

Strategies for the defence of human rights

African activists share their experiences in Dakar

Chérif Faye, *Le Sud Quotidien* (Senegal),
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About 15 human rights defenders have been meeting in Dakar since yesterday, Wednesday 27 April. These activists, having come from a number of West African countries, are discussing the topic, “Community-driven initiatives: Sharing tools to increase impacts in West Africa”. This meeting is organised by the NGO [Lumière Synergie pour le Développement](#), in partnership with [OSIWA](#) (Open Society Initiative for West Africa), and [Business & Human Rights Resource Centre](#).



credit: Le Sud Quotidien

...The workshop has brought together about 15 civil society activists from Senegal, Côte d’Ivoire, Nigeria, Sierra Leone, Niger and Cameroon, among other countries [also Ghana, Guinea and Republic of Congo]. Each [activist] presented a specific example of human rights abuses related to investment projects – most of them financed by multilateral [and bilateral] development institutions, like the World Bank, the European Investment Bank, the African Development Bank, and the Agence Française de Développement, to name just a few. The experiences that participants shared show a lax attitude by governments toward the protection of their citizens.

COMMITMENTS TO COMMUNITIES

From Sierra Leone, Shiaka Musa Sama described the stranglehold of Bolloré over a sizeable territory. The struggle launched by local communities in 2011 eventually led to the arrest by police and criminal charges against about 50 people for merely insisting on their rights to information [about the plantation’s impacts on their lands]. “We realised that the government, which should have supported us, had taken the side of foreign investors, and was defending their interests. The politicians only think about getting rich. As soon as they are elected, they turn their backs on those who voted for them,” said the Sierra Leonean activist.

Paul Guy Hyomeni, National Coordinator of [Réseau Camerounais des organisations des droits de l’homme](#) (Cameroonian Network of Human Rights Organizations, or RECODH) described the case of a hydroelectric dam that has harmed 20,000 inhabitants in 69 villages in eastern Cameroon. Affecting 540 km² at Lom Pangar, the dam, being developed by the [state-owned] Electricity Development Corporation, is a major project. “After having carried out advocacy and published a detailed report to denounce the project, [proponents of the project] tried to undermine our network by corrupting it. They offered us money to organise a press conference saying that our report was erroneous,” he explained. He said that chemicals have been dumped into the river used by local people for drinking water, and children’s education has been negatively impacted by being displaced for the project.

YOUTH PUSHED TOWARD BOKO HARAM IN NIGER

Ousmane Djibo, vice-coordinator of Groupe de réflexion et d’action sur les industries extractives du Niger (GREN) laid out the problems created by oil drilling in his country. He sees increased unemployment and a degraded environment. “...Grazing lands have been reduced because of the pipelines everywhere, upsetting local populations. Many young people are leaving for Nigeria, to join Boko Haram. They return seeking revenge against their parents, and the bureaucrats who oppress them. It’s a huge problem,” says Mr. Djibo. With the support of OSIWA, he organised a caravan to meet with local populations in two regions affected by oil drilling and refining. On the ground, his team observed that the companies had lied: Although they said that they had built schools, in fact they

simply used containers in which they had transported their equipment to the site as classrooms. The members of GREN were intimidated in their visit to the region, and were required [by the police] to turn back to Difa.

Prince Chima Williams, director of legal resources for the [Nigerian arm of Friends of the Earth](#), shared the experience of fisherfolk from six regions in the Niger Delta, who suffered from oil pollution caused by a spill on 21 December 2011 during a transfer of crude oil by Shell. This damaged the fishing [that locals in the area depend on]...near the Bonga platform. Over 50,000 fishermen and women were forced to cease fishing in the area and leave, due to the pollution and the risk of contamination from the oil dispersant chemicals. [Friends of the Earth Nigeria] then launched a lawsuit against the company...although the organization has never been able to obtain financial support for this work.

According to Greg Regaignon, of Business & Human Rights Resource Centre, “In Senegal and elsewhere, economic development is often privileged, without protecting the rights of communities or attending to the local impacts of mining, infrastructure, energy and agribusiness firms.” According to him, “the negative impacts such as displacement, pollution, and exclusion [of local people] from economic opportunities don’t take into account the vulnerability of communities.” For Aly Sagne, head of LSD, the point is to see how local populations can be more centrally considered, and can access remedies for harms that they suffer everywhere, from these projects carried out in the name of development.