



# Canadian Centennial Scholarship Fund

## IMARA ROLSTON

### CCSF SCHOLAR

PhD Candidate, Department of Social Psychology, London School of Economic and Political Science, CCSF Scholar 2014-15.

Imara Rolston is combining his deep commitment to frontline work with disadvantaged people with scholarly research for his PhD. His study is exploring the Nelson Mandela Foundation's use of what he calls community conversation approaches to preventing HIV/AIDS in South Africa.



Imara's undergraduate studies at the University of Toronto introduced him to political science, post colonial studies and creative writing. His work with youths in inner city Toronto enabled him to develop his interest in social justice and inequality, especially in view of the problem of social housing and poverty in Toronto. At this point he thought he might pursue his studies in urban planning or social work, but his interest in issues of gender and identity was peaked during a period of writing for a cultural newspaper on issues of Caribbean identity construction. His interest in criminal justice and the links between health and crime were further amplified when CIDA sent him to Botswana for several years as a communications officer. There he worked with smaller and larger organizations focusing on HIV/AIDS and health issues and experienced the frustration of short-term measures and a focus solely on individuals, rather than also on the environment in which they live.

A return to Toronto found him working with a Restorative Justice Programme that emphasised talking circles as a means of giving voice to those who are often silenced and of addressing crime in ways that go beyond crime prevention and tough sentencing. This led him to OISE (The Ontario Institute for Studies in Education) at the University of Toronto. Here he developed his ideas for his master's degree on community conversations for addressing HIV/AIDS. A job with Oxfam as a programme officer then took him to Ethiopia, Sudan and Tanzania. He was able to support organizations utilizing the very same community conversations approach to address gender-based violence.

Along the way, Imara read the work of an LSE scholar, Prof. Cathy Campbell, which inspired him - she would ultimately become his PhD supervisor. He thought a PhD would enable him to put his concerns about social justice, the political economy conditions experienced by those living in poverty, and ways to bring about social change together - he would be able to ask searching questions about 'how development is done'. He didn't have funding, but he applied, was accepted and started his studies. In his second year he won a scholarship from the Canadian Centennial Scholarship Fund (CCSF). The CCSF scholarship opened the door to more substantial funding from the LSE Centre for Human Rights. He is convinced that the CCSF criteria which take the whole person into account was crucially important for winning funding from other sources. He has won funding from CCSF for his third year and this is helping to make ends meet as he moves to the writing up phase.

His research is focusing on whether it is possible through community conversations to create a civic space that allows people to bring about change in their lives by taking action in ways that do not involve formal voting or overt social protest. His thesis promises a rich ethnography showing how social change can happen when an effort is made to link people's voices with action. Imara's research shows that it is not enough to change the behaviour of individuals. Voice and action are needed to change the context in which this behaviour occurs.

When he completes his PhD, Imara hopes to help create an institute in a university that will encourage action research to enable people's participation through a dialogue with all those who have an interest in reducing poverty. His focus is on creating spaces that expand the voice and influence of communities on the margins so that they begin to direct policy and larger political decision making in ways that political structures cannot ignore. Imara will be in a strong position to advocate these changes.

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