

Statement on the Opening of the Africa Centre for Transregional Research (ACT) at the University of Freiburg.

My warm congratulations to the University of Freiburg and its Arnold-Bergstraesser-Institut for this very promising and new initiative, the Africa Centre for Transregional Research (ACT). ACT comes to fill an important niche as part of a global community of African Studies Centres. Two of Its founding agendas are particularly pertinent- the focus on trans-regional questions, and the space for African researchers to turn their attention to the study of societies in Europe and beyond.

The increasing recognition of the trans-regional character of some of the greatest challenges facing humanity has created a need for a centre conceived precisely with this in mind. We already know that in an interconnected but unequal world, issues that appear particular to one country or continent, often become global in reach and implications. The implications of international migration for domestic politics in receiving countries, the global spread of precarious work, the recent scramble for land and natural resources in Africa that accompanied the global financial, energy and food crises, and many signs of climate change around the globe are only a few examples of such issues.

If COVID-19 has disrupted a grander inauguration and celebration of ACT, it has also made an even more compelling case for its establishment. In the space of five short months, a health crisis that seemed very far away has morphed into a hydra-headed challenge that has grounded the entire globe.

ACT is also an apt response to the resurgence and extension of an impulse that accompanied Africa's anti-colonial struggles. Disappointed with the persistence of a pernicious global economic and political order and Africa's position within it, as well as the failures of African states to create enabling conditions and opportunities, different segments of Africa's civil societies have questioned the efficacy of the post-colonial order. We see this in the various youth and women led movements that have questioned the curriculum and the conditions of learning in higher education such as the

Rhodes Must Fall and Fees must Fall movements in South Africa, or forced dictators out of office in Burkina Faso, Senegal, Tunisia, Egypt and Sudan. Accompanying these movements have been renewed debates among scholars about the meaning and import of decolonisation, and the growing influence of the decoloniality strand in these debates.

If ACT lives up to its promise, some of the research it makes possible will connect with these impulses within Africa and highlight their relevance to other regions of the World. Such research will neither ignore regional and country specificities, nor universalise the experiences and solutions of the dominant regions of the world. It will contribute to changing how Africa is studied, erode the African exceptionalism that has blighted African Studies, and reshape perceptions of the streets in Europe about Africa and its peoples.

ACT aims to afford African scholars the opportunity to study others besides themselves. Rarely do African scholars have the resources to conduct research in other African countries, let alone beyond Africa. Becoming researchers of countries and peoples outside Africa is much more than extending the geographical boundaries of knowledge production in Africa. It goes to the very heart of the politics of knowledge production in normalising Africans as scientists and knowers who may come from elsewhere, but are grappling with similar questions regarding what it means to be human.

It would also contribute to acknowledging and normalising the multi-directional of flow of ideas. As things stand, the knowledge about Africa that is propagated around the globe and within Africa, is produced and published mostly by European and American scholars. Africa is the only continent in this particular predicament, which entrenches understandings of Africa shaped by knowledge systems and research priorities not rooted in African realities.

An ACT which reverses the research gaze would make a unique contribution to an important epistemic community represented by institutions such as CODESRIA and a range of university based and

independent research centres across Africa. This community has for decades decried and made efforts to bridge the knowledge divides that have muted Africa's contributions in global debates and policy making. In particular moments of crisis, the community has made pivotal interventions that changed the terms of debates about Africa. In the late 1990s for example, CODESRIA's monumental research effort produced knowledge by African researchers about their own countries that historicised Africa's economies and challenged the policy assumptions of structural adjustment programmes. The knowledge produced was compelling enough to force the World Bank to concede mistakes in the conception and implementation of adjustment policies. More recent efforts to address questions such as nature of developmental states in Africa, the ebola crisis and the challenges of transitional justice, have produced insights which have been invaluable to those trying to make sense of the nature of the post-colonial state in Africa; the socio-cultural dimensions of diseases and Africa's ambivalence towards the International Criminal Court. The extension of African insights to similar questions outside Africa would be a game changer for the world.

ACT comes to complement another important Freiburg University initiative to reduce knowledge asymmetries between Africa and world, the Maria Sibylla Merian Institute for Advanced Studies in Africa (MIASA) at the University of Ghana. While MIASA hopes to bring the world to, and in conversation with Africa, ACT hopes to bring Africa to and in conversation with the World.

The University of Ghana values its participation in Freiburg's Africa projects. Our ecosystem already has explicitly emancipatory intellectual projects, the most prominent of which is the Institute of African Studies. Established in 1961 to spearhead the decolonisation of African Studies, the Institute continues to work to fulfil its mission through research and postgraduate training. The IAS, MIASA and ACT can derive mutual benefits from this collaboration.

I have many hopes for ACT. I hope that its initiators appreciate the inherently political and contested nature of African Studies, and the

importance of understanding one's positionality to work in this space in a credible and ethical manner.

I hope ACT promotes and pursues questions and subjects that are strategic and show Africa in its fullness, and Africans in all their complications as they navigate the challenges of the 21st Century. ACT should be as interested in everyday African childhoods as it should be in child trafficking and other conditions that steal African childhoods. ACT should celebrate the vibrancy and magic of Africa's youth cultures while recognising the real threats to reaching the fullness of adulthood as well as the ways in which Africa's demographic dividend is being squandered by economic and social policies that see only markets and not people.

I hope ACT will contribute to inspiring and nurturing a new generation of African scholars who prioritise trans-regional research that tackles some of the greatest challenges facing the world today, and who through their collaborative and independent work can fashion durable solutions that speak to all humanity, and to Africa. In sum, I hope ACT will become the home of pluralist knowledge systems that ensure that Africa is researched and understood in its own right.

To end, I would like once again to congratulate the founders of ACT, and wish this new initiative a fruitful and interesting journey in a landscape sure to change beyond our imagination after COVID-19.

I Thank you.