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One World, Many Knowledges

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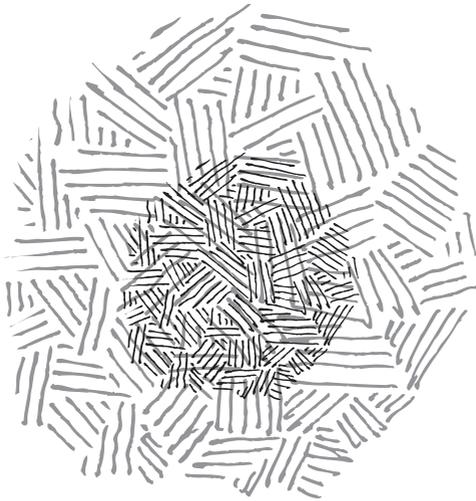
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PART I: BACKGROUND



Chapter 1

The Southern African–Nordic Centre: from conception to realisation

Stanley GM Ridge

IN ONE SENSE, the Southern African–Nordic Centre (SANORD) had to happen. Nordic countries had developed distinct relationships with movements for liberation and national development long before southern African countries won their independence and apartheid was finally abolished. For universities in these two regions not to develop new forms of co-operation would have been a kind of betrayal. Yet finding new forms of co-operation was by no means certain. The world changed fast in the final decades of the last century: liberation movements became governments that could be expected to make their own way in the world, and the fall of the Soviet Union demanded a massive reorientation in the kinds of development relationships required within Europe. Neo-liberal economic thinking also came to challenge a great deal of what had characterised Nordic–southern African relationships. For example, Nordic universities came under pressure to cultivate relationships that might prove prestigious in terms of the international-ratings systems introduced in the early 2000s. On reflection, then, it might be truer to say that SANORD could not have happened without visionary leadership, strong ties of friendship, and a lively sense of possibility.

Setting up

From the late 1990s, some years before SANORD's formation, there were conversations about the need to put the relationships between Nordic and southern African universities on a new footing. Peter Vale – who was at the University of the Western Cape (UWC) at the time – and Tor Halvorsen – at the University of Bergen (UiB) – were saying this, as were colleagues at the

University of Oslo, Linköping University and elsewhere. In the end, it took the particular vision and bonds of trust and friendship between Sigmund Grønmo, rector of UiB, and Brian O'Connell, rector of UWC to set the ball rolling and keep it in play.

In the initial discussions that took place in 2006, three major reasons were put forward in favour of the initiative. First, global challenges require the flexibility and variety of perspectives that diversity offers, and neither North nor South can afford to be locked into a received mindset. Second, however useful individual projects may be, their fixed time frames tend to encourage partnerships that last only until the funds are spent. Besides, if they are not mutually intellectually profitable, they promote patronisation rather than partnership. Sustainable, longer-term and mutually beneficial relationships require both multilateral engagements and the careful alignment of activities with the strategic plans of the institutions involved. Third, institutional leadership is usually marginal to project-based international relationships, but university leaders need to be centrally involved in building partnerships, so as to enhance the vision for what is possible and to help achieve institutional alignment.

Thus, Sigmund Grønmo and Brian O'Connell agreed to approach six other universities, all in different countries, to form the initial membership of an organisation to promote collaboration between southern African and Nordic research institutions. In the meantime, the Nordic ambassadors to South Africa were briefed and proved very supportive. South Africa's foreign affairs and education departments also expressed interest and were kept in the picture. At the invitation of the Norwegian ambassador, Tor Chr. Hildan, the ambassadors of Denmark, Finland and Sweden met with UWC's Brian O'Connell, Larry Pokpas and myself to discuss the possibilities. Since it was deemed highly desirable that the initiative have strong political support, Larry Pokpas and I included meetings with university and government leaders in Norway and Sweden on our next trip to Europe.¹ In the meantime, through the initiative of Sigmund Grønmo, Norway's state-funded Fredskorpset offered to provide funding to enable a senior retired Norwegian university administrator to be sent to South Africa to get the initiative moving, and also to send a South African to spend a year in the North, making appropriate contacts and preparing to run the central office. Accordingly, Kjetil Flatin, who had recently retired from the University of Oslo, agreed to spend time in South Africa, and Leolyn Jackson was appointed as director of the new organisation, and his first mission was to spend a year in the North.

The universities of Aarhus (in Denmark), Malawi, Namibia, Turku (in Finland), Uppsala (in Sweden) and Zambia agreed to join UiB and UWC

at a first meeting in January. In the event, the University of Namibia did not attend and eventually withdrew from participation for internal reasons. Senior representatives of all the other institutions were present, however, as well as Tor Halvorsen from UiB, as well as Larry Pokpas and me from UWC. Kjetil Flatin contributed a great deal to setting up the meeting and preparing the founding documents. After extensive discussion, drafts of a statute, a mission statement and a value statement were accepted, and the groundwork for establishing a web portal was prepared, with UiB spearheading the project.

It was agreed that a council would be set up consisting of rectors/vice-chancellors/heads (or their mandated alternates) of all member institutions, and that they would appoint an executive board (hereafter referred to as the board). It was agreed that the founding members would constitute the board until such time as the organisation was fully established, and that the chair and vice-chair could jointly act for the board when necessary. Brian O'Connell was elected chair, with Sigmund Grønmo vice-chair. The council undertook to meet face to face on an annual basis, with this meeting coinciding with a conference or symposium to emphasise the primacy of the intellectual nature of the project. In-between, the board would meet (at least) quarterly by conference call.

In terms of the statute, it was decided that the organisation's central office would be at UWC, and a special agreement was reached with the university in this regard. The board, which met immediately after the founding meeting, mandated UWC to 'set in motion the appropriate action for hiring' a director. It was envisaged that the initial funding for the centre would be from voluntary contributions by members, but a committee was established to make proposals on membership fees. At the next board meeting, a two-level fee structure was approved. This was initially set at R35 000 for institutions in the South and R50 000 for institutions in the North.

The organisation's mission statement went through a number of drafts before it was finalised. It reads as follows:

The Southern African–Nordic Centre is a non-profit, membership organisation of institutions of higher education and research, committed to advancing strategic, multilateral academic collaboration between institutions in the two regions, as they seek to address new local and global challenges of innovation and development. Its activities are based on shared fundamental values of democracy, social equity, and academic engagement, and on the deep relationships of trust built up between the regions over many years.

The corresponding value statement and list of goals explore the implications of the mission statement, emphasising the values of mutuality, leadership, strategic development, and sustained engagement, as well as announcing the organisation's particular concern with multilateral partnerships. Semiotics received a good deal of attention. The name of the organisation was hyphenated as the Southern African–Nordic Centre to emphasise the mutuality between the two regions: it is not a Nordic Centre located in southern Africa. The acronym SANORD was chosen as it immediately conveys the connection between the two regions. Soon the web portal had been commissioned, and at its first virtual meeting, the board approved a striking logo.

At the board's September 2007 meeting, Leolyn Jackson was appointed as SANORD's director, and he spent a year in Bergen from April 2008. This experience was of immense value, enabling him to tune in to the Nordic ethos, to visit many universities and to establish personal relationships with key people in the region, especially those directly involved in SANORD. The UiB leadership, and those active in SANORD at UiB, advised Leolyn on the kinds of the issues he might have to deal with as director, and gave him crucial insights into Nordic life and practices so that he could approach issues with a deeper understanding of the dynamics relevant to institutions in both the North and the South.

The wisdom of Fredskorpset in proposing and supporting this exchange has been demonstrated repeatedly and their vision did not stop there. After having helped to lay sound foundations, Kjetil Flatin returned to Norway in September 2007. Fredskorpset then sponsored Poul Wisborg, a Norwegian researcher with South African experience, to be based at UWC from September 2008 to March 2010. Wisborg was there when Jackson returned to the central office and when SANORD's first administrator, Maureen Davis, was appointed. Wisborg's energy and collegiality was critical in building the capacity of the central office, and in making SANORD known across the southern African region. Membership grew and active academic partnerships increased substantially as a result. Fredskorpset's sustained contribution thus amounted to approximately 50 person-months.

Membership

Issues around increasing membership were an early challenge. Indeed, the University of Iceland indicated a strong desire to join at the outset, and was happily added to the founding group *ex post facto*. In fact, Iceland's recently appointed ambassador to South Africa joined the founding meeting for one session. However, in January 2007, the board, aware of the range of issues

that still needed to be resolved, decided that initial growth should be on the basis of classic universities concerned with teaching and research in a dynamic relationship with their own communities. This provided important space for resolving difficulties, building capacity, increasing mutual understanding and building a sense of potential. At the September 2007 meeting, seven new members were accepted: Bergen University College, Oslo University College, Mzuzu University (in Malawi), as well as the universities of Johannesburg, Jyväskylä (in Finland), Southern Denmark and the Witwatersrand (in South Africa). By March 2008, there were three more members: the Cape Peninsula University of Technology and the University of Cape Town (both in South Africa), and Lund University (in Sweden). Others followed, and by September 2011, SANORD had 42 members: 17 institutions from the Nordic region and 25 institutions from six southern African countries.

Soon, other membership possibilities emerged. What about independent research institutes? What about tertiary institutions focused almost exclusively on teaching? And what about sub-regional university consortia? In March 2008, a nominations committee was established to make recommendations to the SANORD board on criteria for membership and on specific applications. On the recommendation of the nominations committee, it was agreed to accept as members all institutions likely to benefit and to further the purposes for which SANORD was founded. Relationships with consortia are, however, governed by specific memoranda of agreement.

Local and international events

Organisations thrive when they are perceived to be serving a useful purpose, so from an early stage, members undertook to organise SANORD events on their campuses and to promote participation in joint events, both regional and international. The first major event involving all members was a conference held at UWC in December 2007. Its theme, 'Higher Education, Research and Development: Shifting Challenges and Opportunities', invited reflection on SANORD's founding concerns. Setting a pattern for the future, the conference committee, drawn from both North and South, developed the programme and vetted proposals for papers and seminars. Nico Cloete, Extraordinary Professor of Higher Education at UWC, played a critical role in the first conference, but inputs from all institutions were testimony to the commitment of imagination and intelligence that characterises SANORD's membership. The opening speaker, Nobel laureate and UWC's chancellor at the time, Desmond Tutu, set the context superbly. Plenaries were held on issues such as: the implications of

information and communication technologies for North–South co-operation; the International Foundation for Science’s approach to capacity building; and the roles played by funding agencies. The major part of the conference took place via a range of sessions on key topics for research co-operation such as poverty, the environment, sustainable societies, biodiversity, land reform, and the politics of higher education. A unique feature of these sessions was that they reported back both to the full conference and to the SANORD council on issues that delegates believed would benefit from leadership intervention. These details are provided as an indication of the ways in which SANORD’s distinctive strategic focus shaped the programme.

Holding an annual conference proved impractical and a biennial conference was agreed upon. However, the annual face-to-face meeting of rectors/vice-chancellors proved so valuable that it was decided to persist with those meetings. Thus, instead of a full-scale conference, it was agreed that a symposium would accompany these meetings, again emphasising the primacy of the organisation’s intellectual concerns. The second meeting also took place at UWC in December 2008. That year’s symposium was organised around the theme ‘Innovation and Development’, and drew in leading figures from Denmark, Finland, Norway and Sweden along with representatives of government, business and universities in southern Africa. So strong was the call from research groups, however, that space had to be made in the programme for some of these to share their findings and attract more participants.

The global challenge of the knowledge economy was the major focus of the symposium. To meet it, mindset adjustments and new partnerships were called for in all countries. Four aspects were raised for ongoing attention of the kind that SANORD is well placed to give:

- The importance of ambitious, long-term thinking on the part of leadership, as opposed to the quick-fixes often demanded in institutional and national politics;
- The interests of government, industry and universities in scientific excellence, and the responsibility shared by these sectors to find ways of promoting it, through, for example, fostering new and co-operative relationships;
- The fact that truly co-operative relationships are fundamental to success and to achieving appropriate scale, and that achieving such relationships can require significant shifts in mindset for all parties; and
- The crucial importance for sustained development of being able to attract and retain talent – an ability that can be significantly enhanced by committed partnerships.

SANORD has run a number of successful conferences and symposia at Rhodes University, the University of Johannesburg, and the University of the Witwatersrand, and in 2012 the first such event to be held outside Africa took place in Aarhus, Denmark. Future events include a conference in Malawi in 2013, a symposium in Karlstad, Sweden in 2014, a conference in Windhoek, Namibia in 2015, and a symposium at Uppsala, Norway in 2016.

Stimulating research and innovation

One of SANORD's main objectives is to stimulate research and innovation by researchers and students who team up across institutional, disciplinary and national boundaries. With some cash in hand after the 2007 conference, the SANORD board approved modest support grants to some of the theme groups and to others interested in developing links within SANORD. In 2008, SANORD funded six projects to organise seminars, conferences and other activities directly related to the North–South multilateral co-operation in the fields of social development, water-resource management, Islamic education, climate change and environmental security, archaeology, and literacy education in Zambia. Students formed an integral part of these research networks, and master's and PhD candidates were exposed to international academic experts.

Of the 22 interesting applications received in 2009, ten were recommended for financial support. Since the SANORD board had the funds to support just four of these, SANORD's secretariat requested permission from the board to seek additional funding. Funding for four additional projects involving Swedish university partners was obtained through a joint application from SANORD and Uppsala University to the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (SIDA). One of the Swedish-funded research groups (led by researchers at the University of the Witwatersrand and the University of Johannesburg in South Africa and Uppsala University in Sweden) was later granted extra funds to allow selected researchers from southern Africa an opportunity to discuss and interact with peers in Uppsala, as a means of strengthening research capacity and facilitating staff mobility.

SANORD has grown steadily since it began. This expansion means that there are many more opportunities for research partnerships. Over the first two years, 14 research groups received seed funding totalling R740 000. In 2011, the board mandated the SANORD secretariat to source expertise to develop strategies and guiding principles for the monitoring and evaluation of research projects funded. Meanwhile, discussions are underway with various research teams at the universities of Bergen (Norway), Botswana, Jyväskylä (Finland) and Karlstad (Sweden) who want to register their research networks

and academic activities with SANORD.

The growing membership also means a larger pool of potential hosts for joint events. While various South African universities hosted events between 2008 and 2011, the 2012 symposium took place at Aarhus University in Denmark and there have been offers to host the 2013 conference in Malawi and the 2014 symposium in Karlstad, Sweden. This can only be to the good.

Taking stock

With its vital signs looking strong, it is possible to take stock of SANORD's achievements, as of mid-2012, in relation to its initial goals.

- *To promote strategic co-operation by stimulating discussion and planning of joint endeavours by leaders at institutions of higher education and research.* This goal is predicated on the need to align institutional co-operation with the strategic thinking within such institutions and thus increase the probability of partnerships being sustained beyond project boundaries. Many institutional leaders have been active in SANORD; they have benefited from the annual meetings, and have made valuable contributions. However, there is a growing tendency for SANORD membership to fall under institutions' international offices, and thus find themselves at one remove from their institution's core leadership. Clearly, there are practical advantages to an alignment with the institutions' international goals, but the need for creative leadership in response to rapidly changing circumstances is one of SANORD's founding motives. It is gratifying that rectors and vice-chancellors of member institutions often consult one another informally, and have often taken the initiative in proposing new ideas for the support and development of major initiatives. The distinctive thrust of this book is a case in point. Although based on papers presented at the 2009 conference at Rhodes University, it is not simply a record of those proceedings. Its purpose is to examine the global developments that frame the academic enterprise, and to explore fruitful responses. The prevailing global academic climate is characterised by competition for knowledge resources, the search for knowledge influence for the sake of political and economic domination, and, linked to this, competition for students, for star professors, and for control over the topics considered relevant for research priority. In exploring modes of co-operation that lie at the heart of the SANORD enterprise, this book provides a basis for rethinking these issues and for considering alternatives. It also engages with an initiative taken at the June 2012 Aarhus symposium, which

established three working groups with the aim of strengthening and expanding co-operation. The first group was tasked with developing goals and an action plan for the organisation, thus shifting the onus from the central office to the members when it comes to shaping the framework for activities. The second group was charged with mapping SANORD's research environment and developing research focus areas to strengthen the partnerships between members. And the third group was mandated to give detailed attention to a compiling a portfolio of funding models suited to developing research capacity and output and increasing student and staff mobility.

- *To provide opportunities for staff and students to meet around issues relevant to the SANORD mission.*

The core conferences and symposia, as well as activities within projects and SANORD-linked events on individual campuses, have provided lively opportunities for interaction. In addition, this goal has informed the conceptualisation of major activities such as the SIDA-funded Uppsala–SANORD project. Beyond facilitating the organisation's core purpose of supporting research groups, these events have made possible the increasing participation of researchers, even supporting delegates from two southern African universities that were not yet members – the University of Botswana and the University of Namibia, which have since joined SANORD.

- *To offer resources and information services, including virtual and physical meeting places to facilitate co-operation.*

SANORD's central office has been established, a regular newsletter is published, and a web portal has been developed. The latter two are used to profile SANORD and its member institutions, to provide a forum for the exchange of research news and information, and to share announcements of scholarships and other opportunities that might support exchange and networks. Students have been identified as a distinct user group, and the portal is being expanded to further meet student needs. One advantage of having SANORD fall under the international relations offices at some institutions is that this provides clear institutional spaces for meetings and channels, through which co-operation can be facilitated.

- *To promote cultural exchange for the strengthening of academic life.* The importance of cultural exchange in enriching educational environments has been recognised from the start. While some activities

have taken place, its potential to enhance capacity and build long-term relationships has not yet been systematically exploited. Existing bilateral and multilateral cultural agreements between countries in which members are based provide a promising basis for addressing this challenge in future.

- *To build relationships with the donor community, commerce, industry and the media.*

Significant progress has been made in developing relationships with the donor community. As of 2012, partnerships have been established with SIDA and Norway's Fredskorpset, as already mentioned. Having noted progress thus far, Fredskorpset has indicated that it is willing to consider a long-term agreement to support staff exchanges between Norway and southern members of SANORD, and an application for such an agreement is being developed and was developed for submission by the end of 2012. With the full support of its board, SANORD is engaging with these groups, as well as with the European Union's Erasmus Mundus and Intra-ACP programmes, with a view to promoting core multilateral interests. In addition, SANORD is itself an associate partner in the EUROSAs consortium, helping it implement, promote and monitor the project, disseminate scholarship opportunities, and attract applicants through the other educational networks with which it is engaged. However, SANORD has no room for complacency about donor support. Securing funding requires constant attention and alertness to the shifting focuses of donor agencies and the possibilities of finding synergies with others. A major challenge lies in gaining backing for initiatives from a wider group of donors, including national research foundations and national and international development agencies. In addition, mutually beneficial relationships with commerce and industry have still to be developed, and there is room for much wider media involvement.

- *To strengthen the SANORD central office and the SANORD network by improving the modes of operation, access to resources and efficiency.* The SANORD secretariat has worked consistently with member institutions in establishing fruitful modes of operation, and the structural arrangements made to date testify to the shared desire to realise the potential of this unique partnership. Yet there is much more to do. While it is important to keep the operation lean, ways will have to be found to expand what the central office is able to do in the way of supporting emerging partnerships and making the significance of what is being achieved more widely known. For example, the visits to various centres by

Leolyn Jackson and Poul Wisborg in 2008 and 2009 proved very fruitful in attracting new members and in building on existing relationships and facilitating increased participation in projects. It is important that such personal contact occur on an ongoing basis. While virtual contact is no substitute for face-to-face engagement, it has a vital role of its own. SANORD must also be proactive about the possibilities of personal and group teleconferencing, particularly as broadband access becomes a reality in many parts of Africa.

It takes a great deal to build a new organisation; visionary leadership, strong ties of friendship, and a lively sense of possibility inspired the founding of SANORD and continue to inform its activities. The long-term vision of its founders has been crucial in sustaining the organisation's development. In addition, members have supported one another through a number of crises, and have both given and received resources for projects and for building sustainable, multilateral partnerships well beyond their minimum commitments. For example, when some member institutions (in both the North and the South) were severely affected by the global financial crisis, others (from both the North and the South) quietly paid their fees in order to keep them within the partnership. This kind of thing happens only when there is genuine enthusiasm and unequivocal commitment. With a sound organisational basis, leadership engagement in setting the agenda and an ethos of warm and generous collegiality, SANORD is well placed to respond to the exciting challenges and opportunities that lie ahead.

Note

- 1 We owe much to Lena Wallenstein (Sweden) and Inger Stoll (Norway) for opening doors to us and helping to organise our programme.

