

NGO Forum | Protecting defenders working on corporate accountability in Africa

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On 22 April 2018, in collaboration with Business and Human Rights Resource Centre, the African Coalition for Corporate Accountability and the Pan African Network of Human Rights Defenders, ISHR organised a panel on attacks against human rights defenders working on business and human rights in Africa and their access to remedy.



The panel included Francess Piagie Alghali from the Human Rights Defenders Network Sierra Leone, Ana Zbona from the Business and Human Rights Resource Centre (BHRRC), Erick Kassongo who is an expert member of the African Commission's Working Group on extractive industries, environment and human rights violations, Elizabeth Kariuki from the Kenya Human Rights Commission, Cecilia Mugo from International Commission of Jurists Kenya and Dr Michel Yoboue, executive director of the Advocacy and Research Group on Extractive Industries in Cote d'Ivoire. It was moderated by Joseph Bikanda, coordinator of the Pan African Network of Human Rights Defenders.

To start the discussion, Dr Michel Yoboue reminded the audience that at a time when a lot of states in Africa talk about emergence and development, it implies contracts with companies wishing to invest in the country. He added that these contracts can't be negotiated without the prior involvement of the local communities who can be affected by them, an important step often forgotten by states.

'Extractive is becoming the deadliest industry for those who get in the way. Communities have no power against mining industries and the human rights defenders trying to help them are stigmatised or killed,' said Cecilia Mugo.

Ana Zbona presented the Centre's research on positive and negative aspects companies can have on defenders and civic freedoms. She highlighted findings from the database of attacks on defenders working on corporate accountability, including that the agribusiness sector is the one most connected to killings in 2017. 'Human rights defenders trying to out businesses violating human rights are often victims of judicial harassment, more in Africa than anywhere else in the world,' said Zbona. In conclusion, she also underlined the attempts by some businesses, investors and industry associations to take action in defence of defenders, such as the recent statements by the International Council on Mining and Metals and the Investor Alliance for Human Rights.

Finally, Francess Piagie Alghali highlighted some of the challenges incurred by defenders working on business and human rights in Africa, especially Sierra Leone. Because of their work, they are often the victims of threats, intimidations, reprisals and stigmatised as threat to national security. 'A legal framework protecting the work of women human rights defenders is absent in most countries. When working to protect the rights of communities violated by businesses they are often intimidated and threatened with rape,' added Francess Piagie Alghali.

Some participants shared their view on the need for states and business to work alongside human rights defenders to improve the respect of human rights in business activities all over Africa.

To conclude the panel, Joseph Bikanda emphasised that in such difficult working environments for defenders involved in ensuring that businesses respect the rights of the communities affected by their work, there is a strong need for national legal frameworks to protect these defenders and the important work they accomplish.

Photo: DefendDefenders