What are Community Based Organisations (CBOs) and where did they come from? What is their role in the protection and promotion of human rights? What are their strengths and weaknesses? And what are the information, technology and training needs of these organisations?

Answers to these questions can be found in new research conducted by Fahamu and the Centre for Adult Education. The study was conducted in nine Southern African countries, documenting for the first time, valuable information on the training and information needs and human rights priorities of CBOs surveyed. The survey was funded by the Foundation for Human Rights (FHR) and the Open Society Initiative of Southern Africa (OSISA).

Since about the mid-1990s, there has been growing interest in the development community about CBOs. Although the definition of these organisations is sometimes subject to ambiguity, the term CBO is in practice widely used to refer to non-urban organisations of the ‘poor’. As a result of their perceived closeness to the communities in which they work, they are thus seen as a crucial factor in development and human rights work.

"This research offers stakeholders a wealth of information to assist CBOs in building human rights capacity both within individual countries and across the region," said Anil Naidoo, Executive Director of Fahamu South Africa.

Conducted between October 2002 and August 2003, the CBO research revealed common trends across the region. For example, most CBOs started as a response to a specific need or problem and were thus typically involved in legal and human rights work, HIV/AIDS, health issues, and income-generation projects.

Not surprisingly therefore, the campaigning nature of these organisations emerged clearly in the research. Seventy percent of the 89 organisations surveyed had been involved in at least one campaign, with a significant number of organisations involved in more than one.

But 94% of the organisations involved in campaigns reported experiencing difficulties with these, and most reported more than one difficulty. Lack of community participation, or resistance by the community to the campaign was most often cited.

Education and training for both CBOs and the broader community were given most often as the solutions to problems related to campaigns. Financial assistance was also frequently cited. Ninety-seven percent of the CBOs surveyed believed that they had impacted positively within their context.

The tentative nature of the organisations was highlighted by the research, with less than half of the organisations having paid staff. Funding and a lack of skilled staff was a common problem. The research highlighted that less than half of the organisations had paid staff.

A number of leadership and management problems within CBOs and the existence of undemocratic practices in some organisations was cause for concern, the research said.

CBOs from Botswana, Lesotho, Malawi, Namibia, South Africa, Swaziland, Tanzania, Zambia and Zimbabwe were involved in the survey.

Fahamu, through the use of information and communications technologies, is committed to serving the needs of organisations and social movements that aspire to progressive social change and that promote and protect human rights. Fahamu initiated the research in order to establish how best to support CBOs in the protection and promotion of human rights and the report contains
recommendations on the information and training needs of these organisations. The CBO report follows on from Fahamu’s work in developing pioneering distance learning materials for non-governmental organisations and meeting the information needs of these organisations through the development of Pambazuka News, an e-newsletter for social justice in Africa.


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