



CONFERENCE ANNOUNCEMENT

African Engagements: On whose terms?

AEGIS 4th European Conference on African Studies

15-18 June, 2011 in Uppsala, Sweden

The 4th European Conference on African Studies (ECAS 4) will be convened in Uppsala, Sweden on 15-18 June 2011. ECAS 4 is co-organised by the Nordic Africa Institute and African Studies in Europe (AEGIS). The agreed theme of the conference is **Africa Engagements: On Whose Terms?** The following paper outlines and expands the theme. For more information on ECAS 4, please refer to the conference web page <http://www.nai.uu.se/ecas-4>.

In the past two decades, Africa has experienced dramatic changes. Between 1990 and 2005, in more than 42 African countries peaceful and democratic changes of government took place through competitive multiparty elections, notwithstanding more recent setbacks in Kenya, Zimbabwe and Gabon. On the economic front, Africa emerged as one of the world's fastest-growing regions in the wake of a boom in the international commodities market, despite the recent global financial crisis. Some African countries have put in place appropriate macroeconomic, structural and social policies that have contributed to improved growth rates and some progress towards meeting the MDGs. Significant efforts are also being made to reverse the productivity decline in agriculture and the decline in higher education and basic research in the face of equally daunting challenges including poverty, and post-conflict reconstruction and democratic consolidation. However, there are encouraging signs that the Africa Union and Regional Economic Communities (RECs) are playing important roles with some international support in dealing with potentially disruptive national crises, such as in the Sudan, Somalia, and most recently Guinea and Niger.

Africa is also changing demographically, in terms of its fast growing youthful population, and high rates of urbanization that are placing new demands on resources and connecting regions and other parts of the world in complex different ways. Across the continent an ICT revolution has led to the rapid expansion of the use of mobile phones for communication and business, while the

internet has opened up spaces and opportunities, by speeding up the connections between the continent and other parts of the world. The ICT revolution has empowered civil society organizations across the continent to mobilize around a whole host of issues—such as climate justice, opposition to the EPAs, and to challenge the legitimacy of dictatorial regimes, and build coalitions for democratic change.

The end of the Cold war, and rapid globalization have contributed to increased competition for resources and markets in Africa by the world's established and emerging powers. In an increasingly multi-polar world, Africa's relevance and influence in the emerging post-Cold war order is not in doubt. From being in a state of neglect and marginality in the immediate post-Cold war period, the continent—its resources and markets have become sources of interest and engagement by these powers. Apart from the established western powers: the UK, France, and Germany, Russia and the United States, emerging powers like China and India have stepped up their engagement, in what some have described as 'a new scramble for Africa'.

Despite the political and economic changes within the continent and the world, the study of Africa remains a contested terrain. Questions as to how to understand the current changes in the continent, and how the world can engage a changing Africa on an equitable basis is far from being settled.

The challenge remains, how the world can study and engage a resurgent Africa on the basis of mutual respect that facilitate a process of tapping into the present moment to promote social transformation and development on the continent, while the world opens up innovative African products, cultures and ideas. The critical questions relate to how Africans can define their own priorities and partnerships, and with which voice (s)? Who are, and can be Africa's real partners in the quest for mutually beneficial (re)-engagements and on whose terms? *Although a lot has changed over the past decade or so, some of the research on, and knowledge produced about Africa still bears the baggage of artificial divisions that hinder a proper and nuanced understanding of the nature of changes in the continent and the need for new perspectives, values and partnerships in a world that is equally changing in new and complex ways.* The research community faces the challenge of evolving and expanding opportunities and spaces which can allow for a common multi-disciplinary exercise of knowledge production and understanding without necessarily talking with one voice, thereby enriching the understanding of a dynamic and diverse Africa.

