The ASC’s Research Programme
2012-2016

Africa and Global Restructuring

Since it was founded 65 years ago, the African Studies Centre (ASC) in Leiden has become one of the world’s leading centres for the study and dissemination of knowledge about Africa. Its academic research, which is primarily in the social sciences and the humanities, has a strong empirical base and is also attentive to policy debates. The ASC has an extensive library and documentation centre with one of the best Africana collections in Europe. The Centre has close contacts with colleagues in global and area studies in Leiden and the Netherlands, with Africanists in the Netherlands and Europe (through AEGIS, the African Studies in Europe group) and with colleagues in Africa (through CODESRIA and other networks), Asia and the Americas.

The ASC’s current research programme aims to understand Africa better following the recent global restructuring. The rise of new economic, political and cultural alliances since the 1990s, the economic crisis in North America and Europe and the emergence of new global powers are indications of this restructuring. Africa’s place is markedly different today from what it was just a decade ago. Within this rapidly changing global context, various countries in Africa have been experiencing relatively high rates of economic growth, even countries without oil or mineral wealth. There have been increasing demands for African resources, most notably oil, minerals and land, shifting patterns of trade and exchange, as well as considerable discussion about new investment opportunities in Africa and the continent’s ties with partners in Asia and Latin America. Africa’s rapidly growing population is increasingly youthful and urban, and many Africans are benefitting from improved health and well-being. Other important trends include the rise of a sizeable middle class on the continent, Africa’s ongoing religious dynamism and cultural creativity, and the spread of new technologies, such as the mobile telephone and satellite television. The ASC is attempting to understand this accelerated change in Africa in relation to earlier political economic configurations, shifting patterns of inequality, access to resources and forms of conflict.

The ASC positions its research, educational programmes, documentation and outreach work within the larger context of Africa in a world of accelerated change. With assistance from members of the ASC Community, its new research programme, which runs from 2012 to 2016, will focus on the following four major areas:

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1 The ASC Community links the African Studies Centre to a group of Africanists in the Netherlands, Africa and beyond with whom the Centre has special ties. They are connected to the ASC as Fellows, Affiliates or Associates.
Resources and well-being
Constellations of governance
Identification and belonging in a media age
Africa’s global connections

These four areas are interconnected. Africa’s position in the global restructuring is closely linked to the demand for its resources, which has an impact on the material and immaterial aspects of well-being, as well as patterns of exclusion, inequality and poverty. Markets rather than states are nowadays seen as the major drivers of change and the shifts in power relations between state and non-state actors (local, national and transnational) require critical analysis. New constellations of governance are marked by contradictions and zones of conflict that have major implications for resource use, the sharing of Africa’s increased wealth and the well-being of all Africans. Processes of identification and modes of belonging are also being influenced by global restructuring, notably people’s hopes, plans and aspirations. At the same time, processes of identification and belonging are helping to shape political and economic changes as new alliances are being forged, which might also promote adversity and conflict. New information and communication technologies are increasingly important factors in these dynamics. For Africans in Africa and beyond, global restructuring now means connecting to old and new players across the globe. And for Europe (and also for its Africanist scholars) these developments pose new challenges, which the ASC is taking up.

In addition to its links with the wider academic community, the ASC is in close contact with other major actors in the Netherlands, including policy makers, NGOs, the business community and others with an interest in Africa. The ASC is contributing to knowledge of the current focus areas of Dutch government policy, while still maintaining its academic independence and its own research agenda. The Centre acknowledges the demands and expectations of the Dutch ministries involved in funding knowledge about international/global/development matters. These demands concentrate on ten African focus countries (out of fifteen) and four focus themes (food security; water; sexual and reproductive health and rights; and security and the rule of law) and nine top priorities for the Dutch knowledge sector, as stated by the Ministries of Education, Culture & Science and Economic Affairs, Agriculture & Innovation. Of these, agro-food, horticulture, water, life sciences and health, creative industries, energy and logistics are particularly relevant for the ASC. The cross-cutting themes of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (governance; gender; the environment; and private-sector development) will all be included in the research, research training and documentation work of the ASC. Special emphasis will be put on issues of governance.
The ASC’s Research Programme and the Knowledge Priorities of the Dutch Government

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<th>Dutch government priorities in knowledge policies</th>
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| A: Resources and Well-being | ++ | ++ | + |
| B: Constellations of Governance | + | + | ++ |
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To link its research, documentation work and research training activities in the next five years (2012-2016) to the priorities of the current Dutch government regarding international development and economic and cultural diplomacy, the ASC can build on its earlier work and experience. For instance, of the Centre’s 673 publications from the period between 2007 and 2011, 304 were on security and the rule of law (including publications on failed or fragile states, security and human rights), 128 were about food security (related to livelihoods and poverty studies), 44 focused explicitly on water (including publications on fishery issues) and 33 concentrated on sexual and reproductive health and rights (including studies on the social impact of HIV/AIDS). At least 364 studies dealt with issues of governance, 91 highlighted gender issues, 82 were on the environment and 81 focused on private-sector development and entrepreneurship. For a Centre like the ASC it is of course natural that other topics have been and will be studied, and the Centre intends to continue to provide contextualizing studies, such as the Africa Yearbook that it co-edits annually with colleagues from other European African Studies Centres. And although the ASC has been and will deal with most of the Dutch government’s ‘priority countries’ in Africa, it will continue to be an African Studies Centre, covering the continent as a whole and its linkages with the rest of the world.
The ASC has identified the four major fields of research outlined below for its new five-year programme from 2012 to 2016 and intends to contribute to academic excellence, policy relevance and public debate on these topics in the Netherlands, Africa and elsewhere.

A Resources and Well-being

Africa provides a wide range of experiences with regard to economic development and well-being, as well as aspirations and opportunities for a better life for Africans. These are apparent in the life histories and plans of individuals but also in the diverse ‘planned development and change’ models that the state, international donors and non-state actors have initiated and promoted. They are evident in private-sector investments and strategic business plans too. People have exploited and transformed natural and other (financial, human) resources to create economic, social, political and cultural networks and institutions locally, regionally and (trans-)nationally. And people have been involved in processes of inclusion as well as exclusion. Over time, individual and collective plans for improved well-being may have worked out differently because people live and work in highly volatile, uncertain and often adverse social, economic and political conditions, and the intentions and aspirations of some clash with those of others.

What is central here is how individual and collective plans and actions affect Africans’ trajectories to improved well-being at the level of the individual, the local community, the region and the state within the context of global restructuring. More specifically, the ASC aims to arrive at a better understanding of: (i) how people in contemporary Africa perceive the role of and use Africa’s main physical resources – (arable) land, mineral resources, livestock, physical infrastructure, water and labour – in their journeys towards improved well-being; (ii) how these perceptions and uses relate to and interact with the economic, social and political contexts that are increasingly being shaped by today’s global restructuring (including transnational companies that are linked to headquarters across the globe); and (iii) the effects of individual and collective plans and trajectories on the productive potential and sustainability of these resources. The focal points in this research include: (i) possibilities for improved well-being in terms of land, water and food security and more inclusive access to these resources; (ii) issues of food, land, water and youth (un-)employment in and around Africa’s expanding urban centres; and (iii) the effects of changing perceptions and the use of resources on the quality of life and human development (physical and mental health, nutrition, educational level and skills). One specific project will focus on the impact on rural hinterlands of the increasing demands for food, water and energy from Africa’s urban centres and competing claims on land and water for the (export) production of food, biofuel and other agricultural products. The research will consider the implications of this for food security in urban and rural settings, and issues of cooperation and conflict over natural resources.
Constellations of Governance: Social Roots and Political Conjunctures

Governance, a term that emerged in the late 1980s, is an object of scholarly study and policy approaches, and is usually understood as the system of political management and regarded as a public good. In Africa, governance in this sense has remained deeply problematic despite the economic dynamism and growth seen in various countries over the last few decades. In the light of the continued challenges surrounding governance and uncertain donor-country policies towards Africa (with major shifts in the aid sector) there are signs of a rethinking of the scope and role of the state in Africa and also reinterpretations of the history of Africa’s late-colonial and early post-colonial states in mainstream social-science discourse and among policy makers. ASC research will study these dynamics to observe and understand public debates on politics, representation and governance that have led to new political experiments, hesitant democratic reforms but also movements of authoritarian rule and outbreaks of conflict. In addition to the persistence of socio-political and ethno-regional fault lines in many African societies, scholarly attention is required to understand the effects of processes of the ‘rolling back’ of the state following liberalization policies and the World Bank-inspired Structural Adjustment programmes of the 1980s. These have contributed to what have become known as weak or fragile states on the one hand, and the proliferation of non-state governance arrangements and public-private partnerships on the other. Relations between central/federal and local-level state bureaucracies and power holders have changed dramatically in some cases and the relationship between modern or formal (pseudo-) state agencies and traditional, indigenous or informal ones have also shifted. The weakening of centralist, authoritarian state regimes has propelled regional, non-political or neo-traditional actors to the fore, for example ethno-regional movements, criminal groups, organizations based on religion and youth groups. These new actors and forms of conflict have generated scholarly interest in emergent socio-political and institutional dynamics beyond the state. Rethinking the role of the state also follows on from the increased interest in the preconditions for a strong state and the ‘developmental dictatorship’ concepts behind such metaphors as ‘dragon’, ‘tiger’ and ‘samba’ that refer to the emerging economies in Asia and Latin America. It also questions the role of the military and joint military, economic and legal arrangements between African states and others at the sub-regional, regional and continental level. This includes the African Union and other geopolitical actors.

Understanding politics in Africa involves studying the complex constellations of governance and uncovering the (local and global) powers behind ‘governance-in-action’. In this context, the focus of the ASC’s research will be on participatory reassessments of Africa’s own post-independence histories, the relevance of classical periodization (the ‘colonial’ and ‘post-colonial’ eras), current aspirations for governance and politics among the various actors (state, business, political and religious groups and individuals) and issues related to security and the rule of law.
This is an ideal upheld by many Africans and is prominent in the current Dutch government’s policies towards Africa too.

C Identification and Belonging in a Media Age

Understanding how people identify themselves and others and changing modes of belonging and exclusion over time have long been central to research at the ASC. This field of enquiry will extend its research on identification and belonging in Africa to the current era of global restructuring and the media revolution. The proliferation of new media and communication technologies, most recently the mobile telephone and the Internet but also older mass media such as television, has led to important changes in Africa. It has dramatically extended the possibilities for communication over space and time. However, the role of such media in the shifting modes of identification and belonging in Africa in relation to current global political economic changes is still not well understood.

With the spread of new media and communication technologies, a wider range of modes of identification, belonging and possibilities for self-definition are emerging. These have become symbolic resources in many people’s attempts to make a living and are interlinked with resources such as land and financial resources that can be mobilized to build alliances and connections. Alternately they can be deployed to delink from and work against others. A slum dweller in a megacity might be an actor in the informal economy and a middle-class professional could be involved in the provisioning of services in the more formal economy. Both are able to draw on and emphasize particular modes of identification – ethnicity, region, ‘home’ village, religion, language and/or politics and culture – that are increasingly mediatized. Indeed, their multiple identifications might require complex links with a ‘home’ village and villagers for mutual assistance, a religious community, networks for economic activities and/or leisure, and kin in the diaspora. A wealthy businessman who is investing in land in his home village to develop a plantation for biofuel might also identify himself with ‘home’ but may simultaneously position himself in relation to international business interests and possible investment partners, not to mention the national political field. These phenomena raise important questions about citizenship, transnationalism and multiple forms of identification, as well as shifting norms, values and worldviews.

In this research, the ASC is interested in key moments when identification and belonging are expressed in social, cultural and political forms. These include rituals of the life course (marriages and funerals), cultural creativity in music, the visual arts, material culture and language, diverse forms of political action and expression and the changes seen over time, including their mediatization. The focus here is on new media, the emergent networks created due to shifting definitions of belonging and modes of identification, and the changing resources available to individuals and groups. Detailed empirical research will explore how shifting identifications could
lead to new alliances and networks, influence norms, values and worldviews, facilitate access to new resources, engender forms of exclusion and relations of inequality, and perhaps even fuel outright conflict.

D Africa’s Global Connections

The world has an increasingly multipolar character today as a result of the emergence of global powers such as China, India, Brazil, Turkey and the Gulf States. What will this multipolarity mean for Africa? How will Africa fare when faced with possible struggles over its raw materials and resources (such as land, water, biomass and mineral resources) and escalating bids for hegemony by different global players? What will this mean for new streams of finance and knowledge production and exchange and the reorientation of Africa’s networks? Does the new historical set-up offer African countries and social groups room for negotiation and manoeuvre, and possibly lead to greater growth and stronger institutions? These questions are especially acute given Africa’s potential to take advantage of the demographic dividend. Today, many Africans are young, healthier and better educated than in the past and are poised to enter the work force.

This theme combines an interest in Africa’s changing economic and political linkages to the world with evolving social, political, economic and cultural networks that link Africa and Africans to other parts of the globe, including African diasporas. By taking an African vantage point and highlighting the agency of African groups vis-à-vis external actors, this field of enquiry challenges victimizing views of the continent. It shows how African strategies towards these actors are having a significant effect in helping to shape today’s world. This is not least because choices for orientating themselves to new poles and partners are eroding western hegemony in political, economic and cultural domains. The focus of the research ranges from studies at the local level (e.g. new entrepreneurial partnerships, humanitarian and educational encounters, and changing cultural orientations) to the national level (e.g. bilateral economic and diplomatic agreements) and the international level (e.g. changing alliances in international forums such as the UN). In addition, since the African diaspora is an increasingly important actor in forging and reinforcing new global linkages and relationships, it will receive particular attention. This research aims to contribute to an understanding of the building processes and the effects of the multipolar world that is shaping new economic and political topographies in Africa and beyond. The research will focus on: (i) new and changing connections facilitated by technological and institutional innovations; (ii) Africa’s position in the global division of labour, world trade and investment patterns, including the shadowy side of international fraud and organized crime; (iii) the political consequences of new partnerships and alliances; and (iv) the cultural economy of Africa’s linkages to the rest of the world, especially in religion and education.
A new research programme that builds on the ASC’s past but is also connected to the new ASC Community

In its new programme, the ASC is able to draw on the rich heritage of its past research and its extensive library services. Resources and well-being and questions of governance have long been core areas of research and documentation at the ASC. Over the last decade, issues relating to identification and belonging have become more prominent too, with a focus on agency and historical and contemporary connections. The fourth field of enquiry, Africa’s global connections, is a new core field for the ASC but one that builds on the Centre’s previous research, its established connections in the field, and theoretical and methodological advances made in prior research. In the four above-mentioned areas of research, the ASC will make use of its broad and ever-expanding network, namely the new ASC Community.