

IDD HOSTS RESEARCHING AFRICA DAY 2017

The University's first Researching Africa Day conference was a platform for researchers and academics within the West Midlands researching topics relating to Africa to network and share research findings with the wider university community. The conference was a precursor to plans for a "***Midlands African Studies Hub***", which is envisaged to be an association of African studies scholars within the midlands. It was hosted by the University of Birmingham's International Development Department (IDD) and the Department of African Studies and Anthropology (DASA).

The conference was divided with into four sessions, each featuring presentations across various themes by distinguished scholars within the midlands.

Session one: Exploring African Agency

The first presentation in this session, by [Dr Jessica Northey](#), a research associate at the University of Coventry, explored "***Algerian Associations and Civil society***". This presentation examined the role of associational life on politics and democracy with a focus on North Africa (Algeria). The presentation highlighted the role of NGOs in political lobbying, holding leaders (especially at the local level) accountable, and providing policy alternatives. The research also explored some of the challenges such as a reduction in funding for NGOs, among others.

The second presentation under this section, by [Dr Natalia Telepneva](#), focused on "***The struggle for liberation in Portuguese Africa and the Global Cold War***". This presentation was based on research conducted in three Portuguese colonies (Angola, Mozambique and Guinea Bissau) and made three key arguments. Firstly, it argued that Africans persuaded, sustained and intensified commitment of international donors towards armed struggle. Secondly, it argued that African elites established close-knit relations with Eastern Bloc bureaucrats. And finally, that Africans (MPLA and FNLA) played a crucial role in the escalation of the Angolan Civil War of 1961-1975. The presentation concluded by acknowledging the fact that Africans were agents of their own liberation and also conceding that the cold war allowed for the dominance of African elites over others.

The third presentation by Mphatso Boti Phiri, a PhD candidate at the University of Coventry was on the topic; "***African Agency in conflict resolution: a bridge too far?*** Using Madagascar as a case study, Phiri examined the role and effectiveness of the African Peace and Security Architecture framework of the African Union in responding to conflicts on the continent. The presentation highlighted the hierarchical challenges and conflicts confronting the AU and its regional organizations over leadership in mediation efforts. This was evident in the conflict in Madagascar where mediation teams of the SADC and the AU came head to head over leadership of the negotiations. Despite these challenges, he noted that the role of the AU is still relevant due to the

apparent lack of capacity and resources of regional organizations to lead mediation efforts.

Session Two: Tackling the SDGs in Africa

This session focused on topics related to the Sustainable Development Goals. The first presentation by [Professor Gordon Crawford](#), from the University of Coventry, was: ***“China-Africa Irregular Labour Migration and the Impact of the Informal China-Ghana Gold Rush 2008-2013”***. The presentation discussed the conflict between Ghanaians and Chinese miners over access to gold and the lack of response by the Ghanaian government. An influx of illegal foreign miners into the Artisanal and Small-Scale Mining sector (ASM) took place within the last decade despite it being “reserved for Ghanaian citizens” by law. Chinese miners introduced mechanization and new technology which resulted in irreversible changes to this traditional economic sector within a short time. The state failed to challenge these illegal activities, which emboldened the illegal Chinese miners to act with impunity. The presentation observed that the inaction of the Ghanaian state was not due to a lack of capacity, but rather ‘public officials simply turned a blind eye’ in return for a share of ‘millions of dollars’ being made.

The second presentation under this session was on the topic; ***“Second Chance education in conflict and post conflict societies”***, presented by [Dr Marion MacLellan](#), and [Dr Miho Taka](#) from the University of Coventry. The presentation was based on a research project funded by the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) investigating, among other things, the relationship between violent conflict and education. The presentation focused on the generations of people who missed out on education due to violent conflict but succeeded to obtain a second chance education. It was based on findings from field work in Northern Uganda and post-conflict Rwanda. The presentation highlighted the negative impact of conflict: in Uganda, education institutions were attacked and some students were abducted to serve as child soldiers or wives of soldiers; and in Rwanda, education was used to create division and animosity through institutionalised discrimination. The presentation identified the efforts of international and local NGOs in complementing governments in providing education, but also noted that education provision in Sub-Saharan Africa is plagued with corruption and low financial investment. Dr Miho identified the introduction of free education in Rwanda as instrumental in motivating people to get back to school. The presenters observed the relevance of second chance education, as most of the beneficiaries identified several benefits of education, ranging from equipping them with skills and livelihoods, while for others, education is a form of healing after conflict.

Also on the theme of education, the final presentation of this session by [Dr Paul Lynch](#) was on; ***“Malawi on early Childhood Development and Disability”***. This presentation was based on an ongoing ESRC/DFID funded three year project titled ***“Tikule limodze”*** (lets grow together) which seeks to promote the inclusion of children with disabilities

through the adaptation of assessment tools, as well as teaching curricula and teaching methods in a rural district of Southern Malawi. The research was carried through an observation of Community-Based Childcare Centres (CBCCs) in Malawi. Preliminary findings of this research identified a lack funding from governments and NGOs for CBCCs providing education for children with disability. There is also a lack of food for children especially during the time they spend at the care centres, a lack of training for the caregivers, and a lack of infrastructure. The presentation highlighted that 12 out of 46 CBCC's do not have any buildings, forcing care givers to teach the children under trees. These means the care centres are mostly closed during the rainy seasons.

Session three: Interdisciplinary in Africanist Research: A Case Study of the Asap-East Africa Project

This session featured a presentation by [Dr William Avis](#), [Professor John Bryson](#), [Dr Francis Pope](#) and [Dr Andrew Quin](#), at the University of Birmingham, on a new research project to be undertaken in East Africa. ***A Systems Approach to Air Pollution in East Africa (ASAP-East Africa)*** is a £1.2 million programme funded by the **DFID East African Research Hub**. The programme brings together UK and East African researchers in air pollution, urban planning, economic geography, public health, social sciences and development studies to provide a framework for improved air quality management in East African cities. The project focuses on three cities in East Africa; Kampala, Nairobi and Addis Ababa.

Session Four: Gender and Identity in Africa

The final session of the conference featured two presentations on gender. [Dr Juliet Gilbert](#), a Lecturer in African Studies and Anthropology at the University of Birmingham presented on ***"Fashioning female subjectivities in Urban Nigeria"***. The paper argues that young single women's preferences for making clothes speaks to emerging ideas of cosmopolitanism, class and individualism in Urban Christian Nigeria. The presentation followed the story of Judith, a young lady in Calabar whose love for fashion led her to become influential in her city. The presentation highlighted the flourishing of Pentecostalism in Calabar, which boasts of global spiritual brotherhood and material wealth for its adherents and has promoted an aspirational class that values Western commodities and foreign styles. Young women's regard for fashion as a celebration of their unique selves, coupled with financial constraints, has increased reliance on sewing shops and resulted in young women taking up apprenticeships. The paper argues, however, that most of these apprentices were from 'well to do homes' and were not taking apprenticeships to make a business out of it, rather, it was a cost-effective way of styling oneself in 'a way that told others they were both spiritually and materially successful'.

Finally, [Dr Jessica Johnson](#), a lecturer in Anthropology of Africa at the University of Birmingham presented on ***"Marital Consent and Relational Personhood in Post-Colonial Malawi"***. This presentation highlighted different norms of marriage in Malawi

and the ability of wives in polygamous situations to influence key decisions. She argued that women had more influence in these relationships than conventional accounts might suggest.

Conclusion

Delivering the closing remarks, [Professor Roy May](#), an emeritus professor of African Studies at the University of Coventry welcomed the relevance of creating a hub for researchers working on themes relating to Africa. Professor May called for coordination with other African Studies scholars and urged for more research into increasing levels of migration from Africa to the rest of the world. He called for a panel to discuss migration and refugee crises in future conferences.