

# Introduction to the Research Programme 2007-2011

## Introduction

The African continent and its societies are changing continuously under the influence of global, continental, national and local forces. Such forces range from the by now familiar aspects of globalization and climate change to technological innovations like the cell phone. These changes require continuous research and new research questions. To keep up with these challenges, the ASC formulates a new research programme every five years, facing the developments on the African continent and at the same time building on the results of the Centre's previous research.

Research at the ASC is organized in so-called theme groups. Each group consists of a number of ASC researchers and some affiliated members from other academic institutions in the Netherlands and Africa. Researchers in each group have different disciplinary backgrounds, so the theme groups are by definition of a multi-disciplinary character. They are built around a major research theme and these together form the ASC's research programme. Since the start of the theme group structure in 1997, there have been three such groups but because research themes change, the theme groups also change in terms of personnel, at least in principle. With the start of a new research programme, three new theme groups are launched at the same time.

## The strengths of the ASC's research

Deriving from the ASC mission statement (see ASC Policy Plan 2005-2008), one of the Centre's primary strategic goals is to undertake pioneering scientific research of a multidisciplinary nature on Sub-Saharan Africa, particularly in the field of the social sciences in its broadest meaning, for an international scientific and policy-directed forum. With more than fifty years of research experience and with an extensive library, the ASC is a leading partner in the international knowledge and learning community of African Studies. The most salient points of departure, which are shared by all the research programmes and represent the Centre's strengths, can be outlined as follows:

(1) Research on African societies is, as a matter of principle, undertaken jointly with researchers from other research centres, universities and their various networks in Africa. Research is thus not only firmly anchored in African realities but is also the most direct way to mutual learning, sharing experiences and developing common research agendas, i.e. to developing international knowledge and a learning community in African Studies. The ASC is therefore putting considerable time and resources into academic capacity building in Africa through training, special PhD programmes and its new MPhil programme. Capacity development is supplemented by a visiting scholars' programme in which ten to twelve African post-docs work at

the Centre in Leiden every year for a period of up to three months. During the present Research Programme (2007-2011), the ASC will increase its allocation of resources to African academia by having senior researchers from Africa participate on a more permanent basis.

(2) The focus of the ASC's research is directed by a social-sciences perspective in its broadest meaning, i.e. including not only the social sciences as such and economics but also such disciplines as history, law, ecology, nutrition and linguistics. This means that research at the ASC is by nature of a multidisciplinary character, which makes it especially suitable for a problem-oriented approach defined by both scientific as well as policy debate criteria. In addition, a strong empirical emphasis is one of the hallmarks of ASC research.

(3) Almost all the research carried out by the ASC is characterized by a high degree of scientific relevance and is relevant for policy makers as well. This touches upon the ongoing discussion concerning the distinction between basic and policy-oriented research. The reality is that much of the basic research is relevant for policy makers, while policy-oriented research can be basic at the same time. Much of the ASC research of the past decades has shown this to be true. Although the Centre is first of all an *academic* research institution and not – and does not wish and is not expected to be – an institute carrying out research-on-demand, it does have a rich history of policy-relevant research. Indeed, some large research projects were developed in cooperation with local (i.e. African) policy makers and some projects have had considerable impact on local policies.

(4) The resources the ASC can draw upon allow its research to be of an empirical nature, rooted in primary data collection in African societies, without neglecting additional sources of information inside and outside Africa. The ASC is one of the few institutes in the world capable of setting its agenda in basic research with an impact on African Studies as a whole. Being a Dutch research institute, the ASC is capable of bridging the divide between scholars from and on Anglophone and Francophone Africa, which is clear from the Centre's publications as well as its library collection.

(5) The ASC Library, Documentation and Information Department is of great importance. It continues to offer one of the largest and best collections of Africana in Europe, and is an indispensable source of knowledge for researchers (and the general public). Contacts in Africa as a result of developments in ICT are increasing and the department is playing an important role in creating further access to digital sources of knowledge for African libraries.

It is through a combination of these elements that the ASC has proved to be particularly successful and has generated many original and trendsetting contributions to the academic and policy forum.

## The ASC Research Programme 2007-2011: A long process

The present Research Programme is the result of a long process. Internal discussions started in 2005 and culminated in a one-day meeting of the whole research staff in December that year, at which initial drafts of the three new research themes were presented. The ASC's Scientific Advisory Council gave comments and advice in two rounds of discussions with the ASC Director and with the theme group leaders in 2005-2006.

In the course of 2006, two expert meetings were organized. First, an International Ad Hoc Scientific Advisory Committee was formed consisting of renowned scholars from the Netherlands, Europe and Africa.<sup>1</sup> The Committee was requested to carry out a collegial peer review paying attention to (a) the originality of the topic in its research and/or methods, such as the development of new theories or methods, or innovative work on existing insights using new data; (b) the scientific significance, i.e. theoretical merit, and importance of the research themes for academic debates and issues; (c) the clarity and coherence of the proposal with regard to the problem definition and the Centre's overall approach; and (d) its policy relevance, i.e. societal relevance and relevance for development. During a two-day visit by the Committee to the ASC in May 2006, extensive discussions with the ASC management and representatives from each theme group were held. The Committee's findings were laid down in a report that contained useful comments and recommendations.

For the second expert meeting, an International Ad Hoc Advisory Committee on Policy Relevance was set up, consisting of representatives from various policy-making institutions and development organizations in the Netherlands and elsewhere.<sup>2</sup> The Committee was requested to start an open discussion and exchange of ideas on the policy relevance of the ASC's new research programme, paying specific attention to (a) how the ASC could look upon the relationship between policy processes and research in general, and how an academic institute, such as the ASC, should deal with policy relevance in its research; (b) the usefulness of the distinction made in the present draft between fundamental, strategic and applied research; and (c) the relevance and potential of the present research programme. The Committee visited the Centre in September 2006 and had discussions in joint meetings with the ASC Management Team and the Scientific Management Team. Its comments and recommendations were delivered in a report in November 2006.

Armed with a wealth of comments and recommendations, internal discussions continued and the draft research programmes of the three theme groups were revised

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<sup>1</sup> The Committee consisted of Prof. Mohamed Salih (Institute of Social Studies & Leiden University), chair; Prof. Mamadou Diawara (Point Sud – Bamako & University of Frankfurt); Prof. John Lonsdale (Emeritus, University of Cambridge); Dr Ebrima Sall (Scientific Director, CODESRIA); Dr Chris Cramer (School of Oriental and African Studies, London; chair of the Centre of African Studies); and Prof. Georg Frerks (Utrecht University & Wageningen University; chair of ASC Scientific Advisory Council; ex-officio).

<sup>2</sup> This Committee was made up of Mr Rob de Vos (Deputy Director-General International Cooperation, Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs), co-chair; Prof. Adebayo Olukoshi (Executive Secretary of the Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa, CODESRIA), co-chair; Dr Rob Visser (Chief Development Scientist, Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs); Dr Peter Kagwanja (Director Southern Africa Project, International Crisis Group); and Mr Jan Ubels (SNV Netherlands Development Organization).

and extended. The whole process was completed in the spring of 2007, resulting in the official launch of the programme and the three new theme groups on 1 June 2007.