

Empowering Local Structures of the CSOs to Monitor Policy and Politics in the Area of Food Security and Disaster Management.

On the 16th -17th May 2019, KAS engaged the Asal Stakeholders Forum (ASF) in West Pokot in a refresher training workshop to strengthen their capacity to influence policy and political lobbying on matters to do with food safety. The earlier sessions of the workshop looked at the general policy and political trends, the existing barriers to conducting advocacy campaigns around food security in West Pokot while providing the participants with an opportunity to connect their experiences at the county level with those at the national level. Food insecurity was agreed to be a frequent problem and a reflection of the disasters in West Pokot and therefore the importance of sound and well-reasoned policy development and implementation purposively to address the county and community challenges. But from the workshop, the fact that politics determined the county level budgetary allocation especially its influence in the county assembly, presentations and discussions also focused on how to monitor and engage politicians in ensuring that assembly debates and eventually budgets reflect the aspirations of the policy process.

The other subsequent sessions discussed on the space for CSO to conduct tailored advocacy campaigns (and not activity plans) that could be spearheaded under the umbrella of the ASF West Pokot Chapter. Radio programmes to discuss food security and disaster management issues was one of the preferences especially in West Pokot where it was realized as per the group works that there was a lot of claimed space. In the group work conducted to find out the type of spaces, CSOs in West Pokot generally agreed to the fact that they avoided manipulation or being co-opted (features of invited spaces) in government processes and structures as this had not realized the intended outcome of ensuring that the county was pacified from food shortages and the relief emergencies. CSOs purposely created public interest in their public cause to discuss governance and management as some of the challenges that needed redress in a bid to promote food safety.

The use of barazas to set policy agenda during political activities came out repeatedly as one of the attempts by networks and coalitions of CSOs to engage in claimed spaces. One of the issues raised that were important for reflection in the barazas included the likes of the community managed disaster risk reduction (CMDRR strategy) as well as the community disaster committees as structures for relying information both to the government and communities especially on hazards that pose a danger to the food security situation. Other avenues of advocacy campaigns and spaces for CSOs to engage in included the social media to harness immediate feedback, use of women economic empowerment groups/self helps, schools and churches to create wider sense of awareness. The difference between the normal activities and advocacy campaign was said to be the fact that a campaign was more centered around an issue or list of issues that the ASF under the various civil society membership would want to project. Examples of schools and churches where such campaigns have made significant impact was shared by the various speakers, and with this approach, the participants were able to easily relate to the importance of campaigns based on changes seen in other fields/sectors.

There was a session on the effectiveness of campaign advocacy strategies and the expected outcomes in the area of food security. The case of mutual trust between CSOs and communities in championing for common interest was presented as a foundational base for effective policy change outcomes with the repeal process of the disaster risk management Act of the County Assembly of West Pokot providing a more appropriate example. Policy monitoring was not a common practice by most CSOs as they lacked well developed tools for doing such, especially tools that would monitor the policy change.

As discussed during the plenary, determining if food production or access to food is a policy issue is not as difficult in the practical sense, yet most stakeholders were said to shy from this because of lack of understanding of the concepts of food safety and disaster management. The challenge of most CSOs was the lack of human resource capacity, and a presentation was made to illustrate how this aspect can easily undermine their credibility and effectiveness to engage.

A discussion session was also held to understand the progress made as well as challenges in West Pokot County from a perspective of the local CSOs advocating for issues in the fields of agriculture, livestock, livelihoods, water, natural resource, and land among others. At least a speaker each was able to share their experiences which generally brought out a connection challenge especially on what was contained in the policy, what was being implemented by government (both national and county) as well as whether the various communities' voices were captured.

After getting an idea of this, an advocacy campaign plan was looked at based on what had been developed before. Almost 90% of the plan agreed in 2016/2017 among ASF members had not been implemented. This was the biggest challenge with most CSOs in the county; ability to work independently. A lot would be suggested in such workshops, but very little was done thereafter. An alternative to this was to revise the work plan, make it simple and focus only on campaigns and not activities. Easy to do campaigns that can happen in social media at no cost only requiring members to either retweet, share on Facebook et cetera. Also, the other alternative was to lessen the number of campaigns, with actual physical campaigns like awareness creation to mobilize community groups around issues such as the importance of incorporating disaster risk management into the policy framework on disaster management being highlighted as cost based activities with an indication that such would require financing from partners. This approach was decided for testing by the ASF members and organizations including Pokot Women Empowerment Organization (POWEO) using their local structures organized for two public forums that were enjoined with this measure.

Presentation and group task on the campaign plan was able to reorganize and take care of aspects that made the implementation of the first plan ineffective including selection of the pivotal organizations.