

Institute for Research on African Women, Children, and Culture (IRAWCC)
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Overview of Initiatives

In 1999, Leslye Obiora was recruited by the World Bank to manage its stand-alone Gender and Law Program which was quartered in the Africa Region. Professor Obiora obliged to be of service for one year and obtained a leave of absence from her home institute, the University of Arizona, for the purpose. At the end of her tenure at the Bank, she organized a Ministerial Conference in which Ministers of State from thirteen African countries and participants from across the sectors within and outside Africa endorsed and campaigned for the implementation of an integrated legal outreach model that had emerged from her extensive research, deliberations and consultations with a broad spectrum of stakeholders.

On exiting the Bank, Professor Obiora accepted a residential Fellowship at the Rockefeller Center in Bellagio, Italy where she enjoyed the refreshing gift of time to ruminate over her experience at the Bank, the culminating Ministerial, and the implications for her abiding commitment to help substantiate the human rights agenda. Upon returning to academia in fall 2000, this respite inspired her resolution to establish the Institute for Research on African Women, Children and Culture (IRAWCC) – a 501(C)(3) tax exempt organization registered in Arizona and located in Tucson – to deepen understandings of the objective conditions, and promote efficient strategies to improve the well-being, of women and children in the remote reaches of Africa. Verifying the viability of a prototype of the integrated outreach model which informed the Ministerial was a founding objective of IRAWCC. In April 2004, Professor Obiora went to Nigeria to test the model and explore options for the replication of the social experiment.

For the effective initiation of the Pilot, it was expedient to validate what existed in terms of local capacity and values, and to attempt to deploy such resources to invigorate the creative energies of the target community. More precisely, it was important to determine the infrastructure and networks that facilitate grassroots efforts to galvanize some of the pertinent concerns for which the interventions at the heart of the Pilot were designed. After all, more than a century ago, the British colonial administration in Africa exercised hegemony on a shoe-string by identifying vibrant indigenous institutions and apparatuses of governance which were in turn co-opted as engines to entrench the policy of indirect rule. This history is an eloquent commentary against caricatures that obscure the profound regenerative potentials of indigenous agents by portraying 21st century Africa as some pathology devoid of self-renewal capacity.

Predicated on a reconceptualized notion of capital that gave primacy to extant, even if often latent, capacity, the Pilot privileged a rotating credit management outfit as the fulcrum for the mobilization of resources to address a semblance of a threshold minimum of the human rights of women within a comprehensive framework. Relevant commitments rapidly snowballed to facilitate the reciprocal components of Pilot and once it was underway, the broader applicability of its lessons became apparent. Persuaded to ascertain how to cultivate the fundamentals to harness the transformative potentials of the private sector to invigorate the civil society and more systematically catalyze the agency of ordinary citizens, the facility of the indigent with strategic resource-pooling seemed particularly instructive.

The timing of Professor Obiora's experimentation coincided with the appointment of her former colleague, Charles Soludo, as the Governor of the Central Bank of Nigeria. Intimated of the prospective significance of her initiative for fiscal, anti-corruption, and related governance reforms as well as for democratic consolidation and poverty alleviation, Dr. Soludo helped her attain immediate audience with key Nigerian private sector elites. The course of interrogating these individuals' visions of a good society as well as their perceptions of the opportunities, challenges and strategies for its achievement in the context of present day Nigeria illuminated not just the fertile opportunities that abound vis-à-vis the promotion of strategic philanthropy, but the compelling need for a leadership dialogue, formal learning, concrete framework, and aggressive outreach to augment interest and activity in this arena.