

# **FISTRAD TWENTY YEARS ON : AN OVERVIEW**

## **1. Introduction**

The Foundation for Integrated and Strategic Development was established in 1996. This year marks twenty years of providing opportunities and improving conditions for the poor in Builsa. Twenty years in the life of an organization is a significant milestone for one to step back and reflect. What does the picture look like? Has there been any progress made? What changes have taken place and what impact has it made in the lives of people and the organization itself? Twenty years ago the founders of the project started with a vision of an enlightened society without poverty. There was a passion and burning desire to see changes in our society.

Our mission is to work in partnership with communities and all who are dedicated to poverty eradication, elimination of ignorance and promotion of human rights.

There was high unemployment, particularly among women and the youth. Education was fast on the decline to the extent that the district library collapsed and many schools dilapidated. Students who failed to pass all their examinations did not have any opportunity to re-write. This created despondency and despair among the youth. There was no electricity in the entire district, no access to telephone. Information was very limited. Being in the district was like entering darkness. It was in this situation and context that FISTRAD was born.

Education, skills training and advocacy for social change are the cornerstones of our project and still the major bases of all our activities in the past twenty years. Construction of a staff house a classroom block that houses three training workshops two classrooms and a library was the first activity we undertook. Later a workshop and four chalet guest house were added.

Several lessons have been learnt along the way. For example Cultural factors can seriously affect changes required to transform or bring about social change. Our literacy classes failed not because participants were not eager to learn or did not know the importance of literacy. Most participants simply could not find time to attend lessons regularly.

The socio cultural setting is such that all year round community members are engaged in communal activities. It was agreed at the planning stages that because everybody is engaged in farming, we limit literacy classes to the dry season since community members will be less busy.

Unfortunately the dry season is used for reconstruction of collapsed buildings during the heavy rains as most houses are made of mud and easily give way. Culturally Builsa people perform funerals during the dry season because at that time there is food from the harvest. Funeral performance in one house involves the whole community and that takes priority over any other activity. Community members who are not seen at funerals are frowned on and this has social implications on the entire family.

Women particularly are more engaged in these activities and they were majority in literacy classes and therefore could not find time to attend and participate actively. Similar challenges were faced in the welding and carpentry projects. They were based on the assumption that products made in the shop will be sold and money used to buy materials for training. Unfortunately the market situation was different: people wanted the products but did not have money to buy or offered low prices. Eventually it took nearly a year to sell the products from the carpentry and welding shops. This made obtaining wood and metals for teaching and learning difficult. In spite of the above challenges, a few young people came out successful in carpentry and welding. Francis Asoblim is now a successful welder in Sandema. Atim Akpeok and Mathew Annsumn are also successful carpenters making a living and no more dependent on peasant farming and its uncertainties.

Tailoring and cloth weaving has been very successful. Most of the beneficiaries have been girls who have dropped out of school or got pregnant and given birth. One thousand five hundred girls received training through FISTRAD in various skills i.e. cloth weaving, dressmaking, soap making, pomade, tie and dye as well as batik cloth designs over the period.

It is due to this achievement that the MTN Community Heroes Award recognised Mr Richard Alandu and FISTRAD with the Best Women Empowerment Award in 2013. Skills' training for rural enterprise development is the best strategy in our circumstances to get rural people out of poverty and peasantry. Unfortunately donor agencies have shifted from what they call service delivery to human right approaches and accountability education. This is with the view that when the people know their rights they will demand accountability and participation from their leaders to respond to their needs.

## **2. Education**

Education is key to human survival and all societies have found different ways to educate their members. The colonial educational system Ghana adopted lays emphasis on acquisition of certificate as the only way to success. This has put a lot of pressure on the youth particularly those who have not been able to pass in the subjects required to progress to higher education and professional institutions. The institution of remedial classes as a social protection measure has brought relief and minimised migration of school leavers.

We started classes in Ayeta primary school before moving to our permanent site in Kobdem Sandema in 1999. Our well staffed library is at the centre of the educational process. It has played a very important role over the years in improving educational standards in the district. The library contains relevant books for primary, junior high schools and senior high school as well as books for general reading and academic purposes. It qualifies as one of the best libraries in Upper East Region. Thousands have benefited and are in responsible positions including the current District Chief Executive.

## **3. Advocacy for Social Change**

Culture and attitudes are very important contributory factors if a society is to develop. There are cultural practices that legitimise abuse of human rights in our communities such as non-inclusion of women, children and people with disabilities in decision making, widowhood rites, forced marriages and female genital mutilation. These practices are deep rooted. Ironically, the woman's sons can sit in Kusung to participate but she cannot, only because of her womanhood. Initially drama was a main tool that we used in public education.

Ours is more participatory in the sense that we pick the actors from the community and train them to produce plays that educate their fellows on the negative effects of some of our practices and do the advocacy. Ideas for the drama are drawn from the community through focus group discussions the desire to expand and to reach out to more and give them a voice gave rise to the community radio concept. FISTRAD applied for a frequency from the National Communications Authority in 2006 and on 31<sup>st</sup> March 2008 Radio Builsa 106.5 fm was born as the mouth piece of FISTRAD and the Builsa people. "Bulsa Leoluk" as known in the Builsa language meaning their voice, Radio Builsa has contributed immensely to the high level of both social and political awareness in the communities and has become a household name in the communities we serve.

Through constant education on human rights and advocacy, the chief of Bonia, an area in the Kassena Nankani West District in JULY 2012, publicly abolished the negative practice of widowhood rites. Builsa traditional council has also set up a committee to look into the cultural practices and make recommendations for changes to be made. Initial funding for establishment of the radio station came from the German and French embassies. UNESCO came in later to support with training and equipment. These were one off funding. Administrative and daily running cost comes from Sandema Educational Resource Centre Trust based in London and Paul ev based in Germany. Radio is very expensive to operate. Other sources of financing are from adverts and proposals to implement projects in partnership with other donor organizations. Erratic power supply and high cost of electricity are leading factors that threaten the existence of the radio station. In response to this threat, Paul ev is in the process of acquiring a solar power that will serve the station.

#### 4. Partnerships

We in FISTRAD recognise that development is about people and is social in character. Partnership is therefore critical in achieving success. The achievements over the past twenty years have been a collaborative effort by many organization individuals and communities. The German Development Service (DED) now GTZ played very supportive role in the development of our vocational program dubbed Vocational Training for Enterprise Development. The then DED NGO adviser Dr Almuth Schauber was not only sympathetic to the cause of FISTRAD but was enthusiastic and passionate about the concept. She gave advice and financial support to the project. Amazingly Almuth is so passionate about grass root development that since she left Ghana 11 years ago, she has continued with her mother Gertrud Schauber to support FISTRAD and other grass root organizations in Ghana, through Paul ev a charity she set up.



*Gertrude Schauber and Almuth Schauber above*

Sandema Educational Resource Centre Trust UK was set up in London as a charity to support the work of FISTRAD by Patrick Heinecke, an academic and civil society activist. Patrick has been the brain behind the library and the rich variety of books on the shelves. As co founder of FISTRAD, Patrick financed all the initial cost of the project sometimes from his pocket.



*Patrick Heinecke Fund raising to support Sandema in London*

Nick O'Neil a Falconor School teacher and supporter of FISTRAD also mobilised his pupils to fundraise to support construction of the class room block.



*Mr Nick O'Neil visits the paramount chief of Builsa*

Johanna Dolton a Calgary University student on internship fundraised to construct a children play ground for the deprived children to play with.

FISTRAD has worked with several NGOs both international and local to carry out projects ranging from skills training human rights education, good governance, research as well as health, agriculture and environmental protection to name a few. We have collaborated with government, district assembly, communities and donor organizations such as GIZ, IBIS, STAR Ghana, Ghana Aids Commission, Burger committee Stain Hagen of Germany. D. W. Academy, University of Calgary, Canada.

Our membership of the Ghana Community Radio Network and AMARC The world body of Community Radio Networks has had tremendous benefit to the radio station particularly capacity building of staff.

## **5. Organizational Development**

FISTRAD over the past twenty years has itself been transformed from a small organization to a force to reckon with in Non Governmental Organizations in Ghana. Through capacity building training programs organised by partners and individual efforts of our staff, FISTRAD has been able to build structures and rules and regulations that has made it a credible organization. FISTRAD can also boast of qualified development workers and journalists.

## **6. Builsa Women and Cultural Liberation**

Builsa cultural practice and gender issues are somewhat complex. In Builsa women are very important in the home; they are considered owners of the home and must be present to play very important roles during funerals and traditional religious ceremonies. During the farming season they play key roles cultivating the land and making sure that food which is usually scarce at that time gets to all members of the family however small. Despite the important role women play, there is an ugly side of the culture which puts women at a disadvantage.

Builsa men generally have been brought up to believe that women cannot be equal to men; that women's role is to keep the house and to take care of children. When it comes to decision making the culture frowns on women sitting in the Kusung the main place where real decisions are taken. To add insults to injury, a woman whose husband dies is the first suspect of having killed him, she will have to go

through widowhood rites to prove her innocence. The woman will have all her hair shaved off, will be put in a room without a window for days after which she will be made to bath with hot water. The final aspect of these widowhood rites is even more dehumanizing as the woman has to go out naked to beg in the neighbourhood. Refusal to go through these processes will mean the woman killed her husband and she will be branded a witch disgraced and expelled from the house. Another human right challenge in the area is the phenomena of branding women particularly old women as witches. The infamous female genital mutilation is also laying its ugly head in the area.

FISTRAD over the years has been working with women and other organizations to tackle these anti-social and inhuman cultural practices. The anti witchcraft campaign which was started with the support of German Development Service with Dr Almuth Schaubert as the NGO adviser played a key role in FISTRADs advocacy work, Alongside with other NGOs in the north where these practices are prevalent, strategies were developed using drama, posters and community durbars. With the establishment of the radio in 2008, advocacy, education and sensitization were intensified and engaged more women and community members.

In 2013, with the support of STAR Ghana, focus group discussions were held in three districts with women and the key issue that was raised is the practice of widowhood rites. All the women in the three districts said it was a practice that humiliated women and put them in shame and will like to see it abolished. FISTRAD then formed a committee of women to lobby chiefs and opinion leaders in the communities' radio discussions by women and progressive men were held with phone-ins to make it more interactive so as to galvanise more support. The women were very creative and came out with songs and testimony sessions that drew the attention of more people particularly those in authority and decision making positions at various levels of the society.

In November 2014 the first positive result of our years of struggle began to bear fruits with the chief of Bonia village under the Kassena Nankani district in a colourful ceremony abolished widowhood rites and other forms of practices that dehumanise women. The chiefs in the Builsa district followed suit with the formation of a committee of chiefs to come out with modalities aimed at abolishing some of the cultural practices that work against the rights of women. Another remarkable achievement of our advocacy work is in the area of women inclusion in decision making is the establishment of queen mothers a practice alien to the culture.

Together with the work of other organizations, the chiefs of the two Builsa districts have agreed to involve women in decision making and even established queen mothers in all the villages. These queen mothers are recognised in all public gatherings and participate in traditional council meetings. The establishment of queen mothers coupled with education and our mandatory demand that all our project and community meetings should have women and people with disabilities has changed the perception in the community in favour of social inclusion in community work and decision making.



*Above are women now taking leadership positions*



*Anti- Witchcraft Campaign to stop the abuse of women's Rights*

## **7. Community Participation in Food Security Project**

FISTRAD has always maintained that the cultural and psychological oppression of women in Builsa is not only due to the cultural set up but also the economic circumstances they find themselves in. Women are the poorest of the poor they are most of the time dependent on their husbands who are themselves poor. Even though they work very hard on the fields during the farming season, the proceeds belong to the husband who can choose to give them some or not. Economic empowerment of women therefore has to come from outside. Even though government has programs aimed at supporting women and small businesses such as micro finance and small loans centre (MASLOC) . Corruption and politicization of the scheme do not make it possible for vulnerable rural women who need such assistance to access them. The shift in emphasis from service delivery by most donors to good governance and human right advocacy means less donor funding for support of programs like micro-finance or skill training for rural women.

One project FISTRAD has undertaken within the period under review to support women's economic empowerment is the food security and environmental sustainability project.

This project was funded by Canadian International Development Agency through the ministry of local government. It was meant to address two issues, the first was to contribute to improving women's incomes and also to check environmental degradation which is fast leading to declining agricultural yields and food

insecurity in the communities. The strategy adopted was participatory in the sense that through community engagement in the form of first focus group discussions involving men, girls and elderly women, ideas for the project and its sustainability were developed. The men agreed to give their wives or daughters land to plant mango trees and own them. Mango trees were chosen because they are a cash crop in the area. So much money can be made during the mango season. In addition mangoes are nutritious and can be part of their diet during the season. The mango tree does not shed all its leaves during the long and hot dry season so they easily provide shade as well as vegetation cover. It is expected that when all the trees do well in the beneficiary communities, the area will be greened and forested thereby halting desertification which is fast encroaching the area. The women were selected because they go to fetch water and can easily water the plants and grow them successfully.

One big achievement of the project is that for the first time, men have found it reasonable to give their wife's plots of land which by the memorandum of understanding of the project they are to own and to use the proceeds in any way they choose to.



*Old woman taking good care of her mango tree*

## **8. Giving Voice to the Voiceless**

Builsa district is one of the remote areas in terms of accessibility to information and happenings nationally. The Builsa language itself is very limited in the sense that it is not widely spoken and is one of the marginalised languages because Buli has been excluded from being spoken on national radio or television. After the liberalization of the air waves upon the promulgation of 1992 constitution, saw decentralization of the Ghana Broadcasting Corporation to the regional level leading to the establishment of Upper East Fm station (URA Radio) as a way of extending broadcasting services to all parts of the country. This development however, did not end the marginalization of the Builsa language as very little time was devoted to programs in the language.

The location of URA Radio forty kilometres from the district meant they could only listen to programs designed for them mainly to inform on government policy. They were not in any way part of the programming or its content and people had to travel forty kilometres to make announcements. The worse scenario was the weak signals from both radio and television making listening to the radio or television unpleasant. National newspapers took several days to arrive in Sandema. This made access to information in the district limited keeping the majority uninformed on national issues; it is against this background that FISTRAD decided to put an intervention that will give voice to the voiceless people of Builsa. The air wave is a universal asset and it is the right of all people to have access to it for the purpose of education, information and entertainment in their own language and culture.

The journey towards establishing a radio station initially sounded a crazy idea because of the high cost of radio equipment in Ghana. The concept of a community radio was developed and shared with the then German Development Service NGO adviser Annette Turman who fortunately showed interest but could not raise the amount of money that was required to set up a radio station. She was however determined to help bring the idea to reality. She proposed the idea to the German Embassy officer in charge of grants who readily was willing to help but also could not raise the whole amount required from her outfit. Fortunately she had a friend in the French embassies who proposed cost sharing between the two embassies. The community radio concept to provide voice to the voiceless people of Builsa finally became a reality with the support of the two embassies and was inaugurated on the 31<sup>st</sup> of March 2008 by the ambassadors of the two countries in Sandema with a colourful ceremony witnessed by jubilant community members and their chiefs.

The fact that a radio station has been established in a community does not guarantee that voice will be given to the voiceless. Our major task was therefore to create the necessary and sufficient conditions that will enable the community members to get the voice and develop a sense of ownership. The first task was to train the radio staff to understand that community radio is different from commercial radio whose main purpose is to make profit. They have to develop a philosophy of participatory methodology that will enable them work in partnership with the community members so they can set their own agenda for the radio station particularly in programming and content.

Fortunately, our membership of the Ghana community radio network has exposed our staff to many experts in community radio. Some of our members also received journalistic training from Deutsche Welle radio academy from Germany. We also organised training for community volunteers who were ready to work for the radio free of charge.

Radio Builsa has given real voice to the people because programming is with the people and ordinary people participate in discussions and airing their views on issues in the community. The station has particularly been very helpful in promoting culture, music, long forgotten stories and riddles in the Builsa and Kantose languages. ***You and Your Health*** a program designed by the nurses and other health workers in the district has been very popular with listeners and they participate actively through phone ins asking questions on health conditions facing people. As a predominantly farming area, the radio has been helpful in passing agricultural information to farmers and educating on the use of chemicals and how they should be handled safely. Radio Builsa has now become part and parcel of the lives of the people and is a house hold name serving the community and is their pride. As all other human institutions, Radio Builsa has its own challenges, located in a rural area, and also dependent on volunteers, the station has not got the luxury of abundant skilled labour to deal with technical challenges that arise from day to day and often have to bring in experts from the far places and at huge cost. The poverty of the communities the station serves makes it difficult to generate revenue through paid adverts or programmes. This leaves the station with the option of depending on donor funding which is not very sustainable. High cost of operation particularly electricity cost and unreliable power supply in Ghana is impacting negatively on the operations of the station. The move by our partners in Germany Paul ev to purchase a solar system to power the station will not only reduce cost of operation but will protect equipment from the devastating effect of erratic and unreliable power supply. The solar power will also drastically reduce cost and make the station more sustainable



*Radio Builsa Giving Voice to the Voiceless*

## **9. Discrimination and Stigmatization Agony of Disabled People in Builsa**

In 2013 with funding from STAR Ghana, FISTRAD conducted focus group discussions with people with disabilities in five communities each drawn from five districts in the Upper East region of Ghana. The purpose was to find a way of integrating people with disabilities in decision making. The key issue that came out of the discussions was the fact that disability was generally seen as a curse and a disgrace to the family. As a result people born with disabilities were killed at birth and those who became disabled as a result of diseases were locked up in rooms and prevented from being seen by neighbours. Those who survive are treated with contempt and given derogatory names. They are generally seen as sub human and not counted or considered in affairs of the house. Sending people with disabilities to school is seen as wasting resources.

Even in times of food scarcity it was considered appropriate to deny the disabled and rather give the food to the table. Together with the community, we came out with drama, radio discussions, and testimonies from families with people with disabilities and the disabled people themselves. They were also made to take leadership roles as strategy to advocate for change. Radio programs included phone-ins to make them more interactive. We also carried the advocacy to the chiefs, religious leaders and opinion leaders in the communities.

Our main target was with the district assemblies because they have the power to pass legislation and also to enforce rules and regulations that will bring about the desired change that is to give dignity, self-actualization and realization to people with disability. We advocated for people with disabilities to be included in the assemblies so that they can articulate their views and concerns. We also called on all community leaders to include people with disabilities in community meetings and parents having children with disabilities to send them to schools. The advocacy was also carried to schools to educate teachers and school children to see children with disabilities not as people who have been cursed but their relatives who have the same rights as them.

Today there is a drastic departure from the past. People no longer lock up their disabled children or kill them. Children with disabilities are sent to school and the disabled people themselves have a strong organization that meets and has executives. The district assembly has for the first time appointed a disabled person to the assembly and many community meetings have representatives of disabled people. Capacity building programs, FISTRAD and other organizations have improved the confidence of some of them. In the latest district assembly elections two people with disabilities contested in their communities and were supported by FISTRAD with publicity and air time to explain their manifesto. Although none of them got elected, they polled significant votes which showed their assertiveness and the willingness of people to accept them.



*President of the Disabled persons association presenting a certificate to a trainee*

## **GALLERY**



*Young boys and girls receive certificates after 3years training at FISTRAD*



*Radio Builsa Morning show in progress*



*Trainees and staff of FISTRAD above*



*Students reading in the library at the centre*



*A view of the Centre*



*Playground for kids donated by Johanna Dolton*



*The chalet guesthouse at the centre*

**NB**

You can watch videos of some of the activities of FISTRAD and the cultural heritage of the Builsa Traditional area by following the link [www.youtube.com](http://www.youtube.com) and searching for FISTRAD SANDEMA or <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4dhhP5dT160>

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