

Ford Foundation and ISTR were the making of me: Reflections on Getting Tenure



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In the North American academy, tenure is unarguably the most important milestone in the career of a professor. Understandably, therefore, getting it is naturally the prompt for much relieved celebration. It is also, often, for the just tenured, the occasion for stock-taking: casting a backward glance to see what one might learn from a relatively short professional past, and getting one's ducks in a row in terms of both immediate and long term research projects and broad professional targets. Naturally, I have been doing both. But because of my own specific pedigree, I have recently been doing a lot of the former. In particular, I have been pondering the very long list of individuals and institutions which have helped in smoothing my journey thus far. So, here is to the Ford Foundation International Fellowships and the International Society for Third Sector Research (ISTR), the two major international agencies without which my modest accomplishments would have been impossible.

I studied for my PhD at the London School of Economics and Political Science, finishing in 2005 under the kind guidance of Helmut Anheier and David Lewis. Before I arrived for doctoral work in 2001, I had spent six uncertain years in Nigeria. Although I had started teaching in one of Nigeria's best universities since 1995, I always had one eye open for foreign opportunities. The LSE was my prime target, and, for successive years, had made and continued to renew an offer of admission into its competitive PhD program. However, for financial reasons, it was to remain a bridge too far until 2001. That year, I was among the inaugural cohort of recipients of the Ford Foundation International Fellowships. I was fortunate to be a recipient at the point in my career when I had literally run into a brick wall. The fellowship provided me with everything a doctoral student could dream of, including money with which I attended international conferences and presented my research. Personally, I know of no other program of support for PhD research globally that is as generous, and for that rare privilege, I will always be indebted to the Ford Foundation. In my little corner of the world, I strive to live up to the Foundation's fondest wish that its alumni dedicate themselves to the pursuit of social justice.

In addition to the Ford Foundation, the International Society for Third Sector Research (ISTR) has claimed a special place in my heart. I had known of the Society through a close friend long before I attended my first biennial international conference. A doctoral student in Nigeria at the time, he (my friend) had been sponsored by ISTR to one of its conferences, and he had returned with tantalizing tales

of all the 'big names' in the field of third sector research he had met. My first ISTR conference was in Cape Town in July 2002. On my panel, I was a pygmy among three of the leading giants in the field of civil society, and I could hear myself literally groaning under the weight of their collective reputation. But imagine my incredulity when, at the end of our panel, two of them casually handed me their business cards and encouraged me to keep up correspondence. Of course I did!

Ever since, I have remained a happy member of the ISTR family (I have not missed a single conference since 2002), and played a leading role in organizing two Africa regional conferences in Cotonou, Benin Republic (2004), and in Stellenbosch, South Africa (2011), respectively. From 2007-2009, I had the special honor of being invited to serve as book review editor of *Voluntas*, ISTR's official journal.

It is hard to measure the extent of my indebtedness to the ISTR. As the only international institution of its kind (in regard to the specificity of its focus and the width of its reach), the ISTR provides an intellectual home for scholars at different points in their academic careers. Its regular conferences offer a rare rendezvous for doctoral students, mid-level and senior academics to engage in rigorous comparative debate and exchange of ideas on a wide range of issues under the broad rubric of third sector research. A typical ISTR conference is probably one of the few remaining places in the academia where a specialist on religion, a Keynesian economist, a rural sociologist, and a development activist can find common purpose.

These two institutions have been, quite literally, the making of me, and I hope to be able to call them home for many years to come.

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