

Report for AEGIS about the AEGIS Thematic Conference Africa Knows! (December 2020 – February 2021; all online).

A bit of context and history

The African Studies Assembly around the African Studies Centre Leiden, LeidenASA, (<https://www.ascleiden.nl/content/leiden-asa>) organized the 'Africa 2020' year, celebrating the fact that many African countries got their political independence in 1960: "Africa at 60" (<https://www.ascleiden.nl/africa2020>, and <https://www.ascleiden.nl/content/africa-2020-country-information>), and also marking the successful integration of the African Studies Centre as part of Leiden University (2016-2020). The idea was to end this festive year with a three-day conference, and to organize that conference as a 'crowd funding event' (around a core subsidy from LeidenASA) and with a decentralized format with 50 panels. After two major earlier events ('Africa Works' in 2012 and 2014, together with the Netherlands African Business Council and the Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs) it was decided to do it 'differently' this time, and with more emphasis on collaboration with African and European partners, and with a focus on Africa's knowledge development and the necessity 'to decolonize minds'. In 2019 the AEGIS Plenary accepted this 'AFRICA KNOWS!' conference as an AEGIS Thematic Conference, a proposal that was then proposed by the representative from Leiden's African Studies Centre, and supported by the representatives from Edinburgh and Cologne. And then COVID-19 struck. In September 2020 we decided to organize this event as a three-month online conference, and to make full use of the online opportunities that this presented. This could only be possible by the dedicated, almost full-time attention of a coordinating team (Marieke van Winden, Maaïke Westra and myself), the support of the excellent NomadIT team (and that support went much beyond technical IT support), and the input from hundreds of 'Africanists' from many different places and backgrounds. And there was a lot of enthusiastic support from students of (mainly) the Minor African Studies (Leiden/Delft/Rotterdam, coordinated by Marleen Dekker and Madi Ditmars of the ASC Leiden). And almost all ASCLeiden staff participated in one way or another.

Participating AEGIS members and other input

Nine AEGIS members played key roles during this conference, and many scientists and students from these and other AEGIS member institutes participated online. The co-organizing AEGIS centres were: Leiden (4 leads in panels; 11 co-organizing roles in other panels), URMIS-Paris, CNRS-France, Mainz and Bayreuth (3x) from Germany, Lisbon from Portugal (2x), Lleida/Barcelona from Spain, NAI-Uppsala from Sweden, and Olomuc & Hradec Kralove from the Czech Republic.

In addition, panels have been (co-) organized by other departments from Leiden University (from medicine to languages, from the International Institute of Asian Studies to the Leiden University College in the Hague, and from the natural sciences to law, history and anthropology), other universities in the Netherlands (Rotterdam -including the Institute of Social Studies in the Hague), Delft, Amsterdam - UvA and VU -, Tilburg, and Wageningen), as well as the Hague University of Applied Sciences. From the Netherlands we also had the support from three hybrid think tanks (ECDPM Maastricht, the Knowledge Platform for Food and Business and the Knowledge Platform for Inclusive Development INCLUDE), from NGOs (Edukans, Aflatoun, Voice4Thought, LinkedInAfrica), from the Netherlands University Foundation for International Cooperation NUFFIC, from IHE Delft, and from the Netherlands African Business Council.

Beyond the AEGIS partner universities, panels have also been (co-) organized by the Universities of Manchester, Cork and Coventry in Great Britain, and by the Humboldt University in Berlin, the

University of Bonn, the University of Constanz and the Chemnitz University of Technology, as well as DAAD from Germany.

The support from Africa was quite overwhelming: in eight cases African universities took the lead in panels (Makerere, University of Ghana, Cape Town, Maputo, Ouagadougou, Moi University Eldoret, Lagos, and Tamale), and in other cases they co-organized panels (Rhodes University, MIASA, University of the Western Cape, the PAL Network, the Alex Ekwueme Federal University in Nigeria, the University of Zambia, the University of Dar es Salaam, the University of Ilorin in Nigeria, the Millar Institute in Bolgatanga, the University of Nairobi, CODESRIA, the Gaston Berger University in Saint Louis Senegal, the University of Botswana, the Machine Intelligence Institute of Africa, the Nelson Mandela University, Advance Africa, the University of Cape Town, RUFORUM, the University of Jos in Nigeria, the University of the Free State, and the AAU and IAU.

Financial support came from Leiden University, 13 other institutions in the Netherlands, two from Africa and five from Europe (<https://www.africaknows.eu/13.htm>), and from the modest conference fees paid by participants. As a result, the conference costs could be fully covered, but in total we estimate that the online format resulted in 80% less costs (in total) than it would otherwise have costed to organize a ‘physical conference’, with most costs going to travel and accommodation. Also as a result, the environmental costs were much reduced, although organizing an online event is also consuming a lot of energy, and as a result it was decided to pay a symbolic compensation ‘fee’ to a tree-planting organization in Africa, using part of the conference fees for that purpose. We intentionally did not want to get financial and organizational support from the Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs, to avoid the interference that we earlier experienced from co-organizing the Africa Works conferences in 2012 and 2014.

Activities and output

The online conference had 50 panels, organized in eight ‘streams’. Each panel got its own time slot: a morning, an afternoon, or both. There were no overlapping panels. Each main organizer was made responsible for organizing their own panel, but coordinated from Leiden, and with support from NomadIT. In total there were 112 ‘conveners’ and ca 700 unique online visitors, including 362 authors (for 286 papers), and participants in four round tables (videos: <https://www.africaknows.eu/26.htm>) and seven keynote speakers (videos: <https://www.africaknows.eu/21.htm>). With the exception of two panels, all panels have also been video-recorded (<https://www.africaknows.eu/25.htm>), and most panels produced a written report and/or they have been covered in a conference magazine (online and as a physical booklet): <https://www.africaknows.eu/23.htm>, and <https://www.africaknows.eu/24.htm>. Paper presenters were given the opportunity to put their paper online and more than half of all paper presenters did so (<https://www.africaknows.eu/22.htm>).

Streams	Panels	Papers with online visibility	Other papers	Total papers
Institutional Foundations	5	11	8	19
Decolonizing Knowledge	7	29	27	56
Europe and Africa	3	8	6	14
Regional and disciplinary specifics	14	54	36	90
Transdisciplinary debates	7	20	27	47
Technology and innovation	5	8	15	23
Youth and Gender Issues	2	11	3	14
Knowledge and impact	7	8	15	23

Total	50	149	137	286
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In addition to these conference activities, around the conference we produced 54 country profiles about the history and state of affairs of education in African countries, with a focus on universities, thinktanks and museums (<https://www.africaknows.eu/51.htm>), and in addition we made picture shows of images of African Universities (<https://www.africaknows.eu/52.htm>) and of African museums (<https://www.africaknows.eu/53.htm>). There are 17 blogs online (<https://www.africaknows.eu/3.htm>), as well as a kora concert (<https://www.africaknows.eu/61.htm>), and free access films (<https://www.africaknows.eu/62.htm>; during the conference months participants also got access to other films). The podcasts include two interviews with the conference organizers, one in French, and one in English (<https://www.africaknows.eu/4.htm>). And at the end the organizers, and coordinators of LeidenASA, made a 'final blog', with our reflections about the contents of the conference. This final blog can be found online, but we also add the text below.

Thanks to the many people who have made this event and its results possible, and thanks to AEGIS for allowing us to make this a thematic conference of AEGIS.

Ton Dietz

FINAL BLOG (<https://www.africaknows.eu/pdfs/finalblog.pdf>)

Africa Knows! Looking back and looking forward; Straddling many boundaries

Africa's knowledge expansion

On the basis of the country knowledge profiles, we can say that Africa's knowledge infrastructure has recently expanded tremendously, and that the results of the expansion of education can be felt throughout the continent. Around 1960, Africa's average adult literacy rate was very low, but currently it is beyond 70%. The expected years of schooling for children increased from a median level of 8.2 years in 2000 to 11.0 years in 2018. And the number of universities increased from a mere 107 in 1960, with South Africa leading, and many countries having none, to an astounding 2262 in 2020, with at least one university in every country and (in numbers) Nigeria leading, followed by Morocco and Ethiopia. Of those universities and other tertiary knowledge institutions more than 60% are currently private institutions. In many countries the expansion of higher education started in the 1990s, and the very fast expansion of private tertiary institutions happened from 2000 onwards. Africa currently has many more students and alumni from tertiary institutions than ever before, and these people are leading a further expansion of higher education, research, and innovation in the continent, and beyond. Diversity across countries remains enormous, of course, with current adult literacy rates going from only 16% in Niger and 22% in Chad, to 96% in the Seychelles. The expected years of schooling in 2000 was only 2.9 years in Djibouti and Niger, but 15.7 years in Libya. In 2018 the range was between 1.9 years for Somalia to 15.1 years in Tunisia, and with substantial improvements in most countries during the last two decades.

Decolonising academic minds

'Decolonisation' has elicited a wide range of responses from the conference participants. For some, the issue was, and still is, regarded as odd, so many years after most African countries became politically independent. Some parts of Africa, such as Ethiopia, have never been colonized. Others feel that the impact of colonialism and its institutions should not be overemphasized (it was said to

be “just a scratch in the long history of Africa”), or it is being regarded as “too long ago”, or it takes away the agency (and blame) from African leaders for their policy mistakes and behavior after independence, and puts the blame on ‘the past’, or on ‘colonials’. At the same time, many participants said that, even without ever experiencing colonial overlords, colonial mindsets can be influential, and long lasting, and we think that ‘decolonising the (academic) minds’ really IS an issue, both for Africans and for Europeans – including from countries that have never been colonisers, or have not been engaged in slavery or supporting Apartheid. Moreover, it was also raised as an issue for Asians and Americans. So let us try to summarise some of the mindset issues that have been discussed during the Africa Knows! sessions between December 2020 and March 2021. We will do that schematically, and encourage you to add and comment!

Colonial mindsets and practices in academia

- Framing the relationship between partners as ‘capacity development’, ‘training’, or ‘helping out’ rather than collaboration;
- Preferring leadership in research consortia and in project evaluations to be taken by partners from outside Africa;
- Preferring to publish in non-African journals and with non-African publishers;
- Dependence on ideas, publications, and funding from outside Africa;
- Ignoring indigenous knowledge;
- Disregarding scholarly work not written in English (or French);
- Preferring mono-disciplinary collaboration arrangements;
- Prioritising (first) authorship of non-African scholars in publications;
- Publishing about Africa without taking note of African contributions in the same field;
- Publishing in journals for which others have to pay (behind paywalls).

Decolonised mindsets and practices in academia

- Co-creation of research and innovation in teams with equals;
- Make use of indigenous institutional strength and experiences, and don’t rely on people and funds from elsewhere;
- Encourage African leadership in research teams and in project evaluations;
- Encourage Africans to be first author in cases of joint research;
- Be aware of available local contributions to studies about African affairs, and use it in teaching and in publications;
- Encourage students and authors in African Studies to include many references from Africa;
- Ensure that all partners contribute financially to research projects, conferences, publications, and other forms of collaboration;
- Encourage teaching, conversations and publications in other languages than English, and promote bridging the language divides;
- Highlight indigenous/endogenous ideas and practices;
- In teaching about Africa include more pre-colonial history, and more knowledge from and about marginal areas;
- In African Studies, give recognition to the importance of North Africa and its linkages with SSA;
- Put more emphasis on Africa’s linkages in past and present with Asia and Latin America, and within Africa;
- In encouraging ‘African’ contributions do not judge ‘African’ by skin colour.

What next?

Any academic conference has many different 'layers of impact', but this one intended to have those impacts at all levels at the same time, and that also deserves dedicated follow-up activities by all participants individually, by groups of participants (often led by the convenors of panels) and by the conference organizers. And some of the conference activities will continue for a little longer: the Blogs, the conference Magazine, and uploading the video recordings and panel reports. And all authors who have agreed that their papers can be seen by 'everyone' (as Africa Knows! Working Papers on the conference website) make the website a rich resource for many scholars, students and others, together with all other contents, that will be freely online from now on.

Let us look at 'five layers' of likely (or perceived) impact.

It is obvious that many academics participate in (academic) conferences mainly because they want to be heard by fellow academics and because they use it as a stepping stone for (academic) publications. That's what many regard as the apex of scientific success and often their promotions depend on their publications, where these are published and how often they have been cited (and by whom). So undoubtedly, conference papers presented at Africa Knows! (and most of those visible as free online working papers) will also find their way in separate edited books, and journal articles, and some of those as a joint effort of some panel convenors and authors.

In addition, academics are almost always also teachers, and many use the ideas formed during conferences as a major input in their teaching and supervision activities. In that sense a conference like this one can be seen as awareness raising about contents and forms of 'learning about Africa'. And the fact that most panels will be visible as recorded sessions online, and that there will be written reports (and for some: books and/or articles) and many papers online is a rich knowledge paradise for students and scholars to use.

The third layer is that this conference intends to address structural problems in academia in dealing with 'the past' and in structuring the 'knowledge industry' and 'teaching'/'training'. In the section above we reflect on practical ways to tackle some of these issues and we hope it strengthens those pioneers who really want to change things.

A fourth layer is the impact that discussions and results of this conference and its products will have in "powerful circles" beyond academia: politicians, and civil servants/policymakers in both Africa and in Europe; people in NGOs, in journalism, in business, etc. During the conference we have specifically addressed some of the ways of building those bridges.

And then a fifth layer is the connection between all this and 'local', 'indigenous', 'common' people or whatever phrase you would like to use, and how these people can and do play a role in knowledge creation, and what linkages do and could exist between them and 'academics' (including students). Panel 44 with examples from Tamale was one of the examples of what the attempts are, and panel 29 even did a step further.

All five layers are important and of course we know: it can't be done all at the same time everywhere. Changing attitudes is not an easy thing, and after successes in what we see as "the right direction" there can also be some counter-steps. Success is never granted and changes are never eternal.

At the African Studies Centre in Leiden, and in LeidenASA, we had and have to 'fight' on all those levels at the same time in an academic environment that is often deeply conservative, but where we as ASCLeiden did and still do get a lot of room to manoeuvre. And we also see that in other African Studies Centres: the ones in Europe (supporting each other in AEGIS, and exchanging lots of experiences), the ones in Africa (e.g., those united in the Association of African Studies in Africa), as well as those in Asia, Oceania, and the Americas.

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