

# Africa Ariño: having an international perspective is essential in a multi-polar world

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – The purpose of this paper is to present the gist of a conversation with Africa Ariño, conducted by Santiago Ibarreche, about her career as an Expert Researcher in the areas of Strategic Alliances, Strategic Management, International Ventures and her experiences as an International scholar who is now in an interesting project about “Internationalizing in Africa and from Africa”.

**Design/methodology/approach** – This paper is an interview.

**Findings** – The interview explores Ariño’s career her achievements and continued search for excellence in terms of teaching, research and service in academia, especially in her contributions in the areas of strategic alliances and the importance of Africa as the future of businesses.

**Originality/value** – The interview in this special section, A Life in Research, brings out an individual scholar’s experience and history, not only as recognition of scholarly impact but also as recognition of the person.

**Keywords** Research, Africa, Strategic alliances, Interview, Scholar’s experience, Scholarly impact

**Paper type** Viewpoint

## Resumen

**Objetivo** – Este artículo contiene la esencia de una conversación con Africa Ariño conducida por Santiago Ibarreche, acerca de su carrera como investigadora experta en las áreas de alianzas estratégicas, administración estratégica, negocios internacionales y sus experiencias como una académica internacional que actualmente se encuentra en un proyecto interesante acerca de “Internacionalizando en África y desde África”.

**La metodología** – Este artículo es una entrevista.

**Los resultados** – La entrevista explora la carrera de Africa Ariño, sus logros y la búsqueda constante de excelencia en términos de enseñanza, investigación y servicio en la academia; especialmente a lo concerniente sus contribuciones en las áreas de alianzas estratégicas y la importancia de África en el futuro de los negocios.

**La originalidad/el valor** – La entrevista en esta sección especial, A Life in Research, nos trae la experiencia e historia de un académico, no solo para reconocimiento de su impacto académico, sino también el reconocimiento como persona.

**Palabras clave** Investigación, África, Alianzas estratégicas, Entrevista

**Tipo de artículo** Opinión

## Resumo

**Objetivo** – Este documento contém a essência de uma conversa com Africa Ariño, conduzida por Santiago Ibarreche, sobre sua carreira como pesquisadora especialista nas áreas de Alianças



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Estratégicas, Gestão Estratégica e Empreendimentos Internacionais, assim como suas experiências como uma acadêmica internacional que agora encontra-se envolvida com um interessante projeto sobre a “Internacionalização na África e da África”.

**Metodologia** – Este artigo é uma entrevista.

**Resultados** – A entrevista explora a carreira e as realizações de Ariño na busca contínua de excelência em termos de ensino, pesquisa e serviços na academia; especialmente no que diz respeito às suas contribuições nas áreas de alianças estratégicas e a importância da África como o futuro dos negócios.

**Originalidade/valor** – A entrevista narrada nesta seção especial, “A Life in Research”, nos traz a experiência e a história de uma acadêmica, que transcende o reconhecimento do seu impacto na academia, reconhecendo também o seu valor como pessoa.

**Palavras chave** Pesquisa, África, Alianças estratégicas, Entrevista

**Tipo de artigo** Opinião

### Introduction

Quoting one of her colleagues: “Africa Ariño (AA) has many talents; among them, her humble attitude which often surprises people as they discover her many talents”. Her students talk about her with enthusiasm, and her mentoring has made many of them enthusiasts in their chosen fields. Her career is one of the most productive in research, and, as a consequence, her work has become referenced constantly in the field of strategic alliance management, a subject that she has promoted through her many publications in leading academic journals. Her participation on different boards of professional organizations has made her a household name in the field of strategic management and among European management scholars.

Presently, she is a Professor in the Strategic Management Department at IESE Business School, University of Navarra (Spain) where she has worked for many years. Among the many different positions that Africa has held are those of Deputy Dean for Faculty and Director of the PhD Program. Presently, Africa Ariño is the Academic Director of the Research Centre on Globalization and Strategy at IESE Business School. She is the Associate Editor of the *Academy of Management Discoveries* and *Global Strategy Journal* and serves, or has served, as a member of the editorial board of, among other publications, the *Strategic Management Journal*, *the Journal of International Business Studies*, *the Journal of Management*, and *the European Management Review*.

She has taken part in diverse consulting projects on matters related to strategic management, including the formulation and implementation of strategic plans and the management and governance of bodies; the design of strategic alliances; and issues particular to family-owned businesses. In 2014, Dr Ariño spent half a year visiting Lagos Business School (Lagos, Nigeria) and Strathmore Business School (Nairobi, Kenya). Currently, she is working on a project entitled, “Internationalizing in Africa and from Africa”. She comments regularly on African business and social issues in her blog “Africa from Africa” (<http://blog.iese.edu/africa/>).

Her participation in meetings of the Iberoamerican Academy of Management is always welcomed and expected with anticipation. She has been a member of our organization since its foundation and has participated in many of our meetings. Her presence and contributions are always welcome.

We want to thank Africa for giving up part of her busy time for this interview, which we are sure will be of interest to our readers.

We are honored to present our conversation with Africa Ariño this year. She joins previous interviewees as part of this series (Ibarreche and Mesquita, 2010; Ibarreche, 2011, 2012, 2013, 2014).

## Interview

SI: Let me begin by thanking you for allowing us some of your precious time for this interview. I, personally, and many of our colleagues are looking forward to this dialog.

AA: Thankyou for the honor and for your very kind introduction.

SI: As I told you, I have taken the liberty to ask some of your colleagues and alumni for questions regarding this interview; I am happy to report that you have their admiration and respect and that they have sent me too many questions to fit in the interview, so I have selected some that are representative of those aspects more repeated.

AA: I have colleagues and former students who are always very kind to me.

SI: As you know, the main objective of this section is to highlight main aspects of the professional and personal life of scholars, whose contribution has enhanced the quality of knowledge in their respective fields. Specifically, we want to look at careers of people who have contributed to the field of management in Iberoamerica. So, let me start by asking you how and when did you decide to be part of the academic world? What motivated you to be in this profession?

AA: The passion for academia runs in my blood. My father and four of my five siblings have dedicated their career to academia and teaching at various educational levels. For me, it was just natural to engage in this world.

SI: Your academic background has always been in the area of business and economics, and it is interesting to see that you have been in very solid institutions for you academic programs (Universidad de Barcelona; IESE Universidad de Navarra; and University of California Los Angeles). Since your graduation from your MBA in 1988, you have been teaching in the area of business policy; allow me to use that term because that was one of my concentrations during my doctoral program; how has the area evolved?

AA: There have been some profound changes since I joined the field. For instance, at that time, the Transaction Cost Economics perspective was dominant, and the Resource Based View started making inroads. Then, network analysis gained traction thanks to more powerful analytical tools. The recent focus on understanding the micro-foundations of Strategy is coming along with a behavioral perspective. Underlying most of these changes is the stronger influence from Sociology in contrast to Economics' clear dominance at earlier times. Together with these changes in perspective, there is more interest in studying issues relevant to strategy practice, as well as a greater acceptance of qualitative research.

SI: You have been in academia for a while and one of our colleagues wanted me to ask if you have seen significant changes in the role women have in business and in academia since you started in this career; could you comment?

AA: When we want to, women can be collaborative. This is an attitude which can be very helpful both in business and in academia and which contributes to make work environments more humane.

SI: Among the many issues on the field of strategy you have selected Strategic Alliances; Why Strategic Alliances? What was the first thing that called your attention to this subject?

AA: I was applying for my Ph.D. program at a time when Spain had joined the European Union just a few years before, and when what was then called the Single European was about to become a reality. I started reading in the newspapers about the need for companies to join forces to face the new competition expected to come. That kept me thinking "it's already difficult enough to manage one company, how would it be when two or more come together?" I wrote about this in my application essay and that was the beginning of what would become a whole research agenda.

SI: One curious question that came from one of your colleagues; you have been very successful in the area of research specifically in International strategic alliances; How is it that you have become "successful" as a researcher in IESE business school which is better known for its tradition as a teaching institution?

AA: When I joined IESE after my Ph.D. program, the school was transitioning into becoming a more research-oriented institution. I believed that change would happen, and I behaved as if it had happened already. And I've always tried to be careful about what comes into my agenda: time is my scarcest resource, and I do not delegate its management to my assistant.

SI: One area that can be considered different from traditional research activities but involves dedication and somehow a craft is the writing of cases. I can see in your vita that you have been involved in case writing for several cases, especially in the area of International strategic alliances. Can you talk a little bit about what is involved in that endeavor?

AA: I have to admit that I have written cases with the assistance of others – either students from my alliance course or case writers. But supervising this process has enriched my understanding of the phenomenon.

SI: Following up in the same activity; I have experienced that writing cases helps in understanding the issues and latter it also help in writing the technical notes for teaching concepts that are applied in the case. Do you think that teaching and research activities should be more intertwined?

AA: Definitely. While there will not be a total intersection, looking for some overlap is very healthy, as both activities become mutually reinforcing. To the extent that you do research on relevant topics, you can bring that to the classroom, and to the extent that you have program participants who live that reality, you can gain insights for your research.

SI: You have collaborated with several universities in Spain and throughout the world as visiting scholar; how important is to have an ample network of contacts throughout the world for a scholar? More specifically for your activities as a researcher?

AA: In my case, it has been critical. I have learned a lot about the publishing process from my co-authors; other colleagues have introduced me to relevant networks; more recently, my African colleagues have provided me invaluable support in gaining access to companies for interviews. And all of them have enriched me through our intellectual discussions. I also have to say that I do not “practice” networking.

SI: Your academic activities have allowed you to visit many countries; this has given you several perspectives in different cultures, and something I have seen in some of your writings, an awareness of the importance of understanding contexts and biases in setting policy. What advice would you give a young scholar to incorporate in his/her professional experience to be a more complete academician?

AA: Having an international perspective is essential in a multi-polar world like the one we are becoming. Interacting with people from other countries and traditions helps; we gain perspective. I once heard, Chairman of Renault-Nissan Carlos Ghosn say that if you have a common goal, differences turn from a source of conflict to a source of complementarity. Thus, my advice to young researchers is to get out of their comfort zone and reach out to people who are different than them.

SI: In the same tenor, how important are international relations in a professor’s career?

AA: They are a must. As I just said, in a multi-polar world we can’t ignore what’s going on in other parts of the world, and how they approach business issues. And they are critical if you want to play in the world cup.

SI: Still in the area of International experiences, I and many of our readers would like to know about your activities for the last year; you know that I am referring to your involvement in Africa as a new area of research; can you tell us about your experience in Africa and your blog “Africa from Africa”?

AA: The project is evolving, and now it has turned into “Internationalizing in Africa and from Africa,” although my focus is on sub-Saharan Africa. My experience was fascinating; it has become clear to me that the future is there – even if it won’t happen tomorrow. Africa is youthful, in contrast to the Western world where we fall easily in a gloomy perspective. Many changes are needed for that bright future to take place, but they have the energy to make change happen.

SI: I have read some of your postings and always surprises me the ease you have to summarize complex issues in few but very relevant words. Do you have a process for writing blog postings?

AA: I get inspiration from my own reflections of what I saw in Africa and from current news. I try to think of some personal anecdote to engage the reader at the beginning, look for some informative data and give my own view on the issue.

SI: Some of the responses are also very interesting and you could see how country and personal biases are included in the writing. Sometimes, it is difficult to respond to some arguments which can be very personal. Am I correct?

AA: Yes, but that's what a blog is about: Providing personal opinions and engaging with readers in this way.

SI: What do you think will be your contribution to the profession from your experiences in Africa?

AA: I'm in the process of putting together a full-fledged research agenda around internationalization initiatives in sub-Saharan Africa by African companies and established multinational corporations. I hope this project will contribute pushing the current state of the art in relation to the literature on emerging-market multinationals.

SI: It is interesting to see that many of the topics that are mentioned in your blog could almost be applied to other countries around the world. For example, some of the things so mentioned as parallel frames from the forced immigration and human trafficking from Africa and the similar experiences during slave trades in Latin America. You mention Brazil as an example but I believe is an experience shared by many other countries.

AA: Yes, and particularly the issue you mention – slave trade – has linked the histories of the two continents, and has done so in a very unfortunate way.

SI: In reading some of your postings, and responding to them, I have found that you have a keen eye for finding subjects of interest to many of us. One topic that I liked the way you treated was “age diversity” and the fact that diversity is seldom looked under that aspect of society. I would like to expand on your views about this.

AA: I'm a humanist: I see value in each single human being, as we are all unique. This goes back to the issue of diversity we talked about earlier. Each one of us – whether young or not so young – have a lot to contribute to the well-being of our societies, and our contributions are complementary as they build from diverse experiences and capabilities.

SI: One of the research documents that called my attention because I have personally been in Family businesses and have a special interest in the area. The specific project is one where you propose strategic alliances as a strategy for internationalization of family businesses (Ariño, 2001). One of my students did his doctoral dissertation in that area and it is fascinating. Could you expand on the importance of alliances in the context of family businesses?

AA: Owners of family businesses tend to be concerned about keeping company control. Strategic alliances provide a way for these businesses to grow without

compromising corporate control – even if control has to be shared in relation to a part of the company’s activities.

SI: Some female colleagues want me to ask you about your feeling as being considered a pioneer among women in academia because of your role as leader of programs at IESE. One question is specifically if you have participated or organized activities that promote the participation of women in schools of business?

AA: No, I don’t promote this type of activities. Instead, I try to foster their participation in mainstream activities. But I don’t refuse invitations to participate in those targeted at women.

SI: Curiously, in the latest statistics of the USA schools, enrollment in business undergraduate and master programs have more women than men enrolled. I do not know if this is a generalizable finding in other countries.

AA: I don’t know either. But I have observed a larger enrolment of women from across the board at IESE’s MBA programs in its various formats.

SI: Do you think that women in academia have sensitivity for topics that are different than those normally approached by men? Do women have different research interests?

AA: I see women making valuable contributions in the same fields as men do. I can’t generalize.

SI: Let’s talk about your experience as member of dissertation committees for doctoral students. It is interesting to see your participation on committees from different universities in Spain, and to be external reader in some other dissertation from places as distant as Australia and Finland; what are your recommendations to students that could be going through the experience of writing a dissertation; what are the things you would like them to know before starting the process of writing a dissertation?

AA: When I started my PhD program, I received some advice from a student ahead of me: “if you have some idea – even if vague – of what you’d like to do research on, try to relate all of your course work to that idea”. I found it extremely useful, and I always tell this to our new students.

SI: I followed a similar strategy during my doctoral program and it is a very good one.

SI: Collaboration is key for publication in a highly competitive environment, and you have published with many of your colleagues from around the world; what are some suggestions you may give to young (or new in the profession) scholars about selecting collaborators? How do you select them or do they select you?

AA: I think it’s a process of mutual selection that has to come naturally out of discovering common interests and complementary capabilities. Typically, we start with some collaboration, and if we see that we work well together, we make it grow.

SI: How important it is to maintain closed relations with former students? What are the benefits and detriments of doing this?

AA: I think it's important to help students grow. They need to be autonomous by the time they graduate, and create their own paths. But they all know that I'll be there when they need some advice, and that we can explore new projects if they'd like so.

SI: When young scholars graduate, there is always a big illusion about publications, especially if there is an article or two published from the dissertation subject and efforts. However, once these efforts are exhausted or have diminishing returns, few are able to continue publishing at the same rhythm; however, you have a continuous stream; how have you done it?

AA: You need to enjoy the process, else you give up. And you need to work hard as the demands on you increase with time, and it's not easy to juggle everything.

SI: Very important aspect in our profession is participation in professional organizations. You have been very active in the Strategic Management Society, among others; your organization of the International meeting in Madrid in 2014 had accolades from different participants and organizers, and even the City gave you an award. Could you tell us what is involved in these activities and how a person can get involved in these organizations and events?

AA: Being involved in this type of activities is both an honor and a service: it's an honor that your colleagues entrust you with these responsibilities, which someone needs to undertake with time sacrifice and professionalism, and this is where the service dimension comes in. The way to get involved is by volunteering to help with tasks of a limited scope, and to show that spirit of service and professionalism that's needed to undertake larger ones.

SI: Congratulations for the recognition and for an excellent job!

SI: Changing the subject completely; you travel quite a bit with all the different commitment that you have; how do you manage your time?

AA: I mentioned earlier that I do not delegate this task. I keep tight control of my time, and when I make a new commitment, I allocate time to preparing for it in my calendar.

SI: The reason I asked this question is because, as time goes by, it has become more difficult for me to manage it.

AA: Indeed, because you have more and more demands. And I'm always learning and trying to improve my approach to time management.

SI: What do you think is your biggest accomplishment in your professional life and why?

AA: Not having let my profession override other aspects of my life.

SI: Let me focus now in more mundane aspects of being an academician. One question that I would like to ask is how is your typical day (if there is such a thing as a typical day)?

AA: There's not a typical day. It depends a lot on whether I'm teaching or not, whether I'm travelling or at my office. When I teach, that's my priority; when I don't,



research is my priority. At the same time, I try to accommodate casual requests from colleagues or other people which require my time and attention.

SI: I would like to thank you for all your time and really interesting conversation.

AA: Thanks you for honoring me with your request.

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