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Reporting Impact

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Congolese journalists and NGOs say IWPR Lubanga coverage is vital in filling information gap.

By Melanie Gouby in London (23-Mar-09)

A lack of relevant reporting in the Congo means that IWPR's coverage is the main source of information on the Thomas Lubanga trial for the country's population, say observers.

"We do not have correspondents in The Hague, because it costs too much for us, so you are the only source [of information we have]. We put your [stories] directly in our pages. They have the priority. My editor often congratulates me for this collaboration," said Desire Israel-Kazadi, an international justice journalist at the Le Phare daily newspaper in Kinshasa.



Thomas Lubanga. © ICC

Despite great interest in the Lubanga trial, the proceedings are not being broadcast on Congolese television or radio. Although it is being shown on cable TV, few people can afford to subscribe.

The national television station only provides short summaries on the trial in its news broadcasts, while the radio stations – the main media in Congo – hardly comment on it at all.

IWPR, with the support of the Open Society Justice Initiative, an organisation that advocates legal reform for the protection of human rights, is producing daily updates on proceedings along with commentary and legal analysis, published on the lubangatrial.org website.

Readers are invited to participate by asking questions and posting comments on the site, which also features useful background information and links to related websites.

"IWPR articles allow us to have more contact with the outside world, to know what is going on at the trial, because we don't hear much on the radio," said Delly Mawazo Sesete, the executive director of Credhho, a local human rights NGO.

NGOs said they welcomed IWPR's reports for their fresh and unbiased approach.

"Your articles are more objective than the ones we find in local newspapers," said Sesete.

A leading Congolese editor said that IWPR's stories offered a different point of view.

"I prefer to publish what IWPR writes than what local journalists write, which is not interesting. What you write interests me because you give another point of view compared to the Congolese journalists," said Freddy Monsa, editor at the newspaper Le Potentiel in Kinshasa.

Victor Amisi, executive director of Vision Gram-International, a Congolese NGO that works for marginalised people especially women, children and victims of human rights abuses, said that IWPR was "very

necessary” in Congo right now.

“The population has always followed news through certain TV and radio stations, but it is good to get another point of view,” he said.

Amisi said that Vision Gram-International printed and distributed IWPR articles regularly to keep the population informed.

“People who come to see us can read [them] in our office and take [them] with them. Thus, the articles are accessible to everyone,” he said.

Press freedom is a real issue in the DRC. While editors are supposedly free to publish what they want, the authorities always find a way to put pressure on them if they publish something they disapprove of.

“When there is a political tendency in the editorial line, the authorities intervene one way or another. They can say, ‘You did not pay your taxes, or you did not comply with your specifications’,” explained Christian Hemedi, the head of the Congolese branch of the Coalition for the International Criminal Court – a global network of NGOs which works as a watchdog for the court.

“[The threat from the authorities] does not need to be violent,” he added.

External pressure by organisations such as IWPR can help to fill the vacuum, especially if they collaborate with local organisations and media.

“Pressure for change is more efficient when it comes from outside. If it comes from local entities, the authorities are going to say ‘Ah, we are used to those people, we can shut them down’,” said Amisi.

“I have witnessed this myself, support from the outside give us weight in negotiations with the government.”

IWPR is also helping disseminate information in DRC through its radio programme Face a la Justice, which analyses and explains the ICC’s work in Congo. The programme is broadcast on more than 90 stations around the country in collaboration with IWPR’s local partner Search for Common Ground.

“The programme is followed by everyone – the parliament, local authorities, the military, civil society and so on,” said Major Innocent Mayembe Sangala, president of the military court in Bunia.

“It has a real impact on political life as it influences opinions positively, and beyond the immediate political impact it also educates people. It reinforce rule of law.”

Melanie Gouby is an IWPR contributor in London.

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