

# IDS40: Reflections from Uganda

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## **1 Introduction**

I was very excited to return to IDS and to find some of the staff I had left in 1991. As I listened to the speeches and presentations at the fortieth anniversary conference, I wondered what opportunities African institutions or organisations and people could have to influence the development and research agenda. As Lawrence Haddad reminded us (quoting from one of the Roundtable reports), problems are not a monopoly of the South – the North has development problems too. The conference also gave me an opportunity to reflect on the situation in my own country.

At the age of 40, IDS is wiser and richer in ideas and contacts as it influences the world through research and training. If IDS were an average African woman, we would be celebrating the end of her life (life expectancy for women in Uganda is in the mid-40s). If she were still alive at 40, she would probably be taking care of her own eight children and several orphans. She would be doing it with no pay from the state or from anybody else and probably no word of thanks. But she would be happy to be doing it, seeing it as her maternal and civic responsibility. She would be sustaining her family by ensuring they had food to eat but would not be expected to make important decisions in the household, community, national or global level. Policies would be made for her and issues of gender or human rights would be discussed on her behalf by civil society organisations, the male-dominated local council and parliament.

In the young democracies of Africa, such a woman just sees things happening to her. Policies are made for her and diseases such as HIV/AIDS may also be brought to her as she has very little say in what happens to her body. How can she influence the research agenda or how can she demand to get results from the research done about her? Does she have the power to demand that?

Do African countries have the sociopolitical and economic muscle to influence the global agenda?

According to the statistics presented by John Humphrey at the conference, it is clear that while other continents are moving forward in terms of gross domestic product (GDP) per capita, Africa is almost in reverse gear. For example, in Zambia in 1966, real GDP per capita was over US\$700, while that of Indonesia was below US\$200. In 2000, the real GDP for Indonesia had risen to US\$4,000, while that of Zambia was less than US\$1,000.

Shalmali Guttal, in her presentation at the conference highlighted the alarming increase in wars, social and ethnic conflicts and violence, development- and conflict-induced displacement; decreased democratic and political space, and militarisation of the economy, society and development itself. Africa has experienced a large share of conflict, and women and children have borne the brunt of this war and conflict. Yet the same women and children are excluded when peace-building teams are constructed to negotiate the end of wars or conflicts. This is the case in Uganda, Somalia and other countries affected by conflict and war.

Despite the gloomy statistics, African countries are rich in natural resources, including fresh air! New resources such as oil are being discovered in different parts of the continent, including Uganda. This may not be very new, but what is new is the fact that Africa is finding new allies. At the conference, speaker after speaker wondered what the new relationship between China and Africa would bring and how the rest of the world will fit into this new relationship. It made me a happy to see that at long last people were concerned that Africa was making her own decisions and making new friends! It shows the potential Africa has to negotiate for better terms in trade and positioning in the United Nations.

## **2 What is the way forward for Africa?**

At the Uganda Roundtable, it was suggested that regional cooperation and integration would be the way forward. Problems of energy, trade, education and employment could be solved through

integration. Each country could focus on one sector to avoid duplication and wastage of resources.

At the Roundtable in South Africa, attended also by representatives from the other Roundtables in Africa, discussions focused on governance, resource-based growth and the impact of China and India, global climate and environment change, and developing a research and policy agenda for Africa. The Roundtable concluded that the problems of Africa have to be tackled at the global, regional and state levels. Here I would add that if real development is to take place, the global financial institutions such as the World Bank and International Monetary Fund have to take on a more human face. They need to listen more and use the research by international and local institutions and civil society organisations. Research produced at the local and international level should be widely disseminated.

IDS in its turn can collaborate with Southern institutions to strengthen each other's input into research, especially in agenda-setting and dissemination. Gender should also be given more space on the agenda to ensure that the average African woman and man can benefit from research that addresses felt needs identified by ordinary people.

As Joanna Kerr suggested at the conference, IDS and researchers in similar institutions need to be more innovative in the way their research is disseminated to make it more available to policymakers and other people who influence world events. There is much we can do in our work to achieve this and as a graduate of IDS, I pledge to continue to be an ambassador of IDS as we try to strengthen and build networks across continents.