

## **Lagos hosts regional campaign for FOI regime in Africa**

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IN their discussion, intervention and submission, they were frank, bold and assertive. Of course, they should. Out of the 69 countries around the world that had adopted access to information laws or constitutional provisions, only three are from Africa. And unfortunately, none is from West African region. South Africa in 2000; Angola in 2002; and Uganda adopted it in 2005.

As a result, one theme ran through the two-day Regional Workshop on Freedom of Information in Africa held last weekend at the Peninsula Resort, Kilometre 25, Lekki-Epe Expressway, Lagos-the need to establish a regional Freedom of Information Centre through which networking and collaborative activities can be coordinated and through which advocacy and monitoring strategies can be discussed and strengthened.

Facilitated by the Media Rights Agenda (MRA) in collaboration with the Open Society Justice Initiative (OSJI), the Africaness in the gathering was reflected in the large turn-out of participants from the continent.

In attendance were Gabriel Ayite Baglo, Director, Regional Africa Office, International Federation of Journalists (IFJ); Nana Oye Lithur of Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative, (CHRI, Africa Office), Accra, Ghana; Maurice Nguefack, Transparency International, Cameroon; Ibrahim Famakan Coulibaly, President, West African Journalists Association (WAJA), Mali; Souleymane Diallo, President, West African Editors Forum, Guinea; and Priscilla Nyokabi Kanyua of Kenya Section of the International Commission of Jurists, Kenya.

Others were George Williams, Liberia Democracy Watch; Peaches Suah, Centre for Transparency and Accountability in Liberia; Dr. Emmanuel Kamiyogo, Faculty of Law, University of Cameroon; Jeannette Quarcoopone, Media Foundation for West Africa, Ghana; Patrick Tumwine, Human Rights Network, Uganda; Cheriff Mouminasy, Centre De Presse Norbert Zango, Burkina Faso; Sanjo Camara, Gambia Press Union; Emmanuel Saffa Abdulai, Society for Democratic Initiatives, Sierra Leone; Annes Ebo'o, Citizens Governance Initiative, Cameroon; Alfred Carew, National Forum on Human Rights, Sierra Leone; Joseph-Perzo Anago, Maison Des Medias, Benin Republic; Malcolm, Joseph, Centre for Media Studies and Peace Building, Liberia; and Diallo Oumar, Senegal.

From OSJI were Sandra Coliver and Darian Pavli, United States of America, Maxwell Kadiri and Chidi Anselm Odinkalu, Nigeria, while Gergana Jouleva of Access to Information Programme (AIP) from Bulgaria underscored international dimension to the workshop. In fact, two sessions were facilitated by Jouleva where participants shared experience from Bulgaria. The country adopted FOI law in 2000.

Apart from officials of OSJI who are Nigerians, the country was represented by Lanre Arogundade, International Press Centre (IPC), Lagos and Edetaen Ojo, MRA Executive Director.

As an interactive gathering, the session on country reports on the state of Freedom of Information especially by representatives from West African countries, was revealing and stimulating. Speakers took their turn after one another with focus on challenges and

milestones on the road to establish FOI regime in the sub-region. But when Ojo took participants through the process of having the FOIB passed in Nigeria, there was a consensus that countries in West Africa especially, have a lot to learn from the Nigerian experience. Although the bill is yet to be passed.

There was a demand that a documentation of the struggle so far with emphasis on strategies adopted which have largely enhanced the sustenance of the advocacy in the last seven years of democracy in the country should be produced. The argument was that such document will empower other advocacy programmes in other part of the sub-region. Areas such as effective engagement with the parliamentarians; public enlightenment; media support; strong link with strategic government agencies such as EFCC, ICPC, Budget Monitoring Unit among others; effective use of ICT tool especially GSM in text messaging; FOI coalition online; training for media workers, especially journalists; development of briefing materials among others were mentioned as strategies that could be exported to facilitate result-oriented advocacy programmes in other countries in the continent.

Earlier at the opening session on Friday, MRA head had told participants that "the workshop is being held in the context of a global movement towards the adoption of Freedom of Information laws, which finds Africa, particularly West Africa, lagging behind."

He presented a global overview of the struggle saying "at the present time, about 70 countries around the world have Freedom of Information laws. Africa accounts for only 4 of these, if we count Zimbabwe. No West African country has a Freedom of Information Law. In 2002, the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights laid a strong basis for FOI laws on the continent."

According to Ojo, the commission set standards for FOI laws for member states of the African Union (AU) when it adopted the Declaration of Principles on Freedom of Expression in Africa. Reference was made to Article 4 of the Declaration stipulating that, "Public bodies hold information not for themselves but as custodians of the public good and everyone has a right to access this information, subject only to clearly defined rules established by law."

Within West Africa, Ojo said, there was further justification provided by ECOWAS Statutes for access to information. Article 66 of the Treaty of ECOWAS, he remarked, encourages the free flow of information within national borders as well as regional cooperation in the area of information. The Treaty stipulates, "In order to involve more closely the citizens of the Community in the regional integration process, Member States agree to co-operate in the area of information. To this end, they undertake as follows:

- To maintain within their borders, and between one another, freedom of access for professionals of the communication industry & for information sources;
- To facilitate exchange of information between their press organs; to promote & foster effective dissemination of information within the Community."

Ojo however acknowledged that there are initiatives towards the adoption of FOI laws in some countries in the region. These initiatives, according to him, are being led and driven by civil society organizations and coalitions. But in most of these countries, he lamented that civil society is largely weak and lacking in experience to engage with public authorities. "There is also very little experience on FOI advocacy to fall back on," he added.

Therefore, the workshop, he reiterated was to examine the state of Freedom of Information in Africa. Not only that, it was also designed to identify the challenges which Freedom of Information advocates in the region face, and assess the prospects for the adoption of Freedom of Information in different countries in the region in the near future. Part of the objectives is also to strengthen the momentum behind campaigns for the adoption and implementation of freedom of information laws in Africa through greater networking and collaboration among civil society organizations involved in such campaigns or implementation of initiatives.

Other objectives include enabling civil society organizations in Africa to share experiences and strategies in promoting and monitoring the implementation of freedom of information laws; enhancing their capacity to carry out effective advocacy and monitoring strategies as may be appropriate for their contexts, as well as mapping out a framework for such a centre and the basis for future cooperation and coordination among civil society organizations in the region.

Accomplishment of the context and objectives of the workshop were approached through presentations especially by Sandra Coliver, Gergan Jouleva, Darian Pavli, Edetaen Ojo and Maxwell Kadiri. There was also a video documentary entitled Accounts and Accountability, on the Right to Information Movement in Rural Rajasthan, India.

Some of the issues examined included Freedom of Information around the world: the Global Movement and Lessons Learned; Mounting effective campaigns for the adoption of FOI Laws; Drafting effective FOI Laws; Strategies for Litigation, Monitoring and Implementation; as well as Framework for collaboration and networking on Freedom of Information in West Africa among others.

Curtain was drawn on the workshop yesterday with an appeal that Right to Know Day which is on September 28, 2006 should be celebrated with funfair and optimism.