Human Rights in Ghana

This year, I decided to travel to Accra in Ghana for 6 weeks with Projects Abroad. My main aim was to gain some legal experience in the field of Human Rights law in addition to providing valuable support and advice to the long term aims of an already established project. As I had never travelled to Africa before, it was also an opportunity for me to experience a completely new and different culture and work alongside a wide range of people.

When I first arrived, I was hit by the heat and humidity. My hair, that had remained straight since leaving the UK, instantly recoiled back into its naturally tight curls and would remain so until the end of the trip! An extremely long first day wandering around the capital in the 30 degree heat with completely inappropriate footwear made me question whether I would last the full 6 weeks. As soon as I met my host family however, who were incredibly welcoming from the minute I walked into the house and treated me like part of the family, I knew I would cope.

For the majority of my time, I was based in the Projects Abroad Human Rights Office (PAHO) carrying out various projects in the field of human rights and education. My main project, on which I was a lead volunteer, was working in a Boys Remand Centre. The centre is home to a group of young boys between the ages of 7 and 18 who are awaiting trial for various crimes they are charged with. The crimes can range from petty theft to something as serious as gang rape or murder, although this was easy to forget during the sessions I spent with them.

The main focus with the boys was actually teaching basic Maths and English. As lead volunteer, it was my job to construct lesson plans. The attitude of the boys towards the lessons we had with them was surprising and inspiring. Despite the crimes they were charged with and the incredibly unsanitary and cramped conditions they were subject to within the remand centre, they were always eager to learn, well behaved and even asked us for homework after most lessons!

We also delivered a number of presentations on topics such as drugs, alcoholism, contraception and community living in order to try and educate the boys in areas they would very likely come into contact with upon their release or following a prison sentence.

For me, working in the remand centre was a challenge. Many of the young boys appeared to be merely victims of circumstance. After conversations with the warden of the centre, it seemed that many of the boys had been coerced into committing their crimes by adults and others were driven to crimes like theft through starvation or necessity in order to bring money to their families. Although this was difficult to understand, especially given the lack of adequate legal representation for the boys, it was an incredibly rewarding experience. To have given these young adults something to look forward to each week, even for the short period of time I spent in Ghana, I hope made a difference for them.
In addition to this project, I was also lucky enough to be selected to take part in a week long outreach scheme in the more rural community of Dodowa, located slightly North East of Accra. Both myself and the other volunteers were fortunate enough to be put up in a hotel that belonged to the King of Dodowa! An incredibly welcoming and impressive host, he came to speak to us about his ancestors who dated back hundreds of years. He also informed us of the many ancient practices that were still in place within his tribe. We had some interesting discussions regarding the role of women within the community which was still seen to be a largely subordinate role. The King also talked about issues such as rape and domestic violence which were still rife within his community and often kept quiet due to the need to maintain family honour and respect over obtaining justice for the individual victims. This was shocking to hear and was only greater fuel for the presentations we were going to give during the week to the community about such issues.

My team was responsible for delivering Human Rights Defenders sessions throughout the week. The attendees of these sessions were students of sixth-form age or recent school leavers who were interested in learning more about Human Rights and, by the end of the three sessions we spent with them, would be presented with a certificate labelling them as ‘defenders’ of human rights. The hope was that they would go out into their communities and educate others on what they had learnt. Our sessions included presentations on the nature of human rights, domestic violence and suspect’s rights. The sessions led to some incredibly interesting discussions and we soon discovered that many of the students had come into contact, either directly or indirectly, with police corruption or an obstacle to justice at some point during their lives. In addition, many of the students did not, for example, believe that women should have equal rights to men which created a lively debate with the women in the group. The week was a fantastic experience and was eye-opening in terms of the realities of life outside of Ghana’s bustling capital city.
The final project that I was involved with during my stay was with ‘Energy for Old Fadama’, an enterprise founded by a current Queen Mary law student which aims to equip the slum of Old Fadama with a sustainable, cost effective and safe source of electricity through the installation of solar panels. The organisation hopes that by safely and sustainably energising the slum in a legal manner, in addition to gaining the support of the community, the improvement to living conditions will help to promote a more positive perception of Old Fadama to the outside world and to ultimately bring change to an area in such desperate need of it. The slum is home to over 80,000 residents who, every day, live without access to the most basic of resources, are subject to a myriad of Human Rights and environmental violations and live in constant fear of eviction by the Ghanaian government.

Initially, I was given a tour of the slum by Frederick Opoku, director of WISEEP (Women in the Slums Economic Empowerment) who works closely with the residents of the slum. What hit me first upon entering the slum was the smell, the smell of litter, rotting food and sewage and the smells of food cooking and chemicals burning amidst the glare of the midday sun. A major environmental and health issue in Old Fadama is the dumping of electronic waste within the slum and along the neighbouring Korle Lagoon. This waste disposal has led to local residents creating one of the most profitable yet dangerous businesses in Old Fadama and within the local Agbogbloshie market through the burning of this e-waste and dealing of scrap metal. The combination of the heat and release of toxic chemicals associated with the electrical burning not only affects the young men who usually deal in this business, but also the children and families who live within the slum. They are subject to a daily infiltration of thick black clouds of smoke that billow into their community and surrounding environment. Such clouds were present each time I visited the slum and forced me to wonder how anyone could live in such an environment on a daily basis and why the government could allow such a blatant violation of fundamental rights to continue.
My involvement in the project enabled me to be present for the unveiling of the first solar panel installation within the slum and speak to the press, raising awareness of the organisation to the both local residents and those further afield in Ghana. Working within the slum was an experience I will never forget and made me incredibly humbled. It made any complaints I had ever had, for example with university deadlines or lack of money, fade into insignificance when I saw the daily struggle these inhabitants faced every day.

In addition to these important projects, I also took the opportunity to travel at the weekend and soak up as much of the culture as I could. On my second weekend, I travelled to the popular tourist area of Kokrobite where I took in the spectacular and exotic scenery. I joined in with a reggae night and was lucky enough to witness a live acrobatics performance in which I attempted (much to the hilarity of the locals) to eat fire!

The following weekend, a group of other volunteers and I went to Cape Coast which was a three hour drive from Accra. Here, we visited the infamous slave castles and learnt a great deal about the history and origins of the slave trade. We also braved the famous Canopy Walk (pictured right), a wooden walkway situated 400m above the canopy of the forest.

In addition to this, I also travelled widely around Accra, joining in with the well-known Azonto dancing at the spot-bar’s on ‘Oxford Street’, tasting the local food such as Red-Red and Banku and shopping at the famous Makola market. The trip also made for many amusing moments, including dicing with death in the infamous tro-tro’s (old transit vans filled with seats that are used as buses throughout Accra), being continually subject to ‘Obruni’ (meaning ‘white person’ in the local language) being shouted at you from across the street and haggling with taxi drivers.

Overall, my experience in Ghana was unforgettable. Not only was I able to immerse myself in the rich culture but was also able to contribute, even if only marginally, to such fundamental projects. My trip has furthered my desire to practice in the field of international and human rights law in the future and I am already planning to travel to Ghana again once I have completed my degree to offer my assistance further in the projects I was involved with. I would like to take the opportunity to thank the committee of the Expeditions Fund in granting me an award, without which I would not have been able to undertake this trip.