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West African Dispute Resolution Centre (WADREC) (Ghana)

I spent my IHRP internship working for the West African Dispute Resolution Centre (WADREC), a small NGO based in Accra, Ghana. The Executive Director of WADREC, Georgette Francois, is a lawyer who also owns the small law firm, Francois & Associates, that houses the organization. While there, I was lucky enough to do both community legal education programming in mediation and case work on human rights based files.

WADREC has a number of different programs aimed at promoting alternative dispute resolution as a means of increasing access to justice and peace promotion. WADREC created a Queen Mothers Association, made up of respected traditional female community leaders various chieftancies. The Queen Mothers were given training in mediation and conflict resolution; the goal was to install them as mediators in their communities, many of which are remote, as a means of creating a socially respected and approachable means of access to justice. WADREC has also created Peer Mediator clubs in schools around the country. The clubs learn about mediation and are encouraged to use it to help disputes in the schoolyard. In addition, various ad hoc training sessions are conducted, ranging from those with members of the judiciary to community leaders in a conflict situation.

My work with WADREC was mainly focused on creating a training manual and curriculum for schoolchildren in peer mediation. The employees of WADREC were very young themselves, so Ms. Francois asked me to organize and supervise the training sessions led by the younger employees, as well as to create content for the training curriculum. In doing so, I also created a blue print for other training curriculums WADREC will draft in the future, including one aimed at the judiciary, at laypersons, at police authorities, etc.

I also did fundraising research for WADREC, hoping to create some sustainability and continuity in their funds.

My case work, however, was my favourite part of my placement. Ghana has a large population of Liberian Refugees. Francois & Associates was hired by UNHCR to represent many of the refugees going through the Ghanaian legal system. The main refugee community is on Buduburam Camp, just outside Accra. Poverty is rampant and it is here I have found I am most useful in creating access to justice. Though there is a Camp Manager and rudimentary police presence on the camp, many crimes go unreported for societal reasons. There is some distrust of Ghanaian authorities and authorities in general, for these people have survived a terrible war and treatment by many hands has been rough. What's more, there is a sense of betrayal should a victim denounce a fellow Liberian perpetrator to the Ghanaian police. The sense of community and need to stick together often override the pursuit of justice.

Ms. Francois acted as outside counsel for UNHCR, taking on cases referred to her: those few that do get reported. By the time they arrive on her desk, however, the client has

already been to court several times unrepresented; in one of my client's cases, he has been held on remand without charges for six years in a Ghanaian prison – so long, in fact, that because he can't get access to a telephone, his family emigrated without him, believing him to be dead.

Francois & Associates acted as watch brief in another case, representing the victim in a sexual assault case. This is where I was most involved; not only was it a compelling case, it was also extremely interesting to strategize with my colleagues as to how best to navigate our strange position as watch brief. The case involved a small boy who, as a result of a sexual assault, contracted HIV. As his counsel, we were not entitled to make oral submissions, to question the perpetrator, a well-respected and handicapped community leader, or other staples of legal process. This meant that in order to ensure fairness in the procedure, we would have to put subtle pressure on the prosecution or make suggestions to the judge in our client's best interests.

It was extremely interesting to work and strategize in a legal system where procedure was more flexible and possibly "optional" than in Canada. I was glad to work on many pro bono and human rights cases; Ms. Francois routinely takes payments in yams, cloth, or chickens.

My time with WADREC was educational in terms of the challenges and functionings of a small NGO, as well as teaching me about the challenges in the litigation of human rights cases.