

Africa-Asia, A New Axis of Knowledge



Africa-Asia, A New Axis of Knowledge' is an inclusive transnational platform that convenes scholars, artists, intellectuals, and educators from Africa, Asia, Europe, and beyond to study, discuss, and share knowledge on the intricate connections and entanglements between the African

and Asian world regions. Our aim is to contribute to the long-term establishment of an autonomous, intellectual and academic community of individuals and institutions between two of the world's most vibrant continents. This exchange, we believe, is a prerequisite for a sustainable and balanced

socio-economic progress of the two continents. It is also an opportunity to move beyond the Western-originated fields of Asian and African area studies—something that would benefit Asian, African and Western scholars alike.

An important recent development (in February 2023) is the birth of the "Collaborative Africa-South East Asia Platform (CASAP)", a groundbreaking new network involving two universities in Indonesia and three in Africa. See the article by Stacey Links et al. on this page.

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The Bandung Spirit Anew

Introducing the Collaborative Africa-South East Asia Platform (CASAP)

Stacey Links, Lalita Hanwong, Adrian Perkasa

In February 2023, a collective of scholars met to crystallize further what is now formally known as the 'Collaborative Africa-Southeast Asia Platform' (CASAP). Starting as far back as 2012, during the first Asian Studies in Africa Roundtable coordinated by IIAS in Lusaka, Zambia and the following establishment of the pan-African Association for Asian Studies in Africa (A-Asia), IIAS has expanded its work in connecting Africa and Asia through two successful subsequent international conferences in Accra, Ghana and Dar es Salaam, Tanzania in 2015 and 2018. While the 'Africa-Asia: A New Axis of Knowledge' meetings continue to be a flagship cross-regional event for IIAS and its partners, over time, a noticeable gap has arisen concerning the need for more formalized and ongoing exchanges between Africa and Asia. In particular, the focus on Southeast Asia, a region with unique relations with the African counterpart, has come to the fore.

While China-Africa relations have virtually become a field unto its own, and the economic developmental 'flying geese' models have presented areas for strong Africa-Asia engagement, Southeast Asia equally exemplifies a myriad of sites to explore. One dry season in 1955, in a major city in West Java, leaders from 29 governments of African and Southeast Asian nations gathered in Bandung to define post-colonial challenges commonly faced by all non-Western countries and how to collectively move forward as the Cold War exacerbated. This first Afro-Asian forum was attended by prominent world leaders such as Kwame Nkrumah (Ghana), U Nu (Myanmar), Jawaharlal Nehru (India), Gamal Abdel Nasser (Egypt), Norodom Sihanouk (Cambodia) and Zhou Enlai (China), to name a few. The event also included representatives of the two Vietnams (Democratic Republic (North) and State of (South)), Thailand, the Philippines, Liberia, Gold Coast, and Libya, along with members from the Middle East and East and South Asia.

The Bandung Conference, often seen as a precursor to the Non-Aligned Movement, championed the idea of promoting the common interests of 'developing nations' during the Cold War rivalry between the

United States and the Soviet Union and their respective allies. The enduring influence of this idea, known as the 'Bandung Spirit,' can still be felt today, especially amidst growing geopolitical conflicts. It is essential to emphasize the significance of sharing common interests and promoting the voices of an increasingly self-conscious Global South, to ensure that the wealth of experiences and knowledges from these parts of the world are equally included and circulated.

Beyond shared state-centric logics and narrow economically framed 'developmentalist' agendas, the regions and peoples of Africa and Southeast Asia share a fascinating intersection of cultures, identities, heritage, and languages. Given the potential for knowledge sharing and exchange these two regions offer, it is no surprise that a shared vision should emerge, now encapsulated by the CASAP initiative.

Laying the groundwork

In the guise of a first meeting, a number of individuals from what would become the Collective Africa-Southeast Asia Platform met in November 2022 in Saint-Louis, Senegal, to flesh out the forms and content of such a ground-breaking collaboration. Finding its *raison d'être* in the intersection of knowledge production and community engagement, in a spirit of hospitality characteristic of the two regions, CASAP has gone on to convene two milestone meetings in Surabaya, Indonesia, and Bangkok, Thailand, in February 2023.

The first of these meetings in Surabaya, Indonesia, laid the groundwork for collaboration between Universitas Airlangga (UNAIR) and three African universities, namely Cheikh Anta Diop University, the University of Dar es Salaam and the University of Zambia. Meeting with the rector, vice-rectors, deans, and scholars from various faculties signaled the appetite, need, and potential transformative power such a collective could represent, spearheading a knowledge-based South-South partnership. The meeting brought together key persons from the founding universities to discuss opportunities and possibilities and to facilitate the establishment of the Airlangga Institute of Indian Ocean Crossroads (AIIOC).



Kasetsart University, Bangkok. From left to right: Irfan Wahyudi, Lina Puryanti, Webby Kalikiti, Stacey Links, Mathew Senga, Lalita Hanwong, Philippe Peycam, Mamadou Fall (sitting).

This institute will be pivotal in fostering cooperation amongst a wide variety of knowledge producers and stakeholders in the South-South community. Most importantly, it is set to catalyze collaborations and exchanges between scholars and communities in Africa and Southeast Asia. The port city of Surabaya itself symbolizes a unique intersection and nexus of these existing connections, some of which have yet to be (re-)explored.

The meeting was particularly significant because it helped to ground the operations of the new institute on four functional pillars. First, AIIOC should be a center for interdisciplinary research. This stems from the fact that from the outset, the planned organization received the joint support of four key faculties at Universitas Airlangga: Humanities, Social and Political Sciences, Medical, and Public Health. The four disciplines should not be seen as a limitation but rather a strong departure point to move beyond the conventional setting of area studies. The second pillar is teaching or pedagogical activities involving graduate and undergraduate students. This institute should be a hub for African and Southeast Asian lecturers and students to conduct many programs such as exchanges, dual degrees, and shared courses. Third is public and civic engagement as the core agenda of AIIOC for promoting interactions between Africa and Southeast Asia, not only from and for academia but also for the public in general. This is connected to the last pillar, which makes dissemination a powerful outlet for knowledge circulation. It came as no surprise that the meeting agreed that the planned 13th edition of the International Convention for Asia Scholars (ICAS) to be held in Surabaya in the summer of 2024 should be AIIOC's first launching project. The new institute, together with IIAS/ICAS, along with other members and networks of CASAP, should be responsible for crafting this first post-Covid global academic/cultural public event.

The second founding meeting of CASAP was held between 21-23 February 2023 in Bangkok, Thailand, at Kasetsart University. With its original focus on tropical agriculture and 'sciences of nature,' Kasetsart University has a long history of collaboration with Africa. To celebrate this unique four-

decade-long relationship between a Southeast Asian university and African higher education counterparts along with government agencies, NGOs, and individual experts, the Kasetsart University Africa-Asia Programme (KU-AAP) was established in 2020. A bit like in the case of AIIOC, KU-AAP aims to promote academic, cultural and professional linkages with African partners. In particular, through multi-disciplinary research and education, KU-AAP seeks to encourage public discussions within Thailand on the 'African factor.'

The CASAP network

The discussions in Bangkok culminated in the crystallization of the CASAP network, built as a 'collective' of like-minded individuals and institutions seeking to work together to encourage people-to-people, society-to-society interregional interactions, in the spirit of the vision first articulated in Saint-Louis du Senegal. The Surabaya and Bangkok discussions proposed several concrete themes, including but not limited to food, hospitality, heritage, environment, and sport, to be mobilized to explore the levels of commonalities and experiences between the African and Southeast Asian human realities.

CASAP sees itself as a collective venue that should help scholars, universities, and members of the community to innovate in terms of academic and public initiatives aimed at promoting a shared, genuinely South-South vision, in the original spirit of Bandung. By prioritizing research, education, and public engagement, the Collaborative wants to utilize the distinct capabilities and strengths of the current network of six universities in Southeast Asia and Africa to establish a program that actively involves the communities of the two regions, and those of the rest of the world.

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