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Grassroots Activism in Resolving Intractable Human Rights Problems: Theory and Case Studies from Ghana and Barcelona

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Going Against the Grain

University of Dayton Human Rights Center
Social Practice of Human Rights Conference, Oct. 1-4, 2019

Grassroots Activism in Resolving Intractable Human Rights Problems: Theory and Case Studies from Ghana and Barcelona

Presented by:

Mette Brogden, *University of Arizona*

Phyllis Taoua, *University of Arizona*

Rashid Abubakar Iddrisu (Wari), *CEHDA Ghana*

Durado Brooks Jr., *Independent Artist/Filmmaker*

Francis M. Abugbilla, *University of Washington*

Session: Grassroots Rights Activism: Ghana and Barcelona

Abstract:

Five presentations comprise this panel discussing grassroots activism in resolving intractable human rights problems. Presenters will provide case studies, theoretical framings, and practical steps to create salutogenic trajectories toward healthy societies and communities where marginalized people can realize human rights and freedoms to attain lives “they have reason to value” (cf. Amartya Sen). The Ghanaian and U.S. presenters include academic researchers, human rights practitioners, and independent artist/filmmakers.

Presentations:

Francis Abugbilla, “Overcoming Poverty through Youth Empowerment with Electricity and Internet Access in Rural Ghana” Ghana is one of the fastest growing economies in Africa and is considered a beacon of democracy, yet basic socio-economic needs are not met for a number of rural dwellers. For example, while 89.8% of Ghana’s urban population has access to electricity, in the rural areas only 66.6% of the population enjoy this benefit. Moreover, across Ghana, 87% of households are connected to the grid, but only 42% of those connections provide reliable power. These figures are worse in rural areas in northern Ghana and elected officials shirk their responsibilities of providing these basic services. This presentation examines electricity access and the role community activists, U.S.-based scholars and students are playing in providing solar energy to Kpantarigo, a farming community in the northeastern part of Ghana. The lack of electricity in Kpantarigo, and other communities, is having a decisively negative impact on the educational outcome of children in school. In our technologically-driven world, one must have access to technology and computers from a very young age in order to enjoy upward social mobility. Due to their lack of access to electricity and information technology, many Ghanaians in rural areas cannot pass the requisite exam to enroll in high school and, therefore, are unable to access a college education, which has become increasingly necessary in the contemporary job market. Currently, students in Kpantarigo use kerosene

lamps and flashlights to study at night, while trained teachers refuse to take jobs in this community due to the lack of social amenities, especially electricity. In addition to the deleterious effects from the lack of electricity on education in this rural area, Kpantarigo also has no medical facility due to a lack of refrigeration to store basic medicines. Due to the absence of support from their political representatives, Francis Abugbilla is working to mobilize the community of Kpantarigo in order to independently connect themselves to electricity. With the help of international organizations, they were able to create a basic solar system that provides lighting for the school at night. Francis Abugbilla, a social activist and resident of Kpantarigo will discuss the implications of this project and the remaining challenges the community faces.

Phyllis Taoua: “Relative Degrees of Freedom in Rural Ghana: Obstacles and Opportunities” Phyllis Taoua will discuss the larger framework of freedom and development in Ghana. She will consider the situation in this West African nation from the point of view of Amartya Sen’s definition of freedom as the capacity to live a life one has reason to value (Sen, *Development as Freedom*, 1999). Her paper will offer a discussion of the relative degrees of freedom that Ghanaians currently have; while they enjoy the instrumental freedoms to vote and to express dissent, they do not enjoy equal access to educational opportunities, electricity and medicine. Whereas the current deprivation of the rural population’s substantive freedoms (because of the above-mentioned impediments and obstacles to equal opportunities and services) represents a challenge, it also provides an opportunity for grassroots activism with significant benefits to this and other communities in the future. Rashid Iddrisu (Wari): “Activating human rights in Barcelona and Rural Ghana: The CEHDAGHANA story” Rashid will provide a first-person account of a Ghanaian migrant arriving in Barcelona following a harrowing, nearly three-year journey from West Africa, including the phenomenology of and steps taken in turning exclusion into inclusion in that city. He initially organized a hunger strike among African migrants in Barcelona to protest their exclusion from accessing basic human needs and work opportunities, resulting in migrants getting “papers” needed to begin to take care of themselves and then contribute economically in Barcelona. He founded CEHDAGHANA in 2008 as an NGO working in both Barcelona and rural Ghana (from where he hails originally) to address push-pull factors in migration as well as to help disadvantaged communities entrepreneur and educate their way out of impoverished conditions. A singer/songwriter, he has funded significant portions of this work through his performances as a musician. His projects are developed is based on deep cultural and social understanding of Ghanaian rural communities and the false lure of migration to Europe. Rashid will discuss the wide variety of projects, successes and challenges in activating human rights from the grassroots, as well as the question of why disadvantaged Africans are effectively being denied the human right to travel and migrate, a human right named in the 1948 U.N. Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

Durado Brooks Jr.: “Documentary media elevating grassroots activism” American filmmaker and photographer Durado Brooks, Jr., traces in this presentation his deepening understanding of how art and documentary media can elevate and accelerate the work of grassroots activists in overcoming the underlying causes and structures that prevent realization of human rights for all peoples of the world. He will discuss the documentary film he and others made with Otox

Productions in Barcelona, called *New Roots* (the film can be viewed on YouTube) which features Rashid Iddrisu (Wari)'s agricultural work with immigrants in Barcelona. Then, a few years later and because he was impressed with Durado's passion, Rashid contacted him with a vision of reconnecting the African diaspora with their roots in a project called, "Route to my Origin" and asked for assistance in realizing this concept, a work-in-progress. The project provides another opportunity to explore how artistic and documentary media can generate interest in and advance the work of salutogenic human rights practitioners, as well as showing how practice proceeds dynamically and through synergy. Mette Brogden: "Beyond Outrage: How salutogenic practitioners address wicked issues in human rights, and how academics can help" Mette's presentation suggests four basic practitioner questions relevant for addressing wicked issues in chronic human rights violations: What is this? How did it come to be like this? Can it be different? How can it be different? Focusing on the first two questions often leads to outrage over wicked issues, but to advance human rights without "war" we must be serious about investigating the third and fourth questions, which are actually about salutogenesis within complex adaptive systems. How can individuals tip wicked outcomes in systems and then accelerate change toward human rights attainment? How do practitioners identify salutogenic practitioners and help advance this work? Examples from contemporary economic migration stories will underpin this framing of salutogenesis out of human rights violations and degradation.

Presenter information:

Francis Abugbilla is a PhD Candidate in International Studies and the International Policy Institute fellow at the University of Washington Henry M. Jackson School of International Studies. He is also the 2018 Marcy Migdal fellow at the Center for Global Studies, University of Washington. He researches on conflict resolution and peacebuilding mechanisms in post-conflict societies. His dissertation focuses on how post-conflict peacebuilding mechanisms affect the prospects of reconciliation in Africa. His secondary research interests include human rights, governance, and youth empowerment. He is from Ghana originally.

Phyllis Taoua, Ph.D. is professor of French and Francophone Studies; she is affiliated with Africana Studies, the Honors College, the World Literature Program and the Master in Human Rights Practice at the University of Arizona in Tucson. She teaches courses on African literature and cinema, Critical Theory, Global Africa, Politics of Protest in Africa and the Diaspora, and Contemporary France. She is the author of *African Freedom. How Africa Responded to National Independence* (Cambridge University Press, 2018) and *Forms of Protest: Anti-Colonialism and Avant-Gardes in Africa, the Caribbean and France* (Heinemann, 2002) and editor of special issues on Sony Labou Tansi, Sembène Ousmane, and Mongo Beti. Other recent publications have appeared in *World Literature Today*, *The Cambridge Companion to the African Novel*, *Transition*, *SubStance*, *Research in African Literatures*, *Cahier d'Études Africaines*, *South Central Review* and *Journal of African Cultural Studies*. She was the recipient of a Sheila Biddle Ford Foundation award and Resident Fellow at the W. E. B. Du Bois Institute for African and African American Research at Harvard University. She was elected to the MLA Executive Committee of the Forum on African Languages, Literatures and Cultures and has presented her

research in North America, Europe and Africa. She was a Tucson Public Voices fellow with the Op-Ed Project and has published op-eds on human rights and democracy in Africa.

Rashid Abubakar Iddrisu (Wari), Director of CEHDA Ghana, is from the Gonja tribe (Ka Gbar nyi Bia) of Ghana. He is the son of a Ghanaian farmer, and speaks eight African languages as well as English, Spanish, and Catalan. As a young man, he decided to migrate to Europe (1998) to seek economic opportunities, and after nearly three years finally arrived in Barcelona. The story of his experience as a migrant en route and after arrival to Barcelona is told in a chapter of the 2016 book, *Understanding Migrant Decisions: From Sub-Saharan Africa to the Mediterranean Region* and in the film, *New Roots* (Otoxo Productions). He has served as a guest lecturer in two online graduate classes in human rights practice for The University of Arizona.

In 2001, he initiated a hunger strike in Barcelona among sub-Saharan African migrants to protest a draconian migrant law that prevented migrants from getting papers so that they could work. The strike led to a massive migrants' revolution in Spain and resulted in thousands of people getting documents. He founded the NGO CEHDAGHANA in 2008 to address the very difficult circumstances of African migrants in Barcelona, and to help youth in Ghana resist the lure of migration to Europe based on false expectations about opportunities that would await them upon arrival. He travels between Ghana and Barcelona to carry out his mission.

Durado Brooks Jr. is an independent artist and storyteller who works across all areas of media production: narrative/commercial/documentary film and TV, fine art and documentary photography, and most recently, expanding into live art/music production. He earned his BA at Cal State Northridge (Film), then several later completed an MFA in *producción artística y investigación* from Universitat de Barcelona from. Since then he has been based in New Orleans, traveling the US and internationally in constant pursuit of his passion. With others, he completed the documentary film *New Roots* (Otoxo Productions, Barcelona), which can be seen on YouTube. He is currently making an ongoing series of photo and video portraits entitled "Colorful People in Color: Portraits of Our People", and, with Rashid Iddrisu, a project engaging the African diaspora an a return to their roots, called *Route to my Origin*.

Mette Brogden, Ph.D., Assistant Professor of Practice and Program Manager, Online Graduate Programs in Human Rights Practice at The University of Arizona. Mette is a medical anthropologist whose career has tacked between environmental conflict resolution, resettling refugees in the U.S., and recovery from war trauma. She holds additional advanced degrees in social work and documentary film/communication studies. A "pracademic" who has spent the bulk of her career working in NGOs, government, and university settings ranging from local to international levels, she applies her anthropological knowledge and theoretical resources to addressing human rights issues. Her current interests focus on realization of the right to migrate for all peoples, complex trauma recovery, salutogenesis out of intractable issues within complex adaptive systems, environmental protection, decolonizing knowledge systems through animist understandings, and helping grassroots leaders help vulnerable peoples to realize their desires and dreams while correcting wicked human rights problems.