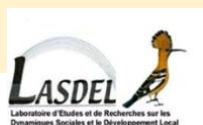


Groupe de  
Recherche sur les  
Initiatives  
Locales



**ACASSS**  
**African Centers for Advanced Studies**  
**in Social Sciences**

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**Cotonou Manifesto**

(January 24, 2026)

**“African Research in the Social Sciences is  
ESSENTIAL!”**

For the first time, seven African centers for advanced studies in the social sciences from seven different countries convened for four days to assess their experiences and define common avenues for collaboration. Together, they now form the ACARSS collective (African Centers for Advanced Studies in Social Sciences).

This manifesto, addressed to African States and development institutions, advocates for a fundamental transformation in the relationships between policymakers and funding institutions on the one hand, and African social science research centers on the other.

**The Contribution of African Social Sciences**  
**“Producing rigorous diagnoses *for* and *on* Public Policy”**

African social sciences generate knowledge rooted in fieldwork and intimate understanding of the local context – an empirically grounded approach that is essential for improving the design and implementation of public policies and development initiatives. Yet they remain largely overlooked.

By definition, African social science research centers maintain continuous engagement with local societies. Their experienced researchers, trained in both quantitative and qualitative methodologies, mentor in turn numerous emerging scholars. Whether within academic frameworks or upon request, these centers provide rigorous, in-depth and uncompromising analyses of the actual functioning of societies, institutions and States. Their work encompasses public services, social and religious norms, local contexts, community changes, social innovations, popular knowledge, conflicts, resilience, stigmatization, and violence, among other critical dimensions.

All public policies have significant unintended consequences when implemented, outcomes that conventional performance indicators often fail to capture. African social science research centers, with their in-depth, long-term expertise in the functioning of States, public services, and societies, are uniquely positioned to document the gaps between intended and actual outcomes. They can describe the mechanisms at play, identify root causes, and propose contextually relevant solutions.

Too often, when technical and financial support for a project or program comes to an end, the institutional changes it introduced—whether reforms or established structures—fade away. Because they are embedded in local contexts and have firsthand experience with these dynamics, African social science research centers can assess the real-world impact of planned interventions. They can also analyze why certain reforms and ‘best practices’ endure, evolve, or disappear over time.

This is the mission embraced by the African research centers united within the ACARSS collective. Their focus is on promoting quality over quantity in field investigations, research, and publications, with the ultimate goal of producing knowledge that serves Africa’s needs.

### **To African States**

“Supporting the Local Production of Social Science Knowledge is essential to improving Public and Development Policies”

Whilst social sciences in Europe, America, Asia, and India receive substantial State funding and benefit from government contracts, African research remains severely underfunded by its own governments.

National research policies are underdeveloped, lack strategic vision, and suffer from chronic shortages of human and financial resources.

While budget constraints in African countries create competition among priorities, these policies frequently overlook the major contribution of social sciences—which provide concrete insights into societies and are indispensable for designing, implementing, and evaluating public policies. Instead, they prioritize experimental sciences and consulting firms; disregarding the constraints of high-quality research.

Investing in social science research yields tangible benefits: it helps identify the bottlenecks that hinder State action, uncover their root causes, and significantly improve the quality of public policies and the development of reforms better grounded in local realities. Social science research enables the adjustment of ineffective or misaligned measures and provide essential insights into social perceptions, practices and the needs of both service users and State actors.

Yet, due to insufficient public support, African social science research remains heavily dependent on external development institutions. While these institutions may have legitimate priorities, their agendas do not always align with the agenda or knowledge needs of African societies or national public institutions. This dependency is unsustainable.

When African States rely on foreign partners to commission and fund research, African researchers lose scientific legitimacy or autonomy within their own countries. This undermines not only the quality and relevance of the research produced but also perpetuates a form of epistemic inequality where African societies are analyzed from the outside rather than understood from within.

To correct this detrimental over-reliance on external actors, each African State—even within existing budgetary constraints— must establish a national Social Science Support Fund structured around three key pillars:

- 1) Sustained structural support for research centers with a proven track record of rigor, national relevance, and international recognition;
- 2) Time-limited seed funding for emerging research centers;
- 3) Thematic research grants for research programs aligned with national issues, awarded through competitive calls for proposals. These should be designed and evaluated by an independent scientific council.

These common-sense measures should be overseen by a commission of accredited social science researchers to ensure that funds are allocated to high-quality, impactful research— by creating dedicated resources for knowledge production rather than for administrative overhead or infrastructure.

## **To Partner Development Institutions**

**“Rethinking ‘Structuring Research Programs’ instead of ‘Projects’”**

African social science research owes much, in many respects, to international partners who have funded the majority of its work and, at the same time, enabled the training of numerous researchers. In doing so, they have compensated for the shortcomings of national research policies.

However, this dependence has come at a cost—one that cannot be overlooked. African social science research centers have often had to align not only with the priorities of their partners but with their timelines and procedures. Yet these frameworks are not always compatible with academic research, which requires exploratory avenues of problematics rather than rigid terms of reference, long-term fieldwork rather than short-term missions, and rigorous data analysis rather than validation workshops.

This research has often been transformed into consultancy work carried out by African researchers recruited outside their home institutions, thereby depriving these centers of both scientific value-added and financial returns.

The reality is that African social science research centers operate under significant financial insecurity, devoting an excessive amount of time to moving from one project to another, from one donor to the next, and from one management model to another—all at the expenses of structuring medium- and long-term programs.

The current crisis in development aid, marked by the unprecedented withdrawal of many partners and the drastic reduction in international funding, may present an opportunity for a necessary break from multiple forms of dependence. This moment calls for an essential change in direction, ensuring that African social science research is taken more seriously and becomes better aligned with the needs of local societies and national public policies.

The ‘project system’ that characterizes the relationship between technical partners and African research centers has the disadvantage of relying on frameworks typically designed outside the countries concerned. While these frameworks are developed by highly qualified and competent experts in their field, they often overlook the specificities of local contexts (due to lack of familiarity) as well as the unique capacities and constraints of the social sciences.

Initiative and leadership for these projects most often come from the partners, without the involvement of African research centers in the upstream phases. The ‘project system’ operates in silos, based on imposed terms of reference, and frequently combines international experts—who lead the design and management—with national experts tasked with producing the required data, which is then send back to international experts for processing.

To break away from this configuration, which fails to recognize the expertise of African social science research, we propose a gradual shift where initiatives would instead originate from the research centers themselves. This would involve supporting African research based on their own proposals, rooted in their in-depht knowledge of local contexts and national needs. In other words, it would mean funding long-term programs rather than short-term, rapid-impact projects, with themes developed by African researchers within their own institutions. While some international partners have previously provided funding on this basis, such cases remain rare exceptions.

This shift in the economy and governance of African research undoubtedly requires new tools the partners, particularly in terms of financing.

## **A Shared Fund for African Social Science Research**

« Produire localement des savoirs pertinents et rigoureux  
pour contribuer à des politiques de développement adaptées et efficaces »

The establishment of a shared fund to support African social science research— spearheaded by a consortium of technical and financial partners— could provide a viable solution to ensure a minimum level of independence and sustainability for African social science research centers.

Drawing inspiration from the previously mentioned national funds addressed to States, this shared fund to support African social science research could also be structured around three key components:

- 1) Core support for research centers that have demonstrated their credibility, national relevance, and international recognition;
- 2) Temporary support for emerging research centers in their formative stages;
- 3) Targeted funding for research programs focused on regional priority themes, allocated through competitive calls for proposals. These calls would be designed and evaluated by a parity commission, composed of representatives from technical and financial partners, research institutions in the countries concerned, and African social scientists with recognized experience and expertise.

To ensure both the scientific quality of funded research and its effective social utility, transparent mechanisms for monitoring, peer evaluation, and public accountability should be integrated into the fund’s design from the outset.

For technical and financial partners, such a fund offers several advantages. It would mobilize national teams organized into multi-country consortia, governed by jointly developed common procedures. It would avoid the proliferation of fragmented and sometimes redundant calls for proposals, which are often divided by country or development agencies, and instead support integrated regional research programs (e.g., education, youth, health, climate, social welfare, environment, mineral resources, security, agriculture and livestock, drugs, etc.).

It would generate substantial financial efficiencies by concentrating resources on high-value, research conducted by larger teams, more experienced teams over longer and more diverse fieldwork periods.

Finally, it would contribute to the development and strengthening of African research—rooted locally but operating at an international level—rather than confining it to consultancy or data collection for global institutions. This approach would foster a more sustainable, autonomous, and impactful African research ecosystem.

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## **The Collective A C A S S S**

**African Centers for Advanced Studies in Social Sciences**

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**GRIL** — *Research Group on Local Initiatives (Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso) : [www.gril-ujkz.com](http://www.gril-ujkz.com)*

**IEFSG / ZIG** — *Institute for Education, Family, Health, and Gender (Ziguinchor, Sénégal) : <https://iefsrgyzig.org/>*

**IPIS** — *Institute for Social Policies and Initiatives (Yaoundé, Cameroun)*

**LASDEL** — *Laboratory for Studies and Research on Social Dynamics and Local Development (Niamey, Niger) : [www.lasdel.net](http://www.lasdel.net)*

**LASDEL** — *Laboratory for Studies and Research on Social Dynamics and Local Development (Parakou, Bénin) : [www.lasdel.net](http://www.lasdel.net)*

**MACOTER** — *Institute for Advanced Research in Social Sciences (Bamako, Mali) : [www.lmi-macoter.net](http://www.lmi-macoter.net)*

**T4DI** — *Transformation For Development Institute (Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire)*