide a brief documentation of how the project developed over time. The following section therefore provides a brief synopsis as recorded in official documentation.

Following the workshop in Harare in late 1988, a proposal for a Forum for Development Studies was motivated arguing for the need to establish a joint venture between researchers and communities, to be located at a University. The principles guiding the joint venture were to be: 1) to address ways in which community organisations could be involved in research, 2) to have affirmative action, and 3) to address the skills/manpower needs for a future South Africa. The venture was to be seen as a study, as the word 'research' was considered to be too academic.

Debates then began over both the proposed Deed of Trust for the Foundation and the location of the project at a university. The University of the Western Cape had been proposed as the project's location with six regional centres. Much was made of the location of the project at the university. The rationale emerging suggested that projects of the universities led to more control over the research process, and increased the bureaucracy. However, a year later UWC decided they couldn't move on the proposal because they needed clarification on their relationship with CDS. This of course, was one source of problems which later emerged. Complaints began to emerge about the cumbersome structures, the slowness in getting the project established, and the question of what process was to be followed in developing research proposals. Yet by July 1989, some regions were quite strong and most had established Study Commissions.

In August 1989, CDS met with representatives from the MDM given that the earlier formal national meeting had not been able to successfully implement decisions as many leaders were arrested. The meeting formally agreed that the CDS was a programme of the MDM (COSATU and UDF). It then became clear that there was

a need to operationalise the legal instruments so as to effect the responsibility of the various structures. In addition each region was asked to identify their own Programme of Action through identifying how they were to establish regional structures, undertake policy research, involve themselves in training and undertake research projects. It was agreed that once the regional study commissions had met a series of National Study Commission workshops would be held to draw up a list of priorities for funding, and make recommendations for training and policy research. Once this task was completed, it was envisaged that there would be a joint meeting to decide on project proposals.

Divisions between regions had intensified. In addition, without authorisation, Transvaal advertised for full-time posts of Study Commission Coordinators. Calls were made for a Board of Trustees to take control of CDS. In order to develop more effective legal instruments, in March 1990 a new Deed of Trust was discussed. This suggested the formation of a CDS Trust (consisting of community representatives, BoT, Executive Committee and Executive Director). During 10-11 March 1990, a joint workshop between CDS, UWC and SASPRO was held in Lusaka. Debates over the whole question of democratising research continued. In addition it was agreed that UWC should establish a Research Centre and that the whole of CDS should be rationalised along the lines of more centralisation (and less regionalisation) and the encouragement of the Study Commission process. SASPRO would be reintegrated into South Africa.

By May 11, the National Coordinator voiced his concerns that research and training proposals had been developed, but no mechanism existed to ensure the projects get funded.

At a national meeting on 20 May, the National Coordinator once again stressed that he had three proposals for funding (the Local Government and Planning Proposal had been approved in January 1990 and yet no one had signed the contract; there was an Economy and Labour National Report as well as a Land Report). At the same time monies were only available for setting up structures and not for undertaking project work. Structural problems, the need for financial accountability; a sound management policy and effective administration were all raised. The Western Cape then tabled a report on May 25 1990, suggesting that CDS lacked accountability and collective responsibility, etc.

By June 4 tensions, inefficiencies, and concerns about funding led to the National Coordinator suspending operations, freezing accounts and operations; and calling for the ANC, BoT and MDM to meet. He argued the suspension arose out of a number of things; most importantly, it was because of a failure by CDS structures to address the impending crisis. He noted that:

- the crisis had been on its way by February. The Deed of Trust had not been signed, the NCC had not met, and the meeting with SASPRO had not occurred,
- monies were used up by Transvaal leading to acrimonious attacks,
- research proposals had been developed, but there were no defined procedures on strategies,
- rumours of funds greater than R25 million were circulating and,

- there were mounting criticisms of national office.

On June 6 1990, the Transvaal RCC met to discuss the suspension. They argued that the NWC had not been consulted; that only NWC could recommend suspension, and that the Coordinator was only an employee. They felt suspension would affect credibility of CDS with academics and community organisations, viability of study commissions, etc.

Natal also submitted a formal complaint arguing:

One the one hand the organisation was beset with a number of problems. Allegations in some regions of unaccountability, mismanagement, lethargy and the like are common. In addition, structural problems in the way in which various elements of CDS relate to each other (BoT, liberation movement, MCC, National Study Commissions, etc.) and a variety of inefficiencies, have led to a situation where the project will fail to get off the ground unless there is a clear, central, political direction from the ANC leadership. On the other hand, changing circumstances have forced us to reconsider the nature and functioning of CDS. These circumstances require bold decisions which may even mean CDS as we know it disappears to be replaced by a more appropriate (accountable, efficient etc.) structure.

The CDS experience teaches us that you cannot solve political problems through legal situations. This can be demonstrated in a variety of ways. Was CDS to be everything to everyone, solving every problem from basic research to setting up new institutions to undertaking all the policy research of the MDM? An examination of the various Trust documents showed how confused and complex the conception of CDS was. CDS lacked direction and definition in respect of the roles and responsibilities of its various constituent parts.

In December 1988, for example, the first Trust document listed its objects as:

- establishing a coordination centre for development studies at the University of the Western Cape;
- establishing and maintaining institutes (or centres) for development studies in various regions;
- generating and supporting development research;
- supporting research and training projects;
- supporting the development of research skills among disadvantaged communities;
- supporting and promoting participatory development research;
- sponsoring research into continuing community education projects;
- supporting lectures, symposia, seminars, workshops, study tours, internship programmes at home and abroad;
- awarding overseas travel grants to researchers and research students;
- making payments in connection with bureaucracies, scholarships, fellowships, internships and study tours;
- contributing towards any charitable research and educational institutions or any fund having such objects;

- generally supporting in addition to development research and studies any other similar undertaking and to engage in any other related activities which in the opinion of the Trustees are likely to further development research and studies.

A second Trust document dated 12 January 1989 suggested that the objects of the Trust were:

- To generate and support development studies in South Africa;
- To promote and coordinate development research on various subjects, inter alia, the economy, education, legal and constitutional matters, culture and mass media, religion and other subjects, and to liaise and collaborate with relevant training and research centres, persons and institutions in South Africa and elsewhere;
- To serve as an information centre in South Africa;
- To mobilise and provide financial and material resources, research and other related activities;
- To organise and arrange workshops, seminars, conferences and consultations with a view to promoting further research and to train disadvantaged South Africans in and expose them to specific research methodologies and skills;
- To provide disadvantaged South Africans with training and vocation in specific areas with a view to equipping them for future planning organisation and administration in various departments and public services;
- To create a data bank of research materials for the purpose of preservation and use by policy makers in various sectors;
- To provide information to the general public and to emphasise the role of research in society;
- generally to maintain and where possible extend useful working relationships with other persons, bodies or institutions either nationally or internationally...
- To award overseas travel grants to researchers and research students;
- Making payments in connection with bursaries, scholarships, fellowships, internships and study tours;
- Contributing towards any addition to development research and studies... to further development studies.

And then a year later, in January 1990, things seemed to get a lot clearer when the objectives of the Trust became:

- to promote and coordinate research across a wide range of fields such as: the economy, education, legal and constitutional matters, local government and planning, health and social welfare, mass media and culture, the land question, and the rural political economy.
- to liaise and collaborate with existing research and training centres, individuals and institutions in South Africa and elsewhere,
- to organise workshops, seminars and conferences with a view to promoting further research and to train disadvantaged South Africans in, and expose them to, specific research methodologies and skills.
- to create a data bank of research materials and to provide information to researchers, community and service organisations as well as other institutions.

- to generate funding by way of grants or donations in order to provide financial and material resources and other related activities.

Finally, a few weeks before the project was suspended, a new Trust Deed captured the aims and objects of CDS as simply to:

Promote and coordinate research and development studies, in order to facilitate the transformation of South Africa into a nonracial, democratic, unitary society.

The *second* most important lesson to be learnt from the experience of CDS was that you cannot do research when there is too much bureaucracy. In many ways bureaucratisation of the CDS became a substitute for the development of mechanisms of accountability. Instead of making life easy for researchers and the democratic movement, with simple, open, structures, but with mechanisms ensuring accountability, the following layers of bureaucracy emerged:

- Board of Trustees: supposedly to give overall 'political' credibility to the project. However, in the earlier Trust Deeds, no provision was made for Trustees themselves to be elected and hence accountable.
- Regional Research Forums: set up to give local political credibility and provide an opportunity for researchers and community organisations to interact over the setting of research agendas etc. However, they resulted in a form of tokenism, where researchers weren't able to effectively debate their areas of specialisation and the community base could not engage within the discourse of research.
- Regional and National Study Commissions: potentially the life blood of CDS, these structures tended to mirror apartheid given that research and policy skills were located primarily in the hands of white and Indian members of the MDM.
- National Coordinating Committee: what does it mean for a region to elect a representative onto a national research structure? What interests does such a person represent: is it specific political, research, or community based mandates that the person takes forward?

Thirdly you cannot solve political problems through simple geographical solutions. While it was admirable that CDS tried to reach out to all regions of South Africa, the differences between 'metropolitan' regions and rural/peripheral areas were all too obvious. For example, CDS structures were developed in six regions; Border, Western Cape, Natal, Eastern Cape, Orange Free State, Transvaal.

The differences between these regions are stark and in some the progressive research capacity is very limited. The particular problems faced within the regions require a variety of different solutions. The tendency for 'metropolitan' regions to set agendas for workshops became all too apparent. This was most evident when, during the Harare conference on Local Government in November 1989, The Eastern Cape, Border and Orange Free State regions held their own caucus to workshop issues they felt needed to be addressed.

Conclusion

There are a number of lessons that the CDS experience teaches us. Firstly, as we begin to prepare for the CODESA experience, cognisance needs to be taken of the dangers of over-bureaucratising basic and policy research. Effective networks of

researchers, acting responsibly and with direct access to the liberation movement, need to be created.

Secondly, CDS held out very exciting possibilities, unheard of internationally where organs of the MDM and researchers came together with the aim of pursuing joint research programmes. While CDS did not realise this mission, it is nevertheless important that we continue to strive for such ideals. This is particularly important in a context where it will take generations to wipe out particularly the white, male dominance of research in South Africa. And, importantly, progressive researchers and the liberation movement will be forced to work actively in order to replace the establishment research institutions and develop national research frameworks which accord with our goals of national liberation.

Thirdly, the CDS experience helped organisations to debate organically if not solve the question of accountability. The process was not an abstract one, as the very setting up of structures like Research Forums aimed precisely to make researchers more accountable, while recognising the interactive nature of project briefs, setting terms of reference, etc.

Several levels of accountability were debated: i) accountability to the progressive movement; ii) accountability to the clients; iii) accountability within the organisation doing research; and iv) accountability between research organisations. Debates flourished around questions of how to broaden the CDS: should there be a voluntarist approach (anyone can join) or should there be structured accountability allowing only organisational membership from within the democratic movement. Who sets the priorities became a further source of productive debate. Simplistic dichotomies (researcher-researched, leading the struggle versus following the struggle, etc.) were discarded for a more interactive approach around how priorities are set.

In June 1990, CDS activities were suspended and a subcommittee set up to transform CDS UWC into the National Research Centre.

In October 1990, CDS organised an initiative on local government and after regional meetings a National Consultative Conference on Local Government and Planning was held.

Other workshops organised have been on electoral systems, gender, and the constitution; and the Namibian experience; February 1991 Community Law Centre UWC.

In addition, CDS continued with an active publishing programme and commissioned some research projects and is assisting in the initiative to create an Economic Policy Research Institute.

Some of the networks established or concretised in early CDS days remain important policy research vehicles today. The National Local Government and Housing Research Project, the Urban Services Network, the Land Commission, the Constitutional Committee work, the National Language Project, the Children's Rights Project, the MERG initiative, etc. all owe part of their existence to CDS.

Moreover, CDS had the courage to restructure in the post February 2, 1990 period. Many other organisations could well learn from that experience.

Finally, what of the future? The old CDS has made its mark. I don't, for one, believe

we should resurrect it. But when we create the new institutions and research frameworks for a future non racial, non sexist, democratic and united South Africa, the progressive networks founded within CDS will be the flag-bearers for creating that future research agenda.

DISCUSSION

HAROLD WOLPE: The way to develop research in the immediate future is largely through research units within the universities. That can also be done in departments, even under conditions of stress of staff, where people within the departments are bought out.

The other thing that this depends on is the question of governance and finance of the universities. We need to start addressing questions about: Who are the councils of the universities going to be? What is the role of the community? What is the role of the trade unions? I think we're not addressing the relevant issues of how to gear the universities to the kinds of work that we want them to do.

DAVE COOPER: CDS never solved the problem of accountability. The way I would have done it, I would have had some money and quite quickly given the money to academics, and say, 'Do the research, but you must train people; you must be accountable; you must consult; you must involve mass organisations.' And after a year you see how they've done. There is a deep distrust of academics, because they're white and they're male, predominantly. I think there was a deep distrust of academic work, academic research, given the apartheid legacy. I don't think CDS ever confronted that problem properly.

MAHMOOD MAMDANI: As I understood it, basically what you're saying is that intellectuals have been opposed to government when it comes to the issue of policy research. That point of view has been one-sided, short-sighted. Now that the democratic movement is about to come to power, we should come of age, be mature, and be prepared to walk in the corridors of power, and *do research*. The language you employ collapses the mass movement and the political movement into one. There is no exploration of any possible tension or relationships between the two. Now, I grant you, the two may have common interests. But they can't possibly have the same interests. The political movement may become the government of tomorrow; the mass movement remains the mass movement, no matter how many men may step out of it into the corridors of power. So it seems to me that there is a need to articulate specifically the relationship of researchers to the mass movement.

DAVE LEWIS: The last point I think is absolutely correct with a number of provisos. It's not the intellectuals necessarily that collapse the mass movement, political power, but some of the mass organisations have collapsed those distinctions. I think that there is within the trade union movement a desire to maintain an independent research capacity. They wish in some sense to maintain a distinction that I think you may be making between opposition movement and government in waiting. I do think

that to the extent that the distinction is not made perhaps, it is the product of the character of the alliance between the political parties, the national liberation movement, the trade union movement, civic associations

One of the points I tried to make is that unions and the ANC and the mass organisations really have to develop a policy of how to deal with the universities. They don't have one. If they did develop a policy and a coordinated response to the universities, you would have seen, I think, a significant change in the approach of those institutions, and of those parts of the university, to policy work for organisations that they were not characteristically given to working with. I think that there has to develop a concerted response to the universities. It doesn't do any good to decry the universities' lack of will to get engaged, to participate in research, all the other stuff that popular organisations throw out.

EDDIE WEBSTER: You know, quite frankly I'm battle-weary of the fight inside the university. The left at Wits, at the university, is weaker now than in 1974. If the mass democratic movement can take the universities seriously, that can help us enormously by developing a strategy with people on how to engage with an extremely difficult institution.

JOHN PAMPALLIS: You said that there was a role for funders to play in getting good research methods, and also in keeping the research *progressive*. Now, these days, for funding research, progressive organisations have been going to places like the Anglo Chairman's Fund, Shell, the Ford Foundation, the World Bank, etc., etc. These aren't exactly friends of the people and they're the kind of organisations that a few years ago we would have stayed away from.

FRENE GINWALA: I think CDS never came to grips with the relationship between universities that do research and participatory research. There is a lot of rhetoric about participatory research. But what is actually meant?

The likely trend, one which we haven't looked at but which is certainly prevalent elsewhere, where political parties set up institutes of policy studies at arms length. To me that seems to be the way, it's very likely, that we may well move.

CAROLINE WHITE: It seems to me that we must look at how we can intervene at the top levels of the universities, in the councils of the universities. At the moment, business and university people themselves run the universities. There's no trade union representation, and that's taken for granted in Australia, for example, that you have trade union representatives on university councils.

DAVID LEWIS: There is a real role for funders in keeping research rigorous, in demanding rigorous standards, both of research quality and accounting. The problem with CDS was that it was political blood money, and nobody asked anybody what they intended doing with the money they gave to CDS. Just as long as the right people asked for it the money was forthcoming. That is bad funding that will promote real corruption. I don't think that demanding rigorous accounting and rigorous research methods is necessarily in conflict with progressive research. We get what I think are actually conflicting messages from our kind of, if you like, clients. One is for participatory research, for constant accountability, for a big training capacity, and they also then demand a high quality research that they want yesterday. There is a

conflict between the speed particularly of output and some of the research methods suggested. I think that maybe the mistake we made was to compromise on the speed, because it's generally not as urgent as it appears to be.

MIKE MORRIS: The thing that we're missing from the discussion in the relationship between researchers and the mass organisations is the capacity of mass organisations to actually absorb the policy that is generated. My experience is that they don't have the capacity to absorb that.