

Profile

ABANTU for Development and Change

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Introduction and history

Fourteen years ago, in faraway Britain, a group of dedicated feminist African women from Western, Eastern and Southern Africa pioneered the birth of an organisation devoted to gender issues. ABANTU for Development set up an office in London. The early 1990s were a time when economic and political crises in Africa, aggravated by armed conflicts, had severely restricted national capacities to sustain the march towards social and economic change. Women were having to bear the greater share of social and economic burdens while remaining largely excluded from politics and policymaking. At the same time, the state was increasingly unable to fulfil its social responsibilities, and non-state organisations were slowly gaining ground as alternative vehicles for the implementation of development programmes and projects in the new democratic dispensations that were emerging in Africa.

The founding mothers of ABANTU for Development came from diverse backgrounds: those with roots in Britain and Europe, those whose pursuit of further knowledge had taken them there, and those who had escaped from political persecution and oppression within their own countries. What they shared was a determination to seize the opportunity to use their expertise, experiences, knowledge and skills to the benefit of the African women at home and abroad.

Since 1991, ABANTU has inspired many African women and men, and given rise to at least one other dynamic African women's organisation – Akina Mama wa Afrika, which was also founded in London. While ABANTU's founders had a shared vision and a common understanding of the economic realities of the continent and the general conditions in which women were situated, there emerged two schools of thought within the organisation. There were those who wanted to move back to Africa and focus solely on the continent, and those who believed that Europe should still hold the centre stage. In the end, ABANTU did both. Some of the founders stayed on and maintained an office in London, while others relocated to establish ABANTU regional offices in East and West Africa. Wanjiru Kiharo, the Director, remained in London, but visited the African offices regularly.

Context

In the 1980s and 1990s, African people experienced the diminishing role of the state in the provision of social and public services, following externally engineered economic reforms intended to divorce the state from the social sector. Under the broad umbrella of globalisation, a number of international institutions, structures and arrangements, including the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Trade Organisation (WTO) and Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAPS), were rendering African economies weak and stagnant. This had serious implications for the reduction of poverty. The economic, social and political crises of these disaster years disproportionately burdened women, who were largely sited within patriarchal social arrangements and reproductive roles. Due to inadequate representation and participation of African women in decision-making at local, national, regional and international levels, few women have been able to contribute to redefining policies, infusing them with women's interests, or to offer new perspectives on such issues as poverty reduction, conflict resolution and reconstruction. Nor have women been wholly successful at placing new items on the agenda that could address women's gender-specific concerns. African women have been absent as decision-makers in very important forums where critical decisions that impact on their lives have been taken.

ABANTU for Development was established in recognition of the urgent need to build the capacity of African women to participate in transforming their societies and achieving gender equality. With this came a commitment to strengthening civil society and enhancing women's participation in all levels of decision- and policy-influencing. ABANTU seeks to strengthen NGOs that work for and with women, enabling them to be more effective actors in the policy-making processes in their various countries.

The organisation that began as a small office in central London grew to include a Regional Office for Eastern and Southern Africa (ROESA) in Nairobi, Kenya, and a nucleus Country Office for West Africa, established in 1994 and based in Kaduna, Nigeria. ABANTU's journey in Africa has sometimes been traumatic; the Kaduna offices were razed to the ground during religious rioting, with some staff narrowly escaping with their lives. In 2003, in a tragic accident, ABANTU's Executive Director was left in a coma after a light aeroplane in which she was travelling crashed in Kenya. The Regional Office for Western Africa (ROWA) was re-established in Accra, Ghana, where a small unit had been initiated in 1999. ABANTU-ROWA co-ordinates all ABANTU programmes in the West African region, including the country programme activities of the Nigeria Country Office, which has been set up in a different location.

ABANTU'S vision and mission

ABANTU has a vision of a world in which empowered women and men, utilising their own resources, work together to address gender inequalities and promote transformational leadership and development for a just society.

It exists to build the capacity of women to participate in decision-making at all levels, to influence policies from a gender perspective, and to address inequalities and injustices in social relations. It seeks to strengthen NGOs to be effective actors with a strong voice in the policy-making processes in their countries.

It is an independent network of people who believe that gender disparity is an injustice, contributes to poverty, and is a major hindrance to development. When necessary, ABANTU forms strategic alliances with others, in order to advance its cause.

The organisation works through advocacy, training, research, institutional development and networking. Through these activities, ABANTU seeks to:

- enhance the capacity of African people, in particular women, to participate in development;
- increase the participation of African women in the political and economic structures of their countries.

The organisation focuses on gender training and capacity-building, extending public awareness of gender issues, and the provision of information and advice on the mobilisation of resources towards sustainable development in Africa.

The rationale behind ABANTU's work is that whereas both women and men face constraints in their participation in policy-making, the specific ways in which women are restricted, and the structural inequalities they face, need to be given sufficient attention and addressed. At the same time, lack of adequate access to necessary knowledge and skills also affects the ability of many NGOs working with women to provide an environment that would empower women to articulate their concerns about policies and their implications for their lives. Thus, policy-making processes not only operate in a top-down fashion, they are also undertaken without the benefit of women's views and concerns.

Core objectives

ABANTU's continental programmes are directed by these objectives:

- to highlight and influence, using a gender-analytical approach, the policies that perpetuate poverty;
- to enable women's organisations to engage in dialogue and negotiations on economic policies at all levels;
- to promote alternative gender-sensitive measures that contribute to the economic empowerment of women;
- to highlight the gender implications of governance and increase the effective and gender-sensitive participation of poor people, especially women, in the political process;
- to enhance and sustain the leadership roles of women in peace-building, preventative action on conflict, post-conflict transformation, and to strengthen the capacities of women's organisations to participate effectively in peace-building and reconstruction;
- to ensure a gender-perspective in all aspects of conflict, peace-building and post-conflict reconstruction;
- to improve African women's access to and use of information and communications technology, and to work for the development of gender-sensitive ICT policies;
- to ensure the institutional and organisational development of ABANTU so that it can be effective in influencing policies and development for the benefit of African women and men.

Programme implementation

ABANTU implements its programmes through the following activities:

Advocacy, public awareness and networking (APAN)

Within this area, ABANTU supports advocacy actions for the implementation of Article 7 of the CEDAW and the critical areas of the Dakar and Beijing Platforms for Action dealing with women's political empowerment, economic empowerment, conflict and peace-building, and access to education, science and technology. Through media sensitisation programmes, ABANTU hosts discussion programmes around the four thematic areas of governance, poverty, conflict and ICTs.

Training and capacity-building

Since 1996, ABANTU's training and capacity-building programme – “Enhancing Capacities for Engaging with National Policies from a Gender Perspective” – has worked across the sub-regions to sensitise policymakers to the gender implications of their policies, and to raise awareness in NGOs and CBOs of gender stereotypes and the potential of women as leaders. The organisation also sets up training programmes for women so that their skills can match the prerequisites for effective engagement with governance institutions. Such training programmes also seek to build the capacities of NGOs in the four main thematic areas (governance, conflict, ICTs and poverty).

One of ABANTU's key strategies is to increase the number of African women trainers who are skilled in gender and policy analysis. Over the years, ABANTU has trained more than

500 trainers in its workshops in Madagascar, Kenya, Uganda, Southern Africa, Ghana, Nigeria and the United Kingdom, using an approach that recognises the different ways in which women and men learn. This people-centred, participatory approach aims to develop participants' abilities and skills to diagnose and solve development problems. It enables the development of critical consciousness for change and transformation. The approach is based on the belief that every individual has valuable knowledge, skills and experiences that they bring to any process. ABANTU trainers therefore encourage participants to contribute their diversity of experiences, thus becoming facilitators of their own, and others' learning. The methods used in the training include context-specific case studies, discussion and working groups, role-plays, songs, folklore, dance, problem-solving exercises and simulations.

Research, publication and information

Research is conducted on each of the thematic areas to serve as a basis for our policy advocacy work. Through debates, information-sharing workshops, public policy forums, popular education, radio, and other media on gender equality issues, additional information is generated, and this serves as a basis for developing publications.

ABANTU also publicises governments' international commitments, disseminates knowledge of women's rights' instruments, and documents the gap between government commitments and the reality of women's lives. ABANTU has also commissioned rapid appraisal country studies in Eastern, Southern and Western Africa.

In 1997, in collaboration with the African Centre for Women at the UN Economic Commission for Africa, ABANTU produced tools and guidelines for developing National Action Plans for the implementation of the Platforms for Action, and for monitoring and evaluating government implementation in 1997.

To gain wider support and broaden acceptance of women's rights and gender equality, ABANTU uses the media to highlight women's experiences of governance and gender-sensitive strategies for improving women's participation in governance, as well as highlighting the gender implications of poverty, governance, conflict and ICTs.

Institutional development of ABANTU

Institutional development is another functional area of ABANTU. Here the organisation implements staff development initiatives around the thematic areas in order to strengthen staff capacity for leading the change process in both the organisation itself and the wider public. Another component of this function is the organisation's resolve to hold itself accountable to legal, financial and accounting regulations in the countries in which we operate, and as they relate to those we serve and our partners.

Recent developments

Recent developments have necessitated institutional rearrangements – the UK office closed in 2004, with the Regional Offices in Nairobi (ROESA) and Accra (ROWA) becoming fully autonomous.

Over the years, ABANTU-ROWA has played a catalytic role in the West African sub-region. This institution has used its expertise, experience in fostering effective partnerships, networking relationships and collaborative alliances with grassroots women's organisations and other civil society organisations to pursue ABANTU's training, capacity-building, advocacy, public awareness and networking missions. It has done so by developing the capacities of local women's organisations through training and development of strategies to strengthen them as agents of change; developing public education strategies to influence

and inform policymakers, aid agencies, et al on gender issues and ABANTU's work; institutionalising ABANTU and partners' advocacy efforts through the establishment of alliances; and enabling civil society organisations and policymakers to debate policies with the aim of enhancing gender perspectives in development programmes. Between December 1997 and March 2004, ABANTU-ROWA provided training for more than 1 200 individuals and organisations in the Western African region.

As a gender and policy advocacy organisation, ABANTU's vision has been directed by a belief in inclusive forms of global governance that ensure that the voices of the marginalised, women in particular, are heard and recognised. In trying to achieve these objectives, ABANTU has recognised that coalition-building and partnerships are the most effective route towards the promotion of gender equality.

ABANTU's involvement as the host organisation for the Women's Manifesto process is a shining example of how these broad goals were pursued in one country – Ghana. This inspiring story is told elsewhere in this issue of Feminist Africa – see Amina Mama's interview with Rose Mensah-Kutin, Dzodzi Tsikata and Hamida Harrison in “In Conversation”. The Women's Manifesto was researched, developed and produced by a collective and collaborative effort of the Coalition on the Women's Manifesto for Ghana. The fact that this was hosted by ABANTU-ROWA stands as testimony to ABANTU's desire to fulfil its mission, born in London a decade and a half ago.

Another example of ABANTU-ROWA's efforts in the region came to fruition in October 2004, when we organised a regional forum that brought together women academics, policymakers, gender activists and politicians from seven African countries to deliberate on the challenges of promoting women in public life in Africa.

While often frustrated by the slow pace of change, over the years ABANTU has grown, and is continually gaining in understanding of the issues we tackle. We have regularly reassessed and reflected on our role and strength as an organisation, and have remained focused on the ideals and commitment to the principles laid down when ABANTU was first formed.

Demanding equal gender participation in patriarchal power structures is a task beyond the capacity of one organisation. ABANTU recognises the value of establishing collaborative links with other players in the development processes, in order to engage with and influence them. At the same time, guarding the organisation's independence is equally imperative. It would be a betrayal of our predecessors and the organisation's commitment to genuine, transformative measures for the promotion of an equal, just and fair society if, for the sake of collaboration and legitimacy, ABANTU were to be co-opted into processes that lack accountability and responsiveness to gender equality.

ABANTU continues to direct its efforts towards advocacy, mobilisation, consensus-building, sharing of knowledge and information aimed at calling on governments to incorporate gender concerns into their development plans. As we step forward into a century that is still young, we look forward to continued growth, building of solidarity, and the excitement of all the challenges that working on the ground across Africa brings.

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