

Title:

Training Institute: Women's Rights, Citizenship and Governance in Sub-Saharan Africa – Evaluation (Project No.104909-002) Contract No. 111626

Evaluator:

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IDRC Commissioning Party:

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1. Background

This memo presents preliminary observations and reflections following the completion of the first Training Institute on Women's Rights, Citizenship and Governance in Sub Saharan Africa.¹

The overall intention of the evaluation is to contribute to course improvement; provide an assessment of strengths and weaknesses in the delivery and execution of the training institute, and to offer recommendations for improvement.

As set out in the Terms of Reference, the rationale is that the evaluation would engage project leaders in critical reflection over the duration of the project, and in this sense the evaluation is seen as intrinsic to the pedagogical approach of the Wits Training Institute. The form of the evaluation is thus an ongoing learning evaluation.

In accordance with this approach the evaluator attended part of the first training institute; met participants and project leaders, and provided feedback to project leaders in face to face discussions on observations during the course of the institute. This memo attempts to record key observations discussed in such interactions, as well as additional reflections and insights from the viewpoint of the evaluator.

Evaluation Uses, Purpose, Key Questions and Methodology

The following uses, purpose and key questions were set out in the terms of reference:

Uses of the evaluation include

- use by the project leaders over the duration of the project
- feeding into WRC's continued programming in the region and providing an assessment of the appropriateness of this model for building capacity.

The purpose of the evaluation is

- to investigate the extent to which the Wits Training Institute is meeting its objectives of advancing feminist research through supporting feminist researchers based in Africa to conceptualise and plan research projects in the field of women's rights, citizenship and governance
- to make recommendations to enhance its performance

Issues/ Questions to be studied include:

Does the institute

- Provide meaningful learning opportunities for the participants?
- Build capacity in developing research proposals?
- Support feminist researchers based in Africa to conceptualise and plan research projects in the field of women's rights, citizenship and governance?
- Build capacity for theory building among feminist researchers
- Mentor the development of younger researchers and enable the emergence of new voices in gender research

¹ Reporting requirements as set out in The Terms of Reference for the evaluation are that three short memos (4 to 8 pages) be produced following each Training Institute (two in year one and one in year two) and that a final end of project report (15 to 20 pages) be presented following the final institute.

- Facilitate comparative learning between countries
- Build skills for effective policy advocacy and policy making
- Reinforce existing policy networks and where possible expand networks

2. Methodology

Up to 26 August 2008 the evaluator

- reviewed the advertisement of the training institute and its dissemination
- attended the selection committee meeting held in Johannesburg on the 12 May 2008
- reviewed course materials to assess their appropriateness, calibre, and regional relevance
- attended selected portions of the first training institute between the 4 to the 10 August, to assess course delivery, pedagogical modalities and interaction of course moderators and participants
- interviewed participants of the training institute between the 4 to 10 August to get a sense of their expectations, and their experience of the institute mid way through the institute
- engaged in discussion with the project leader, Shireen Hassim, during and after the institute

3. Preliminary Reflections

The following is a summary of key reflections:

3.1. The Advert and its Dissemination

The advert was well worded and clear.

The advert was adequately disseminated to a wide range of websites and networks, resulting in 25 Applications from which five had to be selected for the Training Institute.

3.2. Selection of Applicants: Selection Criteria, Selection Process and Observations at the Institute

Overall the Selection criteria were sound and appropriate and the Advisory Group worked well in selecting the five teams from among the 25 applicants.

3.2.1. Criteria as set out and fine tuned by the Advisory Group

The selection criteria as set out in the Application Package stated fluency in English, citizenship of an African country and based in an African institution, a research team of 2 to three with each researcher holding a minimum of a masters degree, a clearly defined research proposal on appropriate themes and having a clearly defined applied policy or advocacy impact.

The selection criteria as set out in the Project Proposal for the Training Institute was further fine- tuned by the Advisory Committee as follows

- Submission of a research concept note on one of several themes in the WRC prospectus

- That the research question be interesting, innovative, applicable, contain the germ of an interesting proposal
- That the five proposals selected represent among them a diversity of themes, regions and institutions.
- That team members have some prior engagement with gender issues
- That in terms of their strength composition the teams be comprised of two to three people including a senior researcher with a PhD and two Masters/ Doctoral level students, preferably a mix of Ngo and academic
- All male teams were ruled out in the selection process although the advert did not state that all male teams would not be considered
- A letter of support from home institutions

3.2.2. Criteria of Age, Feminism and Gender

While the aims as set out in the project proposal made mention of younger and feminist researchers (page 4 of proposal) as the target group the Advisory Group Meeting on the 12 May did not take age or feminism into strict account.

Age

Perhaps age criteria need to be considered in the next round of selections so as to ensure a majority of younger researchers. The evaluator and the project leader both noted that the younger researcher made greater strides and held greater potential to grasp and apply the concepts discussed in the course of the institute.

Feminism

On the question of feminism it is difficult to objectively assess who is feminist; nor do all those who subscribe to ideas which may be considered feminist, identify as feminist. However it would be preferable to bring together participants who are open to feminist ideas (i.e. at least broad ideas supporting women's emancipation from subordination) so that the take off point is not too basic. From observation at the first institute it was clear that the majority of participants had had little prior exposure to feminist ideas and that feminism was a contested term. By the end of the two weeks leaders of three of the five teams might have made some shifts in consciousness but were still not fully convinced that feminist thought was worth pursuing. This has implications for the kind of research and the kinds of advocacy they would link to their research.

Consideration needs to be given to how to engage with this criteria. Perhaps greater examination of prior work by applicants is one way of assessing this – many of the team leaders in particular had published and examining some of their work could be a way of assessing this.

Gender Composition and Gender Dynamics of Teams

While the advert and proposal did not stress the gender composition of the team the Advisory Group did not select an all male team even though theirs was a promising proposal. This was an appropriate response by the Advisory Group as it would have been inconsistent with the overall objective of the Institute to have accepted an all male team.

Of the five teams selected

- one team was made up of three woman
- one team was made up of two men and one woman

- three teams were made up of one man and two women

Overall there were thus five men and ten women researchers participating in the institute with the men being the team leaders (except in the case of the all women team) holding PhDs, and also tending to be older. Gender thus coincided with seniority in terms of both age and academic status (PhD) and the outcome was that the men tended to dominate discussion in the institute seminar and lecture sessions. This trend was clearly observable from the first lecture session, and while attempts by the project leader to speak to the women participants privately in an attempt to shift this trend and to get the women to be more vocal, this was difficult to redress.

Observations at the institute revealed the dynamics within the team made up of two men and one woman were such that male members were dominant. It also became clear from discussion with the two women from a second team that they (the women) had developed the concept for the proposal and had recruited the male team leader because it was a requirement that the team leader have a PhD. During the Institute the male leader was dominant although he was not necessarily knowledgeable on issues under discussion, while the two women team members who were perhaps more knowledgeable on these issues were silenced.

This issue of the gender composition of teams needs to be considered

- one option would be to change criteria to all women teams
- a second option would be to change criteria to teams that are women led
- a third option would be to stress that teams should have a majority of women (although this option could still leave us with a situation of five male project leaders who dominate!)
- since the experience of the one team made clear that the requirement of a team leader with a PhD skewed the composition of their team in the direction of a male team leader, it might be worth reconsidering the requirement of a PhD

3.2.3. Conceptual and Theoretical Grounding of participants

While many participants (team leaders in particular) had done research previously and had publications to their name, it was clear that they were not adequately grounded in understandings of concepts or theory. Many struggled with basic concepts. Many also struggled with the basics of proposal writing. This observation led the project leader to make shifts in the pitch and pace of the lectures and discussion during the institute and is a point to consider in the next institute as it is likely to be the case the next time round.

3.2.4. Participants Preparedness for the Institute

Participants felt they needed clearer information on what to expect at the institute prior to arriving in Johannesburg. They were more than satisfied with the practical information received, but felt they needed more information on the aims and programme for the two weeks. Consideration needs to be given to providing more information on these aspects through providing more detailed written material prior to arrival in Johannesburg; and through an introductory session on the first morning which sets out the institutes objectives as well as engages the participants in discussion on their expectations.

3.2.5. Concluding thoughts on Selection

Who the participants are (by age, gender awareness, interest in the issues) is critical to meeting the objectives of the training. In addition to Masters Degrees and a research

question with promising potential, perhaps youth and a feminist/ women centred consciousness should be stressed as criteria for selection. In addition to putting out an advert (casting a wide net) the institute needs to consider a more personalised approach – that is targeting feminists in key academic institutions and asking them to identify likely participants – beginning with networks of advisory committee members and other key individuals located at academic institutions. Since the Institute is open to NGO researchers as well as academics, individuals in key organisations such as Akina Mama wa Afrika, African Women’s Development Fund, African Feminist Forum should also be targeted with this request.

3.3. Course Design Course Material and content

The course design, content, delivery, and course materials were all of the highest quality. Excellent lecturers with considerable experience, and knowledge in their fields engaged participants in thinking through key concepts. The content of the lectures was excellent – and participants particularly appreciated the constant links made with Africa. There was good interaction between lecturers and participants; and participants were challenged to develop their analytical and conceptual capacities.

Reading Packs offered an excellent resource for participants to draw on not only in their research but also in their teaching – especially since they have limited access to literature in their home countries and institutions

The institute focused on analytical and methodological training, skills in reading and understanding core texts, and the ability to apply concepts to experience. The mix of formal class room (graduate seminar i.e. combination of lecture and intensive class discussion), small group interactive learning, and the opportunity to apply concepts in engagement with NGO based researchers and human rights practitioners worked well.

Participants received support in research proposal writing, with specific sessions set aside for work on their proposals. Teams grappled with reworking their proposals and while the progress across teams is uneven all seem to have gained in that their proposals promise to be improvements on their original proposals.

The aims of the First Training Institute held in August 2008 were thus met i.e

- capacity building of the participating researchers in conceptualising and planning research programmes in the field of gender, citizenship and governance
- developing participant research proposals
- getting a sense of the support the research teams need in the coming months

From the interviews with participants mid way through the institute and their feedback at the end of the first institute it was clear that there were many positives:

- All had learnt a lot
- Their expectations were met and even exceeded
- They had found the sessions to be good, the content relevant, they appreciated the focus on Africa, the good lecturers, the good interaction among participants, the exposure to gender issues and to theory
- They valued the reading pack highly and would use it in their research and teaching

On the other hand participants also found difficulties. These included

- Many experiencing difficulty in coping with the pace of a programme they found too packed and the hours too long. This issue needs attention – consideration could be given to greater variation in the methods used; a lecture room that allows for greater mobility, has more direct light and perhaps a different seating arrangement, in addition to considering ending sessions earlier.
- Many experiencing difficulties in following the lecturer who presented on reading a theoretical text – this was picked up and addressed in the course of the institute, the lecturer was approached by the institute leader, took note of the comments and many participants rated her subsequent presentation on proposal writing as one of the course highlights. However it must also be said that a minority (three) were challenged by the session on a theoretical text to spend a few hours after the lecture applying the method and found it to be very useful
- Many participants not being clear of what to expect in terms of the course (an aspect dealt with earlier in this memo) and this could be rectified by giving more detailed information on the programme and the objectives of the institute
- Dissatisfaction with the location of the venue given its distance from shops where they could buy incidentals, difficulties getting laundry done, and monotony of the menu. They would have preferred receiving out of pocket funds for evening meals (instead of being tied to hotel dinners which were often a repeat of the lunch) and for incidentals. The course leader is looking into a venue change as well as ways of addressing some of these other concerns

4. Overall Assessment

The Institute held in August succeeded in

- providing meaningful learning opportunities for the participants
- building capacity in developing research proposals
- supporting researchers based in Africa to conceptualise and plan research projects in the field of women's rights, citizenship and governance
- building capacity for theory building among feminist researchers
- facilitated comparative learning between countries
- building skills for effective policy advocacy and policy making

Consideration needs to be given to reviewing the areas in need of attention highlighted in the body of this memo. These include selection criteria and practical arrangements.