

September 27 Gender, ICT and... ostrich eggs? GRACE, an African ICT Research Network



South Africa [[APC WNSP](#)] - What do ostrich eggs, free attitudes, ICT and graciousness have in common? An exciting new research initiative that brings together African researchers to study Africa, ICTs and women's empowerment, called GRACE. The Gender Research in Africa into ICTs for Empowerment held its first researcher capacity-building workshop in Durban in July 2005, and while researchers from all over the continent honed their project proposals and fine-tuned networking skills, they also learned how to create ostrich eggs around themselves.

The GRACE research initiative brings together researchers from 12 countries in Africa, all focusing on the central question of ICTs and women empowerment.

Individual research topics vary, ranging from examining mobile telephone use to the ways in which women could use e-commerce barriers to ICT use and women's strategies to overcome these obstacles. Eventually GRACE hopes through its research efforts to influence the existing debates on gender and ICTs, as well as national and provincial policies. Finally, the project has a strong capacity-building focus. It intends to provide researchers with the opportunities to gain insight into their research thinking and evolve this through growing in self-knowledge and self-care; to build confidence and skill in the use of qualitative and participatory research methods and techniques and to develop the capacity to use those ICT tools which would benefit their research journeys and the sharing of these journeys within the network and beyond.

The project is indeed quite unique, according to Ineke Buskens of Research for the Future, the GRACE Research Director: "African researchers focusing on Africa, while living and working here, doing qualitative research on such a large scale together.... I do not know of any other research of this scope, or with this kind of a perspective."

The project is a huge endeavour, with 15 sub-projects, 14 research sites in 12 countries, including Kenya, Senegal, Uganda, Cameroon, Zambia, Zimbabwe, Mozambique, South Africa, Tanzania, Nigeria, Morocco and Egypt, whereby every research site is operated by its own team, making GRACE effectively "a team of teams."

Ostrich Eggs and Free Attitudes

One of the main thrusts of the event was to explore and practice several different research techniques. Interview techniques such as the Depth Interview Technique, the Free Attitude Interview and the Transformational Attitude Interview Technique were presented and used throughout the two weeks of the face to face researcher workshop.

"The Free Attitude Interview sessions were interesting and now seem to me the most natural way to undertake a community-centric research like ours,"

comments Kazanka Comfort from Fantsuam Foundation. The research team at Fantsuam will be examining mobile phones and raising awareness for women in rural Nigeria. "Fantsuam has been on the search for an ICT that is more compatible to our cultural reference for oral communication. GRACE is the first initiative that has made it possible for Fantsuam to focus on the GSM technology which we have found compatible with these cultural characteristics. We are already looking beyond GRACE and seeing our research as the first step to empower our rural women to be in the first league of those who will participate in mobile phone useage to enable rural economic growth."

Kiss Brian Abrahams, from Zambia, praised the exchange between participants and the perspectives on qualitative research that the workshop offered. "It gave us a whole new point of view and general outlook to research that challenged the usual conventions. All the researchers who attended found it inspiring."

Indeed, several sessions of the workshop helped researchers get into their "ostrich egg". "For me personally this was such a useful exercise," comments Kiss, "in the ostrich egg the researcher observe him/her self as an individual within a protective shell, this may be the immediate environment. The protective shell represents the researcher's values and history. but while the researcher is within this shell of properties, they realise that they are a part of the external environment, which their shell shields them from. I found that being conscious of this covering of values and principles, one is better placed to relate with the external environment, in this case in a research."

In explaining the logic of the training design, Research Director Ineke Buskens comments: , "In qualitative and participatory research, researchers are themselves the most important research instruments. ". This means that researchers would not only acknowledge and own personal perspectives and experiences in so far as these have a bearing on their research experiences, but work positively and consciously with who they are and accept their unique subjectivity. In this sense, the "personal" becomes "methodology". Yet in and because of the "striving for research quality" and hence the need for "recognisability" of research actions and decisions, the "methodology" also becomes, "personal."There is nowhere to hide in a qualitative research team". The researcher's personal learning is often part of the research journey and sometimes it is the research journey itself. One needs courage to accept and live with that, and love for the self, a certain light heartedness and integrity and thoroughness. Looking at it from that perspective, these forms of research and also the "learning and teaching of the capacities and skills" become intimate processes. Hence the need to create spaces and moments where the researchers could (learn to) contain their personal vulnerability in a sovereign way. And besides all their other usefull aspects, that was where the Ostrich Egg exercises came in."

Technology

The GRACE researchers are focussing on the interrelationship between ICT and women's empowerment. But they all have their own technological needs, and pulling off such a massive research initiative without the support of ICTs would be close to impossible. Thus the workshop had a strong component of ICT training, in the use of mailing lists, document management, wikis, blogs, chats and conferences, the team intranet, and the use of presentation software. Each

team received a digital camera and recorder and future workshops will provide them with digital audio editing skills. Such skills are fundamental for research and building the researcher network, and debating between face to face meets.

Jennifer Radloff, Knowledge and Networking Advisor for the GRACE initiative, commented, "There was a lot of excitement around technology in the workshop. People were anxious to fully understand the tools and see how they would connect to their work. The problem is that when people go back to their countries, they'll struggle with access to the internet and computers that will enable them to go on working."

Buskens reflects, "The research world wouldn't be where we are right now without email and internet. These ICT tools have revolutionized the way we do our research and the ways in which we cooperate.

In a research network like we are, we are slowly growing into all the tools. It's quite a process to tailor design them around us. We have just started. We probably will discover a lot more. However, a balance between face to face meetings and online tools remains important. The fact that we have had the opportunity to meet and get to know one another Durban was crucial. It has created a strong bond between us."

Participants were also trained in a computer aided qualitative data analysis software programme NVivo. "I selected this tool for many reasons," says Buskens. "It allows researchers to be very exploratory and develop their own theories, yet also use existing theories, for data to be 'pooled' at a later stage to be used for "cross-site" thematic analysis. GRACE researchers may not use all of its aspects yet but they would be able to "grow into it" when they would use it. NVivo is "kind" to qualitative researchers. It allows for our processes of thinking and reflecting and then testing and then narrowing our focus and then widening it again - sometimes all simultaneously."

The NVivo programme was cited by many participants as a challenge to grasp but very useful for their research. "Let me give you our example," says Kiss, a researcher with Longwe Clarke and Consultants in Zambia, also focussing on mobile phones. "We are doing a country-wide research in Zambia, not just one province. That's a lot. Secondly, we are utilising the Longwe Framework in order to compile this data accurately and not miss a single ounce of information. We have found the process of coding using the NVivo program extremely cardinal. The training was necessary in improving the quality of our research, even though the project isn't over yet, we can project a successful outcome."

Graciousness

GRACE is not only a team, observes Ineke. "It is a collection of teams, and many of us have never met and may never meet. Hence the "culture" we are creating to sustain us and "embed" us in, during this journey is tantamount. The GRACE workshop was not only about research methodology training and ICT training, it was also about the creating of a "container" for GRACE, a mental (and not only virtual or cyber) space where all graciousnesses could feel "at home" in and share and grow."

"Excuse me, did you say 'graciousnesses'?" asks the interviewer.

"Well, that name just "happened, you know" Playing with the name of our network. In our first workshop in Johannesburg in 2004, we looked for a name that would resonate with us, and would capture what we are doing and not only in a rational and intellectual sense. I love the name so much, I play with it all the time. My inbox for instance is "Amazing Grace". And the GRACE participants became the "graciousnesses"."

For Ineke, "The most important part of the whole training was for the researchers to understand that their research journey would come from them and from their assessment of their own research context. GRACE is a container in which all researchers can develop their own research journey, because they are the experts in their field."

The GRACE initiative is managed by the Association for Progressive Communications Women's Networking Programme (APC WNSP). It is a 2-year project funded by the International Development Research Centre (IDRC).

Originator: --- (APC WNSP)

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Location: South Africa

Contact: erika@apcwomen.org

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