

A Post-Nairobi Muse: Thoughts after the ISTR Africa Network Conference in Nairobi, July 2013

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Perhaps nowhere more than in Africa does the study of civil society carry such urgency and immediate practical implications. The multitude of social and political issues faced by the peoples and communities of the continent were never absent during the three days of the ISTR Africa network conference in Nairobi this July. It is not surprising, as well, that the conference was a meeting point for scholars and practitioners, seasoned and novices alike. I considered myself a novice in this conference. Coming as a board representative and knowing little of the realities of civil society in Africa, I came mostly to listen and learn. And I did learn a great deal. First I learned African camaraderie and hospitality, and found out that the real understanding of Ubuntu can be achieved only through experience. The friendliness of the organizers, hosts, staff and all the participants in the conference made me and all other participants feel at home, right away. I learned also what 'Hakuna Matata' looks like in the fabulous cultural evening that we enjoyed on the first day of the conference. There I found out that age, rank and gender mean nothing when good African music, dance and Tusker ('barridi', please) mix together. And I learned that time and order can mean very different things in different places. This didn't seem to be much of a hurdle for the conference organizers, Jacob Mati, Richard Wamai, Dineo Seabe, and Wilkister Oluoch of ACORD, whose calm and cheerful organizing capacity seemed like wizardry to me.

I also learned a great deal about the importance and complexity of ISTR's outreach in the developing south. The members' meeting strengthened my conviction that network development is a crucial effort that requires a combination of drive at the secretariat level and local engagement and initiative. I was deeply moved and encouraged by the importance attached by the participants to the connections and opportunities afforded to them and to civil society scholarship in their region through ISTR, and the willingness to pass this message on to their colleagues. In the few weeks since the conference I was already informed by several of the conference goers that they communicated their positive experience in Nairobi in their home institutions and their local networks, and that they are already preparing their abstracts for Munster. The members' meeting and the conference provided me with a few important notes to carry forward to the ISTR board meeting in Seoul this fall. One is the importance of a local focal institution for the stability of regional networks, and preferably a university. The offer of our colleagues Paul Opoku-Mensah and Christiana Atibil to hold the next conference in the University of Ghana in Accra, was a perfect example of this commitment. Another is the importance of active rather than passive networking to 'spread the word' and achieve meaningful outreach. These require, and deserve, in my opinion, additional investment and a new and improved strategy. Like we did with the international conferences, in the regional context too we must look forward beyond a two-year cycle, and reach out to local forces, as we did so effectively with ACORD this year.

Finally, I learned several important conceptual and methodological lessons. I learned about the problematic inherent in our use of dichotomies such as developed/developing, formal/informal, faith based/secular, private/public, colonial/postcolonial, indigenous/foreign, and so on. While clearly instrumental to theory building, the research presented in the conference also highlighted the perils, methodological, practical and conceptual, of their misuse. I learned an important lesson on the importance of context and history, on the lingering effects of colonialism, slavery, autocracy and other historical factors on the current state and practices of civil society actors. I hope that I learned also some humility, in the face of the work done by our African colleagues in an effort to understand and promote the third sector and civil society in Africa. With the challenges and the limited infrastructure and resources that they face, their achievements shine even brighter.