



CIVIL SOCIETY ACTORS STRATEGY WORKSHOP



Kairaba Beach Hotel - Banjul
9 April 2013

Report prepared by Shaka Ceesay
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1. Introduction

Conscience International (CI) in collaboration with CIVICUS: World Alliance for Citizen Participation organized a Strategy Workshop for Civil Society Actors from Africa during the 53rd Ordinary Session of the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights (ACHPR) in Banjul on 9 April 2013. The workshop which brought together 55 participants from 16 countries in Africa, aimed at consolidating the plan of action for the "African Forefront Rights Defenders" and building the capacity and skills of civil society organizations to effectively use the African and international human rights system in their work towards human rights promotion and protection on the continent. The workshop also aimed at strengthening the African Forefront Rights Defenders which was created in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso in July 2012 through engagements in discussions with civil society actors from other parts of Africa. At the end of the workshop, participants agreed to join the "African Forefront Rights Defenders" network. The workshop was organized by Conscience International (CI) with the financial support of CIVICUS: World Alliance for Citizen Participation.

Human rights defenders are women and men working for the promotion and protection of nationally, regionally and internationally recognized human rights, including those working on civil and political rights as well as economic, social and cultural rights through peaceful means as recognized by the UN Declaration on Human Rights Defenders adopted on 9 December 1998.

The workshop was commenced with welcoming remarks by the Coordinator of the workshop, Mr. Shaka Ceesay, officially opening the workshop and thanking participants for their attendance. In his brief speech he described the idea of the workshop as follow up event to the "Regional Workshop on Enhancing the Capacity of Human Rights Defenders to Monitor Public Policy and Respond to Threats in West Africa, Burkina Faso, 2 to 3 July 2012. He explained that the workshop was organized based on recommendations contained in the Plan of Action that stressed the need of capacity building among civil society actors and enhanced efficiency in their work. He encouraged participants to actively involve themselves in the workshop sessions and to learn from each other.

After the welcoming remarks, the participants were asked to introduce themselves and to provide information about their area of work and their experience as human rights defenders in their respective countries. Many of them described challenges of defending rights in their countries which commonly include harassment, cruel and degrading punishments, torture, intimidation, arbitrary arrests, extrajudicial killings and detention in unauthorized detention centers. Sometimes they are subjected to dehumanizing and demoralizing public treatment including smear campaigns, political persecution and vilification.

The participants were then briefed on the content of the workshop and encouraged to shape the outcome by interacting with the resource persons and among themselves as much as possible. The workshop sessions were focused on three key topics namely; The enabling environment for Civil Society in Africa, Freedom of expression, association and assembly, and Networking, advocacy and enabling strategies to engage the African Commission and UN mechanisms (the agenda of the workshop and list of participants can be found in the Annex of this report).

2. The enabling environment for Civil Society in Africa

This session of the workshop commenced with a presentation by Clement Voule, Programmes Manager at the International Service for Human Rights (ISHR), based in Geneva, Switzerland. Mr. Voule's presentation sought to introduce and deepen participants' knowledge on the challenges and opportunities faced by civil society actors in Africa. Mr. Voule stressed that civil society work deals with various issues in Africa, such as channels dealing with government, guaranteeing rights, including freedom of expression and other fundamental rights stipulated in the African Charter. He added that there are various international conventions relating to human rights that governments need to implement. He further noted that the mechanisms that governments use to affect the work of civil societies are usually legislations. "There are laws recognizing the work of civil societies, but are not in practice".

During the discussions, participants gave accounts of the challenging situations they find themselves in promoting and protecting human rights and stressed that the opportunities are very limited and probably not even there to support their work. Participants in their contributions maintained that most political challenges confronting the media and civil society actors are mostly because Governments want to continue ruling and do not want critics. As a result they come with laws that favor their interest, regardless of civil society's plights. A participant from Ethiopia in his comments, among others lamented on the lack of access to funding for some civil society actors, making their work very difficult.

3. Freedom of expression, association and assembly

This session was facilitated by Ms. Corlett Letlojane, Executive Director at the Human Rights Institute of South Africa (HURISA). This session dealt specifically on freedom of expression, access to information and assembly. Attention was drawn on methods civil societies can use to have access to information that they can share for public consumption with a view to ensure transparency. Ms. Letlojane stressed that human rights are something we are born with, that's why when a baby is born they cry, without which something may have gone wrong with that child. She mentioned that there are declarations guaranteeing those rights, including freedom of information which she referred to as the first generation rights, which is with a very long list. She stated that there are no hierarchies of rights, which are indivisible, and are made to be important; with principles contained in protocols and conventions, including the international covenant on civil and political rights. She added that State parties need to ratify these covenants, and when they are passed, they need to be implemented. She buttressed views from participants that laws should be articulated after they are made, to help people know about them; making reference to government budgets and programs. This she believes will help people know if there are corruptions, or other related issues. Civil societies need to have a plan of action to find ways and means of working with governments. Many civil society activists do not know whether they deserve certain rights from government. "We are talking of violations of human rights, and this is mainly because people are not educated about their rights and how to make good use of them," she noted.

A Liberian participant spoke of progress made in influencing policy makers to pass laws in Parliament, but lamented challenges in the process, and complications in implementing enacted laws. However, it was upheld that every country must have a law that protects fundamental rights, that is why there are national human rights institutions mandated to promote those rights.

4. Networking, advocacy and enabling strategies to engage the African Commission and UN mechanisms

The last session of the workshop was facilitated by Mr. Gaye Sowe, Senior Legal Office at the Institute for Human Rights and Development in Africa (IHRDA) based in Banjul – The Gambia. Mr. Sowe's facilitation was centered on introducing and deepening participants' knowledge on networking, advocacy and campaigning as well as enabling strategies to engage the African Commission and UN mechanisms in the quest to protect human rights. The presentation was followed by a lively discussion among participants and the realization of the importance of paying more attention to developing skills and technicalities involved in engaging the African Commission and UN mechanisms on personal and organization level. Participants believed that education and awareness creation will help civil societies play their role more effectively in areas of networking and advocating to effect positive change.

5. Evaluation

Participants were randomly selected for personal interview at the end of the workshop to assess the content, facilitation and coordination of the workshop. With regard to content, the majority of participants commended the relevance of the topics addressed since they addressed the kind of situations they live in. Several participants emphasized the need for extended training on the regional and international human rights mechanisms and litigation before the African Commission and UN bodies. The facilitation by the resource persons was also ranked positively. General comments related to the appreciation of the fact that each participant was given an opportunity to participate during the workshop. The coordination of the conference was ranked positive with most participants happy about the services offered at the hotel especially the meals and refreshments. It was recommended that the coordination team should work hard to establish a functional Secretariat of the "African Forefront Rights Defenders" to administer membership activities and most importantly the sharing of information as well as the coordination of follow up activities.

6. Conclusion

It can be said that the objectives of the Workshop were achieved. Participants, many of whom had no knowledge about the existence of the various regional and international mechanisms, received relevant information and resources through this workshop. As part of the material provided to the participants, they received vital references assisting them in broadening their knowledge about their work. Several participants clearly stated that the newly gained awareness on networking, advocacy and enabling strategies to engage the African Commission and UN mechanisms have given them an opportunity to improve on their skills and face the challenges ahead.

As an organization, CI benefited immensely from the participants' expertise and their various organizational backgrounds clearly depicting the wide range of human rights work and the specific challenges they face in their different countries. The participants' contributions to the discussion were keenly noted by CI and will inform future program planning to enhance the relevance of the African Forefront Rights Defender's work for Civil Society Actors in Africa. In line with the aim of the workshop, CI considers this workshop to have achieved its objectives. Future similar activities will be planned in light of the lessons learnt during this event having proven the importance to take knowledge to Civil Society Actors and thereby strengthening their potential to carry out their work effectively.

Annex 1. Agenda

TIME	ACTIVITY
12:00-12:15	Arrival of participants /Registration
12:15-12:30	Introduction
12:30-12:40	Statement from CIVICUS and Conscience International (CI)
12:40-13:30	The enabling environment for Civil Society in Africa Presenter: Clement Voule Discussions
13:30- 14:10	Lunch Break
14:20-15:10	Freedom of expression, association and assembly Presenter: Corlett Letlojane Discussions
15:10-16:00	Networking, advocacy and enabling strategies to engage the African Commission and UN mechanisms Presenter: Gaye Sowe Discussions
16:00- 16:20	Drafting of a statement
16:20-16:30	The way forward Closing Remarks

Annex 2. List of Participants

No	Name	Organization/Country	Email
1	Fredrick .E. Pius	Youth & Children Art Foundation - The Gambia	ycafoundation@gmail.com
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Annex 3. List of Resource Persons

No	Name	Organization	Position
1	Clement Voule	International Service for Human Rights (ISHR)	Manager of Programs
2	Corlett Letlojane	Human Rights Institute of South Africa (HURISA)	Executive Director
3	Gaye Sowe	Institute for Human Rights and Development in Africa (IHRDA)	Senior Legal Officer
4	Shaka Ceesay	Conscience International (CI)	Director

Annex 4. List of Coordination Team

No	Name	Organization	Position
1	Shaka Ceesay	Conscience International (CI)	Director
2	Phyllis Machuka	Conscience International (CI)	Finance and Administrator
3	Fatoumata Darboe	Conscience International (CI)	Office Secretary

Annex 5. Organization Contact

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