

Report on the Nordic Africa Research Network launch, 13th May, 2015

By Proscovia Svärd, NARN Co-ordinator

The launch of the Nordic Africa Research Network (NARN) took place on the 13th of May at 11.00 O'clock at the Nordic Africa Institute (NAI) in Uppsala. The launch was opened with a welcome note to all participants by the NARN Co-ordinator, Proscovia Svärd. She briefly talked about the commencement of the work of creating NARN which started on the 29th of February, 2015 when she was recruited. She later invited NAI's Director Ms. Iina Soiri to say a few words since NAI is financing the initial phase of NARN. Ms. Iina Soiri started with a clarification as to why NAI is supporting the establishment of NARN. She stated that NAI's mandate is to promote African studies and research in the Nordic countries. This is why NAI is facilitating the establishment and launch of NARN in order to enhance Nordic co-operation. She further contended that even if NAI and NARN are two separate entities and with distinct duties and purposes they both aim to increase networking and cooperation among Africanists in the Nordic countries. She emphasized that Nordic Africanists are stronger together than only being organized on a national basis. It is therefore the intent of NAI to bring together all Nordic scholars working with African issues and she hoped that NAI will use NARN as a client base when looking for expertise or during its recruitment processes. She concluded by saying that research is often a lonely undertaking and that many researchers are scattered around in the Nordic countries. All these researchers cannot solely be brought together by NAI and hence, NARN offers an alternative way of organizing people around similar interests.

Ms. Iina Soiri's speech was followed by that of the former Director of NAI, Ms. Carin Norberg, who is the driving force behind NARN. She offered a brief background about how NARN was conceived and mentioned attempts that have earlier been undertaken such as; the Nordic Association of African Studies (NAAS) that was founded in Uppsala, Sweden in 1991. This association targeted researchers working on African issues and also led to the establishment of the Nordic Journal of African Studies. She also mentioned the defunct Africa Network Norway which was established in 2005 and at the initiative of researchers working on Africa at the Norwegian University of Science and Technology (NTNU). She mentioned that NARN will hold a Round Table on networking and co-operation among Nordic researchers at the 3rd Joint Nordic Conference on Development Research that will be organized by the School of Global Studies (SGS), University of Gothenburg between 5-6 November 2015. She has filed an application for funds to the Riksbankens Jubileumsfond for the Round Table.

Proscovia Svärd talked about the "Role of Networking" and later presented the NARN website. She argued that the interconnectedness of the world promoted by information technologies has brought societies possibilities to communicate, co-operate and share information and knowledge regardless of time and space. Networking is a social communication process that promotes knowledge sharing among communities. The complexity of today's research issues requires interdisciplinary approaches and solutions. She

told the audience that for those who would like to become NARN members, they would have access to the following:

- A multidisciplinary platform where you can further develop your research ideas, share knowledge, get new insights, engage others, enhance innovative research and achieve visibility through the word of mouth publicity. This will be achieved through workshops, conferences, training sessions and lectures.
- Access to a research database listing Nordic Africanists.
- Links with relevant information on African research and developments.
- Up-to-date information for work-related topics and access to people you will not be able to reach on your own.
- For younger scholars, NARN gives you an opportunity to meet mentors through Scholar-Mentor-Scholar seminars.
- Creating ambassadors who will tell about you and connect you with the right prospects.
- The multidisciplinary nature of the NARN offers researchers a possibility to reach out to scholars in a variety of disciplines.

She finally told the audience that there is currently not much content on the website because NARN has just been created and has not yet carried out any activities that would generate content. The network is also looking for long-term funding in order to effectively mobilize members and to pursue its objectives. There will be a membership fee that those who are interested in becoming members will have to pay.

After the two short speeches and a presentation the floor was opened up for comments and questions. The following issues were discussed:

Reaching out to the Policy Makers and Think Tanks:

This issue was raised by a person in the audience who argued that there is a problem when initiatives such as NARN are not made known to the policy makers who need research in their decision making processes. He further emphasized the need for advocacy. Proscovia responded by letting the audience know that she had tried as much as possible to reach out to the different actors and sent out about 44 invitations.

Who is a researcher?

Another person in the audience asked the question of the type of researcher that NARN is looking out for as a member. Carin and Proscovia responded and emphasized the fact that NARN is a multidisciplinary network and all researchers working on African related research regardless of discipline are welcome.

What is the difference between NAI and NARN?

Several of the participants did not see a clear distinction between NAI's and NARN's mandates. An audience member wondered whether NARN is not planning to do what NAI is already doing. This question was responded to by Ms. Carin Norberg who spelled out the distinction between the two organizations:

NAI is a government research institute with the following mandate:

1. To promote research on social, political and economic developments in Africa by conducting its own high-quality research, acting as a focal point and catalyst for Nordic research on Africa, stimulating research on Africa in the Nordic region and promoting cooperation and contacts between Nordic and African researchers.
2. To disseminate advanced and relevant information based on research about modern Africa and African conditions. The Institute is to conduct an active policy dialogue and the information is to be made available to decision-makers in the Nordic region.
3. To monitor and to make available literature and other electronic and physical information carriers of relevance for research, study and information on modern Africa. The Nordic Africa Institute is to provide a library with lending, reference and information services.

NARN is different from NAI because it is a member-based association that works to promote the interests of its members. There are similar associations such as The Associations of Development Researchers in Denmark, Finland and Norway. These associations have been active for many years. NARN's primary tasks are to establish:

1. A multidisciplinary¹ platform where members can further develop their research ideas, share knowledge, get insights, engage others, enhance innovative research and achieve visibility through the word of mouth.
2. A platform to publish informative articles;
3. To compile up-to date information on African topics that are of relevance to its members;
4. A database of scholars in the Nordic countries doing research on Africa;
5. A voice for its members (working conditions, research grants, evaluation standards of research).

The NARN fees:

One of the participants argued against the fact that members have to pay fees. Carin clarified that most associations do have membership fees and did not see anything strange about it. The network fees will be as follows:

¹ Humanities, Social Sciences and Natural Sciences.

- Students – 100SEK or the equivalent in DKK/NOK/ISK/EURO
- Researchers – 200SEK or the Equivalent in DKK/NOK/ISK/EURO
- Institutions/Universities – 5000SEK or the equivalent in DKK/NOK/ISK/EURO

The launch participants represented institutions and universities such as the Nordic Africa Institute (NAI), Uppsala University, Stockholm University, The Swedish International Development Agency (Sida), Dag Hammarskjöld Foundation and former NAI affiliates (For details of the participants see the participant list).

When the comments and question part was concluded, a light lunch was served and that concluded the NARN launch.