Cartooning for Justice

Art students and academics combine cartoons and research to debate justice for war-time crimes in a workshop held in Monrovia, Liberia.

August 27th to 31st, 2018, art students in Monrovia were encouraged to find artistic responses to the complex question of whether or not war-time crimes should be punished in Liberia today. Simultaneously, a roundtable was organized to debate the theoretical implications of this question.

"We wanted to empower the youth to participate in an active and informed debate about the issues of impunity for war-time crimes through the arts" said Nathaly Leduc, Communications and Outreach Officer at Civitas Maxima and Anthropology student at the Graduate Institute.

While the demand for a war crimes court in Liberia is gaining huge momentum, trials of alleged Liberian warlords have only been possible abroad. As a result, the overwhelming majority of Liberians are left with no access to justice and many unanswered questions.

To address these challenges, Civitas Maxima partnered with Livio Silva and Felix Lüth students from the Graduate Institute Geneva to conduct its very first on-ground outreach effort. They jointly managed the research and implemented the project with additional support from the Global Justice and Research Project and the Liberian Visual Arts Academy, both based in Monrovia, and the renowned Swiss-Congolese artist JP Kalonji.
"By combining knowledge and cartooning in the form of a workshop and roundtable, we sought to diversify the debate while still answering complex questions," Ms. Leduc added.

During the workshop, made possible with funds granted to Mr. Silva and Mr. Lüth by Davis Projects for Peace, 30 Liberian students learned storytelling techniques, theater games, and improved their cartooning skills while also engaging in discussions on whether or not war-time crimes should be punished in Liberia today.

"These kids, they have so much talent, so much untapped potential. Their artistic talent is limitless and it was an honor to be with them in this very important project" said JP Kalonji.

At the conclusion of the workshop, students illustrated their answers to the posed question. Most drawings demonstrated the dynamics of power and how it can inhibit justice.

"We are very pleased, indeed, with this outreach project. The cartoons fantastically demonstrated each student's own opinion about punishment for war-time crimes in Liberia. Every single cartoon showed a need for justice," said Alain Werner, director of Civitas Maxima.

The roundtable event brought together journalists, human right activists, Liberian attorneys-at-law, and civil society organizations. Participants discussed some of the main theories on the justification for punishment and how they relate to war-time prosecution in Liberia today. Aspects that received particular attention were the potential to deter the commission of future crimes, the issue of deserving punishment, respect and the enforcement of the rule of law.

Renowned Liberian human rights lawyer Tiawan S. Gongloe asserted "It is important to be clear about those whom we refer to as war criminals." According to him, many Liberians have been falsely convinced that the establishment of a war crimes court would see the prosecution
of the majority of Liberians for their acts during the civil wars - a misconception impeding the pursuit of justice and accountability.

Overall, the participants agreed that various factors influence the accountability debate and the Liberian context must be taken into consideration. In addition to the above theories, the participants emphasized regional, generational differences in perceptions of justice, and the culture of impunity prevailing in Liberia as prominent determinants in the debate.

"We hope the participants of the workshop will carry forward what they learned and contribute to an informed debate around justice and accountability in Liberia," said Hassan Bility, director of the Global Justice and Research Project.

Participants of both the roundtable and the workshop agreed that education and awareness are crucial in empowering civil society to continue pushing for justice and that the establishment of a war crimes court is essential in Liberia.

Considering the increasing number of extraterritorial trials of alleged Liberian war criminals, keeping the local Liberian population informed is crucial. Civitas Maxima and the Global Justice and Research Project hope to continue promoting inclusive and informed debates around issues by combining arts and justice and foresees future projects.