

Strengthening civil society: participatory action research in a militarised state

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Introduction

Research activity is severely constrained in most of post-colonial Africa. If the pursuit of knowledge was previously dictated by imperial interests and the uncritical application of Western paradigms, then today the problems are more numerous and more complex. Three decades after political independence, foreign researchers are often discouraged, while indigenous researchers face awesome material and political constraints that are often discussed within the African intellectual community (see Diouf and Mamdani 1994). Despite all this, Claude Ake (1994: 23) correctly observed that the African intellectual is 'well placed to demystify and expose the self-serving ideological representations of the state and external domination'. He went on to note the daunting nature of this task, emphasising the likelihood of those who embark on it provoking confrontation with the increasingly intolerant forces of the state and international capital.

Nowhere is this intransigence more apparent than in military states. Here, not only is research activity regarded with immense hostility by all officialdom, but civil society itself is imbued with suspicion and mistrust. None the less, research *is* carried out, sometimes successfully. The research experience in Nigeria of the independent African network ABANTU for Development provides a useful demonstration of research strategies that can be deployed to carry out in-depth study effectively, even under decidedly unfavourable conditions.

The ABANTU network

ABANTU for Development is a regional human resources network that was established in 1991 by a group of African women involved in various areas of research, training, and organisational capacity building. Motivated by a critique of the activities of development agencies, ABANTU's founders set out to devise and implement programmes that might contribute to social transformation, programmes characterised by an African perspective and guided by a commitment to gender equity and justice. The emphasis on women as agents of this agenda is expressed in the network's mission statement:

ABANTU aims to empower African people to participate at local, national and international levels in making decisions which affect their lives, enabling action for change ... Women have a vital role to play in policy-formulation and public decision-making, yet there are few African women with the necessary education or experience to enable them to fulfil this role.

ABANTU set out to achieve this through a regional programme — entitled 'Strengthening the Capacities of Non-government Organisations to Influence Policies from a Gender Perspective' — which was to carry out research, training, and capacity building activities directed at developing civil society. So far, this has meant working mainly, but not exclusively, with women's organisations and networks. A large component of this regional programme is located in West Africa, where it focuses on national and local NGO communities.

ABANTU implements its pro-African and pro-women philosophy by applying a gender-sensitive participatory methodology in all aspects of its work, ensuring that its programmes are grounded in a thorough understanding of local realities and circumstances. In keeping with this philosophy, particular attention is paid to social relations at all stages of programming. For example, the relationships between the researchers, trainers, and NGOs working in ABANTU's programme to strengthen civil society are carefully developed through a series of interactions between local programme implementers and the target communities, and between programme implementers and the regional network. In this networking system, the role of offices is deliberately restricted to providing administrative and financial support to those working in the field, upon whom the network relies for the realisation of its goals.

The Nigeria work began in September 1996 when, as the programme initiator, I was responsible for organising a planning meeting between

ABANTU representatives and local activists and NGO representatives. Planning was preceded by extensive discussions that explored the Nigerian social and political context. The meeting realised that there was insufficient information about NGO policy activism across the country for effective programming. In response to this, ABANTU mobilised resources for a West African NGO training and capacity building programme. It included a sizeable research component that would analyse both the local policy milieu and the accumulated experience of NGOs operating under these conditions from a gender perspective.¹

Nigeria was selected as the research site because ABANTU felt uniquely equipped to meet the particular challenges that this politically complex and socially diverse country poses to outsiders. Despite its enormous economic potential and rich human resources, Nigeria has not been a popular target for international donors who support non-government activity elsewhere in Africa. NGOs are correspondingly poorly resourced and remain too weak to play any significant role in national development. Protracted military rule and a state-centred approach to development have further undermined the capacities of NGOs to function as civil actors, or to participate meaningfully in national development. In recent years, however, the emergence of organisations dedicated to defending civil liberties and advancing democratisation indicates a growing awareness of the need for civil society to be organised. At grassroots levels, too, there are signs that communities are organising themselves to address the overwhelming failure of government to provide even the most basic amenities.

In other words, the contemporary international discourses on the role of civil society in development have, until recently, had limited impact on local consciousness in Nigeria. Civil society is, on the whole, highly organised at local and community levels, but such groups have had minimal access to international funds. As a result, even at state and national levels, the NGO sector has remained weak and generally under-professionalised. Women's organisations are little different from the rest, and so are not as effective as they might be in advancing women's interests. Consultation with independent research organisations across the country supported these observations, and affirmed the need for research that would both concentrate on elucidating state-civil society relations, and document the level of policy engagement. It made sense for this research to privilege the experience of NGOs, given the history of state-centred programmes, and since the programme sought to strengthen this sector. Furthermore, the gender politics of the military state have already been documented (see Dennis 1987; Abdallah 1993; Shettima 1996; Mama 1995).

In a different vein, there has been a tendency for analyses of Nigeria to privilege religion, ethnicity, and corruption as the only relevant analytical tropes, to the neglect of other possibilities. Because the main focus of this research was the nature of state–civil society relations as these pertain to gender activism in Nigeria’s contemporary socio-political context, religion and ‘tribe’ were not taken as analytic categories. Thus, the study did not treat different religious and ethnic groups differently, but included NGOs on the basis of their engagement with gender. As a result, Muslim- and Christian-based organisations were included alongside secular ones, and ethnic associations were included alongside non-ethnic state and national organisations.

Because of the ABANTU network’s decision to privilege the often suppressed perspective of NGOs, particularly those engaging with gender on the basis of their own perceived conditions, a participatory methodology was used. However, in view of the many different and confusing uses to which the concept of ‘participation’ is put in both academic and development literature, it is necessary to preface my discussion of ABANTU’s research with a consideration of previous applications of the term.

Participation and its discontents

Participatory research

Participatory research differs fundamentally from the originally anthropological method of participant observation. Instead of observing natives who obligingly pretend to go about their business as usual, as the old anthropologists did, the participatory researcher strives to develop a more reciprocal relationship with those s/he researches. This idea of power sharing in the research process gained popularity in the 1970s among scholars concerned to challenge the ‘scientific imperialism’ of the colonial era, as well as among those intent on avoiding reproducing other relations of domination such as class, race, gender, culture, and religion. Many African researchers have taken up these ideas, linking participatory research with progressive political action:

Research in its most desirable form should seek to be action oriented, informative, empowering and liberating. It should be seen as a means by which a community ... becomes involved in the process of releasing and utilising knowledge relevant to itself in the first instance. (Carasco 1983)

Others cautioned against assuming that the participatory research approach was *necessarily* progressive (e.g. Bryceson 1980).

Since then, there has been a great deal of debate on the politics and power relations of research, much of it stimulated by a combination of feminist and anti-imperialist concerns (see Harding 1987; Harding and Hintikka 1978; Hawkesworth 1989; Narayan 1989; Mohanty 1988; Stanley 1990). African feminists have been particularly critical of the effects of the dual legacies of colonialism and patriarchy in African social science (e.g. Imam and Mama 1994; Imam *et al.* 1997).

The accumulated experience of feminist research leads one to conclude that while there are methods favoured by feminists, the politics of research are not determined so much by the techniques as by the political and theoretical concerns underlying them. None the less, those with a progressive political agenda favour qualitative, open-ended and participatory techniques. The growth of indigenous research has demonstrated that 'natives' are uniquely placed to establish the reciprocal relations that are advocated by the proponents of participatory research. Furthermore, some African scholars have been able to take advantage of their knowledge of local languages and cultures to challenge Western hegemony and to highlight the strengths of indigenous researchers (e.g. Amadiume 1987; Altorki and El Solh 1988). The study that is discussed below highlights another strength of 'indigenous' researchers, namely that of local political knowledge.

Because of its approach to development, ABANTU's research necessarily derives much from these approaches. ABANTU uses research, alongside its other activities, as a means of building up the kind of knowledge that is required to further the goal of people-centred development from an African and a gender perspective. ABANTU's NGO research in Nigeria therefore adopted a participatory action methodology which was regarded as an action in itself, and which generated and supported further training and capacity building activities in the sub-region.

Participation in development

In the Africa of the 1990s, the intellectual debates on the politics of participatory research are confounded by the intrusions of a Western-driven development industry with a remarkable capacity for rhetorical adjustment. Participatory rural appraisal (PRA), for example, is a technique devised to carry out quick, cost-saving feasibility studies for development agencies, and may not, in fact, involve significant power

sharing at the level of development management or control over resources. Perhaps the terminology of participation offers a convenient euphemism for democracy, so often lacking in many of the territories penetrated by the development industry. However, it can also be misleading, particularly in authoritarian political contexts. African governments, ever eager to placate their populace while currying favour in an increasingly competitive aid market, have adopted this language, and produced a series of official declarations calling for 'participatory development'.

But does the adoption of this politically attractive language of participation guarantee any significant degree of power-sharing? Salole (1991: 6) acidly observes:

The term 'participation' is now the everyday parlance of development workers, practitioners, analysts, ordinary donors, governments and even the occasional beneficiary, as a descriptive 'holdall' of a development process which is supposedly both transactional and straightforward.

How 'transactional and straightforward' can development be in a world in which even military dictatorships insist that they are working for popular participation and democracy? In Nigeria, for example, successive military governments have made good use of the rhetoric of participation as a means of perpetuating the status quo (Mama 1998). Like their Latin American counterparts, they set up programmes for rural development, mass mobilisation, 'women development', and family support, as just another ploy for retaining an iron grip on the state and national resources. In this way, they can oversee the spectacular national deterioration that continues to threaten any genuine transition to democracy.

What all this means is that participatory methodologies, whether these are being applied to research or to development programmes, must be directed by clear and explicit definitions of exactly whose participation is involved at every stage, what that participation entails, and on whose terms.

Participatory knowledge-building

The process

The research aim was to furnish ABANTU with sufficient information and data to:

- identify the training needs of NGOs that were seeking to influence policy from a gender perspective;

- conceptualise and develop training programmes that would enhance the capacity of women's organisations to influence policy from a gender perspective;
- provide relevant and locally sensitive case material for use in training.

The research programme was the first step in a process which required building a partnership between the ABANTU network and the Nigerian NGO community, so that information could first be gathered and then be extended and developed in the other capacity building aspects of the programme. The research also provided both participants and researchers with opportunities to familiarise themselves with who was doing what in terms of influencing policies, and the extent to which they were applying a gender perspective in their activism. It was, therefore, a reflective process which enabled the local network to form and to develop collective consciousness about 'policy' and 'gender'.

A research team was convened in December 1996 with the assistance of local research NGOs and the ABANTU research coordinator's contacts. Five researchers were located: in Plateau State, in the middle of the country; Bornu and Kaduna in the north; Oyo in the south-west; and Cross River in the south-east. The NGO researchers were all women who already had good local and national knowledge of NGOs and women's organisations. All were proficient in at least one local language as well as in English, and all had substantial research experience. A research assistant assisted the coordinator with archival and media searches on gender and policy issues.

The research project was designed to be participatory through the following measures:

- it was to be carried out by local (indigenous) researchers residing and working with NGOs in the targeted states;
- it was to use participatory field techniques: open-ended or narrative interviews, focus group discussions and workshops;
- it was carried out under the auspices of an African NGO committed to strengthening civil society within the region;
- it was an action in itself, in that the field work was conducted in a manner designed to encourage reflection and raise consciousness among the researched;
- it was action-oriented because the research was to inform the conceptualisation of all other programme activities, and provide case material and content for the training.

The field work was carried out between January and June 1997. The researchers began by compiling inventories of NGOs that might be assumed to be active on gender issues in each of the five target states. They sought out and met with representatives of at least 50 of the identified NGOs in each state to ascertain basic information about the history, mission, structure, activities, and financing of those that described themselves as being concerned with gender. Most, but not all, turned out to be women's organisations. A smaller number (between five and ten) of those identified as engaging with gender in their activities were then included in the second level.

The second stage involved more detailed study which used in-depth discussions with key figures in each of the selected NGOs, during which the researchers invited the informants to describe their NGO's history and to detail their experiences of intervening on gender issues or policies. These discussions were recorded on audio cassette (where this was acceptable to the participant) and through note-taking. The researchers then compiled their findings into reports.

Finally, 30 NGOs were invited to participate in a national workshop both to broaden the scope of the research, and to give representatives from the five research states a chance to contribute to the final report. The workshop was facilitated by the research coordinator. The researchers presented their findings, and members of the ABANTU network from other African countries already involved in the regional programme also shared their experiences.

The workshop discussions of NGO experiences both within and beyond Nigeria contributed significantly to the process of awareness building about gender politics in a variety of communities. The participants became aware of the wide range of strategies that can be deployed to influence the policy process. On the final day there was an in-depth discussion about how this influence could be enhanced through training, information, networking, and other capacity building strategies. In this way, the Nigerian NGO community was able to participate in the detailed planning of the programme.

The located-ness of research relations

Despite the fact that all the researchers lived and worked in the state they were researching, at community level they were often initially (mis)perceived as government agents. This is unsurprising: the state pervades the psyche of any nation that is subjected to long stretches of dictatorship. In contemporary Nigeria, however, the mention of the term

'women' is enough to evoke the spectre of the military regime, a logical consequence of the fact that successive military regimes have mounted high profile programmes for women. During Ibrahim Babangida's rule (1985–1993), his wife commanded the high-profile Better Life for Rural Women Programme (BLP), the achievements of which were celebrated through the creation of a National Commission for Women. When Mrs Abacha became First Lady, she decided to replace the BLP with the Family Support Programme (FSP) and the Family Economic Advancement Programme (FEAP). General Abacha subsequently upgraded the National Commission into a Ministry for Women's Affairs, with both federal and state structures (see Mama 1995, for a detailed analysis). The main focus of all these programmes has been on supporting women's traditional petty trading activities through micro-credit schemes. Government programmes for women have had a number of consequences, which affected the research relations in ways described below.

The kind of publicity accompanying these top-level incursions into the terrain officially referred to as 'women development' raised expectations of cash benefits in many communities. On many occasions, researchers were expected to bring something to the community. However, being local, they were able to negotiate these demands away from monetary payments into a more acceptable form. In some instances, researchers decided to express their appreciation of the hospitality extended to them by taking small gifts, such as bars of soap for women, or biscuits for the children.

Another effect of intrusions from both government and international agencies was a sense of research fatigue. As the Kaduna State researcher described it:

They've had a series of researchers coming to them and asking them about the situation. 'Do you have co-operatives? Are you organised at local level? What problems do you have? Does government assist you?' And they sit down all day and tell them what their problems are, but they never get any feedback. Nobody ever goes back to say 'Er, this is the bag of fertiliser we got for you'. Or, 'this is the loan facility'. Women expect concrete results ... They say 'eh-heh, they've come again, they want to use us to enrich themselves. They want to write a report and take it to government and collect money! This government—they don't remember us! They only use us! That's why in most cases I had to explain that I'm not from government. (Transcribed discussion of field work experiences, June 1997)

The use of local researchers enabled ABANTU to identify subtleties beyond the national context too. For example, the fact that it was common for NGO representatives to assume researchers were government agents had different political consequences in different places. Whereas in Bornu State this misperception heightened interest and facilitated co-operation, in Oyo State it had the opposite effect, generating anxiety and suspicion. To what can we attribute these different responses?

The two states differ greatly in a number of relevant ways. Oyo State, situated in the densely populated and urbanised south-west, has the highest education level in Nigeria. People there are generally quite aware of their political and human rights, and so are correspondingly less complacent about prolonged military rule (Taiwo, in ABANTU 1997). Located in the relatively remote north-east, Bornu State has a very high illiteracy rate and the society is generally characterised by low political awareness and conservatism. Although Muslims predominate in Oyo State, seclusion of women is not practised, whereas most Bornu women live in seclusion, and very few play any role in public or political life. Women's organisations are a recent creation, and have emerged largely at the behest of the military government, many of them expressly set up in compliance with official pronouncements. The field research found this conformity to be primarily motivated by women's desire to gain access to the credit facilities and monetary support promised by successive First Ladies. In other words, women's groups have formed instrumentally, more out of a desire to access credit and cash to alleviate their immediate economic needs than out of a desire to challenge gender discrimination or renegotiate traditional religious and cultural practices. Only one NGO (a local branch of Women in Nigeria) was found to be committed to challenging entrenched traditions of gender segregation and inequality (Abdu Biu, in ABANTU 1997).

In Oyo State the higher level of gender activism reflects a local history of female militancy (Mba 1982). Nowadays, not only do both mixed and women's organisations express an interest in gender issues, but the majority of NGOs are led by women.

Because ethno-religious privilege has been so integral to Nigerian militarism, local communities in Bornu State assumed that the arrival of the Abachas heralded the arrival of monetary and other resources. Oyo State, on the other hand, was the home of the late Moshood Abiola, the civilian politician who died in detention after winning the annulled 1993 presidential elections. The state came to be viewed as a hotbed of opposition to military rule, referred to as the 'NADECO state' (after the National

Democratic Coalition), and was placed under close surveillance by the security apparatus (Mama 1998). The Oyo researcher had to deploy all her contacts and persuasive skills to gain the trust of the NGO community.

We can see from the field experiences of the research team that the participatory method successfully enabled ABANTU to gather detailed and locally diverse information about NGO relations with the state, and about levels of policy engagement. The social and political nuances described above might not have been comprehensible to ‘outsiders’ or to local researchers had they used more conventional research tools. The sound local knowledge of the researchers played a useful part in establishing reciprocal relationships characterised by mutual interest between ABANTU and the NGO community. In this way, ABANTU avoided replicating the monetary dependence and intellectual subordination, or even plain opportunism, that has tended to characterise relationships between NGOs and government, and between NGOs and international development agencies.

The two-way relationships that were established not only facilitated data collection, but also had consequences for the kind of knowledge that was generated, as discussed below.

Grounding concepts in local realities

The political context of the research was found to have profound effects on the local meaning of the terms ‘gender’ and ‘policy’. It will be recalled that researchers were asked to elicit descriptions of NGO activities concerning gender in as open-ended a manner as possible. As might be expected, even the language in which the questions were posed presented challenges. In many of Nigeria’s 300 languages and 500 dialects, there is no translation for the term ‘gender’, whose current English usage derives much from feminist scholarship of the 1970s. Researchers had to explain what the concept meant, either in local variants of English, or (particularly in the case of community-level organisations) in local languages.² Three major languages and English (the official language) were thus used in the field work.

In Cross River State the researcher conveyed gender in Efik, using the following words: *Nte ibanya a ireri owo ebuana, ndi nam mme mkpo ke obio, ye ufok, ye kpukpm ebuana mmo, ebuana ye edu odude ye iren owo ye iban*. This roughly translates into English as: ‘How men and women relate with each other and their ways in the family, community and society’.

There were several local variations across the three states (Kaduna, Bornu and Plateau states) where Hausa is widely, but not universally, spoken. The terms used included the following:

- *dangantaka*: generic terms for relationship which can be applied to gender relations;
- *zuwa taro*: permission to attend meetings or gatherings outside the home, meaningful in the context of female seclusion;
- *jinsi*: a term not widely used as such, which means gender.

In Yoruba, the following terms were used by the Oyo State researcher:

- *t'ako t'abo*: man–woman relations (also name given to a popular brand of lock and key);
- *eto*: a recently derived local term for gender.

Even where English is used, it soon became apparent that 'women', 'gender', and 'gender relations' are loaded in ways that are conceptually and historically specific, and vary from one location to another. Only when the questions about gender activities were posed and understood in concrete and local terms were people able to respond by narrating incidents that indicated their level of engagement with gender.

This participatory method revealed multiple understandings of gender at personal, household, community, and policy levels. Case material demonstrated a continuous negotiation of gender relations, and went some way in uncovering the strategies that are continuously being deployed by women in and beyond their organisations (ABANTU 1997).

When it came to discussions of 'policy', the wide range of responses indicated that, in Nigeria, there is little consensus over what policy is, not to speak of its gendered nature or the need to engage with policy from a gender perspective (see ABANTU 1997). None the less, NGO representatives talked about a wide range of actions relating to gender and government practices as they affect women. Struggles over the construction and allocation of market stalls, the violent abuse of women in rituals, and the exclusion of women from traditional policy-making structures, were all examples of interventions that display a degree of gender awareness. There were instances in which NGOs had responded to written as well as unwritten government policies, official pronouncements, statements by opinion leaders, laws, or traditional practices, customs, and habitual practices.

At the same time, very few contemporary NGOs displayed a capacity to analyse formal policies or policy processes from a gender perspective. Nor was it at all clear to them who the actors in these processes might be.

As a result, strategies are very rudimentary. The most popular intervention was that of making courtesy calls on the wives of military governors or on prominent officials.

A great many women's organisations are quick to deny having any political position or interests, preferring to project themselves as respectably conservative welfare associations. This is a predictable consequence of the violent and corrupt nature of national politics in Nigeria (see GADA 1997). It also reflects the conservatism of dominant gender discourses.

The results of this aspect of the research presented analytical challenges. If a textbook definition of formal policy is applied to the findings, few NGOs could have been said to engage at this level. On the other hand, if one considers NGO reactions to government practices, or if one widens the definition to include a variety of state and non-state structures regulating and constraining women, then a very different picture emerges. Taking a concrete example, very few people had any knowledge of the National Policy on Women and Development initiated by the then Commission for Women's Affairs in 1993. Yet the programmes and crusades of the Head of State's wives were widely perceived as government policies, which a great many NGOs were busy implementing. A different example is afforded by the activities of the Lagos NGO, Gender and Development Action (GADA), which capitalised on the post-Beijing climate to organise a series of large-scale political summits for women in 1997. These summits created a space in which women could challenge the male domination of political and public life and demand an end to military rule. The initial gatherings were strategically projected as an exercise in mobilising women for political participation, something for which even the military professed support under the rubric of Abacha's transition programme. In this way, the summits were not only held and attended by hundreds of women all over Nigeria, but also produced 'A Political Agenda for Nigerian Women', effectively the first women's manifesto since the 1985 WIN Document (Women in Nigeria 1985).

Broadly speaking, once ABANTU took the decision to work with the local understanding of 'policy' that was at play in the NGO communities, it became possible to get at the kind of information required for the capacity building programme to be strategic and effective. Without being able to articulate a definition of 'policy', many Nigerian NGOs *do* engage in gender activism, and regard it as something they should be doing. What they lack is a combination of skills and strategic information about the processes of governance, processes that would enable their engagement with policy-makers to be more effective.

Conclusion

We can see that the ABANTU researchers succeeded in uncovering levels of gender activism that might not have been discernible had they not used a participatory method. If the terms 'gender', 'policy', and 'policy engagement', which are used in all the programme documents as a means of communicating with donors and other agencies, had been rigidly applied during the field work, they would probably have been far less successful in documenting the real situation. The use of a participatory methodology not only gathered useful and concrete information, but also initiated an important process of collective awareness raising on matters of gender and policy. It also empowered NGOs to contribute to the formulation of strategies for addressing their own weaknesses and building on their strengths.

By privileging the world-view of the researched community, the research process generated valuable insights into locally diverse relationships between state and civil society. This has implications for the manner in which the state is conceptualised. Even in the most overtly authoritarian contexts, the state is not perceived or responded to uniformly, but rather in a manner that is textured by locally specific histories and experiences. ABANTU's approach to research was able to investigate this relationship, not just from the viewpoint of the dominant national, regional, and international ethos, but from that of those who are subjected to the official and less-than-official policies of authoritarian regimes. The insights so obtained generated the kind of information base that is needed to strengthen the hand of the NGOs that are emerging out of beleaguered civil societies and social movements.

Notes

1 ABANTU had already carried out situation analyses of NGO capacities for policy engagement in Ethiopia, Eritrea, Kenya, Uganda, and South Africa, but the size and complexity of Nigeria and West Africa demanded more detailed attention.

2 At the consultative workshop, this exercise was taken further when it was discovered that there were as many as 38 language groups represented.

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