Mobile Legal Aid Clinics—Vehicles of Empowerment and Justice in The Gambia

Banjul, The Gambia: "Since you came, life in this village has changed."

This is what the Seyfo (chief of the district) said to welcome us when our Mobile Legal Aid Clinics Team visited his village for the second time this year. His thanks were echoed by the Security Officer of the District Tribunal,
who said that "now I know my powers and I can help the community." The Seyfo himself had greatly benefited from our advice, and had returned for the second time with a new list of concerns. We were astonished when he proudly referred to some of the clients that we had advised last April: "Kebbah has gotten the land back that was taken away from him illegally... Omar is now sleeping again in his house... Aminatta is divorced from the husband that abandoned her and he is now paying for the maintenance of the children that he neglected."

It’s not easy to find the right words to explain how I felt in those moments, hearing the Seyfo’s words. Listening to him and seeing the pride in his eyes, I realized that we were actually making a difference; that our work was making an impact. We were changing the course of somebody’s life.

In ten days, two regions, six districts, two police stations, one prison and fourteen villages we advised 312 clients, 133 of whom were women, during this last trip of the Mobile Legal Aid Clinics Team. But this figure doesn't tell the whole story. When Kebbah got his land back, he was able to feed his entire family again. Omar, having returned to his house, could once more provide shelter to his wife and children, while Aminatta can now make sure that her children go to school. The impact of assisting one person is, in reality, much wider.

My name is Mauro. I am a lawyer, and I come from Italy. I am serving as a UN Youth Volunteer in Legal Aid at the Democratic Governance and Human Rights Unit of UNDP, supporting the National Agency for Legal Aid (NALA) in strengthening its capacity to deliver legal aid services to the people of The Gambia.

Since its establishment, NALA has made tremendous efforts in providing free legal aid services, especially in the Greater Banjul area. However, due to significant financial and human resource constraints, NALA’s legal representation work is limited to capital offense cases such as murder, rape, drug trafficking, robbery, and treason, all types of cases involving children, and a few other types of serious criminal cases. This unfortunately leaves out the most common offenses such as theft or burglary, and civil cases affecting indigent persons in the rural areas of the country. As a result, poor persons involved in such cases have been left to face the justice system without proper access to legal aid—in contravention of the fundamental human right of access to justice.

To fill this gap, and in an effort to decentralize legal aid services and ensure access to justice for even the poorest citizens in the most far-flung areas of the country, NALA, with the support of UNDP, launched the Mobile Legal Aid...
Clinics Project.

The idea is simple. By bringing a legal office from the capital to every doorstep in the country even the most vulnerable people, those who otherwise would not be able to reach the capital or afford to hire a lawyer, can obtain legal advice for free. Two mobile clinic teams are deployed on an alternating schedule, and three UN Volunteers (one international UN Volunteer, a national UN Volunteer and a UN Youth Volunteer) serve as members of the teams. Other team members include lawyers, paralegals, judges of the Islamic Courts (which deal with family and inheritance issues according to Shari’a law), mediators and interpreters—a fully trained and equipped mobile legal office.

When you go to villages and assist people that never in their lives thought that they could get the services of a lawyer, it is a humbling experience. You feel compelled to double your efforts, the quality of the services you are providing, your understanding of the local realities, the uniqueness of the environment, the culture and the traditions.

The clients are initially skeptical, apprehensive even, but they give you a chance. And you cannot waste it. You may try to make them feel more comfortable by greeting them in the local language, which is always a good start. But you realize you are providing a good service when they look at your eyes and smile. "Afami?" (Do you understand?) "Ekontante?" (Are you satisfied?), I ask them at the end of their individual sessions. Their smiles are now wider, and are accompanied by appreciation, firm handshakes, and in some cases blessings and prayers. "I am an illiterate, I did not go to school, and I could not know much about the law but now you came and enlightened us," a client says as we get ready to depart. Sometimes you may be faced with very sensitive cases, and you need to be prepared. If an elderly woman cries after telling you her story, desperately seeking help, you must be patient and be able to comfort her. Sometimes you have to be prepared to serve not only as a lawyer, but also a counselor. But when the tears are dry and the smile appears one her face you know she will solve her issue. Many cases involve more than the law—sometimes a kind word, and emotional support is what's required. If a young woman, abandoned by her husband and taking care of five children tells you that she is thinking about suicide, there is no space for mistakes. You are her last resort. And, when you guide her, step by step, to the right forum to seek redress, and she, suddenly finding a new ray of hope, thanks you and promises that, "I will never think about suicide again, I have to look after my children", both of you are relieved.

The secret of the Mobile Legal Aid Clinics is that they are about much more
than legal advice. The law is only the beginning, a tool with which people are empowered, develop an awareness of their rights, and gain the confidence and the capacity to claim them.

I am both humbled and honored to be able to volunteer on such a challenging and inspiring project, to be a part of an effort that enables even the most vulnerable people to gain access to justice. While what we are individually doing can seem so small we must not forget that—as the saying common to so many cultures goes, it’s the small drops that make the mighty ocean.

Sub-Saharan Africa

- Gambia • Human Rights • justice • legal clinics

Sustainable Development Goal: SDG 16: Peace, justice and strong institutions