



WANDERING AROUND?
MY YEAR AT WIKO
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I come from a country with an authoritarian family structure and hierarchical formal institutions, including those of education. During most of the years of my education, especially prior to my postgraduate training, I studied in an instructive education system in which teaching is very structured and learners are required to strictly follow a designed curriculum with little room to explore on their own. When I was at Wiko, the freedom to wander away from what you proposed as part of the acceptance to the institution and pursue other goals seemed a rarity.

When invited to Wiko to be part of a study focus group on Medical Practices in Africa, I went with the perspective of a structured learning environment, with targets and outputs. I wrote my proposed project for the academic year, to focus on “Health workers’ perspectives in delivering Provider Initiated HIV Testing and Counselling (PITC) within health facilities”. I had big ambitions for this project, with targets and outputs in my mind. But I never accomplished my plan, and things did not go as I had anticipated. I instead was engaged in several other things that were not part of my original plans. Having come from the background I described above and then exposed to the unrestricted academic life at Wiko, I kept asking myself whether I had not lost my destination or purpose, “have I gone astray, have I drifted from the set course?” At first I thought that there was too much freedom, but I later came to enjoy it. As I was asking myself these questions and sometimes feeling guilty, I found that almost every Fellow had a “secret project”, which was never kept a secret anyway. Many Fellows talked about their secret projects and some even presented what was supposed to be undisclosed during the Tuesday colloquium. Nevertheless, the freedom to wander around enabled me to explore myself more and I learnt many things that I am very optimistic will bear many fruits for the future.

The “freedom” from teaching commitments at my university and the abundant resources available at Wiko enabled me to do much more reading than I could do at my own university at Makerere. Julie Livingston and Steve Feierman, the conveners of our focus group (Dilemmas of Medical Practice in Africa), and other members of the group recommended great reading materials for my project. I did more reading, especially about my proposed Wiko project, than actual writing. The reading helped me to explore more about the project and other important aspects of medical practices in Africa. This is very helpful not only for my Wiko project, but also for the future. I would like to thank the library staff of Wiko for their excellent work. Ask for any book or article, and they will provide it in just a few days. This was a luxury, because access to books is a big challenge at my university. I am also grateful to the library staff for helping me in acquiring books to improve my personal library.

The Tuesday colloquium at Wiko is an epitome of academic freedom and diversity. The multi-disciplinary Fellows and presentations were a good learning experience. While presenting in the Tuesday colloquium was mandatory for every long-term Fellow, it had many freedoms: the freedom to choose when to make your presentation, the freedom to choose a topic, whether from the official or secret project at Wiko or even an idea for a future project. Each presenter had the freedom to choose someone to introduce him or

her and chair the day of the presentation. The chair had freedom in choosing a style of introducing the day's presenter. The very elaborate introductions were done in a variety of ways, including the use of PowerPoint presentations, video shows, poems and prose, songs and a display of long lists of publications by the presenter, among others. The process of introducing a day's presenter was one thing I always (and I think also other Fellows) looked forward to every Tuesday.

The art and freedom in asking questions was another experience. Questions would start with mini-presentations and often were multi-tiered. At first, this seemed to meander or lead to winding courses of questions. Of course, there were some instances in which some participants' questions digressed from the main subject. However, I realized that those who started by summarizing the presentation before asking their questions were not wandering minds. They helped (me) in getting clarity about the presentation. Most participants were "friendly" in their contributions, with constructive rather than destructive comments. This gave confidence to the presenters and showed academic maturity.

I had exciting intellectual discussions with people from a range of disciplines and I learnt a lot. In addition to the Tuesday colloquium, we held regular meetings in our focus groups. We had good discussions and good feedback on our respective work. During these interactions with other Fellows, (in our focus group and other formal and informal discussions), I gained new perspectives on my project. Although we had these regular interactions in the same focus group, we remained individuals on our projects with the freedom to forge our own direction. I felt honoured and proud to have free interactions with academicians from other parts of the world who have rich information about Africa and my country. I enjoyed this very much and I felt good to be part of a bigger group, yet I remained autonomous. Conversely, I often felt guilty and nervous that probably I was not doing enough, given that we never talked of any outputs.

Because there is a lot of freedom at Wiko and one can decide to be on holiday and nobody will ask one for outputs, there are many activities that make it very easy to digress and depart from from one's original plans. Upon my first day of my arrival, I already found invitations to workshops and conferences. I attended a few conferences and ignored others. Herbert (my Ugandan counterpart at Wiko during the year) and I were invited as guest lecturers at the University of Halle and taught a course on "medicine in Africa". These activities greatly enriched my year at Wiko. I am also very optimistic about the new networks I established during this period, not only with Fellows, but also with other

people. Several of the activities I got involved in during the year have potential for future research projects and collaboration. For example, Herbert and I hosted at Wiko a workshop entitled “Resources for the future”, attended by Ugandan researchers in Germany, with the hope of developing a full study proposal in the future. Herbert and I gave talks in Zurich and we established a student exchange programme with Makerere University. As I am writing now, five Swiss Master’s students from Zurich are in Uganda conducting their fieldwork and five students from Uganda are planning their travel to Zurich for some courses and to write their dissertations. I wrote a grant proposal application for a post doc, which I submitted to VolkswagenStiftung. It is my hope that these will bring opportunities to take me back to Germany and to maintain a relationship with the wonderful institution of Wiko.

Reflecting on the year, the time and resources at Wiko enabled me to make my contribution to a co-authored book on “Living on AIDS Drugs in Uganda”, and I submitted some articles for publication on previously conducted studies. All this re-assures me that this was not a deviation or diversion from the main purpose of my Fellowship – but an opportunity to accomplish what I had not been able to do before and to explore myself more. It was a wonderful gift to be at Wiko and it is my conviction that my year at this wonderful institution marked the beginning of many transitions in my life – and I look forward to seeing what happens in a few years to come.