

IofC Francophone Team Training in Yaoundé, Cameroon

Twenty-eight people gathered in Yaoundé, Cameroon from 12 to 16 March 2017 for a training programme that focused on Initiatives of Change's (IofC) Francophone teams. The group consisted of Francophone African participants - six training faculty and local Cameroonian team members. The countries represented included Ivory Coast, Burundi, Rwanda, Mali, Chad, Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Nigeria, South Africa, Lebanon, Switzerland and the United Kingdom (UK).

The vision for this training was born during an IofC gathering in Ethiopia in 2014. The need was identified that over the years there has been a gap in training and development for IofC Francophone African teams and this gap remains a core need for the region. The Africa Coordination Group (ACG) committed to making the idea happen in 2015 during the annual meeting in Ghana within ACG's mandate to support teams and inspire actions.

IofC has a rich history of influence and work across Africa, including in Francophone countries such as Cameroon where IofC has been active prior to the country's independence. Today, IofC is present at different levels across Africa; in some countries it exists as an integrated way of life and a place for fellowship and sharing such as in Tanzania and in other countries there is a centre, a vibrant group of youth and several programmes such as in Nigeria and Kenya. Representatives from Mali and Congo commented that IofC is hugely needed in their countries but there are currently no IofC contacts there. There is hope this will change after the training.

'As a member of the African diaspora living in another country, it is amazing to see the energy for our continent in this room. We need changemakers here and in our diaspora communities,' commented Lusa Nsenga-Ngoy, a faculty member from DRC who is currently living in the UK.

During the training period, we began each morning with a silent reflection for inner listening. The new Chairman of IofC Burundi, Coyiremeye Saturnin, was pleasantly surprised by how the morning reflections impacted him, 'The exercises of silence struck me – it was a filled silence rather than empty which I have never experienced before. I want to live and continue practising this.'

The daily morning reflection was followed by four working sessions that aimed to inspire and equip the group. There was an intense focus on providing a foundation of IofC's 'DNA', as some in the room were new to the organisation. The group explored the vision and journey of Frank Buchman, how to apply IofC's values in one's life and if IofC can offer Africa a solution. Daphrose Ntarataze from Burundi presented a case study on the success of Creators of Peace Burundi. Rainer Gude from IofC International gave a presentation on IofC's strategic priorities and partnership building. Other topics included agents of change – exploring identity, peace and change in Africa and screenings of IofC films *The Imam and the Pastor* and *A Response to Africa – a story from Chad* (it was the first time this film had been shown outside Chad).

The training started with each person in the room sharing the context of their country for IofC's work, current activities and hopes for the future. Every participant demonstrated that

there was a lot of activity and energy in their respective countries but there were also great needs as some work in volatile situations where urgent change is needed, such as in Burundi.

Speakers and participants of the training shared moving personal stories. Many in the room had survived conflict and were living in post-conflict countries, such as Rwandan participants who expressed that trauma is still rife in their communities. A Lebanese speaker, Assaad Chaftari, told his personal story of transformation – from militant to peacemaker. Assaad served as a senior intelligence official in the Christian militia during the Lebanese Civil War and was responsible for many deaths. In 2000, he wrote a letter of apology to all his victims which was published in the national Lebanese press. Since then he has dedicated his life to peace building and promoting personal change. It was a powerful story that touched the hearts of many in the room, as several people had experienced war in different ways.

Francis Evans, Chair of IofC UK's Board, spoke about his father Robin Evans, who was known by many in the group. As a full-time worker for Moral Rearmament (MRA), Mr Evans dedicated his life to Central and East Africa. It was a significant experience for Francis to get an insight into the country that captured his father's heart.

The group was blessed to be in the presence of previous full-time MRA worker, Pierre Oko Mengue, who frequently interjected sessions with his pearls of wisdom and own story of change that included the repayment of debts long forgotten, honesty with his wife over marriage infidelities and the hurt pride of a father taking a new look at his authoritarian approach. 'I am inspired by what I have seen here. I hope you all embrace the future with hope and dedication,' Papa Pierre commented in the final session.

Looking ahead, the group explored and discussed changes that need to be made internally, both individually and collectively, from building team spirit first and then creating regional collaboration. There were a number of invitations to visit each other's countries to work together, for example Assad was invited to Burundi to share his experience. 'It is needed now in Burundi more than ever,' commented a Burundian participant.

In the final session, participants shared what the training meant to them and what they were leaving Cameroon with. There was much gratitude and hope for the future. 'I leave with an even greater thirst than what I arrived here for and I am a better person for it,' shared a young Cameroonian who is new to IofC.

Outcomes of the training programme consisted of IofC 'tools' and pragmatic techniques to takeaway, the setting of short, medium and long term visions, ideas for IofC in the respective countries and a Facebook group that has already been established as a platform for communication amongst the group.

There was a cohesion built over the four days as each person walked alongside the other through the challenges and hopes for their countries. There is optimism that this unity will turn into long lasting accompaniment for the benefit of Francophone Africa.

'I have lots of ideas to go home with. I feel called to create an IofC team in Chad where we need it greatly. I will take what I have learned here to my home country so the knowledge can spread. I will let the global network know when we have a team in Chad!' the Chadian participant excitedly stated.

'It is the beginning of an adventure and great things for Francophone Africa,' concluded Daphrose Ntarataze.