

ACDHRS Newsletter: Religious and Traditional Leaders Strengthen Engagement with African Human Rights Systems

Banjul, The Gambia | 14–16 October 2025



The African Centre for Democracy and Human Rights Studies (ACDHRS), in partnership with the African Commission on Human and Peoples’ Rights (ACHPR), convened a landmark three-day regional training on *“Engaging with the African Commission on Human and Peoples’ Rights: Strengthening Religious and Traditional Leaders in Africa on Regional and International Human Rights Mechanisms.”*

Held at the Kairaba Beach Hotel in Banjul, The Gambia, the training brought together religious and traditional leaders from different African countries, with support from the Ford Foundation and the Open Society Foundations.

The theme — “From Tradition to Transformation: Empowering Religious and Traditional Leaders in Africa for the Consolidation of Democracy, Rule of Law, and Human Rights” — reflected the urgent need to bridge Africa’s rich cultural and spiritual heritage with modern human rights principles.

Day One: Setting the Tone – Tradition Meets Transformation



The opening ceremony, chaired by Mrs Hannah Forster, Executive Director of ACDHRS, highlighted the indispensable role of traditional and religious leadership in promoting peace, justice, and democratic governance.

Mrs. Forster called on participants to embrace dialogue and collaboration, noting that “Africa’s diversity of faiths and traditions can be a unifying force for human rights and democracy if guided by respect and understanding.”

Hon. Hamat N.K. Bah, Minister of Lands, Regional Government and Religious Affairs of The Gambia, delivered powerful opening remarks, emphasizing the need for unity beyond colonial, tribal, and religious divisions, urging leaders to focus on peace, morality, and service to humanity.

Keynote speakers including Dr. Nana Busia, Hon. Justice Aisatou Jallow-Sey, Alhaji Cherno Mamadou Jallow, and Ambassador Ebrima Ousman Ndure echoed the importance of moral authority, unity, and inclusive leadership.

They urged leaders to transcend ethnic and religious divides, promote peaceful coexistence, and strengthen engagement with human rights mechanisms.



A highlight of Day One was the panel discussion on “Religious and Traditional Leaders as Agents of Change in Peacebuilding and Conflict Resolution.”

Moderated by Rev. Bishop Bannie Manga, the panel featured Chief Mabulabo Jere, Rev. Fr. Samuel Udogbo, Mr. Sadikh Niass, and Aisha Tafsir Gaye, who shared experiences on community mediation, gender equality, and interfaith cooperation.

Participants stressed that while African societies remain deeply religious, social ignorance and intolerance often persist — a paradox that leaders must confront through education, inclusion, and justice-driven leadership.

Breakout sessions tackled real-life issues such as child marriage, sexual and gender-based violence, and conflicts between pastoralists and farmers, identifying root causes including poverty, weak governance, and ignorance.

Leaders acknowledged their vital roles as mediators but also recognized barriers such as fear, political manipulation, and societal resistance.



Day Two: Deepening Knowledge and Building Capacity

Day Two focused on understanding Africa's human rights frameworks and the role of leaders in promoting them.

Dr. Nana K.A. Busia Jr. opened with a historical analysis of Africa's governance and human rights journey, urging leaders to reclaim moral and ethical leadership.

He reminded participants that nation-building and development must go hand in hand with respect for human dignity.



Mrs. Hannah Forster then introduced participants to the African Charter on Human and Peoples’ Rights, emphasizing its unique integration of civil, political, economic, and cultural rights — as well as collective duties and community values.

She noted, “The Charter embodies the African spirit of Ubuntu — that our humanity is shared — and places both rights and responsibilities on individuals and states alike.”

Madam Abiola Idowu-Ojo, Executive Secretary of the ACHPR, followed with a comprehensive overview of the African human rights system, its structure, mandates, and challenges. She outlined the work of special mechanisms such as the Special Rapporteur on the Rights of Women, the Working Group on Indigenous Populations, and the Special Rapporteur on Human Rights Defenders.

Through landmark case studies — including *Endorois v. Kenya* and *Ogiek v. Kenya* — she demonstrated how the Commission has advanced the protection of cultural, religious, and indigenous rights.

A lively question-and-answer session addressed issues of state compliance, protection of victims, and how traditional leaders can participate through observer status, shadow reports, and collaboration with National Human Rights Institutions (NHRIs).



Day Three: Leadership, Accountability, and Future Cooperation

The final day shifted focus to state obligations and the future of traditional and religious leadership in Africa's human rights landscape.

Dr. Mohammed Benabdoun delivered a session on state reporting obligations under Article 62 of the African Charter, explaining that each member state must report every two years on the implementation of human rights.

He emphasized that reporting is both a *legal duty* and a *political commitment*, and noted challenges such as delayed submissions and incomplete integration of newer protocols like the Maputo Protocol and the Protocol on the Rights of Older Persons.



Hon. Commissioner Litha Musyimi-Ogana, ACHPR's Special Rapporteur on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, engaged participants in a reflective session on indigenous governance, spirituality, and reparative justice.

She reminded participants that "Africa had functional governance systems long before colonialism" and cautioned that religion should never be used to divide Africans.

Her remarks linked the discussions to the African Union's 2025 theme — "Justice to Africans and Africans of African Descent through Reparations."

She also shared progress toward the All-African Conference of Traditional Leaders planned for 2026, to be hosted under the leadership of King Mswati III, and efforts to repatriate stolen African artefacts and sacred heritage.



Toward a Continental Network of Traditional and Religious Leaders

A key milestone of the training was the proposal to establish the African Religious and Traditional Leaders Network (ARLIN) — a platform to sustain dialogue, share best practices, and collaborate with the ACHPR and civil society partners.

Participants agreed to develop a vision, mission, and governance structure for the network and explore merging with existing initiatives for synergy.

As one participant noted, *“This network ensures that our learning does not end here — it lives on in our communities.”*



Closing Reflections

In closing, speakers reiterated the power of moral leadership to transform Africa:

- Mr. Mohamed Mabassa Fall, vice chairperson of the ACDHRS Governing Council urged leaders to use their influence to promote peace, unity, and justice.
- Mr. Sadikh Niass praised the participants for their humility and courage in learning about human rights systems.
- Mr. Okay Machisa, delivering the vote of thanks, expressed gratitude to ACDHRS, ACHPR, interpreters, facilitators, and sponsors, pledging that participants would apply their knowledge in their communities.
- Commissioner Litha encouraged regional alignment with existing bodies such as the African Indigenous Governance Council (AIGC), while IEC Chairperson Mr. Joseph Colley highlighted the importance of leaders in ensuring peaceful, credible elections.
- Mrs. Hannah Forster commended the participants for initiating a network, urging them to merge with last year's cohort to strengthen unity and collaboration.



Looking Ahead

The training concluded with renewed commitment to uphold human dignity, justice, and equality in Africa.

Participants pledged to:

- Advocate for peaceful coexistence and interfaith harmony.
- Empower women and youth in leadership and decision-making.
- Strengthen engagement with the ACHPR and other human rights mechanisms.
- Promote the African Charter and Agenda 2063 at the grassroots level.

As Mrs. Forster noted,

“When our moral and traditional leaders stand for justice, peace, and equality, Africa moves closer to the vision of a united and dignified continent.”