

International Affairs Forum Interview

March 17th 2006

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IA-Forum speaks with **Carin Norberg** about the development challenges of African countries and the role of *The Nordic Africa Institute* and Africa-Scandinavia relationships. Carin Norberg is the new Director of the Nordic Africa Institute (NAI) in Uppsala, Sweden. She has worked with and in Africa most of her life, with a spell of 12 years as Assistant Director General for the *Swedish International Development Agency* (SIDA), and three years as adviser to the UN Commissioner for Namibia in New York. She spent many years in Southern Africa during the Swedish involvement in the struggle against apartheid in South Africa. She spent the past three years working for *Transparency International* in Berlin, Germany before joining the Nordic Africa Institute in January 2006.



International Affairs Forum: What do you feel are the greatest development challenges in Africa and how can the Africa-Scandinavia relationship help address these?

Carin Norberg: The combination of poverty, inequality and the demographic, social and economic effects of HIV/AIDS are, in some countries of Africa, threats that can severely destabilize societies in the future. There is also an evident void of, let us call it “benign purpose” in many societies. This lack of purpose leaves young people, particularly young men, vulnerable to recruitment calls from despotic war lords, the effect of which is equally destabilizing. I believe that the cooperation between Nordic and African researchers is important in the search for new knowledge. Research cooperation in the field of social policy and economic development can help us interpret past failures and rethink development options for the future.

IA-Forum: NAI has distinctive successes on research and studies on Africa in the Nordic countries and co-operation between African and Nordic researchers. How do you intend to add to this reputation?

CN: Recent research at the Nordic Africa Institute has focused on gender, age and sexuality including the concept of “masculinity”, institutional capacity and resource mobilization and post-conflict transition in African states. We will soon add a program on Global Trade and Regional Integration. The special profile of NAI’s research programs has been the extensive networks between Nordic and African researchers that have been built up as part of the programs. NAI will continue to support these networks. I would like to see research on Africa, the so-called African studies, move out of what I call “the development box”. It has to do with the direction of influence. It is my strong belief that NAI has a unique position to

become an alternative to mainstream research because of its genuine partnership with African researchers and because of its emphasis on mutual learning processes and problem definition. We also have our eyes set on both micro and macro levels, maybe with a focus on local level complexities. Our challenge is to make this research available not only to academia but in as much to governments, policy makers and those responsible for the course of action taken by international institutions.

IA-Forum: Some reports suggest that NAI does not attach equal importance to economic growth issues in Africa as it does to other development variables (political stability, equality of opportunities, health and environmental protection). Do you feel that these allegations are justified?

CN: I don't share that view. It is true that the emphasis in the NAI research programs have varied over time. In the nineties the emphasis was on economics and the political economy of structural adjustment. NAI had a series of research activities on the socio-economic and political transformation of African societies under an increasingly internationalized development discourse. Over the last couple of years we have seen a shift to gender and sexuality, gender and age in African cities, post-conflict and democracy and capacity building. We have recently launched a new research program on "Global Trade and Regional Integration: Effects on African Economics, Producers and Living Conditions". This will add a new economic dimension to our profile.

IA-Forum: It is frequently noted that the results and findings of most Researches on Africa are used to enrich libraries/research institutes, and are hardly ever implemented to solve the problems investigated. What measures do you plan to put in place to ensure that such allegations are not directed to NAI?

CN: Our challenge is precisely to make our research available not only to academia, but in as much to governments and policy makers. We are presently exploring new ways of communicating the result of our ongoing research. Our website is under reconstruction. The new site will be launched in May 2006. We are trying to find new ways and means of communicating our research results to policy makers. We are trying to locate new arenas and new formats of publications in order to become more pro-active.

IA-Forum: Many African countries have almost completed their privatization and liberalization process. Accordingly, indigenous small and medium size enterprises are increasingly being considered as agents of development. Given the complex and politically unstable business environment, do you see any prospects for Africa's indigenous enterprises?

CN: This is a difficult question to answer. I believe that there are countries/environments that are more or less supportive of indigenous enterprises. Legislation, trade regimes, import/export regulations are important aspects but so are predictability and stability. It is difficult to see an ideal setting for private civilian enterprises in conflict prone environments. The challenge, in my view, is to provide better opportunities for the rural people. Their responses already include efforts to organize in new ways, to explore the benefits of the markets and commercialization. But they also face situations that are often characterized by lack of trust and

unpredictability. Often women are discriminated against through a heavy domestic work burden and weak rights to land and resource ownership.

IA-Forum: Many reports note that Africa is the only continent whose governments and peoples have never been given the opportunity to make own decisions over resource use. In what ways do you think the Nordic countries respect the decision-making autonomy of African countries?

CN: I believe that Nordic countries respect the decision-making process of African countries. The donor agenda is however increasingly becoming more and more interlinked. We have the international financial institutions; we have the Paris Declaration about harmonization, the Millennium Development Goals, the new EU Strategy for Africa. The combined effects of these different processes when confronted with weak State institutions in Africa can be devastating.

IA-Forum: The US has emerged as the most powerful force in international relations while countries like France and Britain have considerable interest in Africa due to their positions as former colonial masters. Do you think these powers have adverse effects on Africa-Scandinavia relations?

CN: I don't think that they have a direct adverse effect on Africa-Nordic relations. My impression is that Nordic countries are trusted partners. The Nordic countries have developed a strong bilateral development co-operation relationship over the years with a number of African countries. Direct economic interests and trade have always been in the margin except in the case of a few countries such as South Africa and Angola (oil). Nordic companies are expanding in sectors such as telecom and oil. Three of the Nordic countries (Denmark, Finland and Sweden) are members of the EU and are engaged in its various initiatives. As for the strategic interests of the US and former colonial powers such as France and Great Britain or for that matter, China, we are moving in a different league.

IA-Forum: One of the main causes of Africa's economic backwardness is bad leadership and defective institutions established by African leaders at independence. Some experts suggests that the best way out is to go back to the roots of African culture and move forward instead of adopting western models of leadership and institutions. How important is Scandinavia in resolving this conflict of cultures?

CN: I don't think it is a realistic option to go back to the roots of African culture. What seems important is for African academics and intellectuals to get more involved in the development agenda of their countries. It is in this context that I see the work of NAI. Research and the application of knowledge can be strong weapons in the hands of researchers and activists. Hopefully it can be used to put pressure on politicians, in the government and in the opposition.

IA-Forum: You have long experience working against corruption in Africa. What do you think are the strength and weaknesses of African leaders in eliminating corruption and why do you feel the intervention of Nordic countries is necessary?

CN: Corruption is a cause and effect of bad leadership and non-transparent structures. If corruption is left unattended it will remain a problem in society. As seen recently in the case of Kenya, the fight against corruption is long and bitter. We are in many cases, not specifically in Africa but all over the world, confronted by so called “embedded networks”, networks of individuals and interests, that are difficult to diffuse and put to trial. It must not be forgotten that corruption has a demand and a supply side. The Nordic countries are listed on top of the Transparency International Corruption Perception Index as being among the least corrupted countries in the world. The Nordic countries should therefore set an example and act decisively. For example, prosecuting Nordic companies involved in the recent oil-for-food scandal and ratifying the UN anti-corruption convention.

IA-Forum: Is there any issue not covered above that you would like to highlight?

CN: You have not mentioned HIV/AIDS. I think it is a crucial issue in Africa because it will change the demographic profile of many African countries in the coming years. This is very problematic because it reduces the labor force, which will affect the young generations. Such a change in the demographic profile will obviously have adverse effects on the economies of African countries.

IA-Forum: Thank you.

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