

HURIDOCS Fifth General Assembly. Geneva, 28 February 2009

Report by the HURIDOCS Secretariat

The Fifth General Assembly of HURIDOCS was chaired by Kofi Kumado, Chair of HURIDOCS. It was attended by 45 participants and 8 observers.

Kofi Kumado opened the meeting by welcoming all. He then gave an overview of the structure of HURIDOCS, pointing out that it is a global, decentralized network with a modest Secretariat.

The Board of HURIDOCS is called Continuation Committee (CC), and it has seven members. Its composition reflects a geographical division, with at present two members from Europe and one from Africa, Asia, Latin America, North America and the Middle East. It consists of individuals who should be willing to make time and sometime use resources available for the benefit of the network. CC members do not get paid, and only receive reimbursement of the costs of travel, board and lodging.

During the past period, the CC members carried out various concrete tasks. At the moment, one of them is Executive Director. Apart from developing strategies, approving programmes and monitoring their implementation, members of the CC members have also to be active in fund-raising. HURIDOCS is glad that substantial funding was obtained for the Conference.

Kofi Kumado thanked the new members of the CC and IAC in advance, can count upon support from the network.

Judith Dueck, CC member, gave an overview of the highlights of activities and developments within the network since the Fourth General Assembly in Gammarth (Tunisia) in March 1998. She referred to the document *Harnessing the power of information: HURIDOCS Activities 1998 to 2008*, a preliminary version of which had been distributed, and to the *Strategic Plan 2008-2012*.

The activities were presented within the framework of the four goals of HURIDOCS as listed in the present Strategic Plan:

- Develop and Adapt Human Rights Information Handling Tools for Action
- Build Capacity and Empower organisations to manage Information
- Link Human Rights Communities to foster synergies
- Provide Leadership, Advisory and Support Services to sustain initiatives

Aurora Javate de Dios, HURIDOCS Board member, gave a presentation on the future directions of HURIDOCS. She highlighted that standards for information management will continue to be relevant tools for human rights organisations. She also pointed out that the last three days had given many ideas with regard to new partnerships. HURIDOCS links up various actors within the “human rights community”: NGOs, victims, lawyers and governments, for the improvement of human rights. A new initiative involves setting up a learning hub on human rights documentation.

HURIDOCS Treasurer Agnethe Olesen gave an overview of the financial situation of HURIDOCS over the last ten year. She pointed out that HURIDOCS has modest financial means. While it does not want to have a huge infrastructure, it needs a stronger financial basis than was the case in the past period.

She also pointed to some of the challenges faced in obtaining financial support:

- the amount of funding available for human rights has decreased in comparison to funding

- available for development, and more recently for humanitarian assistance and relief;
- core funding is more difficult to obtain
- many donors give priority to supporting organisations in the South and NGOs in their own countries.

HURIDOCS has been rather successful in obtaining funds for joint projects in collaboration with partners, and it will continue to seek support in this way.

Discussion

Ibrahim Sarr (RADDHO, Senegal) thanked the Continuation Committee for its work over the last 11 years. Realising that HURIDOCS cannot often generate funds for convening a major Conference and General Assembly, he wondered if the time frame for convening General Assemblies should be expanded beyond the present five years.

He also requested that HURIDOCS should seek to facilitate access to information for organisations based in the South, in collaboration with partners.

Olga Sadovskaya (INGO Committee Against Torture, Russia) remarked that donors show an increasing interest in the post-Soviet countries. HURIDOCS could work together with human rights groups in Central Asian countries, and assist them in preparing reports for the Universal Periodic Review.

Adilur Rahman Khan (Odhikar, Bangladesh) said that there is need for regional communication mechanisms within HURIDOCS, with meetings of network participants in Asia, Africa and Latin-America.

Nelly Herrera (CEDHU, Ecuador) mentioned that there were several needs in Latin America, and that a list of priorities should be established. Her organisation requires assistance from HURIDOCS in collecting information.

Kofi Kumado responded with regard to finances that HURIDOCS prefers to receive multi-annual funding. Donors prefer to provide partial funding, and therefore NGOs should seek to diversify their sources of income. When this succeeds, the original donors may withdraw and provide support to other organisations. Donors prefer indeed to fund projects requested by organisations in the South, and HURIDOCS is always interested to be a partner in such projects. He also noted that there appears to be less political support for economic, social and cultural rights. NGOs should maintain certain ethical principles and not accept any funding that is available to them.

He confirmed that the NGO Forum of the African Commission was at times attended by the then Executive Director and other officers of HURIDOCS.

Steve Wright of Leeds Metropolitan University pointed to the need to see the big picture. Because of climate change, a “tsunami of human rights violations” may take place, possibly already in the coming few years. HURIDOCS tools should be used and adapted to document such large-scale violations.

He pointed to opportunities for funding, remarking that HURIDOCS should package its activities in the right way and explore opportunities for collaboration.

John Asit Das (Ain o Salish Kendra, Bangladesh) inquired with regard to the perspectives of expanding HURIDOCS activities to India, Pakistan and Nepal. It was pointed out that HURIDOCS

has already undertaken various activities in these countries. Suggestions for new contacts within the South-East Asian region, and for any other region, are always welcome.

Hannah Forster (African Centre for Democracy and Human Rights Studies, The Gambia) pointed to the need to further extend HURIDOCS' activities in Africa. A useful opportunity to familiarise several African NGOs with the work of HURIDOCS would be a presentation at the NGO Forum preceding the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights. The Centre, as Convenor of this Forum, would be able to provide the necessary space and would also welcome HURIDOCS at the Book fair.

She also pointed to the need to make better use of the expertise of the members of the International Advisory Council.

In order for the network to be sustainable, it is crucial to engage partners on the ground, and in particular young people. This should be done among others by training of trainers.

A suggestion was made for HURIDOCS to collaborate with networks such as the Euro-Mediterranean Human Rights Network and the International Federation of Human Rights Leagues (FIDH), which have a need for HURIDOCS tools and knowledge

Kofi Kumado responded that HURIDOCS is "coalition of the willing when willing". HURIDOCS does collaborate with various thematic and regional networks. The Arab Human Rights Information Network (AHRINET) was set up in collaboration with the Arab Institute for Human Rights and other groups, and organised various training activities in the region.

Mandeep Tiwana (CIVICUS) pointed to the importance of documenting human rights of violations for early warning system, on which his organisation is working.

Inputs from the regions

Regional meetings had taken place during the Conference that preceded the General Assembly, and the different regions provided reports.

Saskia Bal (Netherlands Institute of Human Rights) gave a presentation of the activities of the **European** network, called European Co-ordination Committee on Human Rights Documentation (ECCHRD). This group has been able to hold a meeting almost every year, hosted by human rights organisations and institutions in different parts of Europe. The Secretariat has been rotating, and is now with a conglomerate of Nordic institutions, namely the Human Rights Centre at Abo Akademi, the Raoul Wallenberg Institute and the Norwegian Centre for Human Rights. The agenda of the meetings is determined by the needs of the participants and the availability of local experts. At times, training events were held in conjunction with the meeting. Each session has a presentation of HURIDOCS activities, and the use of HURIDOCS tools is promoted.

Opportunities which should be further explored include the use of a cumulative on-line database and the use of meta-tagging for describing documents on Websites.

Nina Attalah (Al-Haq) reported that for the **Middle East-Arab world**, a main topic is the collection of evidence on large-scale violations in Gaza. This requires expertise in fact-finding and documentation. Al Haq is preparing evidence for national courts, while governments may require assistance in bringing cases to the International Criminal Court. Collaboration with HURIDOCS would be welcome.

She noted that there was limited participation from the Arab world at the Conference, and suggested that HURIDOCS strengthens relations with Arab-speaking organisations. It would be important to make the new OpenEvsys software available in Arabic.

Rosario Narvaez (APRODEH, Peru) remarked that in **Latin America** various long-standing human rights organisations have collected large amounts of documentation. Their activities relate among others to impunity and creating historical memory. Other important topics are social conflict and the operations of multinational companies. The problems they face relate in particular to the lack of resources.

Interesting strategies and tools have been developed to provide information required by internal and external users, including development of software and the technical application of statistical data. The Latin American organisations represented already use HURIDOCS methods and tools, and so are others including Truth Commissions and Prosecutor's Offices.

The Latin American network Red de Informatica y Documentación en Derechos Humanos de America Latina y el Caribe (RIDHUALC) has been less active over the last years. Its membership list should be updated, so that participants are better aware of who is doing what. It is particularly important to share information about case work.

Jean Enriquez (Coalition against Trafficking in Women-Asia Pacific) presented the report for the **Asian region**. She pointed out that the needs expressed at the meeting include more information about the structure and membership of HURIDOCS.

Activities which were considered to be particularly useful include Training of trainers; training and resources on the use of communication tools and technologies to protect human rights defenders and training on legal research and human rights education. The collaboration among organisations can be strengthened if members share available resources, good practices, experiences, tactics and technical expertise.

In Asia, HURIDOCS should seek partnership with groups that have limited access to information, them, identify their needs and provide technical support. Linkages should be made between different tools, sources of information, technologies and ways of communications. It is important that resources (tools, information) are available in local languages and that experiences are shared. The use of HURIDOCS tools should be promoted in each country or sub-region of the Asian continent.

The regional report for **Africa** was presented by Hannah Forster (African Centre for Democracy and Human Rights Studies). She pointed out that the organisations present do want to be actively involved in HURIDOCS. Over the past decade, HURIDOCS organised several training activities and other events in the African region. Information on ongoing and planned activities should be better shared with others in the network.

Among the issues which are of priority concern to African organisations are security of communication and of data, and support in coping with legislation that limits the freedom of association of human rights groups.

There is a need for more technical expertise, and for training on documentation of human rights violations and the new Open Evsys software. The training should also include sessions which explain the potential of organs such as the Universal Periodic Review and the International Criminal Court.

HURIDOCS provided in-depth advice and technical support to NGOs in Zimbabwe, and should seek to respond to similar needs in other countries.

There is a need to evaluate the impact of HURIDOCS trainings, in order to enhance its sustainability. The capacities of local resource persons should be strengthened through training of trainers activities.

Kofi Kumado thanked the rapporteurs; there were no further questions.

Elections

The elections were introduced by Jonathan Kuttab, Chair of Election Committee. He emphasised that HURIDOCS is not an organisation in the ordinary sense of the word, but rather a network. As such, it is driven by network members, and those who want to get more out of it should actively seek collaboration.

With regard to the elections, Jonathan Kuttab pointed out that the Constitution provides that the Continuation Committee (CC) is to consist of three to seven members from different regions and fields of expertise. Its members shall serve in their individual capacity and determine their own procedures. The CC can attribute functions (President, Treasurer) to its members, and co-opt additional members if required.

For this election, a request was sent out in advance to all Conference participants to indicate their interest to be member of the CC, the International Advisory Council (IAC) or the Election Committee. As the number of spontaneous candidatures received for the CC was not sufficient, some recruitment had to be done.

Jonathan Kuttab noted that there was a strong interest to join the IAC, which should reflect the regional structures as well as the diversity of participants active in HURIDOCS. He encouraged also those who had shown their interest but would not be elected to continue their engagement with HURIDOCS.

Based on the consultations that had taken place, Hanne Stemmann as member of the Election Committee proposed to the General Assembly a slate of officers for HURIDOCS.

The following slate was presented for the Continuation Committee:

Judith Dueck (Canada)
Jean Enriquez (Philippines)
Frej Fenniche (Tunisia)
Hannah Forster (Gambia)
Edward Halpin (United Kingdom)
Rosario Narvaez (Peru)
Agnethe Olesen (Denmark).

No alternative slates were presented. The General Assembly adopted this slate by acclamation, without objections.

The slate proposed for the IAC consisted of 18 members, which gives the CC a small margin to add a few more members, in the light of needs and experiences. The following slate was presented:

Adama Dieng (Tanzania)

Ibrahim Sarr (Senegal)
André M. Titus (South Africa)

Aurora Javate de Dios (Philippines)
Adilur Rahman Khan (Bangladesh)

Dan Brickley (United Kingdom)
James Lawson (France)
Tom Longley (United Kingdom)
Hans Thoolen (Greece)

Luis Marina Lozano (Argentina)
Aida Maria Noval (Mexico)
Nelly Benilde Herrera Román (Ecuador)
Lucrecia Molina Theissen (Costa Rica)

Nina Atallah (Palestine)
Youssef El-Bouhairi (Morocco)

Lars Bromley (United States)
Sam Gregory (United States)
William R. Pace (United States-Netherlands)

No alternative slates were presented. The General Assembly adopted this slate by acclamation, without objections.

Kofi Kumado pointed to the need for both participation and criticism.

Rosario Narvaez pointed to the need to clarify the meaning of the membership of HURIDOCS. She remarked that members should be made better aware of the implications of membership, and that the election process should be more democratic. Kofi Kumado replied that this was a welcome comment

Kofi thanked all participants for attending the General Assembly. He recalled the vision, of HURIDOCS, and stressed that translating this vision into concrete activities is not easy, and therefore challenging.

Kofi Kumado pointed out that he had been on the Board of HURIDOCS after the Inaugural Conference in Strasbourg 1982 and became member of the Continuation Committee in 1990. He has been Chairperson of HURIDOCS since 1992, and believed that it was in the interest of HURIDOCS to step back. He did consider that HURIDOCS is a task that he considered to be useful. He thanked the donors, and in particular Norad which provided core funding for a considerable period of time and the donors to the Conference.

He also thanked the Conference Centre, the interpreters and volunteers as well as the members of the HURIDOCS Secretariat.

Finally, Kofi Kumado thanked all participants and wished them a good travel back, expressing the hope that they would maintain contacts.

