Columbia's Bootcamp for Human Rights Advocates

Conversations from the frontlines

By Mary-Lea Cox

While globalization has brought many benefits, it has also brought new risks of economic and political exploitation. Debates continue to rage about the best ways to remediate the social inequalities and human rights issues that have been associated with the rising global economy.

This year, 11 grassroots human rights leaders from 9 countries (China, DR Congo, Ecuador, Ghana, Indonesia, Liberia, Mexico, the Philippines, and Trinidad and Tobago) came to Columbia to share their stories about the global economy and its impact on their communities. They came as part of the Human Rights Advocates Program (HRAP), a four-month intensive capacity-building program at Columbia's Center for Human Rights, now in its 16th year. Recognizing the extraordinary nature of this program, University president Lee C. Bollinger recently awarded a substantial grant to support the work of both the program and the Advocates.

"The benefits of this program are substantial," said HRAP director Margaret Ladner, "and are felt long after the participants complete the program, through the networks and connections they make to leading members of the academic, policymaking and NGO [non-governmental organization] communities—not to mention the skills they pick up in strategic planning, fundraising, utilization of the press and media, and building sustainable organizations."

As a measure of the program's success, Advocates "collectively raise an average of over $400,000 for their organizations' work in the year following their Columbia residency," Ladner said, while further noting that the program also offers many tangible benefits, such as a rare opportunity to connect with others who are facing similar challenges.

"There is very close bond among program participants, and many of them report how much confidence they derive from being in such a supportive atmosphere," she explained. "To get an idea of the program's richness, we spoke to three of this year's participants: Ida Le Blanc, Benedicto Sánchez and Masoka Hubert Tshiswaka."

Ida Le Blanc

Ida Le Blanc is the general secretary of the National Union of Domestic Employees in Trinidad and Tobago. In that capacity, she assumes responsibility for representing—in courts and government ministries—the rights of domestic and other low-wage workers, particular women, on wrongful dismissals, retrenchment, maternity protection violations, violations of minimum wage requirements and related issues. She coordinates work on educating workers on existing labor laws and develops advocacy strategies to improve the terms and conditions of contracts and to reform labor legislation.

Three months into the Columbia program, Le Blanc said she had offered her many "great opportunities." In addition to several speaking engagements, she was invited to participate in a labor tribunal in New York City for domestic workers she, who, having faced mass exploitation at the hands of the diplomats they work for, are now suing their former employers for back pay.

"I met a few Trinidadians who told me they were so happy to see that we were doing all this work back home for domestics," she said, "and some of them even related to me the many problems they were facing here in New York."

Like the other Advocates, Le Blanc is taking some Columbia courses while further noting that the residencies, "Ladner said, "and are felt long after the program ends next month." She also enjoyed learning about labor rights with Susan Sturm and the global economy with Mark Barenberg (both of Columbia Law School). Marvelling at how Barenberg "could explain globalization in a way that even a grade-school child would understand," she credited him with having altered her perspective on the involvement of international NGOs in workers' issues in her country.

"Before I joined the program, I didn't feel that people in Western NGOs were careerists seeking to build their reputations on the backs of the underprivileged. But now that I've met more members of the NGO community and participated in class discussions on this topic, I can say that NGOs are doing great work for the world's domestic workers.

Le Blanc looks forward to returning to her country to apply the skills and ideas picked up from the program. "I have a lot of work cut out for me, and I should not be 'more empowered,'" a goal she sees as her achievement. "The goal is to come back and help to create a voice for the workers."

Benedicto Sánchez

Benedicto Sánchez is a program coordinator for the Broader Perspectives Development, a local NGO in the Philippines. He seeks to develop projects to help residents of the isolated Filipino province of Negros Occidental—consisting of poor and marginalized mountain communities—gain access to natural resources, social and economic development programs and government social services. He also plays a role in marketing local products under fair trade conditions.

"Benedicto Sánchez: My biggest adjustment to life at Columbia was to Western-style academics, who favor individual achievement above all else. I found being part of study groups a welcome relief—the spirit comes closer to the bayubusan, or cooperative relationships, we develop in the Philippines. Intellectually, I felt challenged by Jeffrey Sachs' class on understanding poverty, as this is in line with my work back home. I can now see the potential in using these concepts to develop new programs for the Negreses as well as for lobbying the Filipino government to align their policies toward achieving Millennium Development Goals.

It will be strange when the program ends next month and we all have to go back to our separate communities. After so much camaraderie and intense debate and sharing of experiences, I'm going to miss my fellow Advocates as well as the people at the Center for the Study of Human Rights."

Masoka Hubert Tshiswaka

Masoka Hubert Tshiswaka is the executive director of Action Against Impunity for Human Rights, a local NGO in Lubumbashi, DR Congo, that seeks to curb corporate misconduct and ensure respect for the rights of local communities. The organization monitors, researches and documents economic and social rights abuses committed by various corporations, especially mining operations.

"Masoka Hubert Tshiswaka: The beginning of the program was difficult for me, because of my language problem. I'm a Francophone and New Yorkers speak so fast that it took me a little while to catch up with what people were saying. For me, the program's greatest benefit has been developing a wonderful address book. I've met donors, international NGOs based in New York and Whitney], and I've been able to mention my colleagues here in the program, who represent grassroots NGOs. NGOs in the so-called Global South enjoy taking a Columbia class on inter-regional migration and development—in addition to English classes."

"We were given a special memory of the group outing the Advocates took to Massachusetts. It was my first time getting out of the big city and seeing the American countryside. I ran a run in the mountains, visited local towns and had some great food. I made new colleagues. It was an experience I'll never forget."

Panel Probes Deeper Causes of France's Recent Riots

In the lingering aftermath of the two weeks-long French protests that began in the suburbs of Paris and escalated across the country, leaving over 100,000 vehicles and a quarter of a million people homeless, public officials and academics convened a panel entitled "Understanding the Riots in France."

The Nov. 21 discussion, attended by Bernard Salané, professor of economics at Columbia and École Polytechnique, and Sudhir Venkatesh, an associate professor of sociology and director of research at the Institute for Research in African-American Studies in France, Venkatesh said, immigrants are asked to accept the insti-