



## Advancing early-career agri-food researchers publishing opportunities in Sub-Saharan Africa

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### Abstract

Social science researchers from Sub-Saharan Africa are underrepresented in internationally published and peer-reviewed journals. Their low representation is often attributed to factors such as limited funding, unfamiliarity with scholarly styles and language, and the lack of a support network that provides mentoring. Recognizing the knowledge gaps resulting from lack of training and exposure, the Research Committee on Sociology of Agriculture and Food (RC40) of the International Sociological Association (ISA) supported the development of a two-and-a-half-day virtual workshop and conference participation to address these concerns. Based on our experience, it is evident that virtual workshops provide an inexpensive and rapid avenue for capacity building. However, proficiency in producing high-quality publications requires continuous training and strong support from a mentoring network. Common difficulties observed include the lack of a conceptual framework to position field survey (or qualitative) results within current scientific debates. Weak engagement with theoretical concepts constantly debated in the social sciences also suggest that enduring competencies cannot be achieved through a short online workshop alone.

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### Biographical notes

**Dr. Fridah Mubichi-Kut**, is a Professor of Practice in Applied Economics and Policy at the Charles H. Dyson School of Applied Economics and Management, Cornell SC Johnson College of Business. Her research and work are focused on international development, agricultural technology adoption, gender equity, and engaged learning. She is a member of the International Sociological Association and Executive Committee member of the Research Committee on the Sociology of Agriculture and Food (RC40).

**Prof. Dr. Allison Marie Loconto**, is a sociologist of science and technology focusing on the governance of transitions to sustainable food systems, specifically on the metrics, models, standards and systems of certification that constitute emerging institutional innovations. She is the ISA's Vice President for Research, a founding member of the Multi-stakeholder Advisory Committee of the Sustainable Food Systems Programme of the One Planet Network (UN Environment) and a member of the French National Committee on Organic Agriculture. Professor Loconto is Chief Editor of the *International Journal of the Sociology of Agriculture and Food*, Associate Editor of the *Journal of Rural Studies*, Associate Editor of *Science as Culture* and co-editor of *Agrifood Transitions in the Anthropocene: Challenges, Contested Knowledge, and the Need for Change* (2024, Sage).

**Dr. Sheila Ngoh Manka**, was a senior lecturer at the University of Mpumalanga in South Africa. Her research interests included education, gender, health, food, social policies and particular interest in food consumption patterns in Africa. She was member of the International Sociological Association and Executive Committee member of the Research Committee on the Sociology of Agriculture and Food (RC40).

## Introduction

Social science researchers from Sub Saharan Africa (SSA) are among the least represented and internationally published (Arvanitis et al., 2000; Waast and Gaillard 2018). Reasons for their low representation and participation are often attributed to factors such as limited funding, unfamiliarity with scholarly styles and language, and the lack of a support network that provides mentoring. Historically, social, behavioral and economic sciences have remained underfunded in comparison to natural sciences (Harris, 1967; Kilonzo and Magak, 2013; Solovey, 2020).

Inadequate funding significantly hampers social scientists' ability to conduct and publish high-quality research. Researchers face difficulties in covering publication fees and attending conferences that are crucial for epistemological advancements and professional development. Additionally, limited institutional funding restricts access to major citation databases such as Scopus and Web of Science, as well as international peer-reviewed journals - where most articles are not published in open access, but are protected by a pay-wall - that would allow them to stay updated with current research trends (Kilonzo and Magak, 2013). Early career PhDs landing faculty positions are often assigned lower level/introductory courses. These courses frequently have high enrollment numbers and provide little teaching and grading assistance. Separately, institutional incentives that might support mentoring by tenured faculty members are scarce. As a result, these conditions tend to restrict the research and publication opportunities for early career scholars in this world region.

Africans come from a rich multilingual background. Many, however, lack proficiency in English, the predominant language for international publications (Aldirdiri, 2024). For example, researchers often struggle to write effectively and convey their ideas due to inadequacies within their educational systems. Although English is taught as a second language, many students lack training in assignments that promote critical thinking, reflection and debate. In tandem, cultural norms and practices do not emphasize the importance of originality, which is coupled with a lack of awareness on how to correctly cite others' work further impeding their publication success.

## RC40 Early Career Writing Workshop

Recognizing the gaps and opportunities faced by many early career SSA scholars, the Research Committee on Sociology of Agriculture and Food (RC40) of the International Sociological Association (ISA) supported a two-and-a-half-day virtual workshop in May 2023. The workshop was designed to assist early-career agri-food researchers seeking to move their papers to successful publication in an international journal. As such the main objectives were to:

- provide constructive feedback on working draft papers and,
- train participants on publishing strategies (e.g. identifying the correct journal outlet/ audience for work) and destigmatising rejection in academic publishing.

In January 2023, the workshop organizers, Drs. Sheila Manka, Fridah Mubichi-Kut and Allison Loconto invited applications from Ph.D. candidates, researchers and young faculty who had earned their PhDs in the last seven years, were living in Africa, and had not managed to publish in any international journal. Using Qualtrics survey (a cloud-based survey tool) applicants were invited to submit a short (400 words) abstract of their working paper, a short professional bio and their most recent curriculum vitae.

A total of 80 applications were received from 12 countries (Nigeria, Cameroon, Ethiopia, Ghana, Kenya, Malawi, Rwanda, South Africa, Zimbabwe, Tanzania, Namibia, Togo, Somalia, Senegal and Uganda). Nigeria had the highest number of applicants followed by Ethiopia and Kenya. The majority (56%) were male and almost half (47%) had not yet completed their PhDs. Following three subsequent rounds of screening that considered educational background, professional achievements/goals, and quality of the submitted abstract, the team



invited 14 applicants (7 male, 5 female and 2 other) from seven countries to submit their draft manuscript (approximately 6000-9000 words). By the beginning of May 2023, only seven (4 women and 3 men) met the deadline and hence participated in the virtual workshop.

Publishing in international journals is often perceived as an elusive and unattainable goal by many early-career scholars. This is mainly because many lack knowledge on, for example, how to identify suitable journals for their work. Noting that the majority of desk rejects are often on the basis of incongruous submissions and language, the first day focused on skill development. Participants were led in sessions focused on: identifying the right journal audience; communicating beyond one's local language, and offering practical tips for navigating the academic publishing landscape. To demystify the review processes and destigmatize rejection, participants were assigned a peer-review take-home assignment that required them to review their colleagues' manuscript and provide written feedback.

On the second day, participants were paired in teams of two along with an invited faculty<sup>1</sup> mentors in a 60-minute breakout session. Using an open discussion format, the peer reviewer along with faculty mentor provided constructive feedback to the author. The team also offered practical examples to improve the paper and helped come up with a plan of action that would support the revisions. Following the workshop, the organizers conducted a survey to evaluate the participants' experiences and skills gained and found that all participants agreed that they had gained new skills in publishing (Table 1).

**Table 1: Pre and post workshop assessment of perceived publishing skills**

<b>Skill Development</b>	<b>Mean</b> (1-5 scale)
How would you rate your level of skill/knowledge on publishing in peer review journals at start of the workshop?	3.29
How would you rate the level of feedback you received from your peers?	4.29
How would you rate your ability to read and review manuscripts outside your primary discipline/ training following the workshop?	3.71
How would you rate the level of effort you put into the peer review assignment?	4.14
How would you rate your ability to review manuscripts outside your primary discipline/ training before coming to the workshop?	2.71
How would you rate your ability to review manuscripts outside your primary discipline/ training after the workshop?	3.57

To minimize manuscript attrition rates and revision hell, research fellows were assigned to provide feedback, emotional and moral support until the paper was submitted to the journal. Working as the RC40 Africa Representative, Sheila secured funding that afforded the group to attend and present their working papers at the South African Sociological Association conference in July 2023. The following are the thematic focus areas of the workshop papers that were supported.

- Food sovereignty and the contours of organising from below in the South African food system
- Challenges faced by smallholder farmer on marketing of avocado in Gisagara district, Rwanda
- Constraints that impinge South African rural women's development
- Role of informal and formal seed systems in promoting seed security in Malawi
- Strategies for governing shared commons in Malawi's inland lakes

### **Lessons learned and introduction to the special section**

The question of what it will take to increase SSA researchers' participation and publications in international

<sup>1</sup> Faculty mentors: Drs. Patrick Bottazzi, Kiran Odhav and Mamadou Goita

peer-reviewed journals is one that warrants strong attention. Based on our experience it is evident that virtual workshops provide an inexpensive and rapid avenue through which capacity building can be attained. Nonetheless, proficiency in producing high quality publications requires continuous training and strong support from a mentoring network and cannot be solved by a short online workshop. Although most of the papers went through two rounds of double blinded peer reviews following the workshop, considerable revisions remained before they could be published in an international journal.

We find that a common difficulty is the lack of a conceptual framework that is able to position field survey (or qualitative) results within current scientific debates that enable social scientists to generalise their very contextualised results. Weak engagement with the theoretical concepts that are constantly debated in the social sciences often translates into convoluted explanations and inadequate epistemological contributions. Every discipline has its own cannons and ways of writing, which are indeed difficult to engage with depending upon where the author is starting their journey towards the sociology of agriculture and food. The RC40 community positions itself at the cross-roads of critical agrarian studies, science and technology studies and feminist epistemologies (Loconto et al., 2022) and the inclusion of new voices from around the world is what keeps this community vibrant and attentive to the power and knowledge dynamics of our changing agrifood systems (Carolan et al., 2022). For this reason, investing time and energy in supporting young scholars of agrifood studies to emerge as these new voices is important for the RC40 community.

This imperative goes well beyond SSA, it stretches from the proverbial centres to the farthest corners of the world. It concerns those scholars whose voices are emerging, at times softly and at others more loudly, both inside and outside of academia. To respond to the need to provide visibility and voice to this large group of scholar, the creation of a special section dedicated to the work of these emerging scholars is a priority for the *International Journal of Sociology of Agriculture and Food (IJSAF)* and should find a place in the forthcoming issues of the journal.

This issue opens the special section with two articles that were first discussed in our 2023 workshop. The first paper examines the efficacy of school feeding programs in South Africa. Based on a case study approach, the authors find that although the nationally supported feeding program contributed to improved school attendance and academic performance, systemic issues such as delayed food deliveries and limited community involvement hindered its effectiveness. In conclusion the authors advocate for a more holistic, community-integrated approach to ensure sustainable and impactful school feeding programs.

The second paper examines the dynamics of food sovereignty movements in South Africa. It analyzes how these movements interact with broader political, economic, and social structures. The author presents a dual typology of food movements, focusing on social justice and production. Utilizing a conjunctural analysis informed by Stuart Hall's concept of articulation, the paper argues that food movements in South Africa are influenced by the legacy of settler colonialism, racial capitalism, and ongoing class and ecological struggles. By exploring the relationship between local organizing efforts and global food sovereignty discourse, this study enhances our understanding of how food movements in the Global South address structural inequalities and outline pathways for transformative change.

We expect the next issue of *IJSAF* to contain the remaining papers, including a thematica analysis of the collection by the senior mentors who accompanied us through this process.

We close this essay with a few words from our hearts to our dearly departed colleague Sheila, who unfortunately was not able to see the end result of all of her hard work. We dedicate this special section to you! It was a true privilege to collaborate with you on this initiative and we are sure that you would be proud of what your mentees achieved. Rest in peace dear colleague.



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