Global Network Enjoyed in Home Comfort:  
A Reflection about the ISTR PhD Online Seminar 6-10 July 2020

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Though we missed out on in-person interactions in Montreal, Canada, the online PhD Seminar provided more learning opportunities than expected. The news of a virtual interaction found me in my remote rural home in South-Western Uganda under lockdown. The continuous emails from the joyful Megan, ISTR’s Programme Manager, served that purpose. My worry was how to successfully engage virtually with our poor rural network connection. Without hesitation I relocated to town to seek internet connectivity to capture the benefit from this rare opportunity. It was the first-ever international virtual meeting in my life connecting with peers from all continents. It all started with procuring a modem, setting zoom audios and videos, and praying that the electric power would not disappoint me. Such experience demonstrated that indeed the internet has become a basic necessity in all circles of life.

While reviewing my colleagues work, I learnt that problems are different across countries but methodologies are similar. With awesome group two members, I enjoyed more friendly, engaging, and professional and productive comments on my research project than my local peers have ever done. The virtual meeting provided enough time for feedback like that I received at the ISTR PhD Seminar in person in South Africa in May 2019. Therefore, the choice of participants was thorough as all participants’ demonstrated knowledgeability of subject content as if they were part of the research team. I was made to rethink my methodology, problem statement, and next steps towards becoming a better scholar. The zoom chats became platforms for sharing journal articles, and other readings. Of course, my peers Kidist, Meng-Han, were superb in sending reading materials, with Aaron, Antonius and Dominik offering to assist in a case contacted. I appreciated the rich feedback and wealth of experiences from the faculty (Professor Ali Awni, School of Management and Director of the John D. Gerhart Center for Philanthropy, Civic Engagement and Responsible Business, The American University in Cairo, Egypt and Gabriel Berger, School of Business, and Director of the Center of Social Innovation, Universidad de San Andrés, Argentina, and Carolyn Cordery, Aston Business School, UK and ISTR Board Treasurer). Their approach to third sector research provided more inspiration and motivation towards initiating more third sector youth-focused projects. Professor Deena White’s opening remarks - most especially those on the persecution of Civil Society Organisations (CSO) - made me to feel that she had experienced what happens in my country where CSO advocacy is regarded as a planned coup to overthrow the regime. Additionally, Susan Appe’s presentation was short but comprehensive in covering what it takes to enrich young scholars like Enos.

The PhD Seminar cafés awesomely connected me to different groups, as we enjoyed sharing our challenges in the PhD journey, photos of local dishes, and tourist attractions. Of course, each student demonstrated that his/her country has the best. Whereas we perceive that PhD students outside Uganda have better and smoother supervisory structures than we do here in Uganda, during the cafés I realised that institutional supervisions issues are universal across the globe. That gave me more courage to believe in my mentors and supervisors at my home university. We exchanged contacts during cafés and realised we are one family only limited by distance and time. It became a relief hearing PhD experiences from fellow students from India, USA, South Africa, Netherlands, and Chile among others. I loved the dedication and enthusiasm from team members amidst diverse time zones.

The seminar was a real dividing line in my thinking about both myself, my project and my education. The unstructured learning in all directions proved fundamental in shaping my academic career and
professional growth. I was energised by the comments from colleagues and looked forward to each and every member in the group. I find it telling that I felt deeply challenged, yet excited. In discussions like in many other interactions, we learn our disciplines, pedagogy and content and we learn more about what our friends outside Uganda are doing. I call it an International Community of Learners (ICL); now that I belong to the world-wide society, then I can achieve greater academic heights. Although the COVID-19 pandemic has disorganised world systems, it has ignited innovative ways of doing things. I am humbled to have had such a great opportunity to participate in an international virtual seminar, the first of its kind in my life. I found learning purposeful, inclusive and humane. My initial worries about how it will go were finally turned into enjoyment, academic achievement and social capital. Of course, the beautiful certificate stands on my wall. I will live to remember the contribution of the International Society of Third Sector Research towards developing the skills, knowledge and linking world PhD young scholars. Long live ISTR. Webare munonga (thank you so much)