

THE DANISH INSTITUTE FOR HUMAN RIGHTS (DIHR) IN WEST AFRICA

The Danish Institute for Human Rights (DIHR) has many years of experience from working in the Sahel region. This regional approach resulted in the development of a West Africa strategy whose first phase (2007-2011) was evaluated in 2011. The focus was on institution building of human rights actors, family law, human rights and security, and human rights education and documentation. The program was implemented in three countries, Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger, and DIHR had regional partners in other West African countries and cross-cutting activities encompassing all of West Africa.

In 2012-2014 the West Africa program continued to reflect actual challenges in the region and was basically needs driven. Building local capacity for human rights change was one of the key objectives. National experiences and synergies were used to promote regional platforms on key human rights issues.

BRIEF FACTS

Geography: Region consisting of 15 countries: Benin, Burkina Faso, Cap Verde, the Gambia, Ghana, Guinea, Guinea Bissau, Ivory Coast, Liberia, Mali, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal, Sierra Leone and Togo.

Demography: Population in West Africa is 340 million.

Economy: GDP per capita (current USD 2015): USD 1,655.

Politics: The 15 states cooperate closely through the Economic Cooperation of West African States (ECOWAS) whose headquarters are in Abuja in Nigeria.

Official languages: English, French and Portuguese.

Source: <http://knoema.com/AfDBSED2014Jan/afdb-socio-economic-database-jan-2014?region=1000690-ecowas>

Security is one of West Africa's major challenges: The region is being torn by several conflicts with armed groups fighting to control vast territories for trafficking of all kinds; jihadists are still present in Mali's northern regions; terrorist groups close to Al Qaida threaten to kidnap people; and the sect of Boko Haram terrorises vast stretches of Nigeria, Niger, Chad and Cameroun. Security forces, including the police, are therefore a key target group for the protection of rights in West Africa. Also, in a region with the lowest human development index and the highest illiteracy rates in the world human rights documentation and knowledge is crucial.

DIHR PROGRAMME 2015-2017

The goals for the regional activities in West Africa are (i) solid human rights expertise established in the region, (ii) the promotion of human rights based law enforcement at regional level through the West African platform on police and human rights, and (iii) the recognition of the role of the police in the promotion of human rights by governments and law enforcement agencies in West Africa. This is in line with DIHR's International Strategy 2015-2017. Promoting the development of the human rights expertise of DIHR partners and state actors is important to enable them to bring changes relating to central human rights issues. We work with the police as one of our two primary target groups within the justice system.

The Chaire Unesco for human rights and democracy at the Abomey-Calavi University's Faculty of Law, Cotonou, Benin

For more than ten years DIHR has had a strong partnership with the Chaire Unesco in order to promote qualified human rights education and documentation in West Africa. The Chaire Unesco is one of very few university institutions with a regional mandate in francophone West Africa. It offers human rights masters programs as well as other professional human rights education. The Chaire Unesco has started to also offer a PHD program in human rights, and several doctors in human rights have graduated so far.

Several graduates from the Chaire Unesco are now working in African institutions such as the African Court on Human and Peoples' Rights in Arusha, the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights and the ECOWAS Court of Justice. Other graduates are in national constitutional courts; some are national police directors or responsible for police education at police academies; others are judges or directors in ministries or working in national human rights institutions.

DIHR sends partners from priority countries to the annual regional human rights course for West African professionals. DIHR also proposes applicants every year for the human rights master program for which a couple of scholarships are offered. DIHR's experts transfer human rights knowledge to the Chaire Unesco to enable it to conduct regional courses on the human rights based approach and expand its documentation centre. In the current programme, DIHR will also support a regional research program on family and human rights.

The West African platform on human rights and policing (POLI.DH)

The impact of DIHR's work with the police in Niger has enabled the Institute to play a role regionally for the promotion of human rights and policing. Several regional activities have taken place previously to promote synergies between national police services in West Africa and between police and human rights actors. In November 2013, representatives of the police services of Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger gathered at a workshop in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso, recommended the establishment of a West African platform on human rights and policing. The platform, POLI.DH, encompassing the three police services, was formally established in 2014 with DIHR support. It is open to other West African police services. Its secretariat is located at the National Police School in Niamey, Niger.

DIHR continues to support POLI.DH's efforts to provide its members with human rights expertise and knowledge and to actively participate in the development of strategies and policies on human rights & policing at regional and international level. The members of the platform have for example decided to promote a common theme for master theses of new police commissioners. POLI.DH will be represented at the sessions of the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights to influence policies regarding human rights and policing, such as the implementation of the Guidelines for Conditions of Arrest, Police Custody and Pre-trial Detention in Africa.

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