



Enhancing the capacity of human rights defenders to monitor public policy and respond to threats in West Africa

Introduction

In spite of some of the positive gains made in the quest for democratisation in most countries in the West Africa region, citizens are still unable to fully exercise fundamental human rights including the rights of association, assembly and expression. Prompted by concerns over national security, foreign influence or the desire to promote a particular agenda, state institutions and agents in countries in the region continue to limit civic space through restrictive legislation, actions and policies that curtail the influence of independent civil society.

With freedom of expression, association and assembly under attack, experience dictates a greater need for intervention at the early stages of the drafting process of restrictive laws, policies or moves to introduce restrictive practices in order to effectively offset threats. Through early intervention at an opportune moment, and engagement before the actual enactment of a law or policy, the success of influencing and cooperating with a government or vested stakeholder in the revision of particular action is greatly increased.

Objective of the workshop

Within this context, CIVICUS and RESOCIDE, plan to organise a workshop on 2-3 July which will bring participants working on human rights issues from the region and experts from different countries around the world. The workshop will seek to devise ways in which human rights organisations in the region will monitor and respond to threats to civil society and human rights defenders and adequately respond to these threats.

It will also focus on models which will enable civil society and human rights activists to intervene pre-emptively before attacks occur or before laws are promulgated to increase the likelihood of reversing such threats. It will create a network in the region that seeks to monitor and identify indications of impending threats to civil society in order to enable effective and pre-emptive responses to restrictive laws and policies.

By addressing the first signs of danger in order to effectively address restrictive laws and practices before they are enacted, the network will be able to alert regional and international civil society actors and decision makers possibly preventing such threats from progressing further. In addition to orienting and training partners on how to use the network to monitor and respond to threats, the workshop will also serve as a forum for the exchange of experiences and further refine communications methods to publicise situations where civil society activities are threatened. To better coordinate and sustain effective pressure on legislation, policy or other actions by governments and stakeholders that threaten civil society, there is need to centralise information, improve networking capacities and enhance the dissemination of knowledge.

More specifically the workshop will focus on:

- the creation of a West African Network of civil society organisations that will identify and monitor indications of impending threats to civil society and human rights defenders to enable pre-emptive and effective responses to restrictive actions, laws and policies.
- an assessment of existing laws and regulations in West Africa and how these laws affect civil society and human rights defenders
- training of participants on how to engage with regional, continental and international bodies on human rights issues
- sharing of experiences on communication mechanisms and methods to publicise situations when civil society is under threat
- creation of a central information system to enhance information sharing on ways to respond to threats.