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cc: Charmaine Pereira, Project Co-ordinator
Project: Strengthening Gender Justice in Nigeria: A Focus on Women's Citizenship in Practice
Organisation: Initiative for Women's Studies in Nigeria (IWSN)
Subject: Evaluator's Feedback to Project Coordinator and Project Officer
Date: 10th October 2007

1. Introduction.

This report follows the methodology workshop held in Abuja 7-11th September 2007, at the Golden Gate Hotel, marking the commencement of the project 'Strengthening Gender Justice in Nigeria'.

According to the programme that was circulated to participants and resource persons, the methodology workshop was designed to launch the research project, and to bring the research team together, providing

“a forum for interactive discussion and exploration of ideas and experiences, with the overall aim of facilitating the production of new knowledge on women's citizenship that is theoretically and empirically grounded”.

The main business of the meeting involved establishing the research network and designing the project methodology. In this respect a number of specific objectives were also identified and shared with the invited participants and resource persons. These were:

- To explore and set out a theoretical and empirical framework for researching women's citizenship in Nigeria through an analysis of the practice of citizenship;
- To use this framework to facilitate the process of designing and executing collective research on women's citizenship and gender justice in Nigeria;
- To share experiences with researchers and activists in Nigeria and elsewhere and learn from our collective herstories and histories, as well as analyses of issues raised during the workshop;
- To strengthen capacity for addressing the methodological challenges of researching women's citizenship in Nigeria in terms of women's everyday lives as well as struggles for women's rights;
- To begin the process of building a research and advocacy network for the design and execution of action research on the practice of women's citizenship in Nigeria.

Prior to attending the initial research workshop, I studied the concept proposal, reviewers comments on the proposal, and the project coordinator's communications. These reflect a great deal of thought, and the intellectual and political interests motivating the area of study. The proposal displays an excellent

combination of i) scholarly knowledge of the field, and ii) knowledge of the context and the current local political terrain, within which the research project is located.

The proposed action-research project on Women's Citizenship is extremely timely and relevant to the current political situation in Nigeria. Nigeria is aptly characterized as being in a state of political transition, given that the country was governed by military rulers until 1999. As such the present moment offers historic opportunities for political development, and these are currently being pursued a number of nongovernmental and civil society organizations, including key women's movement organisations. Through a focus on citizenship, the project seeks to pursue the possibility of making a gender-focused intervention into the ongoing struggle for the realization of democratization. Given the deeply patriarchal nature of military rule, the focus on the meaning and lived realities of women's citizenship is a necessary element in any consideration of democratization. The transition to democracy opens up hitherto absent possibilities and opportunities for the emergence of citizenship, and for the pursuit and advancement of women's citizenship in particular.

The project concept makes good use of the project coordinators experience – she has carried out research and analysis on the gendered effects of military rule in Nigeria, and has also been involved in various advocacy efforts and research initiatives during the last decade or so. Her understanding of both the academic and the policy context positively informs the design of a project that seeks to bring activists and researchers into a collaborative intervention.

If implemented successfully it offers an unprecedented opportunity to intervene meaningfully in a rapidly evolving political context that presents historically unique opportunities, as well as being replete with challenges. This spirit was summed up in one of the participants who made reference to the popular expression:

“If a bird doesn't try to fly it will never reach the sky”.

On the practical front, the project coordinator is an established gender researcher and earned respect through her work as the convenor of the national Network for Women's Studies in Nigeria. Now referred to as the Initiative for Women's Studies in Nigeria, it has successfully established an office in Abuja and recruited excellent administrative support staff under Dr Pereira's leadership.

While the project outcome will inevitably depend very much on the research team that will be established to carry out the field work, the coordinator will carry responsibility for intellectual direction and management of the project.

The remainder of my remarks focus on the extent to which the workshop fulfilled its own objectives and the manner in which the challenges arising during it were responded to, before summarizing these as recommendations.

2. Overview of the initial workshop.

Held in Abuja, 7-11th Sept 2007

Preparation and programme design was undertaken well in advance and this was successfully carried out to its conclusion. The preparatory work involved preparing a resource pack that was presented

participants on their arrival. While this was not directly utilized during the workshop itself, it was well received, and provides a common base of reference material to be drawn on as the project develops.

There were three resource persons, all of whom gave highly relevant inputs to the programme, and supported the coordinator throughout the three days. Dr Jibrin Ibrahim, Director of the CDD gave valuable input on the broader national political history and context, detailing the problem of citizenship in general, and noting that an understanding of this was a necessary basis for addressing women's particular experience of it. His address made reference to the mass disenfranchisement of Nigeria's people during the most recent elections, and discussed the acceptance of the results as a strategic response of a population that was determined not to facilitate a return to military rule. His contribution set the scene for the meeting.

Dr Dzodzi Tsikata from the University of Ghana provided valuable input on the theorization of women, state and politics in African contexts, drawing on Ghana's experiences. She shared her rich and diverse experience in academic research and the women's movement to elaborate the challenges of conducting research and fieldwork in local contexts, intervening constructively throughout the meeting.

Dr Andrea Cornwall shared her experiences of biographical/life history research in Brazil, and also contributed much substance to the discussion of concepts and the development of the project methodology throughout the meeting.

The participants were well selected, constituting a diverse group that came from five selected locations across Nigeria (Abuja, Kaduna, Maiduguri, Nsukka and Lagos). They brought varying degrees and kinds of experience that related to considerations of citizenship. Some had been identified primarily as NGO activists and others had been identified primarily as researchers. Among the researchers there were individuals who had been identified to coordinate the implementation of research at the selected locales, and others who would play supporting roles as assistant researchers. This division of labour that was being anticipated was not immediately clear. However, following advice (from this evaluator and the resource persons), these roles and responsibilities were clarified both within the programme, and when the coordinator held a separate meeting with the research coordinators.

The designated research coordinators were well chosen, but (as is most often the case) had not had previous experience of the proposed project methodology, namely qualitative, in-depth feminist action research. Attempting to develop this as a shared methodology for the project was one of the goals of the meeting.

It became clear that additional support would be needed to develop capacity and shared understanding of the research framework and the field approach, as familiarity with these could not in fact be assumed in light of the newness to feminist research and qualitative methods (see recommendation 1).

The workshop programme was intensive as it became apparent that in addition to grounding participants in research methods, it also needed to cover both intellectual and personnel issues in order to get the project off to a good start. In this respect the three programme was perhaps not long enough.

The intellectual challenges included developing a working knowledge of concepts and methods within each of the five research teams. The personnel issues involved the establishment of five small research teams, each working in a different part of the country.

3. Establishing the Research Teams

Each of the five teams included a research coordinator, researchers and NGO representatives. Within each team it was also necessary to develop sufficient understanding of the different roles and responsibilities of research coordinators, local researchers/research assistants and the NGO activists. Whereas the research was to be carried out by the researchers/assistants, it was anticipated that the NGO people would facilitate the research by helping the research coordinators and researchers with the identification of field sites, possible interviewees and community contacts.

Most of the researchers all had on the ground experience of research in Nigerian contexts, a deep knowledge of local political and social conditions, and competence in local languages and cultures. The project team was thus well placed to carry out research that could be grounded in local activism, advocacy and struggles of women's rights, and thus likely to have the possibility of engaging with the ongoing political transitions to advance women's citizenship in political and policy arenas.

The initial programme did not allocate space to the elucidation of the various roles and responsibilities, so during the course of the workshop the project convenor was advised to develop guidelines for participation to ensure management of these roles, and to sustain contact with the five research coordinators throughout the process.

4. Research Development

In terms of the research itself, the workshop embarked on the planning of the research projects at the five selected locations. The research would be enhanced by general documentation on each context and its situation in the Nigerian political context, with particular attention to experiences that address the question of citizenship – both in terms of policy and politics and in terms of women's lived experiences. The research coordinator is advised to consider how much of this contextual information gathering is delegated to the research teams, and how much of it might be undertaken centrally.

The fieldwork component was developed in terms of two main methods, case studies and life stories, to be designed and selected by the researchers. The workshop involved the development of criteria and thinking around this process,

Given that appropriate selection of both cases and life stories may ultimately prove key to the success of the project, it was advised that proposals be elicited and considered in dialogue with the project coordinator, prior to the commencement of fieldwork.

The broader and in some ways deeper transformative goal of understanding how citizenship is actually lived - beyond the political and policy discourses - requires locally grounded research, and the project design takes full cognizance of this. (see recommendation 2) .

5. Research Framework and Concepts

Conceptualisation of the research presented some challenges. There was much discussion of the multiple meanings and manifestations of citizenship, complexity of concept. To facilitate the research, it was necessary to develop shared working understanding of the concept, and to operationalise this in terms of

the research that would be carried out. The participants were given a lot of guidance on how to approach citizenship – both in terms of the legal and policy definitions of the term, and as women's lived political realities. Citizenship was discussed as a site of contestation that reveals much about political power and women's agency as citizens and political actors in Nigeria.

The attempt to introduce discourse analysis and 'the discursive construction of citizenship' in a Foucauldian sense was rather too complex for a group of researchers and activists not schooled in contemporary social and political theory. It is advised that this should not be pursued or required of the researchers, because most of the team lack the theoretical background. The researchers were encouraged to research the various definitions and manifestations of citizenship via the specified institutional sites generating particular understandings of citizenship – officials and govt institutions, Women's NGO's, religious institutions.

The core concepts that were introduced and discussed will need to be synthesized into a clear and usable research framework. It is strongly recommended that a framework (including working understandings of the concepts and research questions) be synthesized from the workshop discussions, written up and sent to the 5 research coordinators, to be shared and applied by each team. This could then be used alongside the above mentioned roles and responsibilities guide, to provide a research management tool to guide the remainder of the process and support the researchers as they seek to gather material on women's citizenship.

6. Research Methods

The chosen method - in-depth qualitative action research approach offers the possibility of contributing constructively to the feminist objective of developing knowledge that will contribute to enhancing women's citizenship .

However, the participants displayed some difficulty in gaining sufficient grasp of the research methods to be used in this project. This seems to reflect the various different experiences of research, and disparate understandings of the meaning of research (quantitative, survey research and advocacy work, legal case handling and intervention-based information work), but little notion of in –depth qualitative social research or feminist research.

In particular, it took almost 2 days to clarify the difference between a life history and a case study. The meeting eventually developed an understanding for the purposes of this project:

- i) life histories are to be taken to refer to individual experiences that can inform us about women's lived experience of citizenship, to be undertaken through biographical interviews with selected individuals
- ii) case study refers to institutional or movement engagements with citizenship. Case studies require are put together using multiple data sources (policy and organisational records and documents, legal documents, interviews, observation etc) and should address collective or institutional engagements with the challenges of realizing citizenship.

The project coordinator was strongly advised of the need to consolidate the understandings that began to clarify during this first meeting, by following up with further methodology training – in the form of one or more follow up research workshops (at least one more than is currently planned within the project budget) and regular communications, possibly with site visits. In this way the coordinator would be able to support the implementation of the fieldwork that will remain attuned to the conceptual framework and methods developed at this first meeting. It would be advisable for the coordinator to visit research sites, and support the development of research designs and workplans by each research group. This was initiated at the workshop, but needs to be continued through the research, analysis and writing up stages of the project.

While many possible case studies were generated and discussed during the workshop, it makes practical sense to limit the number of case studies to a small number (2 per team) and cases proposed and carefully designed prior to their being carried out, workshopped at the methodology workshop.

Researchers need to be briefed on what they will be required to do in relation to literature reviewing and contextualization of the research in the Nigerian context. Support on this from the coordinator needs to be considered – e.g. identification of existing material, policy documents, NGO reports and focal areas of activism and its achievements etc.

Sustaining participants adequate grounding in the conceptualisation of “citizenship” will need to be addressed, as well the operationalisation of this into various manifestations of citizenship in everyday life, and different constructions of citizenship by different players (official, within women’s NGO’s, local communities, popular parlance and commonsense understanding among the researchers, etc).

Research design and selection criteria.

These were discussed and developed in plenary, and then given as guidelines for group work to select possible cases.

- Political
- Legal
- Social-economic
- Sexual/cultural/religious

It was agreed that the research use purposive sampling to address various dimensions of diversity in citizenship: those named were hierarchies of class, status, age, marital/sexual status, regional, ethnic and religious differences

The teams need further training on both doing case studies and on carrying out life histories (8 per team). It would also be important to ensure that researchers retain a close sense of the conceptual framework that will inform the analysis to illuminate the manifestation of citizenship/deprivation of citizenship in women’s lives. The training should involve simulation exercises, and feedback on initial interviews that should be conducted prior to the training.

Summary of recommendations

i. Research Framework and methodology.

At least 2 further research methodology workshops or meetings of the researchers are strongly advised (and the idea is already being implemented with additional funding mobilized from IDS). These should include:

- further work on the operationalisation of the core concepts into a research framework, and further into guidelines and field instruments for the carrying out of the research.
- research design- overall conceptual coherence of project, within the individual projects and the implications of their particular locations for specificity and commonality.
- field work – its meaning and location in the research process
- interviewing techniques for gathering life stories
- case studies of women's struggles – what does a case study comprise, how put together, what kind of cases are needed for this research.
- analysis of qualitative data
- report writing.

ii. Team building, roles and responsibilities

Clarifying and developing a mechanism for sustaining the research teams and somehow maintaining communication between project participants located at some distance from one another needs to be part of the management and implementation strategy of the overall coordinator.

Maintaining an ongoing connection with the activists who are facilitating case work needs some thinking through, given that the same activists – perhaps along with others who participate in the research - will be later relied upon for action and activation of the research findings. If this role is to be the responsibility of the research coordinators, this needs to be addressed early on.

It seems likely that the intellectual and analytic responsibility for the project will remain heavily on the shoulders of the project coordinator, unless interventions are made to ensure participation of the research coordinators (and perhaps the researchers too) in the processing – interpretation, analysis and writing up of the research.

In this respect it is advised that it may make sense to hire a research officer to support the convenor, both in terms of the outreach and site visits, and in terms of carrying out background and context-specific research on the political and policy context for women's citizenship in the five locations. A competent social research with gender competent expertise in the field of politics and policy would be suitable, unless this role can be adequately devolved to the five coordinators.

In conclusion

The methodology workshop covered a great deal of ground, and successfully launched a project that all the participants are committed to completing. It is clear that it will generate some very interesting and original documentation and insights into questions of citizenship in Nigeria, as this is lived, experienced and struggled for by women. I look forward to seeing some of the results of a potentially far-reaching project and the development of concrete strategies for engaging with policy makers and activists working in this highly challenging arena.