

## EVENT

# A Side Event at the United Nations High Level Political Forum (HLPF) (New York, 16 July 2019)

*Gladys Mirugi-Mukundi*

*The Dullah Omar Institute, in conjunction with the African Centre of Excellence for Access to Justice (South Africa), and together with other partners and the governments of South Africa and Indonesia, co-hosted a side event on 16 July 2019 at the United Nations (UN) High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development (HLPF). The purpose of this event was to highlight the exemplary models of co-operation between government and civil society in countries in the Global South in implementing SDG 16.3 on access to justice.*

This, the seventh session of the HLPF, took place under the auspices of the UN Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) from 9–18 July 2019. The HLPF, which involves the participation of all UN member states, from both developed and developing countries, as well as relevant UN entities and stakeholders, is the central platform for follow-up and review of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the Sustainable Development Goals. A record number of member states presented voluntary national reviews (VNR) at the HLPF, which coincided with World Day for International Justice (July 17) and Nelson Mandela Day (July 18).

2019 was a special year for highlighting innovative justice work at the UN as it was the first time there was an in-depth, special thematic look at progress made towards SDG 16, including access to justice. Themed ‘Empowering people and ensuring inclusiveness and equality’, the HLPF reviewed progress towards the SDGs’ Goal 4: Quality Education; Goal 8: Decent Work and Economic Growth; Goal 10: Reduced Inequalities;



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Goal 13: Climate Action; Goal 16: Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions; and Goal 17: Partnerships for the Goals.

The side event was well-attended by about 30 participants, with the governments of South Africa and Indonesia discussing their experiences on

access to justice. Speakers emphasised that the most innovative progress towards access to justice in recent years has been made by countries in the Global South. Long-term political commitment to achieving comprehensive access to justice is leading to significant impacts on many other SDGs, ranging from economic growth and gender equality to health and education.

Dr Diani Sadiawati (Deputy Minister of Development Planning, Indonesia) and Mr Febi Yonesta (Co-Chair, Indonesia Legal Aid Foundation) said that government and civil society are working together to establish a national network of local legal aid organisations. This network is helping to bring locally responsive justice advice and solutions to every part of Indonesia's diverse islands and communities. Government and civil society are taking forward Indonesia's ambitious Legal Aid Law, which recognises the role that paralegal advisors in civil society organisations play in achieving access to justice for all.

Dr Winnie Martins (Centre for Community Justice and Development, South Africa) spoke about the crucial role that a network of independent community advice offices (CAOs) plays in offering free legal and human rights information, advice and assistance to marginalised people. CAOs are staffed by community members who are not lawyers, and help in the effort to secure access to justice and advance substantive rights, including those to health, housing and decent work.

In his presentation, Mr Risenga Maluleke, Statistician-General and Head of Statistics South Africa (Stats SA), said that South Africa is working at the global, regional and national level to align its national policies with the SDGs and the broader development agendas. South Africa's first VNR, submitted in June May 2019, is testimony to the national commitment to the full and integrated implementation of the 2030 Agenda. He stated that the VNR recognises the role of community justice organisations in providing access to justice. At the time, StatsSA was busy analysing a household survey undertaken to gauge the legal needs of people in South Africa.

The speakers agreed that efforts in Indonesia and South Africa are emblematic of a broader shift:



## **Not many African civil society groups are conversant with the VNR process**

around the world, governments and civil society are deepening access-to-justice partnerships to deliver on developmental priorities. Participants also agreed that lack of access to justice is a problem in all countries, including some of the world's most prosperous nations. They proposed that by recognising and investing in the central role of civil society organisations in delivering access to justice, as well as by measuring people's everyday experiences of justice, UN member states could accelerate their progress towards achieving access to justice for all by 2030.

Participants said the HLPF presented an opportunity to interact with civil society groups from the south and north and to learn important lessons on how to navigate the space. Participants were concerned that African governments do not always include civil society groups in the preparation of their VNR reports. Although the HLPF requires governments to engage with civil society groups, many African governments tend to engage with them as a formality rather in a genuinely consultative process. By the same token, it was noted that not many African civil society groups are conversant with the VNR process; as a result, they do not engage with their governments during the reporting process or submit shadow reports.

There was general consensus among participants that having Africa-based civil society and community-based organisations at the HLPF and the UN Summit provides a unique opportunity at the international level for discussion and cross-learning in regard to access to justice.