

EVALUATION OF THE SOCIAL SCIENCE
RESEARCH COMPETITION

1981

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Old evaluation report number was 2.5.5

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13. 11. 1975
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Introduction

The Ford Foundation's Nairobi office and the Social Sciences Division of the International Development Research Centre jointly commissioned this evaluation in order to assess the accomplishments and weaknesses of the Social Science Research Competition. Now sponsored jointly by Ford and the IDRC, the Competition has been operating since 1975.

This report begins with a brief history of the competition, and then discusses various issues raised in the course of interviews with participants and other academic and non-academic observers. Next there is an analysis of the personal characteristics of the applicants by nationality, discipline, and sex. A review of the strengths and weaknesses of the Competition as perceived by the interviewees and their suggestions for its improvement precedes our own recommendations for its future. These recommendations are made within the broader context of ongoing research activities and the general academic and social environment affecting research in Eastern and Southern Africa.

I. Background to the Evaluation

By the mid 1970's, considerable progress had been made to replace expatriates in East African universities with Africans. The Ford Foundation gradually withdrew from staff development programs and became increasingly concerned with enhancing the quality of research in the social sciences, a field of special interest to it and one in which a high level of africanization had been achieved.

Other organisations were also heavily involved in institution building and research support within the universities and government. There were major programs of bilateral assistance from Western and Eastern Bloc countries. The Rockefeller Foundation's University Development Programme provided substantial support for the Universities of Dar es Salaam, Makerere and Nairobi. The Ford Foundation's activities included training awards; a research coordination group; summer research awards to undergraduates in social science; and the financing of research programs and projects. Ford and Rockefeller also financed research and evaluation units within government ministries in Uganda, Tanzania and Kenya. The IDRC supported several large and a variety of small projects in the social sciences. The Centre also provided training awards and fellowships.

In spite of these programs, in 1974 the Ford Foundation perceived the need to raise local professional standards and to permit recently returned academics to develop their research skills. Otherwise these individuals tended to become immersed in teaching and administration. Moreover, the universities did not - and still do not - offer incentives to con-

research, since academic promotion has been determined primarily by the performance of teaching and administrative duties. If the universities were to develop social science communities committed to establishing and maintaining high levels of scholarship, the next logical step would be to encourage this new generation of scholars to continue to conduct research. Furthermore, materials appropriate for local teaching purposes could be developed more readily from research into local issues.

The new generation of African social scientists were concerned with development and social change. Governments tended to justify their support of the social sciences in terms of their perceived utility for understanding and solving development problems. However, these scholars also needed to be given the option to do basic research. Because funds have been much more readily available for short term applied studies, scholars have naturally tended to respond to these market forces and neglect more fundamental types of research.

The younger generation of scholars often possessed better skills and had received a more rigorous theoretical training than their senior colleagues. The latter, however, controlled most research funds. Since they did not actively engage in research because of administrative, personal and official commitments, much of the work, particularly that portion concerned with primary data collection, was delegated to younger colleagues and students. Their junior colleagues had access to funds only through the patronage of the senior academics, and were unable to pursue their own priorities

and build systematically upon the skills acquired in graduate school. At the time, it was estimated that there were about ninety social scientists in the region who could potentially benefit from a program providing individual grants to cover the costs of small scale research projects. This was the rationale for the research competition.

In the course of preparing the research competition, there was considerable discussion of several important issues. ^{It} ~~They~~ included the question of a thematic competition versus an open-ended one; the different procedures for selecting the awardees; the extent of involvement of the sponsoring agency(ies); and the dissemination of research findings. The sensitivity of (Goran Hyden) the Ford Foundation's Social Science Advisor to these issues, all of which were raised in the course of our own evaluation, has undoubtedly contributed to the success of the competition to date.

A parallel development to the competition was the organization of social scientists in the region. For some time social science conferences had been dominated by established scholars - often expatriates - and the younger generation of African scholars were rarely asked to participate. To counteract this situation, a group of younger scholars began meeting informally on a more or less regular basis as the East African Social Science Research Consultative Group (EASSRCG). The quality of their papers was uneven, and no publications resulted until their 1979 conference, which led to the formal establishment of OSSREA, the Organization for Social Science Research in Eastern Africa. This initiative was directed toward the

same generation of African scholars for whom the Competition was primarily intended, and both activities, which have been supported by the Ford Foundation, have been mutually reinforcing.

→ In the seventh and most recent round of the Competition, seven additional awards were provided by the International Development Research Centre (IDRC). These awards, subject to the same terms and conditions as those financed by the Ford Foundation, were provided for research in the rural social sciences. Since the IDRC's Nairobi Office had not yet re-opened, the Centre also provided a consultant, Dr. Susanne Mueller, to assist in publicizing and managing the Competition. The Ford Foundation and the IDRC agreed to undertake a joint evaluation of the Competition after the completion of the seventh round before determining levels and conditions of support over the longer term.

Prior to the joint evaluation, which is the subject of this report, there were two other assessments of the Competition. In June 1979, Goran Hyden, then the Ford Foundation's Nairobi-based Social Science Advisor, wrote a summary report on the first five rounds of the competition describing in detail how it had been organized and conducted, and providing a breakdown of the submissions by discipline and country. In February 1981, Susanne Mueller submitted an excellent description and analysis of that round coupled with a cogent discussion of the competition's strengths, weaknesses and future prospects. Instead of replicating these efforts our own evaluation has been based on an investigation of local perceptions of the Competition.

The team was composed of Dr. Alula Abate, Director of the Institute for Development Research of the University of Addis Ababa, Dr. Richard Horovitz of the Ford Foundation and Dr. David Steedman of the IDRC. Before the team met in Nairobi, Alula Abate wrote to the deans of the social science faculties in every country of the region and to the directors of research institutes in order to elicit their views of the Competition. In Nairobi the team read the responses and perused the Ford Foundation's files and other relevant background documents. The team met with Susanne Mueller and with resident Foundation professional and administrative staff involved in the competition. We also asked a prominent newspaper editor, a refugee academic residing in Nairobi, and the local representative of the Rockefeller Foundation for their opinions of the Competition.

The primary focus of our investigation was the academic community. At the University of Nairobi and its affiliated Institutes (the IDS and the IAS) we met with past and present award recipients, with former jury members, with successful applicants, with individuals who were aware of the competition but had never become involved, and with others who were totally ignorant of it. Interviewees included M.A. students, junior and senior lecturers, department heads, deans, and institute directors (see the attached list). From these discussions emerged a number of issues and concerns which will be highlighted below. The consensus of the evaluation team is that these

opinions are broadly representative of local views of the Competition. They also provide a means of substantiating from independent and diverse sources many of the observations and recommendations made separately by Hyden and Mueller.

II. Factual Data on the Competition

There have been seven rounds of awards since the Competition was first held in 1975. The competition commenced with ten applications only, but the number of submissions doubled in the next two years. This rate of increase levelled off in 1977 and 1978, and the total number subsequently declined from - in 1978 to 27 in 1979. There was subsequently a resumption of the earlier pattern of growth.

In terms of the proportion of successful applications, the fluctuations over the past seven years have been less pronounced than for submissions as a whole, but followed a similar growth pattern. Since the total number of awards has remained relatively constant, the proportion of successful applications has declined with the growth in the total number of submissions. The ratio of awards to submissions reached its lowest point of about 26% in the seventh round of the competition (1981). For all seven rounds the average rate of success has been about 33%.

The attached tables provide information on the number of winners, their disciplines, nationality, institutional affiliation, and sex for the last two rounds. Since few scholars are working outside their own country and institution, nationality and institutional affiliation figures are more or less synonymous. For both submissions and awards, the figures

show a high concentration of Kenyans and Tanzanians, with Ugandans not far behind them, and Zambians and Malawians trailing as poor seconds. In the last round Ethiopians and Zimbabweans raised their participation level noticeably, whereas the number of Zambians declined to only one applicant. As Zimbabwe had been excluded from the competition until that country's recent independence, it will be interesting to see whether this trend will continue to the point where with the return of Zimbabwean scholars from abroad they may soon rival that of the Kenyans and Tanzanians. the case of other countries in Southern Africa, there has only been a token level of participation.

Due to a time constraint, we have been able to determine the participation of women scholars for sixth and seventh rounds only. There were only seven women applying in 1980 and eight in 1981. Their rate of success was poor. Two of the seven applicants in 1980 won awards. In 1981, two of the eight applicants had applied jointly and shared their award.

The disciplines represented among the applicants over the last seven rounds have been quite diverse, but there has been a noticeable concentration in the core areas of the social sciences, and in economics, political science, and sociology in particular.

The causes underlying fluctuations in the number of submissions differ considerably from one country to another. With changes in the climate of academic freedom, scholars have been forced to move from one university to another within the region, or have become discouraged, or have simply refrained from social science research in order to avoid confrontation

with political authorities. Others leave the region. Serious social and political unrest also reduced applications, particularly from Uganda.

A major reason for the jump in the number of applications in 1981 has been the impact of the IDRC consultant who travelled within the region in order to publicize the competition and answer questions related to it. The sharp fall in the number of applications in 1979 occurred when there had been no Ford Foundation social science advisor for four months. These positive and negative responses further underline the need to designate a person locally with specific responsibility for the Competition. Inasmuch as personal contacts have encouraged more applications, the location of the Ford Foundation office and the East African Regional Office of the IDRC in Nairobi has contributed to the current geographic imbalance in submissions and awards.

In summary, although seven rounds do not suffice to establish a definite trend, the figures do suggest some significant issues, namely an uneven growth annually in total submissions; a declining rate of successful submissions; a concentration of research topics in the core social science areas; and a preponderance of submissions from relatively few countries in the region.

III. Local Perceptions of the Competition

The individuals interviewed in the course of the evaluation perceived a variety of strengths and weaknesses in the competition. They also made a number of useful suggestions some of which have been incorporated in our recommendations.

A. Its Strengths

According to many interviewees, the competition's greatest strength has been its "openness" which was stated to have helped promote intellectual diversity in the region. For many researchers it has been seen as only vehicle permitting more junior scholars to conduct basic research.

The competition was praised for encouraging those wanting to pursue policy relevant topics to do so, but without limiting support solely to this type of research. The jurors were praised for their diversity of ideological views and for their broad representation of the various social science disciplines, as well as for their "tough-mindedness" and "commitment to the merit principle." According to one former jury member, every award which was made deserved to be made. This assertion was supported by our own interviews. Because of the aura of fairness that surrounds the competition as a genuine contest (based on high standards of scholarship, we were told that winning a Ford Foundation/IDRC research grant bestows much greater prestige within the academic community than the award of a more lucrative government research contract.

Interviewees agreed that the findings of the research projects financed by the competition are contributing to knowledge of the region and the material from local case studies can be used for teaching purposes. The Competition's support of fieldwork also provides graduate students, and especially those pursuing their doctorate^(A) studies overseas, with the opportunity to carry out empirical research on topics of local importance. The competition also permits grantees to pay research assistants, usually M.A. students, and thereby contributes to ~~M.A.~~ (their) training.

Even in those cases where their own submission had been rejected, the individuals whom we interviewed expressed their appreciation of the critical comments and suggestions that they received from competition staff and the jury. The feedback from the juries was considered fair in every instance but one. In most cases, the comments of the jury were directed towards refining the methodology and narrowing the focus of the proposal. Even when applicants chose not to reapply, they said that they found the intellectual stimulus helpful in shaping their ideas and reformulating their proposals.

Finally, the ease with which the Ford Foundation and the IDRC disburse the grants is seen to be superior to university administration of research funds. No one claimed that the terms of the awards are unjust. In the case of local universities, although outside funds are earmarked for disbursement to a specific researcher or research project, they are treated as fungible. Thus, the funds are often not made available when the researchers need them. Even when university-administered funds are made available, cumbersome bureaucratic procedures often hinder implementation of the project. Universities often also claim a percentage as an overhead for handling outside funds. In summary, direct disbursement by the Foundation/IDRC is seen by the interviewees as superior to payment through local

universities and affiliated research institutes.

B. Its Weaknesses

Several interviewees made valid criticisms about certain aspects of the competition. Most frequently cited was the unevenness and in some cases the total absence of publicity. A few individuals claimed that they did not learn of the competition in time, or that department heads who received flyers informed only their best students or favorite colleagues about it. Others intimated that they did not realize the competition's broad definition of social science encompasses a very wide range of subjects including history, literature and law. Another frequent complaint was that funds were meagre in comparison to other types of support provided by private foundations in the region. Occasionally such comments demonstrated a confusion between the small grants of the Social Science Research Competition and other Ford Foundation and IDRC supported activities, or a misconception that the Competition was now the only vehicle by which either organization supports research in the region.

There were also contradictory comments to the effect that the very diversity of topics financed by the competition has greatly restricted the opportunity for collective seminars, joint publications and other means of sharing research findings ^{for any given round}. Other interviewees pointed out that juries made up of senior scholars are not judging their peers since most of the entrants were junior in academic standing if not always in a. There may also be some truth to the allegation that senior academics who have rejected a research proposal in their capacity as members of a faculty review panel may subsequently end up reassessing the same request as members of a Competition jury.

Some interviewees claimed that although the Foundation and IDRC may not set explicit themes for the Competition, they implicitly introduce ideological and disciplinary biases through their choice of jurors. However, this allegation was not substantiated. Most of the people interviewed were extremely impressed by the range and fairness of the jurors' judgments. Indeed, as one former juror remarked, the juries have probably on the whole been less conservative in their attitudes than most of the applicants.

Some interviewees recommended semi-annual competitions to enable unsuccessful applicants to take immediate advantage of criticisms of their initial submission. Others suggested publication of a newsletter or circular that would list the new award winners' names and topics and a brief description of the findings from earlier research projects financed by the competition. The newsletter would publicize details of the competition and contain an abstract of research findings.

IV. Issues

A. Scope

A commonly recurring theme in the interviews was the scope of the Competition. Interviewees universally expressed appreciation for the opportunity to submit proposals on topics that they themselves deemed important rather than on themes dictated by a funding agency or the government. Such discussions almost always led to a consideration of the role of higher education in a developing country.

Our discussions have revealed more than one locally held concept of the functions of a university in an independent African state. Many political leaders believe the university should serve its society in immediate and pragmatic ways. This viewpoint is reinforced by the urgency of the development problems confronting African governments and the sizeable budgetary contributions that they make to their universities. Most academics, on the other hand, feel that the university environment ought to provide resources and opportunities to reflect upon and investigate other visions of society. They believe that social science research and training should be justified, not only through their ability to solve immediate problems, but also by enabling committed individuals to reflect intelligently on society's problems and seek new and innovative solutions to them. From this standpoint, universities are seen as bastions of independent and critical thinking in which a plurality of ideas and opinions can be expressed. Many of the interviewees saw the Competition as an important vehicle for encouraging study, scholarship and learning along these lines.

Taking these discussions into account, our opinion is that the Competition has the capacity to demonstrate, in a microcosm, the university's function of ensuring pluralism across a wide spectrum of ideologies, nationalities and disciplines. The Competition may help vulnerable academic communities to preserve their intellectual independence in a very uncertain and often hostile environment.

On a more pragmatic level, many interviewees felt that a social science curriculum that emphasizes a narrow technical competence alone is

particularly disadvantageous for a developing country. A university should stimulate students and faculty to think creatively about the issues and problems faced by their societies. The current tendency for academics in certain disciplines, especially economics, to provide consultant services to government departments and ministries is accepted as a fact of life, but decried because the involvement of these scholars makes it more difficult for them to maintain an independent critical view of government activities and policies.

In summary, those who believe that the university's primary function should be the creation of new knowledge felt that the competition was particularly important in a continent generally unreceptive to intellectuals and to critical thought. Whilst acknowledging the desire that research reflect on more immediate social issues, most of the academics we interviewed cautioned against an overly narrow definition of "applied research" and applauded the competition for encompassing both empirical and theoretical scholarship.

B. Equity

Matters touching on equity were raised in the course of our discussions even though the procedures for preserving the anonymity of applicants and for the selection of jurors are designed to ensure that the intellectual rigour of a submission is the sole criterion for assessing its merit.

Several people argued that a totally open competition favours ~~local~~ ^{senior} scholars and highly trained Western academics to the detriment of the younger generation of African scholars whom the competition was designed to

assist. The former group are alleged to be adept at grantsmanship and to know how to draft an attractive research proposal. This contention is not borne out by the facts. Our review of the list of unsuccessful applicant over the past seven rounds revealed the names of several well-known local scholars. They include the head of a research institute and an educationalist who has conducted several heavily funded studies but who was turned down on four separate occasions by competition juries. Moreover, many of the more senior and experienced scholars are working on larger, longer-term projects and have recourse to other funds. For these and other reasons, this group seems to have less interest in small grants. It would therefore appear the competition is serving the constituency for whom it has been designed, namely the younger generation of scholars.

As noted earlier, Kenyans and Tanz^{an}ians accounted for the largest share of submissions, and female scholars, as a group, have made relatively few submissions. While one or two people suggested nationally instead of regionally based competitions whereby awards would be given for the best proposals from each country, few of the interviewees were really comfortable with any sort of a "quota" system that would inevitably compromise the non-discriminatory nature of the competition as it is currently structured. Any criterion other than scholastic rigour for evaluating submissions appeared repugnant to most of the interviewees. However, one way of reducing current imbalances would be a deliberate attempt to seek out potential applicants from underrepresented groups, to explain the competition to them and to assist them in preparing their submissions. The IDRC consultant performed these tasks most effectively during the last round. Continuing efforts to meet

with scholars in Zambia, Malawi, Lesotho, Botswana, Zimbabwe and possibly Mozambique and Angola, should help redress the geographical imbalance. The same approach could be adopted in the case of female scholars to ensure that this group, whilst still small and underrepresented within the academic community at large, nevertheless is able to obtain maximum benefit from the competition.

C. Financial Support

Another topic that surfaced in many of our conversations with Kenyan scholars was whether funds were available from other sources for small research projects. In theory, University of Nairobi lecturers can apply to the Dean's Fund for research awards and for financial assistance to attend conferences. However, everyone at the University, including those in the administration, admitted that in reality this source has dried up. A similar situation prevails at most other universities in the region. Funds at the department level are also scarce, but apparently some departments strive to make a vehicle or other form of transport available occasionally to researchers.

The Kenyan scholars mentioned the National Council of Science and Technology as the only other possible source of support for independently financed research projects. The Council does consider research in the social as well as physical sciences. However we were told that it emphasizes policy oriented research in its advisory capacity to the Kenyan government. According to more than one interviewee, its selection procedure is politically biased.

Other research funds are tied to specific topics and are given to collective efforts rather than to individual researchers. Support for population studies by the Ford and Rockefeller Foundations and by the USAID was frequently cited in support of this contention. The interviewees also

contrasted the relatively large sums allocated for this type of research with the much more modest amount offered by the competition. Only two interviewees felt that US \$ 5,000 would enable a researcher to conduct a project in Kenya that entailed a substantial amount of primary data collection and analysis. The financial constraint is even more severe in such countries as Tanzania and Uganda, where the most rudimentary items are prohibitively expensive or unavailable and transport costs are exorbitant. Furthermore international airfares are now so high that the current grant ceiling effectively prohibits a scholar from one country in the region from undertaking research in another.

D. Dissemination of Research Findings

Another issue which came up repeatedly during our interviews was the dissemination of research findings. No overall consideration has been given thus far to sharing research results, the matter having been left to the discretion of the individual awardee. The findings from a few studies have been published as articles in journals, but usually the research results have been presented as seminar papers if at all. Thus, it is very difficult to determine if the results have appeared, and where, and whether they have reached their intended audience. |

The question of an appropriate means for disseminating research results has been a priority for both the IDRC and Ford Foundation. One joint response has been selective financial support and encouragement of social science journals in the region. This and other measures will enhance the quality of research, facilitate the exchange of scholarly work, and thereby help establish a sound tradition of the social science research in the region.

E. Administration of the Competition

Aside from the awards themselves, the Competition entails such other indirect costs as secretarial services, photocopying, correspondence, and financial administration. However, the most important cost is the demand that it has and will continue to place on staff time in the Ford and IDRC Nairobi offices. Aside from the jurors, the IDRC consultant, the Ford Foundation Representative and program officers also assess the proposals. They send a written summary of comments to each competitor. The demand on staff time and the other indirect costs will increase as the number of submissions grows in future years.

These costs may appear excessive relative to the total number of awards and their nominal value. However, these costs must be assessed in terms of the competition's benefits, as identified by us from our interviews. The Competition's impact cannot be assessed solely in terms of the number and value of awards but from the broader perspective of its contribution to scholarship in the social sciences. In this context, the costs of the Competition, both direct and indirect, seem reasonable. Nevertheless, we recognize that different arrangements will have to be considered to ensure that administration of the competition as well as other IDRC and Ford activities do not suffer from the expected increase in the number and variety of submissions

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V. Recommendations

1. We recommend that Ford and IDRC renew their support of the Small Grants competition for two more years. Each organization will finance its own awards and indirect costs of the competition in accordance with its respective mandate and administrative procedures.

2. We recommend that the upper limit of the awards be raised to \$8,000 and that approximately 20 awards be made annually on the assumption that the average value of each award will be \$6,000.

3. We recommend that both agencies jointly hire a consultant for four months to publicize the competition and advise potential competitors. Based on the experience of the IDRC consultant, we believe that this measure is essential to stimulate proposals from underrepresented groups and to improve the overall quality of submissions.

4. We recommend that the programme be reviewed after one year to determine the feasibility of other administrative arrangements, such as a gradual transfer to OSSREA or another African run organization. The implications of a semi-annual competition should also be explored at that time.

5. We recommend that Ford and the IDRC provide funds during the next two rounds for an African trainee to participate in administering the competition.

6. We recommend an attempt be made to broaden the competition's base by including such other donors as SAREC and the Rockefeller Foundation.

7. We recommend issuing a newsletter publicizing details of the competition including a summary of ongoing research projects. This newsletter could also be used as a vehicle to disseminate research findings.