Environment, Information and Sustainable Development: The Africa-Asia Nexus

Stark tensions between economic development and environmental sustainability increasingly dominate debates about the Earth’s future. Will massive social changes – from population growth to violence and epidemics – and unprecedented environmental stresses magnify each other in a deadly cycle? Or can nations develop their economies and improve the health of their societies while preserving the quality of natural environments? In recent years these tensions have appeared with particular clarity as postcolonial economies give way to new integrations, including rapidly expanding exchanges between Asia and Africa. The Africa-Asia nexus harbors partnerships between traditional governance, transnational capital, and national democratic institutions for the management of natural resources, labor, and wealth. It also represents a set of coupled natural and human systems that hang in precarious balance, with simmering conflicts and critical implications for global security. Successful navigation of these tensions poses an economic and environmental challenge of world-historical order, with deep and lasting consequences for economies, environments, and livelihoods at every conceivable scale.

To address these challenges, we need new economic, diplomatic, and technological initiatives, guided by interdisciplinary and transformative scholarship.

This cluster follows these challenges where they lead – across disciplines, across academic units and professional schools, and across regional expertise – in order to bolster UM’s growing commitments in both Africa and Asia and to craft new approaches to “inter-area studies”. Building on UM’s disciplinary strength in history, environment, and information, as well as the rich tradition of UM area studies, we propose a new approach to studying and improving global connectedness. We seek to hire specialists in four different areas: a humanist (History), a social scientist (Center for Afro-American and African Studies), an information technologist (School of Information), and a specialist in coupled social and natural systems (School of Natural Resources and Environment). Together, with the support of their home units and relevant area studies centers at the International Institute, these new faculty will explore the past, present, and future relationships of Asia to Africa, seeking to understand struggles for and flows of resources between these regions. By studying global connectivity across the Asia-Africa nexus, we bolster area studies expertise, but also transcend it, implementing a new “inter-area” studies approach commensurate with the broader global challenges and possibilities of environment, information, and sustainable development.