



Vance News

September 2016

Vance Center Assists Guatemalan Communities Living in Environmentally Protected Areas

The Vance Center's Environment Program recently provided legal advice to the Asociación Bufete Jurídico de Derechos Humanos (BDH), a Guatemalan nonprofit legal organization that promotes human rights and the rule of law. The advice concerned communities living in areas in the department of Petén that the Guatemalan government has placed under environmental protection, creating uncertainty about the rights of these communities.



Petén region close to the Guatemala Mexico border
Photo Credit: Julio Fernando Reyes Palencia

Collaborating with the Environment Program, the international law firm of Allen & Overy researched the interplay between environmental protection and human rights to support BDH and the communities in ongoing negotiations with the government over a cooperation agreement. Applying international laws and standards, the law firm advised BDH concerning the communities' rights to adequate housing and food, and the rights of the communities in the event of forced evictions.

Balancing the rights of communities and the conservation of forests and other resources is a pressing issue in many regions of the world, and one that

human rights and environmental organizations are increasingly addressing. A largely forested area with unique biodiversity, Petén was a mostly uninhabited area until the 1950s. Due to government incentives and other policies and an influx of refugees fleeing armed conflict in other parts of the country, the population in Petén grew significantly. Currently, there are approximately 80 settlements in the protected areas where BDH works, and each community contains 60 to 450 families. These communities have developed their own identities and adapted to a Petén way of life, building the infrastructure necessary to provide basic services, including schools for their children and other facilities.

To protect the biodiversity of forests in Petén, the government has promoted on-site conservation through the establishment of protected areas. It gradually began displacing communities as it implemented the law, leading to forced evictions. BDH has been advocating on behalf the communities in Petén to protect their basic human rights, with a key goal of negotiating a cooperation agreement that will allow them to remain in the protected areas and help preserve the biodiversity of the Petén region. The Vance Center will continue to offer BDH legal advice and representation, as needed.



CYRUS R. **VANCE CENTER**
FOR INTERNATIONAL JUSTICE

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Vance Center Hosts Ugandan Democracy Champion



From Left, Vance Center staff Brenda Kombo and Alexander Papachristou, Dr. Kizza Besigye, and Vance Center Co-Chair Elchi Nowrojee

Photo Credit: Karina Benzaquen

The Vance Center recently welcomed Dr. Kizza Besigye, a leading Ugandan political opposition leader and pro-democracy activist, to the New York City Bar Association. Former leader of Uganda's largest opposition party, the Forum for Democratic Change, Dr. Besigye ran in the controversial February 2016 presidential elections, which various international observers characterized as deeply flawed. President Yoweri Museveni, who has been in office since 1986, was pronounced the winner.

Vance Center Committee Co-Chair Elchi Nowrojee introduced Dr. Besigye's, lauding his tireless efforts to promote democracy in Uganda. Dr. Besigye delivered an address entitled "Fighting for Justice, Rule of Law, and Democracy in Africa: Lessons from Uganda," which reflected on the challenges to democratic participation and described his efforts to ensure that Ugandans "regain [their] citizenship." He expressed his view that by gaining knowledge, developing organizational tools, and being involved in non-violent action, Ugandan citizens can assert democratic control over decisions, resources, and their country's future. Optimistic about this future, Dr. Besigye urged lawyers to

play a role in protecting activists who are reclaiming their rights and using public interest litigation to challenge unjust laws.

The event was co-sponsored by the New York City Bar Association's African Affairs Committee. Ochoro Otunnu, a leading Ugandan and U.S. lawyer, provided invaluable assistance in organizing the event.

Vance Center Helps Launch National Women in the Profession Programs Across Latin America



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Vance Center WIP international Steering Committee (the "ISC") Members in Washington, DC
Photo Credit: Shearman & Sterling Associate

The International Steering Committee (the "ISC") of the Vance Center's Women in the Profession ("WIP") program recently held its second meeting since its inception in March 2016. This first "in-person" meeting marked the official initiation of fifteen of its eighteen national chapters. Three others, in Argentina, Chile, and Mexico, have existed for a few years. The WIP program itself for more than 9 years has convened women lawyers in Latin America to consider improving their professional opportunities and conditions. Thirty-one women lawyers attended the meeting, at the Washington, D.C. office of Shearman & Sterling, with seven others participating by telephone [[list of participants](#)]. The

women represented over 30 law firms and two corporations from Latin America and the United States. Four members of the Vance Center Committee also attended: former Committee Chair and Shearman & Sterling partner Antonia Stolper; Mayer Brown Director of Pro Bono Activities Marcia Maack; Greenberg Traurig partner Patricia Menendez-Cambo; and Committee Co-Chair and Linklaters partner Sabrena Silver.

In her welcoming remarks, Ms. Stolper praised the work of the ISC members since their last meeting, including the planning and launching of national chapters. Each chapter, in advance of the meeting, submitted an [outline for its 2016-2017 action plan](#), which pursuant to the Commitment Declaration signed by representatives of the programs, had to include at least two events and a pro bono project to be carried out within the following year. With some countries joining the ISC as recently as July 2016, developing an action plan for a completely new program was an ambitious goal. However, not only did all 18 national programs submit the required outlines, but Guatemala (["Abogadas por Guate"](#)) and Paraguay (["Liderando Paraguay"](#)) also held launch events in their respective countries.



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The ISC participants discussed its next annual conference, which has taken place in various Latin American countries since 2007. The upcoming conference will convene in Buenos Aires, Argentina in March 2017. Representing the host country, Zang, Bergel & Viñes partner Carolina Zang, and Marval O'Farrell & Mairal partner Patricia Lopez Aufranc presented a potential list of topics, structure, and venues for the conference.

The core of the meeting centered on ISC representatives describing aspects of their programs previously identified for their distinctiveness. Representing her Ferrere partner Marysol Estigarribia of Paraguay, Lindsay Sykes, a member of Bolivia's WIP chapter, shared the strategies used in

Paraguay to achieve the most diverse membership of all national programs. Colombia's Philippi Prietocarrizosa & Uria partner Claudia Barrero; Brazil's Tozzini Freire partner Moira Huggard-Caine; Peru's Miranda & Amado partner Nathalie Paredes and Lazo, De Romaña & Gagliuffi partner Fatima De Romana; and Chile's Carey counsel Patricia Silberman described how they had pursued strategic alliances with other organizations or government ministries in an effort to increase both membership and impact of their respective programs. In closing, Baker & McKenzie Venezuela's partner Maritza Meszaros described her program's more systemic approach to improving the situation of women victims of violence through an extensive analysis of existing legislation in this area, with subsequent guidance to these women on how to exercise their rights under the law.

The discussion among the participants expressed a consensus that sharing information is essential to take full advantage of having various programs within the same organization. Participants decided to establish a communications committee, consisting of Uruguay's Hughes & Hughes partner Marcela Hughes, Guatemala's QIL +4 partner Gabriela Roca, and Mexico's Honeywell International Vice President and General Counsel Latin America Valeria Chapa, to study how to share best practices among the groups, using social media and technology, and thus increase the impact of each program not only nationally, but also at a regional level.



ISC meeting in the Shearman & Sterling Office in Washington, DC

Photo Credit: Vicky Fulop from DLA Pipe

Vance Center Expands Africa Program



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Brenda Kombo

Photo Credit: Eric Friedman

With encouragement from new Vance Center Committee Co-Chair Elchi Nowrojee, the Vance Center is expanding its programmatic activities in Africa. Brenda Kombo, newly hired as Africa Program Manager, will lead this effort, focusing on all areas of the Vance Center's work.

Ms. Kombo, a recent Northeastern Law School graduate with a PhD in Anthropology from Yale University, previously worked in Africa for Equality Now and the United Nations. She has assumed responsibility for the Vance Center's African Legal Fellows Program, which brings lawyers from African law firms to work for a year at New York City firms, and is determining the adaptability to African contexts of Vance Center programs that have flourished in Latin America. These include the

promotion and institutionalization of pro bono practice and the Women in the Profession program.

The Vance Center has had considerable experience providing pro bono representation to African NGOs, particularly in Kenya and South Africa, as well as involving in global pro bono projects law firms from Botswana, Ethiopia, Ghana, Kenya, South Africa, Tanzania, and Uganda. For example, a Vance Center law firm helped to advise former United Nations Secretary General Kofi Annan in his mediation of the post-election conflict in Kenya in 2008, and the Vance Center continues to work with the Kofi Annan Foundation on electoral issues in certain African countries.

The Africa Program will develop further client and law firm partnerships to expand such work, including a heightened focus on collaboration at the African Court and Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights. Vance Center Committee members participated in the inaugural session of the Court and the Vance Center is a member of the Coalition for an Effective African Court on Human and Peoples' Rights.