

THE THIRD ANNUAL IHEYO REGIONAL WORKING GROUP MEETING AND TRAINING

2 – 4 DECEMBER 2014, NAIROBI, KENYA

THEME: SECULAR SOCIAL JUSTICE – ACHIEVING PRAXIS



*The third Annual IHEYO regional working group meeting and training was convened by the Kenyan Humanist Association and brought together East African humanist youth from diverse backgrounds and regions, from suburbs and townships, as well as those from economically advantaged and disadvantaged backgrounds, who have been witnesses to the reality of marginalization, poverty and oppression. There were 22 attendees in total. The countries represented were Sudan, Burundi, Uganda and Kenya. They came to learn and share how they could combine activist engagement with democratic concerns for social justice and equality; how they can achieve through rationality a society no longer exploited by the power elites of church, state and business.*



The opening plenary commenced with an encouraging welcome address from Mr. Moses Alusala, Chair, Kenyan Humanist Association. He highlighted the fact that poverty and social justice are the most immediate and central areas of

common concern in Africa as stated in the global consensus that underlies the 2000 Millennium Declaration and the Millennium Development Goals. “The Sub-Saharan African region has the second worst gender-related development indicators after South East Asia according to the Human Development Report for 2012/2013, ”. He proceeded by stressing the need to focus on poor people, patterns of exclusion and the disappointment of unfulfilled human potential. “Women continue to be oppressed by African tradition, religious fundamentalism, colonial patriarchy and global capitalism. As helpful as the faith based interventions and strategies are, they stop short of engaging with the root cause of conservative, gender-biased religion.” He further emphasized the importance of empowering young people to take action to create a more just world stating that they are a powerful force that can be harnessed for civic engagement.



Mr. George Ongere of Centre for Inquiry Kenya gave a talk on humanism and altruism in which he affirmed that civic engagement and community service are the most appropriate forms of altruism and that the humanist community should be as civically engaged as their religious counterparts, if not more. He emphasised the need for greater visibility of organised humanist service groups and that the IHEYO meeting should herald the beginning of that shift.



Mr Lukyamuzi Joseph of HALEA Uganda, gave a talk on critical thinking as one of the crucial skills needed in social justice activism. He stressed

that the youth needed to address social and political issues with the tools of critical thinking. Mr Lukyamuzi further stated that there is need to apply skeptical principles to every facet of life and society. "While we may not be able to make the same value judgements and have the same opinions, the end goal of skeptical movements should be that no matter the circumstance, facts and evidence should be critically examined," he added.



The delegates expressed concern over the harm caused on women and children by the ongoing civil war in South Sudan. Mr James Luyobya (Humanist and Ethical union of South Sudan), stated that religious differences are one of the main causes of the wars in South Sudan. He explained how religious institutions in South Sudan have often failed to act in accordance with their vision. Inter-faith violence, 'communalism', aggressive proselytising and unpalatable manoeuvring for power or money has been real obstacles to social and economic well-being in South Sudan. He recounted how the impact of war, intensified by desertification, drought and famine has taken their toll on women and children. How they suffer from frequent incidences of kidnapping and assault from soldiers and flee the war with no assets or skills and survive through domestic work, begging, petty trading, beer brewing and prostitution.

The delegates later raised concern over the conventional approach to peacemaking in most of the countries torn by internal conflict and violence in Africa where powerful countries establish a cease-fire between warring parties, followed by imposition of the dominant model of markets and electoral politics. This "neoliberal" approach, they alleged, is designed to put in place the institutional forms of a peaceful society without seriously considering questions of social justice.



Mr. Boaz Adhengo gave a power point presentation on the Future of Humanism in Africa and stressed the need of regional partnership and collaboration of humanist groups to achieve synergy.



Mr. Ayella Collins of Humanist Empowerment of Livelihoods in Uganda gave a talk on challenges of humanism in Africa which as he stated, includes lack of enough funds, religious fundamentalism and illiteracy. The conference made a firm commitment to deal with the challenges.



Mr. Blaise Ntakaritumana of Burundi

Humanist Charity gave a talk on how intersecting identity markers such as race, gender, ethnicity, disability, religiosity and nationality play in shaping the experiences of 'non-normative' sexual and gender diversities in Burundi. He explained how a specifically literalist interpretation of Christianity and Islam, as promoted by fundamentalist groups from outside Africa are the cause of the recent wave of homophobia in the country.



Mr. Moses Alusala of the Kenyan

Humanist Association gave training on Social Justice Advocacy and stressed the need to nurture social justice skills such as critical thinking, cooperation and conflict resolution, challenging injustice & inequity and participation.



Mr. Kato Mukasa gave a talk on the meaning of humanism and its origin in the Renaissance while emphasizing that Africa has always had a humanism that predates any codification of the ideology. He later trained the youth on fundraising and resource mobilisation skills as well as capacity building.

The conference noted that the widespread witchcraft allegations in Eastern Africa was as a result of the combined effects of age and sex discrimination on older women as well as religious induced superstitions. They proposed plans for youth to support campaigns to stop violence against women, promote critical thinking and ensure gender equality within the secular movement. It was noted that violence against women was undermining efforts to achieve the millennium development goals in Africa.

The delegates later decried the apparently unstoppable Islamist militancy in the region as a result of jihadist indoctrination of youth and proposed de-radicalisation countermeasures through critical thinking and economic empowerment.

The forming of a regional network was one of the Agenda items. The participants suggested a network (East African Humanist Network) that would amplify the social justice worldview, platform and community context. The participants suggested a magazine for the network which would act as a platform for secular social justice in East Africa, providing cutting-edge commentary on current affairs, development, human rights, and culture in the region. The magazine, to be named Active Humanist would act as a forum for people to articulate their dreams and share information, facilitating the building of a movement for civic engagement. Mr. Boaz Adhengo of Jahwar Amber Humanist Trust Fund was appointed as editor for the magazine, while Lukyamuzi Joseph, Debra O. Ouko and Boaz Adhengo were to act as the advisory council for the network. The delegates resolved that the IHEU country representatives for each respective country would also serve as the country coordinators for the network.

The conference emphasized the need to strengthen the capacity of humanist youth organizations in Africa to promote social justice by providing information, stimulating debate and supporting advocacy.

After ample deliberation, the conference elected Mr. Moses Alusala as the Kenya country coordinator for IHEYO, taking over from George Ongere of CFI/Kenya. They also resolved that the 2015 conference would be held in Rwanda.

In conclusion the delegates resolved that religious concepts are inadequate or false relative to the values of rescuing them from systemic injustices destroying so many millions of human lives in the Eastern African region and that there was need to form a network to amplify the social justice worldview, platform and community context of radical and progressive East African humanists.

The participants later expressed their thanks to the Kenyan Humanist Association for their smooth organisation of the conference, and IHEYO and Hivos for sponsoring the event. In the same vein, they pointed out that the conference attained its sought objectives while signalling their efforts to follow through with their advocacy action items.

Report by Moses Alusala

Chair, KHA