

Postscript: To Know Africa Without Knowing Africa(ns) – Denmark’s Bumpy Road to Consent About Africa-Related Knowledge Production and Capacity Building

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Abstract

Based on my professional journey in the Danish Africanist landscape, I analyse the history of Denmark’s Africa-related knowledge production and capacity building. Throughout the article, I highlight major changes in the Danish approach to Africa-related research, starting from the establishment of the Centre of African Studies at the University of Copenhagen. Along the way, there have been changes in Danish society’s approach to Africa. I argue that we are currently at a crossroads, with several major changes, both internally in Denmark, including political priorities related to the educational landscape, and externally, related to geopolitical changes. These entail paradigmatic changes to the foundations for both relations with Africa and the production and capacity of Africa-related knowledge in Denmark. The Danish Africa bubble has changed and seems ready for even more changes; these require the ability to listen and adapt, while we rethink perceptions, interests, and investments as agenda-setters. The grassroots, in the form of students and researchers at the Centre of African Studies, are already both promoting and adapting to these new realities.

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About the author

Stig Jensen is associate professor and former director at the Centre of African Studies (CAS), University of Copenhagen. He holds a MA in Political Science from Copenhagen University and a PhD in Geography from the Department of Social and Spatial Changes, Roskilde University. Stig has comprehensive experience with research, capacity building in higher education linked to African studies, and consultancy. He also holds advisory roles in various settings and has extensive fieldwork experience from Africa, Asia, and South America. His research focus is on the governance of the green transition, including climate issues, as well as on combining biodiversity conservation and rural development and working with local, national and international stakeholders.

Introduction

To conclude this special issue, my ambition with this postscript is to go a step beyond the question of consent, and analyse the evolution of Denmark's relations with Africa over time and how this has affected Danish knowledge production in and about Africa. By contextualizing debates on consent within the history of imagining and producing knowledge about Africa in a Danish context, I wish to illuminate the intimate relations between historical contingencies, power struggles, and ideas such as 'partnerships', 'consent', and 'agency.' By understanding how these notions have emerged and evolved, we can critically engage with and nuance discussions on 'consent', which is otherwise often presented in depoliticized and technical language.

My focus is on Africa-related knowledge production and capacity building. The motivation comes from my position – over several decades – as both an observer and an active participant in the Danish Africa-related research landscape. During this time, I have been involved in knowledge production and higher education efforts concerning Africa in Denmark and have gained insights into Danish consent processes (implicit as well as explicit ones) related to Africa – especially in relation to the production of academic knowledge about Africa. This has provided me with both insights and understandings of key actors involved in such processes and their ideas, values, and power struggles over consent in the history of Africa, African studies, and development research initiated from a Danish context.

For decades, there has existed a hegemonic discourse in Denmark about Danes being important to Africa. Recently this has been exemplified in the Government of Denmark's (2024) new Africa strategy, entitled, "Africa's century", which articulates a change in Denmark's relationship to the African continent through focusing on more equal partnerships. This can be seen as a change in

perception which finally acknowledges Africa's importance for Denmark as well.

For decades, Denmark's aid and other investments in Africa-related activities have boosted Denmark's international position as a global powerhouse in development assistance. Denmark has garnered international recognition for years due to the perceived volume and effectiveness of its efforts to assist the world's poorest (e.g., Lancaster 2008). Accordingly, Carol Lancaster proclaimed Denmark's aid to be based on the humanitarian imperative. Another example of this (self-)perception was given by Mogens Jensen, a former Minister for Development Cooperation, who stated that assisting the world's poorest and most vulnerable is part of the Danish national character (Frandsen 2014), thus framing Denmark as an altruistic nation that is important for the poor – particularly in Africa.

Branding Denmark as the best friend of the poorest is valuable for the nation, Danish companies, and Danes employed internationally. Geopolitically, Denmark has – as a small state – been able to benefit from international goodwill (e.g., Jensen 2015; Larsen 2020). This comes especially from the support of African nations helping Denmark to secure its prestigious position as a non-permanent member of the UN Security Council in 2005–06 and again in 2025–26.

Denmark has, over the years, built ties with numerous nations on the African continent, particularly through development assistance framed as partnerships. However, these types of relationships are fundamentally asymmetrical. Asymmetry is not surprising, as it is often the underlying condition in relationships between donors and recipients (Martens 2005). Denmark's approach to development assistance has for years been based on the implicit notion that we know what is best for Africa. However, in 2024, Lars Løkke Rasmussen, Denmark's current Minister of Foreign Affairs, indicated a shift in the new Danish Africa strategy, emphasizing the need

for a more listening approach (Government of Denmark 2024). Paradoxically, however, this includes learning from China (Kristeligt Dagblad 2024). That said, no matter the role model, new winds are blowing, and the Danish government is seeking support from Danes to counter emerging changes in the geopolitical landscape.

In my attempt to contextualize both changing perceptions and approaches to Africa from Danish actors, this article is structured around the following questions:

- (1) What are the perceptions of Africa (and its relationship to Denmark) that have been operationalized in Danish society from the 1960s until today?
- (2) What effect do these perceptions have on the idealization and operationalization of consent in Danish knowledge production and capacity building related to Africa?

Several 'layers' of actors are involved in thinking about and producing knowledge about Africa in Denmark. There are those at the top political level in Denmark who are employed by the state in Denmark or overseas. There are also those who, either through development work or commercial activities, imagine and produce knowledge about Africa. There are also the layers of students and researchers affiliated with Danish institutions, some of which are Africanist and some of which ascribe to different conceptual views. Then there is also the popular imagination. My point of departure involves all layers, but focuses on certain key events and key actors in thinking about Africa in Danish contexts.

I have chosen a chronological structure to highlight how selected visions by key actors, throughout the history of Danish African studies, have shaped various Africa-related activities in research and policy. This postscript

is structured in six main sections. The first section focuses on me and my journey into Africa(n studies) in Denmark, functioning as a point of departure to set the scene of an ever-evolving relationship between Danish research and Africa, including the frequent clashes between Danish interventions and ideals and African ideals and practices of decolonization.. The second focuses on the nascent stages of knowledge production in Denmark related to Africa. It outlines the underlying motivational factors, which created a new knowledge framework for understanding Africa. The third, and most extensive, section focuses on the establishment and later consolidation of African Studies at the University of Copenhagen. A core aim of these three sections is to reflect on the visions shaping African studies in Denmark, with a special focus on education, as it has proved crucial to the consolidation of the Centre for African Studies (CAS). The fourth section reflects on the Danish initiative "Building Stronger Universities", which was initiated by the Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The stated objective of this initiative was to strengthen capacity building at African universities, and it was presented as a new way to approach and collaborate with African actors, with an emphasis on mutual agency in research processes. With this analysis, I seek to articulate my understanding of the foundation and significance of Africa-related knowledge production driven and financed by the Danish state. The fifth section ties the previous sections together by reflecting on recent initiatives which have affected the development of knowledge production and capacity building on the Danish-Africa nexus broadly, and which also lead to a seemingly new orientation towards consent among central actors and institutions involved with both knowledge production and other activities with (and in) Africa. In the sixth section I conclude by reflecting upon the initial research questions presented above.

Sprouting African studies in Denmark: Perspectives from a participant

If we wish to understand the current situation and develop fresh perspectives for the future, understanding the past is essential. This includes the central actors and ideas that created the basis of the current Africa-related research landscape and the consent processes applied by Africanist researchers. Accordingly, allow me to take the reader on a journey back in time. The account and the resulting reflections must be read and understood as my selective personal views on how these ideas have evolved and what specific events have driven this development since the early beginnings of African studies in Denmark. This is based on a combination of my own observations and communication with central people in the Scandinavian Africanist scene. As a tour guide, I will initially declare my personal journey, with key points, in the Danish Africa-related landscapes:

Africa entered my life in the mid-1970s, when I spent almost two years attending evening classes alongside 40+ Danes to learn about African birds, which was followed by a group tour to Kenya. It was central to me and my group to use our accumulated knowledge to identify bird species which resided among the vibrant, yet, to us, remote landscapes and people of Kenya.

The next significant transition came in the late 1990s with my entry into the academic realm after completing a master's degree in Political Science from the University of Copenhagen, via employment at the Centre for Development Research (CDR). This started as research assistant position, which later led to a PhD scholarship with a concurrent affiliation to the Geography Department at Roskilde University. CDR was at that time the leading institution for development research in Denmark and a key player in Danish research activities and policy development with a particular focus on Africa. Here, I gained my first academic insights and actively

engaged in research, debates, and policy development related to the Global South. These were transition times, with debates and shifts in perceptions on development aid and its impact on poverty alleviation in Africa. There was a change to looking more at people, grassroots, and development from below, rather than a top down approach copying the development pattern in the Global North. Major sources of inspiration and debates were Guy Gran's (1983) *Development by People* and Robert Chambers' (1983) *Rural Development: Putting the Last First*. These books particularly questioned whether aid initiatives were reaching their primary target, namely poverty alleviation among the poorest of the poor (a primary target group in Danish development assistance). Critical works such as these led to intense debates within development circles in Denmark, where some emphasized the need for increased national and local ownership of initiatives in Africa. This also correlated with emerging trends in the donor community, who increasingly suggested budget support as a replacement for project-based and programmatic approaches (more on this in, e.g., Stokke 2019). In short, there seemed to be emerging a strengthened focus on creating African consent to, and ownership of, research activities on the continent.

In the 2000s, I became associated as an Assistant Professor with the Centre for African Studies at the University of Copenhagen through my work at CDR, which at the time had become embedded within the Danish Institute for International Studies (DIIS). Through this time of employment, I was exposed to and actively participated in knowledge production, teaching, and later capacity building related to African studies. Later, I was involved in rethinking and structuring the content for the new two-year master's programme in African Studies. My primary contribution involved re-imagining the educational structure based on an interdisciplinary approach, challenging the traditional mono-disciplinary silo approach

that had dominated previous education programmes at the University.

Eventually, I was promoted to Associate Professor and Director at CAS. During my six years as director I was engaged in diverse activities in the field of education, in the dissemination of knowledge to Danish society about Africa, and in policy processes. During this time, Afro-pessimism was growing, as was exemplified by the speech of then-Prime Minister Anders Fogh Rasmussen at the opening of the Danish Parliament in 2006. Unexpectedly for most, he brought Africa into the speech, undoubtedly inspired by a trip to Africa the year before, which led his government to set up a Danish Africa Commission. The Prime Minister highlighted, in his opening speech, Denmark's leading role as "the world's best" in development assistance, which was juxtaposed with the limited prospects for its success.

This implicitly blamed internal factors on the African continent, subscribing, as in the early 1960s, to the classic modernization theory, which claimed that internal conditions in Africa are the primary cause for the failures of our development activities (Pieterse 2010). This was presented without reflections on factors such as external interventions and the classic asymmetrical relationship in collaborative relationships between Denmark and Africa.

I experienced first-hand the clash between external interventions and African ideals and practices of decolonization as the University of Copenhagen sent a high-level delegation (myself included) to Ghana's leading university, the University of Ghana in Legon. Our purpose was to extend an agreement established many years previously by George Bennett, Vice-Chancellor of the University of Ghana, Legon and Professor Henrik Jeppesen in the Geography Department at University of Copenhagen. The agreement included cooperation and shared lab facilities, a journal, and a house on campus, called Denmark House.

Prior to the Danish delegation's visit there had been one-way communication from the Danish side and an unspoken expectation of consent to this visit from the Ghanaian side. The University of Copenhagen wanted to continue the cooperation and interpreted this silence as signifying consent to the extension of cooperation. Therefore, it came as a shock for our delegation when the Ghanaian side, upon our arrival, informed us they wanted to stop the cooperation and have control over the house.

This case illustrated a cultural difference which manifested in miscommunication between the two partner universities, with the Danish agenda-setting and dominant approach completely overlooking and taking the partner for granted. Simultaneously, the Danish delegation overlooked the values and significance for the Ghanaian side of reclaiming the house as a central element in their decolonization efforts.

After leaving the director's position, I continued as an Associate Professor at CAS and have since then been active in diverse activities in Denmark and Africa, where internationalization also meant increasing collaborative relationships with individuals and institutions on the two continents. I likewise became engaged with academic exchanges for capacity building in higher education in Africa (Adriansen et al. 2015) and in various policy discussions, which allowed me to make frequent, almost daily, contributions to the Danish media, providing expertise on Africa-related topics.

1960s: Nordic politicians created the foundation for knowledge production on Africa

The politicians in the Nordic Council¹ drove the breakthrough for the formalization of

¹The Nordic Council was established in 1952 to facilitate the discussion and coordination of policies in areas of joint interest to the Nordic countries among parliamen-

Africa-related knowledge production in 1960s. A consensus was established in the Nordic countries concerning the need for capacity building at the Nordic Africa Institute (NAI) to produce research-based knowledge about Africa. Behind the scenes, individuals within the Swedish Ministry of Foreign Affairs drove the build-up phase of NAI.² The Nordic Council agreed to finance NAI with Sweden as the main contributor. NAI was located in the central Swedish city of Uppsala, with an institutional set-up consisting of researchers from the Nordic countries based in Uppsala. From the outset, NAI's task was to be a knowledge hub for academic knowledge production about the African continent, while contributing to policy making and the dissemination of information on Africa-related issues to the Nordic public.

The decision was solely based on a Nordic (and Swedish) need; there were no actors from Africa involved in the process. In contrast, it was primarily driven by consent among the Nordic countries to play a more proactive role, where four of the most central motivational factors were presented as follows:

During the early 1960s, the Nordic Council was a cooperative organization considered significant by the Nordic countries, both individually and, importantly for the region's position in the world, especially as a part of active multilateralism. In this context, it should be mentioned that the first two elected Secretary-Generals of the United Nations came from the Nordic countries; firstly, Norwegian Trygve Lie and, secondly, Swedish Dag Hammarskjöld. The latter was particularly vocal in advocating active multilateralism and the Nordic countries playing a central role in the decolonization of Africa.

Several Nordic countries were in the process of rethinking their vision, moving from a national focus, characterized by the establishment of what can collectively be termed the Nordic welfare model, to a more international focus (e.g., Holm 1982). This was primarily driven by the social democratic parties in the Nordic countries, and in some cases in alliance with other political parties. In the Danish context, the Social Liberal and Social Democratic parties played a key role (Holm 1982). Poverty alleviation in the Global South featured centrally in the vision behind the expansion of the Nordic welfare model. The focus was to strengthen institutions with the aim of improving the living conditions of citizens in democratically anchored societies, drawing from the experiences from the Nordic countries.

Some of the Nordic countries, and especially Sweden, were in the process of establishing (or had already established) frameworks for development aid aimed at the Global South. Therefore, the Nordic Council's decision to establish and financially support knowledge producing centres in the Global South was seen as support for national political-administrative systems. Systematic data collection and subsequent analysis were considered beneficial and potentially conducive to enhancing the quality of each country's development aid.

A last concern was the Nordic nation states' position in the world. Despite the varying territorial sizes of the Nordic countries, in international politics they were collectively referred to as small states. The Nordic countries were, to varying extents, concerned with playing a role internationally, particularly with regard to poverty alleviation issues in the Global South, which contributed to strengthening both the region and the international position of the Nordic nation-states. In other words, this was a type of combined altruism supplemented with self-interest intended to strengthen the Nordic position internationally.

tarians from its member nations, Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, and Sweden, and the autonomous territories, the Faroe Islands, Greenland, and Åland.

² In the beginning the countries involved were Denmark, Norway, and Sweden. Later, Iceland, Finland, and Estonia became part of NAI.

A growing political focus in Denmark on international politics, and with specific interest in the Global South, meant that the government established political consensus behind an economic framework for development aid in 1962. Subsequently, in 1969, the Danish government, under the auspices of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, created the economic foundations for capacity building in Denmark for knowledge production about the Global South with the establishment of the Center for Development Research (CDR). The objective was very similar to NAI's production of research-based knowledge related to economic and political conditions in the Global South, along with supporting research, training, and policy in Denmark concerning the countries of the Global South. The main difference was the point of the departure, where CDR's focused on development studies broadly, while NAI's focus was on African area studies specifically.

In summary, the agreement in the Nordic countries concerning the need for in-house knowledge production about Africa was an attempt on the part of these nations, and particularly Sweden, to strengthen their position in the world. Capacity building and the production of knowledge about Africa happened in the North and among Nordic researchers, with African voices being close to absent and without their involvement, influence, or ownership.

1980s: The epistemic society as the driving force

The early 1980s was the beginning of a new era in Denmark's Africa-related knowledge production and, notably, capacity building. Researchers at the University of Copenhagen who had activities in Africa drove the breakthrough for African studies. They agreed on the need for a meeting place in Denmark where knowledge and experiences related to Africa could be shared and exchanged. This

arose from a combination of increased research interest in Africa and the fragmentation of researchers at the University of Copenhagen across various faculties. The impetus for the researchers' interest in a formalized meeting place for African studies was primarily rooted in their own individual research interests, with the ambition of exchanging knowledge among researchers, but without any immediate changes in views or approaches to Africa.

The University of Copenhagen's receptivity to the researchers' interest led in 1984 to the establishment of the Centre for African Studies. The researchers' initial interest in CAS expanded from internal relationships among researchers at the University of Copenhagen to engaging with Danish society. Simultaneously, there was growing interest in Danish society for research-based knowledge about Africa. The interest from the Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs (based on an agreement within the political-administrative system on the necessity of investments to strengthen the production of knowledge about Africa) was particularly important to this group of early Africanists, as it opened funding opportunities for what eventually became CAS.

The economic consolidation of CAS was enabled by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs' funding combined with strong support from University of Copenhagen, particularly through the so-called North-South framework initiatives. Accordingly, a secretariat under the leadership of Professor Holger Bernt Hansen was established. He was, until his mandatory retirement in 2006³, the charismatic leader and focal point of CAS. Prior to his appointment as CAS director, Holger Bernt Hansen was already a central figure in Denmark's Africa landscape, often referred to as Denmark's Mr. Africa. This title stemmed from his involvement in various activities in Denmark and the other Nordic countries related to Africa, such as holding key

³ Holger Bernt Hansen retired as a result of the University of Copenhagen's then rules on retirement at the age of 70.

positions in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs' advisory committee on aid, policy activities, active participation in research programmes, and outstanding dissemination of knowledge about Africa, utilized by the media, educational institutions, and so forth.

Kjeld Møllgård, rector at the University of Copenhagen (1994–2002), with medical research experience from Ghana, was another key individual involved in building upon both African studies at the University of Copenhagen and area studies related to the Global South at Danish universities more broadly. Here, the responsibility for sub-Saharan Africa was awarded to Copenhagen. Meanwhile, Odense University (later renamed the University of Southern Denmark) had responsibility for North Africa and Middle East Studies, while Aarhus University focused on Asia and China in particular.

CAS later evolved from being an introspective hub for researchers and their interests, to becoming an independent and more outward-looking institution with a focus on being primarily beneficial to Danish society. Both the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the University of Copenhagen viewed CAS as a central institution in building Danish knowledge-based capacity on Africa. Central to CAS during the initial stages was the enhancement of knowledge production through the establishment of the Africa Seminars, which were open to the public. These seminars typically featured international researchers with expertise on Africa and African phenomena. Another crucial decision during this time was the establishment of educational activities, which initially were driven primarily by CAS' researchers' desire to voluntarily create and teach courses on Africa-related topics.

Educational activities became central to CAS's consolidation, building on Holger Bernt Hansen's unique and extensive network in the Danish resource base on Africa. He saw potential in an expansion, which initially involved offering courses, followed by the establishment

of a diploma programme in African Studies. The teachers on the courses were a diverse group. Some researchers were based at the University of Copenhagen, while others came from other Danish universities and beyond through international guest researcher programmes. Lectures and examiners also came from the Danish consultancy sector, the NGO sector, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and other public and private institutions dealing with Africa-related activities. The courses covered a broad range of areas, often linked to various academic traditions such as African geography, African anthropology, African history, African economics, etc. Furthermore, thematic courses were offered on topics such as conflicts in Africa, HIV-AIDS in Africa, human rights, and film and literature in Africa.

The diploma programme, alongside optional courses, was initially developed as a post-graduate programme aimed at meeting the growing demand in the Danish labour market for Africa-related knowledge for development workers and others already engaged in Africa-related activities. Most of the students belonged to professional bachelors and the senior segment in Danish society, with several being retired. This distinguished the student population at CAS from most other educational programmes at the University of Copenhagen.

An MA in African Studies

A rising pressure from the Danish society to adapt the higher education sector to international standards spelt changes at CAS. Although the diploma programme was in demand, it was phased out as Danish universities aimed for a harmonization with the international Bologna Process for higher education.⁴ Subsequently,

⁴ The Bologna Process involved 46 European countries undertaking a series of reforms intended to ensure comparability in standards and quality to create an integrated European higher education area.

higher education in Denmark was to be structured according to a template with a three-year bachelor's programme followed by a two-year master's programme.

CAS faced the choice between discontinuing its educational activities or adapting to the new template. The choice was made to adapt to the new model. The process for CAS involved the establishment of the new master's programme. Initially, this entailed communication between CAS and the University of Copenhagen's leadership regarding the requirements and expectations for establishing such a programme.

The initial considerations primarily focused on three aspects:

- Could CAS offer a programme of the necessary academic quality?
- Would there be a market for a master's programme in African Studies, i.e., demand among regular university students?
- Would there be jobs for CAS graduates in the Danish and international labour markets?

The conclusion was to proceed with the plan for a two-year master's programme (MA or 'cand.mag.' in Danish)

The new conditions shaping the master's programme prompted the establishment of a task force and a subsequent process of internal discussions and decisions regarding the new programme's content and structure. Central to the establishment of the programme was its alignment with the new and centrally formalized accreditation process. The consequence of this was a complete restructuring and rethinking of the new master's programme. In terms of content, there was a notable shift from the diploma programme's discipline-specific courses to an integrated cross-disciplinary approach. This marked a significant departure from the mono-disciplinary and silo-based

perspectives that characterized many existing programmes at the University of Copenhagen.

The structure of the new programme consisted of one year of compulsory and interdisciplinary courses, namely: Nature, Population and Society; Religion, Culture, and Society; Politics, Development, and Change. In addition to this we created a third semester for elective courses or project-oriented activities, including internships and/or fieldwork with flexibility for students to explore as a central consideration. Students had the opportunity to receive credit for internships and/or fieldwork, which could take place both in and outside of Denmark, although the hope was that it would primarily occur in Africa, thereby creating opportunities to build first-hand knowledge about the continent. This new component actively encouraged the students to engage in Africa and with Africans, through either internships or fieldwork. Initially, very limited efforts were made to equip the students and make sure that they would act ethically and in morally sound ways while in the field. However, elective courses addressing contemporary and relevant issues were offered, which did equip students with an (at least theoretical knowledge) of the complex dynamics shaping life on the continent. Finally, it was decided to offer an elective course in an African language. Kiswahili was chosen, as many Danish activities at that time took place in East Africa.

Although the master's programme in African Studies was obviously different from other educational programmes at the University of Copenhagen, the program was accredited. The master's programme represented a complete departure from the previous diploma programme. That said, there was a certain continuity in the teaching staff, especially with the combination of instructors from CAS and the inclusion of external instructors with particularly relevant expertise. Later, both the structure and content of the master's programme served as inspiration for

other master's programmes at the University of Copenhagen.

The new master's programme was an immediate success and exceeded initial expectations, as students enrolled both in the new master's programme and in optional courses. The students who applied to CAS in the first years of the master's programme were primarily Danish, with some coming from other Scandinavian countries, mainly Sweden. The students' academic backgrounds were diverse, with a wide range of bachelor's degrees from Danish or foreign universities. Moreover, there was an evident interest in Africa among the students, often stemming from shorter or longer stays on the continent. This diversity created a unique and dynamic student landscape, albeit with didactic challenges due to the students' varied previous educational and academic backgrounds.

Despite the successful start of the two-year master's programme, its life was short, due to the decision at the University of Copenhagen to expand the number of English-language programmes. This prompted CAS to transition to an English-language master's programme. The transition process was administratively demanding but did not entail any changes in the programme's structure. However, it did create two side effects:

- (1) It attracted more international students to the master's programme and to the individual courses.
- (2) More English-language instructors became affiliated with CAS.

Overall, this added an extra dimension to the diversity of the teaching staff in African Studies. While graduate education remained a core activity for CAS, previous areas of activity continued and expanded, such as the Africa Seminars, primarily featuring external guests and with a growing number of scholars coming from Africa.

Lastly, a one-year flexible master's programme was established as a post-graduate education programme aimed at upgrading the Danish Africa-related workforce. The flexible master's programme has always played a marginal role in terms of student volume but garnered significant public attention due to its completion by Denmark's current Prime Minister, Mette Frederiksen, and several other Danish notables.

2010s: Capacity building in Africa

In the early 2010s, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs initiated a groundbreaking shift in Denmark's approach to Africa-related knowledge production and capacity building with the launch of the Building Stronger Universities (BSU) initiative. This new initiative resulted from a Danish political-administrative vision to strengthen the production of knowledge and institutions in Africa based on partnerships. Behind the scenes, the development of ideas was driven by a network of a few individuals, both in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and at the University of Copenhagen. They primarily wanted more South-driven research collaborations and support for institutions other than the large, well-established institutions in 'donor-darling' countries.

BSU was and still is driven by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs' proactive support and is aimed at strengthening universities and other institutions primarily in Africa. These were considered central to partnerships aimed at aiding African state building with inspiration from Western state models.

The Ministry's support for capacity building in knowledge production in and related to the Global South was far from new. The Ministry had supported the international agricultural research system (CGIAR) since the 1970s. Another flagship activity was the ENRECA (Enhancement of Research Capacity) programme, established in 1989 and phased out in 2008. The ENRECA initiative

aimed to support the capacity development of Danish research institutions with institutions and researchers in partner countries, mainly in Africa. As a participant in the team that evaluated the entire ENRECA programme, I encountered voices from Africa expressing difficulties related to their involvement in the project activities, as many activities within ENRECA partnerships were decided and managed by the Danish partners.

Simultaneously, the implementation of BSU formed part of following up on recommendations issued by the Danish government's Africa Commission, which was initiated by former Danish Prime Minister Anders Fogh Rasmussen. The initiative was built on the UniBRAIN programme⁵ launched in 2009, which aimed at providing support to innovation centres, thus linking research institutions and the private sector. BSU thus represents a reorientation of support for knowledge production and capacity building with a clear and targeted focus on solving concrete challenges, as evidenced by the following statement:

It is of paramount importance to the success of poverty reduction strategies and to the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals that the capacity of research and tertiary education institutions in the developing world is strengthened. Flexible and well-managed universities are essential if low-income countries are to develop into modern knowledge societies. Economic growth and increased welfare require the availability of highly skilled professionals and a capacity in society to innovate and to adapt technologies and knowledge in national contexts. Research and higher education institutions in developing countries need,

therefore, to improve their ability to respond to current challenges and to the rapid transitions. (Hansen et al. 2011).

The above illustrates the Ministry of Foreign Affairs' conception that universities in the Global South play a central role in economic development, in undertaking and providing high-quality research, relevant education, and courses using new learning methods, and in providing the educated personnel needed for various forms of governance infrastructure.

A central element of the BSU initiative is to strengthen capacity in the South and to support North-South and North-South-South networks, which is seen by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs as an effective way of transferring knowledge and good practices to and between universities in developing countries.

Although the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, with BSU, has articulated a South-driven approach to capacity building in the Global South (primarily in Africa), there are several challenges to this objective:

- The Ministry of Foreign Affairs sets the guidelines for BSU, and control thus still lies in Denmark, including financial control.
- Structural and practical limitations reduce the freedom of South-owned and South-driven initiatives and prevent South-owned tailoring of the projects financed.
- Discrepancies in the resources and capacities of large and small knowledge institutions in the Global South make equal competition for grants impossible.
- There are difficulties in coordinating and aligning expectations and regulations, both internally within the African context, and between national policies and internationally donor-funded initiatives.

⁵Support to Universities, Business and Research in Agricultural Innovation (UniBRAIN)

- There are often challenges related to coordination between actors involved in activities in Africa.
- There appear to be challenges in clarifying and following up on the impact of BSU initiatives, including the allocation of responsibilities and follow-up activities, which have challenged the achievement of synergies that could have driven progress in the Global South.

The BSU initiative has obvious challenges, many of which are caused by the fundamentally asymmetrical relations between actors in Denmark and Africa. This has resulted in Danish priorities and interests setting the agenda in most cases.

Despite the obvious challenges involved in creating equal partnerships between actors linked to Danish and African institutions, BSU has changed the rules of the game. The Danish focus is now more on building and strengthening knowledge production and capacity building in Africa. The development is driven by Danish initiatives and funding, but at the same time is an expression of change, emphasizing the need for cooperation and the desire to support Africa's resilience and self-reliance.

Recent development – Africa is important for us but...

Conditions for cooperation in Denmark in Africa-related activities has recently changed dramatically, decisively, and with expected great significance for the future. In the following, I highlight three aspects that I find particularly interesting to discuss.

First, we have seen a breakthrough in the conceptual elevation of consent in a European context, which was born from the EU's approval of the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR). The purpose of the law is to protect personal data and it has subsequently been rolled out throughout the EU, as

a fundamental instrument in the protection of individuals' data. Rules have also set the framework for researchers' data collection in the EU, Africa, and elsewhere (with varying success, as some of the contributions to this issue illustrate).

A corresponding, and almost paradigmatic, shift can be identified in two recent developments within the Danish government. First, the Danish government seeks to promote a new framework for future Danish Africa-related activities. Second, the Danish government's policies related to higher education have changed dramatically, which potentially puts Danish Africa-related knowledge production and educational capacities under pressure. Allow me to dive a bit further into these two points.

The Danish government's initiation of debates on Denmark's Africa strategy in 2024, spearheaded by Foreign Minister Lars Løkke Rasmussen, emphasizes the need to rethink our relations with Africa. The prospect is a showdown for Denmark's implicit and self-established brand as 'the ones who know best what is good for Africa'. Both the process and substance, related to the newly formulated Africa strategy, are interesting and contain novel elements worth attention.

Firstly, the government did not put forward a new draft Africa strategy. Instead, it invited Danish stakeholders to contribute their thoughts on the new strategy. In principle, this is an exemplary approach of inclusion, but its success depends on whether stakeholders contribute and whether the input is incorporated. In the past, these consultations have been semi-open and characterized by exclusively Danish actors articulating their positions – most often with limited effects on policies. In the current process, actors from Africa were invited to participate. The initial intention with these consultations seems to have been far more comprehensive than in the past, but it is unclear to what extent these African voices played a decisive role. Additionally, it was

primarily representatives from the African political establishment who were invited, which is not surprising since a central element in Denmark's foreign activities is state-to-state cooperation. On the other hand, governments in a growing number of African countries are increasingly criticized and otherwise challenged by civil society groups. Therefore, the Danish government's challenge going forward, specifically with the Africa Strategy but also more generally, is its ability to navigate the different, and sometimes conflicting, realities in Africa that do not necessarily uphold the Western dichotomy between state and civil society.

Precisely the ability to listen and learn has been an unusual feature emphasized by Foreign Minister Lars Løkke Rasmussen, who at the Africa Strategy launch event stressed the need to learn from China. The notion of us learning from China is interesting. Choosing to highlight a non-African and non-Western country, namely China, as one that can help us be more successful on the African continent is new and remarkable. This does make sense in the light of China's massive and growing presence in Africa. However, a general perception in the West, including in Denmark, is that China is one of the West's most significant challengers and competitors on the African continent. Likewise, China has a fundamentally different approach to activities on the African continent, based on secrecy in its bilateral dealings with actors in Africa. Additionally, and building upon this, the West has been extremely critical of China's collaborations with certain African states, which we have labelled as pariah states contributing to maintaining undemocratic and authoritarian regimes in Africa.

Lars Løkke Rasmussen's interest in the development of the new Africa Strategy, and his emphasis on China, is undoubtedly due to the recognition of Africa as being on the frontline in a changing geopolitical landscape. This means that Denmark must be aware of

and able to act in relation to these changes, which seem to shake the West's historically dominant role, replacing it with a multipolar world order, which is expected to challenge the West's privileged position. An element of the latest development trends is a growing number of African nations opting out of cooperation with the West and turning towards other non-Western actors, including Russia and China, which is particularly concerning from a Western state perspective.

Another notable aspect in the initial statements about the new strategy relates to knowledge production and capacity building in Denmark. In the government's proposal, capacity building is primarily to be strengthened within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. This is perhaps not so surprising considering the massive cuts in Africa-related spending, including Danish representations in Africa, over the past ten years or so (Marcussen 2019). Upgrading the capacity of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Denmark and Danish representations in Africa is obviously needed and important. The most obvious consequence of the government's reorientation is that the Danish embassy in Tanzania, the long-standing Danish donor-darling, which was in the process of being closed, will now remain operational. Adding to this, new Danish embassies in Rwanda, Senegal, and Tunisia have been (or are in the process of being) opened. Overall, the process with the Africa strategy has been unusually closed and centrally directed by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

Notably, in the process leading to the Africa strategy no new and additional resources seem to be being allocated to knowledge production and capacity building in the Danish resource base, as has otherwise been customary since the 1960s.

Meanwhile, the government's education policy initiatives, which are also in the pipeline, are putting pressure on the educational ecosystems of Africa-related knowledge production. In the following I reflect on two of the

new education policy initiatives, with a special focus on the consequences for CAS.

First is the dimension of student admissions to graduate programmes, which involves the political-administrative regulation of the number of students admitted to higher education programmes, such as African studies.

Second is a political reform of master's programmes at Danish Universities, which has been under way for some time as a result of agreements between a majority in the Danish political landscape about the need to reduce the numbers of students and education programmes, mainly within social sciences and humanities. The initial ambition was that several education programmes, including African studies, should be shortened from two years to 15 months (from 120 to 75 ECTS points). In the most recent development, Danish universities have taken on the task of discussing and looking for opportunities to reform, including by shortening higher educational programmes.

These initial proposals would have had negative implications for CAS:

- A shorter programme duration, including fewer courses, means a deterioration of the graduates' academic knowledge.
- Shorter programmes may reduce the graduates' opportunities for jobs, especially outside Denmark.
- The shorter master's degree is in breach of the Bologna Process, which mainstreams education within the EU. This could affect Danish graduates as they will not meet the international criteria, while also being disadvantaged with shorter degrees, which could negatively impact, for example, the students' possibilities for later PhD enrolment.

A central element in the initial reform was a less academic and more practical orientation

and a new requirement for students to link up to the private sector.

Finally, there are plans for further reductions in admissions to several graduate programmes, probably including the MA in African Studies. The combination of these initiatives will result in a reduction in the number of graduates, who are also likely to have shorter programmes and possibly diminished expertise.

At first glance, the political consensus on changing and thereby deteriorating educational programmes, such as African studies, seems paradoxical when seen in the light of the growing emphasis by politicians, the media, and policymakers on the need for knowledge and understanding of Africa. At worst, a shorter educational programme, with fewer students, might mean the discontinuation of master's education in African studies, because it is no longer financially and practically viable.

The proposed reduction in the duration of degree programmes follows a trend in Danish society which has lessened academic focus on the international sphere. This is exemplified by Danish universities recently implementing a series of initiatives, such as closing a range of area studies programmes. This includes the University of Southern Denmark, which has closed their Middle Eastern Studies programme. At the University of Copenhagen, both the Nordic Institute of Asian Studies and the Think China initiatives have likewise been closed.

African studies in times of transition

Changes at CAS have always been determined by both internal and external conditions, and particularly by the adaptations which have gradually taken place in the Danish research landscape in the search for growth and financial opportunities. The motivation for change has been primarily economic. In this context, the MA programme has been vital for CAS but has recently been reduced as a

result of the above-mentioned restriction on student admissions to graduate programmes. Meanwhile, increased external funding for research activities has led to a change in the staff landscape, with an increase in the number of project-based researchers.

Another driving force behind these changes has been the agreement to prioritize closer collaborations with research institutions and researchers in Africa, which has resulted in a shift in personnel, from primarily Danes to an increasing number of international staff and individuals with roots in Africa.

The student population is likewise changing, with a majority of international students. This includes an increasing number of students from outside Europe, including Africans admitted to the programme. This trend has changed the dynamics, and CAS has become an even more international study environment.

The students' approach to studies is constantly changing, as evidenced, for example, in thesis topics, which have always been diverse. While, for example, HIV/AIDS issues were popular topics in the early days, they have garnered marginal interest in recent years, whereas topics such as the green transition, climate, and issues related to identity and representations of Africa have gained growing interest.

Students are still very keen on utilizing opportunities in the third semester for project-based activities, but fewer are choosing fieldwork, while more are opting for internships. The trend of less fieldwork can be attributed to students' perceptions of fieldwork conditions in Africa being more difficult, including because a growing number of countries are tightening the rules for researchers. Three resulting trends are especially notable:

- An increased use of opportunities for online surveys, i.e., cyber-based data collection.

- An increased focus on African diasporas, including in fieldwork, and particularly focusing on migration and integration issues in a Danish/European context.
- Lastly, internships are becoming increasingly popular as students perceive them as safer and more structured. Some of the internships are in Africa, but an increasing number are outside Africa. Internships are to some extent used to collect one's own data, which can be used in connection with the MA thesis.

Conclusion

On a political level there is a clearly vocalized agenda to 'include' African voices, albeit forced by a growing African sense of agency. The question, however, remains as to whether these voices are representative enough to consent on behalf of the continent's broader populations? Likewise, students have become increasingly aware of issues of representation and questions of (fieldwork) ethics. While this is generally a positive trend, it also creates a fear of engaging directly and first-hand with the continent – maybe, among other reasons, because our consent procedures are so skewed from the realities on the ground, which makes students doubtful of whether they are able to do the research in an ethical way.

When discussing how to ensure consent in future research, these insights are equally important. How Danish politicians, development workers, business actors, students, professors, and the public imagine and produce knowledge about Africa, agency, and partnerships informs the ways consent is imagined and secured. Informed consent tends to be discussed as something you either get or not. However, as the broader history of knowledge production about Africa in Denmark shows, consent is intimately related to longer

historical contingencies and unequal relations between people. This shapes how knowledge about Africa, and ideals of agency and equal partnerships in particular, are produced and reproduced. While the focus on Africa-related partnerships is intensifying, research and educational activities aimed at equipping people for it are diminishing. This is concerning, as it leaves a vacuum for critique and knowledge-based improvements of the so-called 'equal partnerships' that the Danish state claims to be in favour of.

Perceptions of what it means 'to know Africa' have undergone major changes since the 1960s. In the first decades, development in Africa-related capacity building and knowledge production was primarily driven by centrally located individuals and their networks. These networks created changes by decoding the continent's trends and developments at the time, for the political-administrative system, academia, and Danish society.

Danish relations with Africa have also changed, perhaps not dramatically, but they have become more fluid and segmented – and so has the Danish societal view on the need for knowledge production and capacity building in both African countries and Denmark. Although several actors have contributed to these changes, the limited role of people and institutions from Africa is noteworthy.

The processes and decision-making have primarily been driven by individuals in Danish and other Nordic academic and political-administrative institutions. The political-administrative institutions, and particularly the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, have played a central role in investing in, building, and changing Denmark's Africa-related knowledge production and capacity building. Since the Building Stronger Universities initiative began in the 2010s, the ambition has been to facilitate a more South-driven collaboration. More recently, this aspiration has also been mirrored

in the government's new Africa strategy, which can be seen as a political recognition of how strengthened knowledge production and capacity in Denmark is important. However, this also has limitations, which have been made apparent in recent debates about the overproduction of academic candidates in Denmark, including those with Africanist expertise.

Regardless of ongoing changes in Nordic African Studies since the 60s, this postscript illustrates that despite the ideals of capacity building and equal partnerships, there is a silenced, or at least selectively mobilized, set of African voices. The question moving onward is thus how to talk about and develop better practices around consent, partnerships, and agency in the future. This raises some important points for reflection in a Nordic context:

- If we wish for equal partnerships, how do we practically approach the notion of equality – especially when working with socio-economically unequal parties?
- While an increasing number of students and researchers acknowledge the dynamics of global inequality, which give shape to their work, we need a broader institutional conversation about how to approach African studies in the future, in ways which consider and respect both African and Nordic actors, perceptions, and experiences alike.

Of course, these questions and historical excerpts do not only apply to Denmark. It is necessary for all countries, especially those with colonial pasts, to look back at how knowledge about Africa has been produced – both historically and today – in order to critically engage with both internally and externally imposed ideals and practices, which may counter the very ethics they seek to ensure.

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