



UGANET spearheading legal aid service delivery in the context of HIV



Executive Director Uganet
M/s Dorah Kiconco Musinguzi

The Uganda Network on Law Ethics and HIV/Aids (UGANET) was founded 16 years ago to create awareness and understanding of human rights among persons living with HIV/Aids, other vulnerable groups, and the general society.

This is UGANET's contribution to the strengthening of institutional and individual capacity in responding to HIV/Aids in all dimensions of life and bolstering protection of human rights among the vulnerable groups through research and documentation, reporting violations and providing free legal aid.

The organisation's legal aid project, advocacy and awareness campaigns have reached many people through workshops and the media, enabling the public to change their understanding of HIV/Aids and human rights for the better. This intervention has also made it possible for people living with HIV to stand up and openly bring out issues when they face discrimination.

UGANET operates in five districts of Lira, Masindi, Ntungamo, Pallisa and Kampala. The organisation is a foundation for legal reforms that ensure access to the courts and enhance justice.

Advocate rights

Mr David Baguma, the UGANET chairman board of directors, says HIV/Aids was largely misunderstood by many people in the early 1990s.

"There was a lot of fear, stigma and families were not only losing loved ones but also property. Widows could be thrown out of their homes and children who lost parents had no support against this stigma," he says. Mr Baguma says ethical and legal matters became pertinent as a way of intervention to help reduce stigma and support the rights of the vulnerable groups.

He says there was need to help families that had lost loved ones to live with some kind of decency rather than continually suffer from discrimination.

Thus a foundation was laid in the 1990s when HIV/Aids was still a dreadful disease through creating awareness in the communities in almost every district countrywide. He says the campaign has helped society to change attitude, and appreciate that HIV/Aids affects human rights.

UGANET functions

The UGANET Executive Director, Ms Dora Kiconco Musinguzi, says the organization responds to the 'human rights or law-related' issues arising in the context of HIV/Aids.

She says the organisation addresses vulnerability, in particular with advocacy around human rights and law related matters.

She says HIV/Aids causes human rights violations such as rape, defilement and domestic violence, a reason for human rights to be at the centre of the responses.

"Many people suffer discrimination because of HIV. They are disenfranchised and victimized, the abuse of human rights is both a cause and

a consequence of HIV," she says.

UGANET therefore contributes to a legal and social environment that supports other HIV interventions such as anti-retroviral therapy (ART), social inclusion and enjoyment of human rights in general.

At the grassroots, UGANET offers free legal aid to vulnerable groups including women [People living with HIV/Aids], people with disabilities, orphans and vulnerable children, with empowerment and enabling them to demand their rights.

In the five districts of its operations, UGANET provides legal aid



Orphans whose land was recovered relax at home with their aunt and grandma

services in form of legal counselling, mediation, assistance in making wills and court representation.

At the national level, UGANET is involved in policy advocacy, analysis of policies and upcoming laws such as the HIV/Aids Prevention and Control Bill, where it is coordinating with other civil society organisations and legislators, to ensure that the intended HIV/Aids law is appropriate for enhancing all the gains achieved in the HIV response.

Achievements

Ms Musinguzi says in the last 15 years of the organisation's operations, many women who were disenfranchised at the passing on of their husbands have regained their property, and many women and girls who had been violated have received justice.

"We have secured judgments in some defilement and rape lawsuits. We have also mobilised other civil society organisations to speak with one voice on the issues we think are not appropriate in the HIV/Aids Control Bill and when it is passed, it will have the mark of UGANET's work," she explains.

She says the organisation plans to expand the scope of its operations to cover more districts and cater for many other vulnerable people such



Paralegal officers sensitize the community on human rights

as prisoners.

She says there are vulnerable people in every part of the country who need the services UGANET offers hence the need to reach all parts of Uganda and even further penetrate those already reached, to further compliment other HIV/Aids interventions.

Paralegal aid

Mr William Kamba client at the Kibuku Health Centre IV HIV/Aids clinic, expressed interest to join UGANET when he learnt that the organisation was recruiting paralegal officers.

He says he voluntarily disclosed his sero-status on which basis he was selected for training in the elementary basics and components of the law, human rights and mobilisation and sensitisation skills, last year. Mr Kamba who operates in Bulangira sub county, Pallisa District, was trained alongside 30 other people of whom 20 were paralegal officers and 10 community activists, to reach all the 18 sub-counties in the district.

Paralegal work mainly involves going into communities and assisting in raising awareness about basic rights, education, health and decision making.

He says the number of expectant mothers accessing antenatal services has increased significantly, and there has been a reduction of domestic abuse and violence incidences as a result of paralegal work.

More training

Ms Cathy Annet Nyanzi, UGANET's legal programme officer, says there is need to train more personnel as the workload can be overwhelming for a single person.

For instance, in 2010 alone, the organisation's Pallisa office received 240 cases most of which were land and inheritance disputes involving especially widows, people living with HIV/Aids, people with disabilities and orphans.

In a country whose judicial system is choking with a backlog of cases, paralegal services that UGANET provides cannot be more welcome. Their interventions at community level are such a relief to the arduous task of securing justice. They tackle complaints that according to statistics, contribute the biggest percentage of the backlog of cases in the court system.

Make your will

At a weekly HIV/Aids clinic at Pallisa Hospital Ms Nyanzi asked a group of about 50 people, most of them women, how many had written a will and only one raised her hand, albeit half-heartedly.

She was at the clinic to create awareness about the importance of writing a will and to offer guidance on how to actually write one. UGANET conducts such talks on legal procedures and human rights in partner institutions such as health centres to create awareness on HIV/Aids and human rights in all communities where it works.

Ms Lovinsa Akello (not real name) [a13] who raised her hand said, "I'm sick and my people are not treating me well. I want to write a will to make sure that the government can protect my children when I'm gone."

Ms Akello [a14] is feuding with her relatives over two plots she says she bought with her own money but which they are bent on snatching from her. As such, she couldn't have a better reason for writing a will since many legal experts have noted it is a strong tool in mitigating crises about property when the person who acquired it passes on.

Writing a will, which is a good cautionary act, is at best, practiced by only a handful whether in these communities with gender-biased norms or even elsewhere where the norms are more accommodative.

Owing to their economic levels, most especially the women, and the belief that they didn't really own anything worth bequeathing, writing a will remains one of those issues they will need more explaining and convincing about.

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