

ACAS Issue Working Group:

Scholar Activists: From the 1980s to the 1990s

The Problem: The task of this Issue Working Group (IWG) is to assess the ways and means that scholars and their academic analyses should link to and affect U.S. policy on Africa in the late 1990s. One of the major tasks of the IWG will be to analyze the possibilities for scholars to affect U.S. policy on Africa in the arenas where it is formed - in the academy itself, the media, the policy-interested NGOs and public interest lobbies for Africa in Washington, the Congress, the Administration (State Department, National Security Council, White House), and the many other agencies of the U.S. government where Africa-policy are made (the World Bank, IMF, DOD, CIA, Department of Commerce, etc.). A goal of the IWG will be to produce a strategy document of analysis of these potential arenas of action, the current role of scholars in each, and potential areas of need and opportunity for scholarly focus and contribution.

Background: From the testimony of many policy-makers in Washington, we know that Africa has fallen off the U.S. policy map. In the judgements of most of these policy-makers, Africa is not central to U.S. interests in trade and investment; it is regarded as an ever-festering bundle of problems with few *success stories*; and, perhaps most salient of all, it has a weak and ineffective constituency in the U.S. In the past 20 years, most U.S. scholars of Africa have been relatively critical of the U.S. policies toward Africa and a surprising number report giving to public-interest lobbies for Africa and to NGOs attentive to U.S. Africa policy. Nevertheless, relatively few scholars are involved in either consulting with policy-making agencies, assisting policy-oriented NGOs in Washington, or even providing testimony to or research for the Congressional Africa subcommittees. Most scholars who are engaged with government are from "within the Beltway" in Washington, where the policy opinions are less divergent and critical than those of the wider Africanist community.

Thus, scholars interested in change in U.S. Africa policy are confronted with at least four action options, which are not mutually exclusive: 1) to mobilize to affect U.S. Africa policy in the Administration and the Congress through classical interest-group tactics in collaboration with other constituencies for Africa outside the university, 2) to assist and help direct the NGOs which are oriented to Africa policy, 3) to conduct research and publish on the key pressing issues in Africa and concerning Africa in the global economy, 4) to engage the policy-makers and their institutions and representatives in focused debate on the key issues needing attention, and 5) to organize nationally and locally among other scholars, students, and the local community to seek to develop a constituency for Africa.

These targets of action by scholars may be engaged in a variety of arenas - within the academy itself, through the media, from within public-interest lobbies and NGOs in Washington, and by Africanists employed as consultants and collaborators within the Federal and Congressional agencies. Yet, in spite of the wide range of alternative channels for action, scholarly mobilization - individual or collaborative - is weak in 1992. Scholars, like many North Americans, are beset by the ambiguities of changes in U.S. government policy toward Africa, by the shifting context in the global paradigms of power, by the racial cleavages which continue to bedevil a broader mobilization for Africa in the U.S., by the demobilizing dynamics of the economic and health crises in Africa, and by the end of the familiar forms of anti-apartheid work in which many scholars were engaged.

The goal of this IWG is to address this new political situation of scholars in the 1990s, to provide a compelling rationale and methodology for mobilizing U.S. scholars on Africa to work on policy issues, to specify some organizational strategies that can work, to set some priorities among the many possible policy issues concerning Africa, and to derive some strategic plans for U.S. Africanist scholars and for ACAS for the next year or two.

(revised by David Wiley and Deborah Theado, Michigan State University, 2/8/92)