

EU promotes human rights in Uganda

As the European Union (EU) commemorates 60 years, the Foundation for Human Rights Initiative (FHRI) wishes to express its solidarity with them as their partners and key player in the democratic process in Uganda. JACQUILINE EMODEK sat down with Dr. Livingstone Sewanyana, the foundation's executive director and talked about how EU has been instrumental in promoting human rights in Uganda and what the 60 years of its existence mean to the country.

O Firstly, familiarise us with what the Foundation for Human Rights Initiative does. What are some of the projects you are doing?

The foundation as an advocacy organisation has been working on various fronts to promote democracy and human rights in Uganda through many avenues namely; provision of legal aid to victims of human rights violations, especially women and children. On average, we support over 1,000 cases annually, most of which comprise people who are victims of unfair dismissal and land grabbing among others.

The organisation works closely with Parliament to ensure that the Bills passed meet both constitutional and human rights standards. This has been achieved through training of Members of Parliament and submission of memoranda on Bills tabled in Parliament.

We also strove to influence the enactment of laws and policy that would promote the rights of Ugandans like the most recent Human rights enforcement bill, the law revision in criminal matters miscellaneous amendment Bill seeking to abolish mandatory death sentences. Other legislations include the Prisons Act, Access to Information Act and the Amnesty Act.

FHRI also works with partners such as the Judiciary and promoting judicial activism has been one of our preoccupations, not only through training of judicial officers, but also being party to the reforms the institution is promoting.

A typical example is our appearing before the case backlog committee to give our views on case backlog and how they can be eliminated. We are also members of the sentencing guidelines committee.

We also do rights monitoring and release periodic reports with the most recent being one on pretrial detention in Uganda and Human rights during the election

We work closely with EU in ensuring that there is respect of human life through our campaign against the death penalty not only in regards to the policy, but also in improving the regulatory framework.

Through Citizens' Coalition for Electoral Democracy in Uganda and the Citizens Observers Network,

which oversaw the elections last year, we have also worked to promote electoral reforms, as well as free and fair elections.

Fighting for human rights is not a mean feat. What challenges do you face?

Our main challenge is public perception; as a human rights group, we have been at the forefront of advocating for a society-friendly police. We condemn arbitrary actions by the Police and police brutality. We also speak out on mistreatment of detainees and in defence of opposition activists. As a result, we are perceived as opposition-leaning and yet we are simply doing our work.

There is also the issue of poverty and a high unemployment rate in the country, with over 83% of the youth unemployed. This creates a serious dependency, which fosters domestic violence and child neglect by parents that cannot afford to look after the families.

When it comes to the youth, our main challenge is with those who leave the country to get jobs and come back to report cases of abuse and mistreatment. This increases the case portfolio which exceeds our capacity. This is a challenge because we are currently facing limited funding due to the Eurozone crisis that emanated from the issues to do with immigration. This has made us scale down on our staffing, so when the case portfolio increases yet the staffing is down, it creates stress on our ability to deliver.

"THE EU IS DEMONSTRATING THAT COLLECTIVE ACTION MATTERS; STATES HAVE TO WORK TOGETHER TO ACHIEVE COMMON GOALS"

FHRI executive director Dr. Livingstone Sewanyana during an interview at the New Vision head office in Kampala last week. Photo by Abbey Ramadhan



A European Union observer at a voter education rally at a market in Moroto district last year

Despite the Eurozone crisis, you have maintained your partnership with the EU as you earlier highlighted. How is the union instrumental in advancing the mission of FHRI and human rights in Uganda?

The EU stands out as one of the major partners of Uganda in infrastructural development, as well as building human technical capacity in all areas through sharing of expertise.

We are aware that one of Uganda's major challenges is the weakness of its institutions to deliver on their mandate, especially in the area of service delivery.

As an organisation seeking to promote police reform, judicial reform, prisons reform, legislative reform, we benefit from EU because of the concept of shared values.

It is an organisation that seeks to deepen democracy in Uganda by ensuring that there is effective leadership and respect for the dignity of individuals.

What are some of the projects you have worked on with EU to promote human rights in Uganda?

Importantly, EU's support is direct and indirect from the Democratic Governance Facility, which is a consortium of donors.

We deployed over 700 people to observe the February 2016 elections on a long-term basis and about 900 observers on a short-term basis (that is the election day and after). This included training and facilitation, which was catered for by the European Union and other members of the Democratic Governance Facility. EU contributed 336,000 euros.

They have also supported our rights awareness work among communities and 31 universities for 10 years. The foundation currently has about 37 human rights clubs in universities which engage in democracy-related activities and human rights issues like debates. This aims to nurture

a new cadre of leadership that can cause social transformation.

What does EU marking 60 years mean to the FHRI and Uganda as a whole?

Sixty years of European Union means the necessity for us to continue learning from the European experience. They are demonstrating that collective action matters; states have to work together to achieve common goals.

It also means consolidating the democratic ideals which they stand for like no country practices the death penalty in the union, but more importantly, they appreciate the importance of treating the citizen with respect; the individual is supreme.

Six decades of promoting these values should be a lesson to Ugandans that we need to work together towards that.

Lastly, the level of stability Europe enjoys today after a traumatic experience should teach us that states can overcome situations of conflicts, poverty and unemployment if they put their heads together and speak with one voice.

What lessons can the East African Community learn from EU?

Being in existence for 60 years also shows you that nothing should be taken for granted because after 60 years, we are seeing countries like Britain leaving the union. Recently one of the French candidates in the presidential elections has been advocating to leave the EU.

So you learn that after 60 years, it is important to work on the unity and not take it for granted. You remember our East African Community disintegrated in the past and now it has been revived. However, it is yet to come to terms with common values.

They are talking about a federation, but they should also learn that having such a federation is not easy; there will always be issues around economic performance, political participation, state interests, and refugees. Therefore, they need to work hard for the survival of the leadership and draw lessons from Europe as architects of better governance, democracy, peace and political stability.

We can also learn the spirit of giving; even though these countries came together for their own good, they went on to contribute to global governance, stability and development.

The people that receive the funds should in turn appreciate that the money is taxpayers' money from those in Europe; those who divert these resources for their own need should bear in mind that we cannot attain the level of economic prosperity we need to achieve Vision 2040.