

MEMBER INSIGHTS

Jacob M. Mati's Reflections on the Completion of a PhD

By Jacob Mwathi Mati

In one of the masterpieces of African literature, *Things Fall Apart*, the renowned Nigerian author, Chinua Achebe writes: "If a child washes his hand he could eat with kings." This saying is used to capture possibilities of people of humble beginnings scaling great heights if they wash off the deficiencies of their ancestry/origins. In so many ways, this captures my own intellectual trajectory thus far. My academic pursuits have been an endeavour to remove the uneducated 'dirt' and hopefully scrape a chance for a different kind of future not just for myself, but for many more who look up to me for inspiration. I say this not to disparage my humble origins and the great life lessons from the same, but to register the fact that I come from what president Barack Obama, in his inaugural address, termed the forgotten corners of the world. Getting a PhD in that part of the world is no mean feat. To help illustrate this, my parents are people of meagre earnings. My mother has never been to school, while my father was too poor he had to drop out for lack of fees after only six years of schooling. Most of their age mates where I come from have equally never been to school. But as fate would have it, the sons and daughters of that generation of Atharaka who inhabit the lower Eastern parts of Kenya, still face mountainous challenges in the pursuit of modern education. Much of this is of course driven by prevalent poverty.

In an environment like this, the challenges are not limited to poverty. The lack of social networks helpful in advising on opportunities and resources out there can also be incapacitating. As such those who have made it to a PhD level from that part of the world, as my own story testifies, have had to overcome quite a lot. My PhD story is one that shows that the dearth of local networks can be overcome by reaching out to regional and/or global connections, given a chance. The thought of studying for a PhD began, at least at the mental level, around 2000 after spending three years doing everything and nothing in particular with a BA honours from Moi University. I then decided that I needed to go back to school if I were to change the material circumstances that I found myself in. But I had no money to pay for my graduate education, neither in Kenya nor abroad. In Kenya, there were almost no scholarships around that time,



especially if you were not a government or a university employee, and more than that, politically or ethnically well connected. The admission opportunities I got at several UK universities, all came with a fees only (at EU rates) scholarship. The same fate befell me for admissions I had for some Dutch universities where I was admitted. Raising the remainder of the fees was a gargantuan task.

As I continued struggling, I saw an opportunity in the name of a volunteer sending organisation (VSO Jitolee) that was recruiting Kenyans and sending them to serve in other developing countries. Under the circumstances, I applied and was taken. I was sent to India and served for two years (2003-2005). On coming back to Kenya, VSO paid me a resettlement grant enough to afford my graduate education in Kenya. But at the same time, another opportunity arose to continue volunteering in South Africa with CIVICUS. Graduate education at Wits University was then still a bit affordable for African students before they introduced divisions between the Southern African Development Community (SADC) students and non-SADC students and made it cost an arm and a leg for non-SADC students. I figured that since I did not have a job in Kenya, I could as well head south. But I was late for registration in 2006 and had to defer my registration for a Master of Arts in Development Studies at Wits to 2007. I am glad the decision to defer turned out to be a great one as I got the University's post graduate merit award and some invaluable experience for a year while volunteering at the CIVICUS' Civil Society Index in 2006. Part of this experience was an exposure to an organisation known as International Society for Third Sector Research (ISTR). I came to know of it through my boss at the time, who had organised a panel at the Bangkok conference. Although I did not attend this conference and was still not a member of ISTR, I became interested in the past conference papers that I easily found on the website.

From my reading of these papers, I began to identify an area I wanted to study for my MA research. As 2007 approached, I was looking forward to enrolling at Wits. My contract at CIVICUS was also coming to an end, but they indicated their desire to retain me in the project. I was luckily allowed to take my studies and continue working for them. This way, I was able to afford paying for my living in Johannesburg. The relationship was further helpful as CIVICUS exposed me to ac-

MEMBER INSIGHTS

tivism at the heart of the Global Call to Action against Poverty that I studied for my MA thesis.

In 2008, as I completed my MA, I got a provisional offer for PhD studies at the Department of Sociology of Wits University. My dream of studying for PhD finally began unfolding. The same year, I became a member of ISTR and attended the Barcelona conference. It was an experience that provided numerous networking opportunities with all the giants in the academy that I had only hitherto met through their written work. Since then, I have remained linked to this group and have attended the 2010 conference as well as the 2009 Asia-Pacific and 2011 Africa regional conferences. Going back to the proverb that I started with, perhaps Achebe should have added that kings can help a child they want to dine with, clean its hands. For I feel that the mighty names that I have interacted with in the course of my PhD project in the last couple of years have literally helped me clean my hands. This is specifically so because I as an upcoming third sector scholar, I have benefitted a lot from my experiences and interactions with professional colleagues in ISTR not to mention the critical comments I have received on conference papers that I have presented in various conferences in the last couple of years. These reviews and comments have enabled me to complete my PhD thesis which was examined and passed (incidentally by professors who are towering members of ISTR) in April 2012. I am scheduled to graduate in a ceremony later in the year.

Besides the critical comments and reviews on my vari-

ous presentations that I treat as the help I have received in washing my hands, a towering figure in ISTR asked me whether I would be open to nominations to stand for office in the ISTR board in 2010. I politely told him I did not think I was, in anyway, at that level yet. But he insisted, telling me that ISTR and especially the Africa regional network needed people like me. I accepted without giving myself as much chance in being elected. When the election results were announced and was informed I had been elected, I truly felt humbled and honoured by everyone in ISTR. I take this honour greatly and since then, been part of a group of colleagues from the region that helped organise the 2011 regional network conference through which we have been growing ISTR a little bit more. I would love to see the Society develop greater visibility in Africa because I know, from my own experiences, that many more upcoming civil society scholars would tremendously benefit from the same. This is especially so for scholars in a region that, unlike many others, has few professional scholarly associations.

I hope to harness these networks to secure a post-doctoral fellowship to publish my PhD thesis in the coming year. I also look forward to a continued collaboration with many more members of the Society.

Jacob Mwathi Mati recently completed a PhD in Sociology at the University of the Witwatersrand. He currently holds a short-term post-doctoral fellowship at the Wits Humanities Graduate Centre until the end of October 2012. ■

“Inside ISTR” is published by the International Society for Third-Sector Research (ISTR). Please submit materials/information for publication to the ISTR Secretariat:

International Society for
Third-Sector Research (ISTR)
559 Wyman Park Building
3400 North Charles Street
Baltimore, Maryland 21218-2688 USA
Telephone: 410.516.4678 FAX: 410.516.4870
<http://www.istr.org>

Margery B. Daniels, Executive Director
e-mail: istr@jhu.edu
Robin Wehrlin, Administrative Coordinator
e-mail: rwehrlin@jhu.edu