

Evaluation of the African Transitional Justice Research Network

Summary

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15 December 2008



UNITED NATIONS
UNIVERSITY

Background

The African Transitional Justice Research Network (ATJRN) seeks to increase the capacity of local level researchers in African countries engaged in transitional justice processes. By doing this it aims to improve the skills of African researchers, practitioners and civil society members to conduct effective human rights advocacy, intervention and public education through the production of locally-based, quality, targeted empirical research.

The original impetus for the network came out of the “Empirical Research Methodologies on Transitional Justice Mechanism” conference held in Stellenbosch in 2002 hosted by Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation (CSVR) and the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS). At the conference it was concluded that there was little at the time in the way of empirical research in the transitional justice field and nothing in the way of locally-based empirical research. Following the conference AAAS and CSVR began discussions about forming a network which could remedy this situation. The ATJRN began in 2004 with seed funding from the International Development Research Centre (IDRC). During this initial phase, the institutional partners—the Centre for Democratic Development-Ghana (CDD-Ghana), Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation, South Africa (CSVR) and the Human Rights Program of the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS) in the United States—laid the groundwork for the eventual development of the Network. Activities in the groundwork phase included raising awareness amongst key stakeholders; a mapping exercise to document the state of transitional justice research on the African continent; a feasibility assessment of the future website design; identification of related networks and complementary dissemination tools; and the running of two workshops. The ATJRN was then formally established in 2006 and Phase One of the project began.

Over this period the ATJRN was managed by the three regional partners the CSVR, Refugee Law Project (RLP) at Makerere University, and CDD-Ghana. The AAAS was initially represented on the Steering Committee as a founding partner of the Network, however stepped down in 2007.¹ At present the CSVR serves as a secretariat for the Network.

Phase One of the work sought to build a ATJRN website, setup a Listserv and a quarterly e-Newsletter. These activities were aimed at networking individuals in the transitional justice field internationally through disseminating key information and facilitating dialogue. In addition, to this a range of capacity building workshops in various regions across the African continent on transitional justice research were envisaged.

The website began running successfully in June 2006. The website usage statistics show that some 20,000 individuals have visited the site since it began in 2006, and about 22-23% (4,520) of these have returned to the site. The website traffic since its inception has been steadily growing since 2006, but now appears to be leveling out between 2007 and 2008.

¹ The American Association for the Advancement of Science were original members and stayed on with the Network through Year 1, however with key staff leaving in Year 2 and no real TJ expertise remaining in the institution it was felt that it would be best for them to relinquish their position to free up funding to be used in bringing on board further African partners – this will be pursued moving into Phase 2. AAAS continues to administer the Listserv.

The Listserv continues to grow and has 864 members (December 2008). The numbers of users have steadily increased from 174 in June 2006 to the current number. At the time of completing this report, there had been two editions of the newsletter (October 2006 and March 2007), with a third expected in 2009.²

In terms of workshops, the Network had run six workshops (between June 2006 to March 2008) in a range of countries across Africa, i.e., Liberia, Uganda, South Africa, Rwanda and Sierra Leone. The number of participants trained in the first phase of the Network was: 13 in the Liberian workshop, 16 in the East and Horn of Africa, 23 Southern Africa, 26 in the Great Lakes and approximately 28 in the most recent workshop held in Sierra Leone. Although not a regional capacity building workshop, the ATJRN, in partnership with the Evaluation Unit of International Development Research Centre (IDRC), also co-hosted a workshop on Outcome Mapping and transitional justice in April 2007 in Cape Town, South Africa.

Evaluation

The aims of the evaluation, as defined by the CSVR and ATJRN, were:

1. To extract learnings and results from the project process; and
2. To propose ways in which such learnings and results could be integrated into the participating agencies' work, and in particular, future projects of a similar nature.

Specifically the terms of reference stated that the evaluation should focus on the:

- Website including an evaluation of it from the consultant's own perspective and through a survey of participants (at least 30);
- Listserv including an email survey of members to evaluate the usefulness of this tool for them (at least 30); and
- Capacity building workshops which were to be assessed through interviews with past facilitators or partners.

The evaluation was also to make recommendations on the future of the ATJRN organisationally and in terms of its work.

Methodology

The evaluation methodology involved the following steps:

1. A desktop review of all available information on the ATJRN.
2. An online survey of Listserv members to which 91 responses were received over a 6 week period from a potential 730 members (12% response).
3. Interviews with partners and workshops facilitators. A total of nine interviews were carried out with ATJRN Steering Committee members, as well partners and past facilitators.

² This evaluation only covered the period until December 2008, it is worth noting that by March 2009 a third Newsletter had been released and there were over 1,000 members of the Listserv.

4. A full analysis of the website against a range of criteria, as well as a study of the website usage statistics.
5. An analysis of the survey data and interview material.
6. Collation of a draft then final report.

Findings

The ATJRN and its various components was, on the whole, evaluated by those interviewed and surveyed positively. The focus on Africa was praised and the importance of having a sustained civil society engagement around transitional justice driven by Africans was considered vital. The ATJRN was seen as essential in starting this process.

Workshops and capacity building

To date the project has reached 106 individuals across Africa in capacity building workshops, exceeding its target of 75. Generally speaking, those interviewed felt that the workshops had contributed to the research capacity of those that attended. The workshops had proved to be timely in some cases and able to meet needs as they arose. Although it was difficult to point to impacts beyond the workshops at a wider level, those interviewed did feel those that attended received a range of skills to assist them in doing research in their contexts that could lead to social change. Partners and facilitators also felt they learned a great deal from others through participation in the workshops.

Workshops that worked best were those that focused on a specific case study or projects and knowledge being imparted, and reinforced, through the engagement with real examples. The use of peer review processes in this regard was considered a potentially useful method of engagement between African partners on projects and as a way to build research capacity across regions and countries.

It was a challenge to get the “pitch” of workshops correct with different audiences often attending, e.g. those with rudimentary knowledge of transitional justice and those with considerable research skills. Both these constituencies were considered important but more attention might need to be paid to workshop recruitment strategies in the future.

There was a clear preference for using African-based facilitators in any capacity building processes between organisations rather than bringing in “external” facilitators (e.g. from US and Europe particularly).

One of the biggest challenges identified was how to sustain the capacity building work after the workshops. Continued engagement across countries was costly and resource intensive. To this end, strategies such as peer review and using technological methods (e.g. dedicated email networks, social networking, internet phone and video) for follow-up were highlighted.

Listserv

The Listserv was considered one of the biggest successes of the ATJRN with 864 members at present. This figure has continued to grow steadily from when it was first established. Those who use the Listserv found it a valuable source of information and debate. The Listserv was seen as a

positive and constructive intervention in the transitional justice field. It provided a focal point for discussion that was simply not there before.

About 76% of participants felt the Listserv was “very helpful” or “helpful” in providing information on transitional justice. There was a desire however to increase and change the nature of contact through the Listserv in some cases, e.g. having dedicated discussions on specific topics; differentiating posts (e.g. announcements, research, topic specific) and having a social networking element where users would know exactly who they were speaking with.

The type of information those surveyed wanted to receive on the Listserv in order of priority included latest research reports; information on forthcoming conferences and news; online discussions on key transitional justice issues; and to lesser degree a place to find out information about funding, job advertisements, and consultancy and tendering possibilities.

Website

The website was seen as a useful addition to the project and valuable source of information, and a quality product. The content of the site seems to be the main draw to those who use it. It seems to be used primarily as a research aid and the research repository functions of the site are the ones participants value the most. However, clearly users value information on upcoming events, news and wider information about the field. Some desire for the site to also have social networking functions and online discussion was also expressed.

In terms of providing information on transitional justice, enhancing research, and enhancing web contacts the website was scored fairly well by those that were surveyed. On each dimension sizeable numbers felt the site is “very good” or “good” (71% at providing information on transitional justice, 59% on enhancing research, and 45% on enhancing web contacts). Again the research dimensions are considered the areas the website helped with most, and less so, as would be expected, in building new contacts. Overall satisfaction with the website can be gleaned by the fact that 88% of respondents felt that they were “likely” or “very likely” to recommend the site to others

In terms of frequency of use, the website seemed to be used fairly frequently by those that were surveyed with 35.7% using it once a week or at least every two weeks. Nearly 10% said they used it everyday.

In terms of demographics it would appear that most of its users are early to mid-career researchers generally working as academics or in NGOs with fairly high levels of educational attainment, e.g. post-graduate degrees.

In terms of access, on average, it appeared that most users of the website were from North America (42%), Africa (35%), Europe (18%), South America (2%), Asia (2%), Middle East (1%) and Oceania (0%). This suggests that North Americans use the site the most, but interestingly those based in Africa (who of course might all not be African) using the site are relatively speaking at a fairly high percentage considering that only 3.5% of people in Africa have internet access. However, users from Asia, the Middle East and Oceania are minimal. This offers new possibilities for expansion.

In terms of content, design and layout, usability and finally an overall rating the website was scored fairly well by those that were surveyed. On each dimension the majority feel the site is “very good”

or “good” (74% on content, 55% on design and layout, 64% on usability, and 69% overall). A total of 85% of respondents found the site “easy” or “very easy” to get around. The area targeted for most improvement by some, albeit a minority of users, was the navigation process, menus and finding exact information remain challenges for some website users. Although 63.6% of those who responded to the survey felt the menu items made sense and were clear, 7.6% felt they did not and 29% felt they only “sort of” made sense and were clear.

Some specific issues to consider are making the menu font more readable; addressing the fact that there is an unnecessary white column on the right hand side on most pages; having less information on the homepage especially if this is given elsewhere; and making it clear why registration is necessary and encouraged. Other simple features could also enhance the site such as the use of an RSS feeds where appropriate and considering links to social networking sites, if this feature is not incorporated into the website itself.

Newsletter

Overall the ratings given to the Newsletter were consistent; that is 40% felt the Newsletter was “very good” or “good”, and 8% thought it was “average” and 3% thought it was poor. But overall 48% said they did not know there was Newsletter or said they did not download or read it regularly. Taken together this means that those that know of the Newsletter or read it rate is fairly well, but at the same time the Newsletter lacked a sense of penetration with the ATRJN users more broadly, with the issue regularity getting the poorest rating.

The Network

Exactly what constitutes membership of the Network remains unclear, e.g. is it by virtue of being on the Listserv, having attended a workshop, using the website regularly. Those interviewed and surveyed however did not seem particularly concerned about whether they were or were not members. It was the services offered they were primarily interested in.

A majority of survey participants (63%) found the Network “helpful” or “very helpful” in enhancing contacts; and over half of participants (56%) found the Network “helpful” or “very helpful” in enhancing research skills and capacity. All of those who considered themselves part of the Network found it helpful in some way in terms of enhancing contact. The vast majority found it helpful in terms of enhancing research skills and capacity.

As was noted in relation to the website above, it seems that most users are primarily interested in research information, reports and literature from the the ATJRN. However, strong views were also expressed about the Network being more formal or ATJRN not merely being a “clearing house” but shaping the transitional justice debate more actively through sustained in-country programmes or for example taking Listserv debates, summarising them and turning them into advocacy documents or statements.

The management of the Network was of little concern to most of those surveyed who largely interacted with the project through the website. Steering Committee members and partners felt that in the long run the Network should have its own identity free from any organisational connections.

Recommendations

A range of recommendations were made, these can be summarised as:

1. It is recommended that the Network continues to expand and cement the developments to date; this would be enhanced by structuring in organisational development time on a regular basis.
2. It is recommended that the ATJRN maintain the essence of the programme and its major elements, e.g. the website, Listserv, capacity building focus, and specifically maintaining its African focus.
3. It is recommended that the ATJRN maintain its focus on capacity building in Africa. A range of programming activities should be implemented including both workshops and peer review processes focusing on less workshops but ensure deeper more sustainable engagements and outcomes.
4. It is recommended that the Listserv continues and expands. The idea of topic specific lists or more specifically targeted discussions should be piloted, and ways of grouping posts and archiving messages on themes explored.
5. It is recommended that consideration is given either to a topic-focused Newsletter or replacing the Newsletter with “Advocacy Briefs” that summarise key discussions and make specific policy recommendations.
6. It is recommended that part of the website seen as most valuable by users (content and transitional justice research literature) be maintain and enhanced, and this should be seen as the “core business” of the site. To do this effectively a full-time researcher focusing on web content would be necessary.
7. It is recommended that parts of the website are improved. A range of these are listed in the main report and concern navigation, layout and accessibility.
8. It is recommended that a social networking dimension of the website be piloted; that is the members of the Network can build profiles of themselves on the site for others to see their interests, location, photos, posting on topics or personal blogs, and a research profile.
9. It is recommended that the management of the Network be reviewed. Consideration should be given to greater decentralisation and the management of tasks being spread across regions over time. The Network should also rely on core and dedicated Network staff. Incremental development of a full time independently-housed secretariat should be considered.
10. It is recommended that the issue of membership of the Network be resolved by enhancing services rather than forcing users to be categorised as different types of members.
11. It is recommended that fundraising be considered a top priority over the next two years, so as to ensure that future goals and current levels of operation are maintained. This fundraising strategy should draw on the combined strength of the Steering Committee members to campaign for funding.
12. It is recommended that attention is continually given to the diversity, language differences and multiplicity of organisational practice among its members and itself. This is a major asset of the Network.
13. It is recommended that a knowledge base be developed that can be used to record learning, policy transfer and examples of best practice from different projects, workshops and activities. This should be available to all members over time on the website and be built into the ongoing monitoring process.
14. It is recommended that the Network consider establishing a reference group or a sharing and learning forum that meets annually to discuss and work with the ATJRN in developing

- and furthering its capacity building, policy and potential advocacy work, web and Listserv service, as well as management process.
15. It is recommended that, in order to sustain the above activities, a strategic plan be developed for the Network with a 5 year horizon.
 16. It is recommended that the organisation continues to monitor its processes, progress and developments. To achieve this the Network must continue to document the history and development of the organisation as was begun in this evaluation on an annual basis; the completion of six-monthly reviews based on a working template structure along the lines of an “outcome journal”; and annually monitoring progress using the organisational principles outlined in the main report.
 17. It is recommended that ongoing self-evaluation takes place and full evaluation take place every two to three years. These evaluations should be based on baseline data and an evaluation framework, which will need to be developed at the strategic planning phase.