

An Overview of AEFJN Participation & Experience in the Caravan West Africa



Caravan West Africa, What is it?

The Caravan of the CGLTE-AO (Convergence Globale des Lutttes pour la Terre, l'eau and les semences- Afrique de l'Ouest- Global Convergence for land, water and seed struggle, West Africa) is a West African regional coalition of CSOs, Faith based actors and Social Movements that link communities together for a common struggle to protect their land, water and farmers' seeds for and with the Communities. The caravan is organized to give moral support to communities resisting the grabbing of their natural resources (land, water, seed) or destruction of their environment through solidarity visit to those communities and creating an opportunity for them to be actors rather than being beneficiaries of Civil Society activism.

How does it work?

True to its name, it is a Caravan of activities (town hall meetings; sometimes with funfair) organized in communities with concrete cases of resource grabbing: land grabbing for agro commodity investments, natural resource extractions, water, projects that negatively impact communities with the participation of Government officials. The communities are given opportunities to tell their stories directly to the government officials with specific demands and the officials are given opportunity to respond to the concerns of the communities. The 2018 edition of the Caravan witnessed the presence of government officials at the level of Regional Governors, and Ministers but in the 2021 edition the caravan had even the opportunity of meeting with two of the Presidents of the countries of the countries who publicly committed to listen to the demands of the people. We watch with keen interest how they will keep their words for the people.

What are the demands of the communities?

They are articulated in [the Green book of the CGLTE](#) which is usually handed over to the government officials with specific variations from the affected communities. The demands are principally asking for the implementation of [Africa Charter of Human and Peoples Right](#) and [The Malabo Declaration on Accelerated Agricultural Growth and Transformation for Shared](#)

[Prosperity and Improved Livelihoods](#) that have been ratified by ECOWAS countries

Frequency of the Caravan

The caravan is organized every two years and the first edition was in 2016. The 2021 caravan is the third edition and was meant to be in 2020 but was postponed due to the COVID-19 crisis. Each edition follows a defined country route through identified impacted local communities while delegations from other ECOWAS countries and Mauritania converge at designated point for the caravan. The 2021 edition began from Gambia and passed through Senegal Guinea Bissau Guinea Conakry and Sierra Leone.

Unique Feature of the 2021 Caravan.

1. AEFJN with support of CIDSE (Catholic Alliance of Development Agencies) developed the RECOWA (Regional Episcopal Conference of West Africa) Online Justice Pilgrimage to complement the Caravan thus eliciting more participation of the Church in the Caravan. The Caravan thus becomes an opportunity for RECOWA to listen in a new way to the cry of the poor and the cry of the land. The online Justice pilgrimage equally has an internal advocacy intent of inviting the Church in West Africa to be a more listening Church. It is still ongoing and will terminate during the plenary of RECOWA Bishops in May 2022 with messages of what have been seen and heard during the pilgrimage to the bishops calling for their reflections and actions on this unique experience. [You can follow the link to read more about the online justice pilgrimage.](#)
2. It provided a systematic opportunity for the local Churches to evaluate their advocacy engagement beyond pulpit rhetoric.
3. Engagement of the services of a film maker who highlighted through short video clips the voices from the communities paying particular attention to the participation of the local Churches for the RECOWA Online Justice Pilgrimage. These videos were uploaded in the RECOWA Facebook page linked to the Facebook page of national conferences and some dioceses. Relevant video clips are also in the AEFJN Facebook page
4. AEFJN offered intermittent reflections to RECOWA from the Caravan drawing her attention to issues of practical importance to the Church's advocacy engagements in ECOWAS. Some of them were published in RECOWA Facebook and AEFJN Facebook pages respectively while others were set aside to help RECOWA in their future advocacy plans.

Motivation for AEFJN Participation in the Caravan

The participation of AEFJN in the Caravan is motivated by its commitment to multilevel Africa driven advocacy strategy in its 2019-2022 work plan:

- Promotion of Africa community driven advocacy
- Facilitation of Church and non-Church collaboration in Our Land is Our Life platform (LOL)
- Promotion of North South collaborative advocacy.

Outcome of the Caravan

1. There is a progressive involvement of the Church in West Africa with the community driven advocacy movement
 - In 2018, only Caritas Togo was involved in the activities of the caravan
 - In 2021 edition, three national Caritas were involved (Gambia, Guinea and Sierra Leone) were involved in the Caravan activities. However, what stands out in the participation of the Church is the personal and physical participation of the Bishop of Banjul in the launch of the Caravan in Banjul. In addition, the bishop hosted the representatives of the delegations to dinner after the launch of the Caravan. The national and catholic radio stations were agog with the caravan activities in the Gambia. Both the Church and the Social Movement actors had joint press conferences, radio interviews on resource grabbing in the Gambia. The involvement of the Church in Sierra Leone helped the Caravan enormously to navigate through very challenging moments in the country. But the most important outcome is the commitment of these local Churches to ongoing collaborative advocacy engagements with the Civil Society and the Social Movements in their countries.
 - A new awakening in the understanding and doing the JPIC ministry for the local Churches who participated in the caravan
2. In the 2021 edition of the Caravan there were opportunities to meet directly with the Presidents of two of the countries who committed to listen to the content of the green book of the Caravan. The Government of Benin returned the land grabbed by local land grabbers to the community and individual owners in 2018 after the caravan and we look forward with great hope that some of the public commitments of the Governments during the 2021 Caravan will bear fruits.
3. A very successful Launch of 2 land grab cases Policy Briefs involving EU corporations in Sierra Leone with the participation of some EU officials and those of the national Government of Sierra Leone
4. RECOWA Secretariat will collaborate with the CGLTE and other CSOs for joint advocacy event at ECOWAS Secretariat in Abuja in January 2022.
5. A decision to hold Africa Peoples summit during the EU-Africa summit in February has now expanded to include the Eastern and Southern Africa's grass root farmers' movement. The caravan is also catalyzing initiative bring in the social Movements in central and northern African regions to create a common Africa Peoples driven movement to protect Africa's resources and take Africa back from the hands of Resource grabbers.

Challenges

One of the major challenges of AEFJN in the Caravan is the absence local religious communities' participation in the local communities' struggles. The Secretariat made spirited effort without success during the planning stages to get connected to the local JPIC persons and communities of members Congregation through the Contact persons in Rome but this was not successful. My personal encounter with a few of them during the caravan shows a



disconnect between what the Congregations are doing at the International level and what their communities are doing at the local levels similar to the way the institutional Church is disconnected from the local Church communities. It will not be possible for AEFJN to pursue community driven advocacy without the involvement of local religious communities. It will be helpful if the Contact persons will recognize this gap and re-strategize with Secretariat on how to close it. Community driven advocacy to build African Peoples' Capacity to bring about the real change that the people want.