

## History of the research group

This research group contains an interesting group of scholars who come from different traditions in the social sciences. Social history, geography, social anthropology are the dominant disciplines of the researchers in the group. In 2002 the group started with a research programme around issues concerning 'Agency in Africa'. By choosing for agency the group has situated itself in the long line of interest for the relation between agency and the specific conditions of African life. Seeing agency as part of the production of specific social formations, of the dynamics of interaction between people, and between societies and their predicament and environment in Africa, a number of key areas for research were identified. Each of them was meant to provide particular answers and insights as to the nature of that agency in the production of these social formations. Yet, while being topical in the understanding of the present predicament of African societies the study of the relevance of agency in and for Africa is dependent on a long history of continuity and change of the application of the concept itself. The agency approach has a long tradition in anthropological and historical studies in and of Africa, and is a continuous comment on common/accepted theories. Over the past 4 decades or so, it is striking to note that all major social sciences paradigms explaining the predicament of African societies in terms of structure have been countered and critiqued by perspectives that have emphasized agency; the productive and creative capacity of people and groups to construct social formations that are capable of negotiating pressing conditions.

Fields of study that have been central in the agency approach of the research by the group have been: mobility/migration; poverty/marginality; urbanisation; religion; identity construction; conflict and violence, development and policy; technology; reflection on the role of various groups and positions in societies including this of the researcher. This research has resulted in the publication of various articles and books. The theme group also organised two seminars on the topic of which the results are now being edited into a book to be published in 2007.

*What has been the added-value of agency-research so far?*

One answer to this question lies in the ways in which research has provided insights in the ways in which African groups and societies have been forging answers and responses to globalisation, not only in reaction-to but also in the much more pro-active social formations. This relates to research that has been carried out in the fields of religion, transnational movements, production of knowledge and studies of coping behaviour/livelihood. We should realise that there are many forms of 'proto'-globalisation like mercantilism, the spread of world religions, of formal organisations, statehood, technologies and sciences after North Atlantic models. The studies on agency have made clear that globalisation may not have been the main change in the environment in which people live. Climate change, war and conflict may have been as important. These are however of a different nature in the sense that we can not label them as a hegemonic project. Furthermore, the interpretation of war and climate change on the local level interferes often with the influences from other models of thinking that come along with globalisation. Also in the case of ecological change one may speak of co-creation; in the same way as we have defined technological change: it is all about understanding the appropriation, internalisation and cultural production of the social, political and economic environment.

The result of the studies on agency ascertain an understanding of 'globalisation' as a diverse process, that can be 'consumed' in different ways, and that is not inescapable. Though other changes in the environment may be inescapable, for instance climate change, or war and conflict. While globalisation in its present or historic forms has meant the introduction if not implementation of all sorts of Western or Eastern inventions and appetites on the African continent, an open eye is developed for particularly those social formations that negotiate these forms in terms of an African socio-cultural understanding. Agency, in other words proved to be much more than only the actions by the individual in response to anything global, but agency instead means a constant negotiation between environment and society in changing circumstances, be they globalisation, climate change or otherwise. This agency can be produced by individual actors but may also concern organisations.

Hence, in the creative appropriation of globalisation, ecological and political changes the relationship between individual agency and social agency was demonstrated.

Insights from our studies have proved to inform policy and development related discussions, as our participation and invitation for these fora have shown. The contribution of this research to the analysis of the development policies and practices did not stop at the individual contributions to specific domains of study by each individual researcher. With the study of the history of the SNV Dutch development organisation we entered a new domain of reflectivity on development and analysis of development as a dynamic process in itself. Here we stepped on the shoulders of people like Quarles van Ufford, Olivier-de-Sardan, Binsbergen and others, who have been central in the development of 'development anthropology'.

*From agency to connections:*

A second answer to the question of added value lies in the truism that agency is only produced in relationality; no agency exists in isolation, whether we speak of individual agency or group/organisational agency. The profound insight that agency is about producing relationality came to the fore most strongly in research of the theme-group devoted to livelihoods and situations of extreme poverty combined with questions of social security and social capital. Increasingly the Theme group discovered that the central question here is not whether agency is relational but how and why and with whom it produces relationality. Relationality is always in relations to, on, at or with, it contains a certain hierarchy. Important is to know who want to relate and in what particular way they want to relate. As agency is manifested in relationality and that as we have to understand the how of its production in the current condition of plurality and multiplicity, the issue of connections comes to the fore.

In the creation of these connections communication, social and organisation technologies play an important role. The use and appropriation of these technologies is of course guided by agency and are influenced by inequalities and power relations that are always present in societies. In the present new forms of communication and organisation technologies are shaping the African social and land scapes, daily life of Africans is increasingly dominated by 'modern' technology. Currently an African setting, be it rural or urban, without transistor radios, motor-vehicles, and mobile phones, or the presence of NGO's and other development organisation is quite literally unthinkable.