To Blog or not to Blog? Technology, Blogging from a Pedagogical Consideration and Teaching International Economic Law: Taking Blogging Seriously from the Lens of AfronomicsLaw Blog

By:

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Introduction

Global advances have changed teaching, access to resources and interaction in many ways. In particular, 'technological advances have further transformed both the practice and teaching of law'. Despite the technological changes, generally, as I have argued in my article, the legal profession's adoption of technological tools has been slow and evolutionary. Nevertheless, the impact of COVID-19 and restrictive measures adopted by governments in curbing its

spread, such as closure of schools, has forced schools to adopt online teaching as an alternative to classroom-based teaching. However, not all schools had the opportunity to immediately move to online teaching. In the Global South and particularly in Least Developing countries where internet usage is limited, exacerbated by the digital divide, online teaching was scarce. In worst scenarios, most schools remain closed.

This is happening at a time when the 2020 Teaching and Researching International Law in Asia (TRILA) Project Report, paragraph 121, found that:

> …IL teachers tend to *rely more on traditional methods of teaching,* and *technology-based methods were the least commonly employed*, with a mere 17 out of 69 teachers (24.63%) using either the internet-based or flipped classroom method. However, 38 of the 69 (55%) respondents mentioned that their schools had provided training sessions on using technology in teaching. *This raises the question of whether IL teachers were sufficiently leveraging on (or were equipped to make use of) technological advancements and the pedagogical possibilities that result from such developments* (emphasis added).

In this blog article, building on the findings of the TRILA Project Report, and using AfronomicsLaw blog as a case example, I focus on the role of academic blogging as one of the digital tools that has great potential in shaping scholarly development in international economic law in the Global South. The AfronomicsLaw blog, launched less than two years ago, has exponentially grown, and therefore this blog article provides scholars, legal practitioners, policy makers, law students and readers and followers of the blog in general with an opportunity to assess the benefits of academic blogging through its lens.

The TRILA report, technology and the benefits of academic blogging in teaching and researching international law (IL)

The TRILA Project Report identifies a number of problems in the teaching of IL in Asia, including students' limited interest in IL, the lack of resources limiting students' access to information, and the use of innovative teaching methods. Paragraph 24 of the Report stated that one way of invoking students' interest in

IL was to adopt:

> *[p]edagogical approaches* that encourage the *development of reading habits and critical-thinking skills*, and innovative teaching methods. Such methods might include *discussions of potential IL issues* surrounding *recent* domestic international events, or even pop culture. Some teachers said that students respond positively to *case simulations* or internal moot court competitions (emphasis added).

The TRILA Report recommends the use of 'new and engaging tool modes of teaching such as Moodle, Google Classroom and other electronic learning management systems' (para 26). In addition, one of the technological advancements the TRILA Report recognizes is the power of academic blogging. That is why, the TRILA project sought to find out whether the teachers made use of academic blogs in keeping informed about developments and scholarship of IL; how often they read and follow international blogs; if such blogs existed in their jurisdiction and whether they dealt with IL issues, among others issues (see questions 109-116, Annex II questionnaire, TRILA Report).

During the TRILA conference, Dr. Michael Riegner also offered a discussion on the role of academic blogging in disseminating IL scholarship. He pointed out that blogs are short, concise, argumentative, most are open access, easily accessible and of importance (see para 59) because:

> …its dialogical nature makes it optimal *domain for academic debate and exchange*. Further, the sheer reach of academic blogs makes them a very attractive platform to *publicise one's work*, either pre- or post-publication. Finally, he observed that blogs are more diverse geographically and gender-wise. This helps researchers hampered by institutional obstacles in academia to get their *voices heard*" (emphasis added).

So, does blogging change the landscape of teaching and advancing IEL scholarship? In 2012, Kevin O'Keefe, a lawyer and CEO of LexBlog, poised the question: "should we be teaching blogging and WordPress at Law Schools?' He argued:

I'm not suggesting that law schools turn into trade schools. But writing, and in effect publishing, is at the heart of being an attorney. So is collaboration and networking to learn from other attorneys and thought leaders. *Online writing, networking and collaboration,* of which blogging (and in turn WordPress), is at the centre of, is *becoming more important than writing and networking offline today*" (emphasis added).

According to Kevin:

> Law schools concerned about getting their students jobs, and I hope that includes all of them, would *be well served to introduce their students to blogging*. There's no better way for a law student to *network* with leading lawyers, alums and potential employers than blogging. *There's no better way for a law student to demonstrate their passion for and desire to get into a niche area of the law than blogging*(emphasis added).

Kevin further underscored how law schools would benefit from blogging. He said:

> Want to get your law school on the map for recruiting students and law professors? *Demonstrate your scholarship through law blogs.* Your law school's law review is likely not a big draw. Finally, there's potential employment for law grads outside the practice of law. Legal publishers, news companies, and law firms *are going to be looking for students who know social media and blogging. They're also going to want people who know the law for those growing areas of online media* (emphasis added).

At a time when Kevin and other legal technological entrepreneurs sought to emphasize the benefits of legal blogging and persuade lawyers to blog, the legal profession was pessimistic and skeptical of its usability and capability. Nevertheless, currently, legal academic blogs have increasingly emerged, offering researchers the platform to publish short academic pieces of research and participate in academic discussions.

The effective use of academic blogging platforms provides one with the

opportunity to showcase his/her writing skills, area of expertise and network with like-minded researchers. And as Gazzini pointed out:

> Considering the Eurocentric origins of international law and the heavy influence of Roman law, *enlarging the learning community, developing new activities* and *exploiting the potential of new technologies* will facilitate the cross-fertilization of legal traditions, *give voice to different experiences and approaches and ultimately broaden the horizons of the learning experience* (emphasis added).

Moreover, blogging develops one's thinking, authenticity, social skills, analytical skills, and confidence. According to Li and others, blogging enhances critical thinking, and teachers can use blogs as a tool of instruction. As the TRILA Report indicates, there is a need to adopt 'pedagogical approaches that encourage the development of reading habits and critical-thinking skills, and innovative teaching methods that will increase students' interest in IL' (see para 24). Blogs offer this platform. This is because blogs are usually short and concise, yet provide an in-depth understanding of the subject issue. This enhances and invokes students reading habits and development of coherent arguments.

Furthermore, blogging creates a symbiotic relationship to both the reader and the writer. Unknowingly, blogs are an efficient digital marketing tool that increases one's visibility and readership. As Black noted:

> Law students should consider blogging, and more broadly, should also use social media to establish a professional presence during their law school years. *Interacting strategically online is a great way to jumpstart your legal career and make connections that can last a lifetime* (emphasis added).

To students I venture to say: you may not expressly market yourself, but be rest assured that an important network or an institution is reading your works, and this might land you an opportunity you never thought of or could never have come across. Blogs therefore are your digital DNA. That is why, when blogging be very careful of what you write, the claims you make and the argument you want to further.

According to World Bank, blogs not only increase reputation, but can also influence policy formulation. A study by David and others in 2011 found that most famous economists had influential blogs. Reading and following blogs keeps you updated with the current developments and conversations in your area of interest. In order to benefit from blogging, either as a participant or reader, you must be strategic. This means, identify the blogs that meet your goals and professional aspirations. Identify researchers and influencers in that field, then strive to connect with them. Additionally, 'read their articles, blog posts and social media posts and interact with them online' and offline as well. For instance, for competition law developments, I religiously follow and read blogs such as Competition Policy International, Concurrences, Centre for Competition, Regulation and Development (CCRED), African Antitrust and Competition Law, among others to update myself with what is happening in competition law enforcement and development.

The AfronomicsLaw blog and its role in advancing the International Economic Law conference: taking academic blogging seriously

I had never taken blogging and use of social media to further my career path seriously. Of course, I had come across blogs, but I had never checked whether legal blogs did exist, and particularly blogs discussing African research, or the Global South generally. In a nutshell, I never took academic blogging seriously. Then in July 2019, when I attended the African International Economic Law Network Conference (AfIELN), held in Nairobi, the team launched the AfronomicsLaw blog. It was just a blog, or so I thought. It was not until the AfronomicsLaw blog invited me to write a short blog article on the presentation I had made during the 2019 AfIELN Conference and, separately, a book review blog article, that I began to reassess blogging and the opportunities that AfronomicsLaw blog has created for us as researchers from the Global South.

In less than two years, AfronomicsLaw blog has grown in breadth, thanks to the editors, contributing editors, those who participate in writing for the blog and most importantly, the readers. I am not sure if, when the AfronomicsLaw blog founders—Prof. James Thuo Gathii, Olabisi D Akinkugbe, Nthope Mapefane, Titilayo Adebola, and Ohio Omiunu—converged and discussed the possibility of having the blog, they had anticipated this unprecedented growth.

AfronomicsLaw Blog prides itself as a platform that:

> …focuses on the international economic law landscape as it relates to the Africa and the Global South. *Its primary goal is to complement existing forums that analyze, discuss and debate international economic law issues as they relate to Africa and the Global South.* It offers scholars, policy makers and others interested in these issues a forum to *insightfully reflect on these developments more contemporaneously with than the scholarship that is being produced*. The blog also offers *the growing and important voice of scholars and practitioners* of African international economic law and the Global South, *a forum to share their views* (emphasis added).

These goals are the actual reasons that informed the formation of the AfronomicsLaw blog. During the Ongolo conversations, when the AfronomicsLaw blog editors were interviewed, Dr. Olabisi D Akinkugbe, underscored that:

> …part of what the blog seeks to do is *to emerge from the continent of Africa and project to the world*. So that means we are not insular, in what we do. A core aim of the blog, is to really get scholarship…from a diverse group of people…scholars, policy makers, NGOs, activists and *put them in conversation not only with western scholars but also other Global South countries…*it is important because…the narrative and structure of power…is not just skewed against Africa. *It is one that has impact and ramifications beyond African continent*…over the past eighteen months we have been able to galvanize interest, not just on the continent but also outside of the continent… to learn what they are doing and to see how academics can bring conversations with each other (emphasis added).

He also explained the benefits that accrue to contributors of the blog:

> Second one, I would like to highlight is just a shared breadth of people who write…and when we think about academics, I think we all come to writing with a bit of… we know how to do it, but sometimes with a bit of *we are not sure if what we have written would really fly out there*. So, *we have seen graduate students who write, and their blogs just pick*

> *along,* people…westernized and African, around the world are engaging with these ideas. You *cannot put price and value on the importance of confidence* that those kind of scholars and graduates' programs get from that kind of writing that is out there... (emphasis added).

To meet its objectives AfronomicsLaw blog has employed a number of tools such as symposia webinars and the upcoming African Journal of International Economic Law etc.

A. Symposium

AfronomicsLaw blog uses symposia as platforms for scholars and policy makers to discuss and debate on IEL issues as they relate to Africa and the Global South. Its first symposium was posted on 15th April 2019 and the number of symposia has grown since then as shown in the links below:

- Traditional Knowledge and Plant Varieties in Africa**;**
- Dispute Settlement in the African Continental Free trade Agreement**;**
- Teaching International Economic Law In Africa**;**
- ACP-EU Cooperation: Challenges and Opportunities for the Post-2020 Relationship**;**
- **State and Investor Responsibility in Africa's Extractive Industries;**
- The WTO Reform – Views from the Global South**;**
- UNIDROIT/FAO/IFAD Draft Legal Guide on Agricultural Land Investment Contracts (ALIC)**;**
- **Symposium Issue from the** Fourth African International Economic Law Network Biennial Conference**;**
- Symposium on Law and Policy, and the Promotion of Investment in the Renewable-Energy Sector**;**
- Sustainable Development Goals, Trade, Investment, and Inequality**;**
- Theoretical and Methodological Approaches for the Study of International Economic Law in Africa**;**
- **Reforming Private International Law in Africa;**
- Global South Perspectives for Pluralising and Decolonising International Economic Law**;**
- In Honour of International Women's Day**;**

- The Commercial Law Reform Network Nigeria (CLRNN) Inaugural Conference Proceedings; Learning and Teaching International Economic Law through Moot Courts**;**
- COVID-19 Symposium on International Economic Law in the Global South**;**
- The IEL Collective Symposium III: Reimagining International Economic Law for Sustainable Development;
- Due Diligence in the Business & Human Rights regime: A Latin American view**; and**
- Taxation and the Social Contract in a Post-Pandemic Era: Domestic and International Dimensions**.**

I will not delve into the content of each of the above symposia due to world limit for this blog article. Nevertheless, if you click on the above links, you will see that the breadth of topics discussed, the number of contributors and the richness of the contributions have grown. For instance, the COVID-19 symposium attracted a lot of submissions that led to the blog having four symposia within one symposium. In fact, when I count, AfronomicsLaw posted 39 articles within this singular symposium. As AfronomicsLaw blog's visibility and readership increases, the diversity of its discussions also expands. It will remain one of the platforms that teachers of IEL will need to refer their students to and encouraging their participation.

B. Webinar Series

After the conclusion of the four-part Symposium on COVID-19 and International Economic Law in the Global South, Afronomicslaw organised three follow-up webinars, inviting scholars across the globe to continue its discussion. These were:

- **Overturning Sovereign Debt for Violating National Law: Lessons from a recent Mozambique Constitutional Council Decision moderated by** James Thuo Gathii.
- Vulnerability in the Trade and Investment Regimes in the Age of COVID-19 **moderated by** Olabisi D. Akinkugbe.
- Intellectual Property Rights: Global Rules, Regional and National Realities **moderated by** Titilayo Adebola.

C. Academic forum

The Academic Forum was established in 2020. The goals of the Academic Forum are to: (i) encourage and build core research skills in teaching, research, theory, methods and writing; (ii) build a forum that is inclusive and accessible; (iii) develop content for Afronomicslaw.org and where possible to encourage authors to submit to the African Journal of International Economic Law; (iv) over time, hold workshops and masterclasses on core research skills in teaching, research, theory, methods and writing; (v) organise annual poster/essay competitions on international economic law issues. The introduction of the Academic Forum in 2020 is one of the steps that AfronomicsLaw has used to incorporate the young researchers.

D. AfronomicsLaw YouTube Channel and use of Social Media

AfronomicsLaw blog makes use of its social media platform such as Twitter, and LinkedIn to disseminate information and engage with its readers. AfronomicsLaw now has a YouTube channel where it shares its conversations. These conversations can be referred to in the future and cement the discussions pertaining to the Global South. So far, AfronomicsLaw has posted three videos on its YouTube channel.

E. African Journal of International Economic Law

One of the biggest challenges facing the teaching of IEL has been the lack of reading materials that discuss Global South scholarship. The AJIEL is in the offing to address this challenge.

F. Indaba

The innovative nature of AfronomicsLaw blog cannot be underestimated. To further steer discussions and encourage the participation of policy makers, it has introduced a new tool, called *Indaba*. In describing *Indaba*, James Gathii said on 27th July 2020 that:

> Indaba is a Zulu and Xhosa word that refers to a meeting to discuss a serious topic. It also refers to a discussion on a matter of concern or for discussion. This occasional series will discuss issues relating to international economic law relating to Africa, the developing world and the Global South. The discussion will prioritize bringing in expert voices

> who work very hard on the issues we care most about here at Afronomicslaw.org. *These individuals do so behind the scenes, invisible to our audience yet their insights are invaluable to the work we do* (emphasis added).

The first episode features Mustaqeem de Gama who is currently a Counsellor at the South African Mission in Geneva and responsible for intellectual property (TRIPS) dispute settlement, trade-related investment measures (TRIMS) and rules related disciplines such antidumping, countervailing and subsidies. In addition to the tools identified above, AfronomicsLaw shares events, call for papers, conferences, job opportunities, recent news and information regarding African Union and Regional Economic communities.

Conclusion

I do not think I need to reemphasize the role of technology and the use of digital platforms in teaching and researching IEL in the Global South. The AfronomicsLaw blog speaks for itself. And, so does it speak for the potential of academic legal blogging. If a blog that has only been in existence for less than two years has already offered this much, and the potential is apparent, then why are we not taking blogging seriously? It is no longer a question of blogging or not blogging. Let us blog. Let us embed academic blogging in our teaching curriculum. Let us identify the relevant blogs and refer our students to these blogs. Most importantly, let us engage and contribute towards AfronomicsLaw blog. Read the Guidelines for Submissions and make your submissions by sending an email at afronomicslaw@gmail.com. Remember, you do not need to wait until AfronomicsLaw blog makes a call for contributions, you can always send your individual contributions on any issue relating to IEL in the Global South.

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