



**Universität
Zürich^{UZH}**

**Right
Livelihood**
CENTRE ZÜRICH

Sustainability Now!
Analysing Empowerment for Change
«Establishing and Protecting Human Rights for
Women and Girls at Risk»

Veranstaltungsbericht

Janna Keiser
Glynis Cerneaz
Janine Gruber

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As part of the lecture series “Sustainability Now! – Empowerment for Change” we had the pleasure to welcome Marthe Wandou, Right Livelihood Laureate, to the University of Zurich. The lecture series is organized as a collaborative module, open for students of all disciplines to take part in and the public to attend, by the right livelihood centre of the University of Zurich, represented through PD Dr. Aline Steinbrecher-Frei and the Sustainability Team of the University of Zurich with Dr. Jeannette Behringer as project manager.

Marthe Wandou and her organisation ALDEPA (Action Locale pour un Développement Participatif et Autogéré (engl.: local action for a participatory and self-determined development)) received the Right Livelihood Award in 2021. Wandou founded ALDEPA in 1998 to fight against gender-based violence, especially child marriage, provide support for those who have experienced such violence, and to empower young women and girls through a holistic approach that engages all members of community. In addition to Marthe Wandou, we had the pleasure of hosting two panellists for a vivid discussion. One of the panellists was Angelika Weber, program manager of the NGO “Mission 21”, an international church mission organisation that provides sustainable development cooperation, emergency aid, and reconstruction. They are active in the southwest region of Cameroon, where they support the local population through projects in education, health, theological education and humanitarian aid. We also welcomed Dr. Lea Chilian who works at the University of Zurich as a Senior Teaching and Research Assistant for Theological Ethics at the Faculty of Theology and is the deputy director of the Institute for Social Ethics at the university’s ethic centre. Her main research topics include pastoral care and spiritual care, care ethics and feminist ethics, on which she has published various articles and essays.

The discussion revolved around the topic of gender-based violence, especially child marriage, the role of education and religion in this, the impact of Boko Haram and other ongoing conflicts in Cameroon as well as national and international cooperation in addressing these threats to the livelihoods of the people in Cameroon. Marthe Wandou offered us a vivid insight into the daily struggles that her and the organization ALDEPA are faced with. Boko Haram, which is primarily active in the North of Cameroon, has further worsened the situation for young girls and women by spreading the false narrative that Islam sees education as haram (meaning “sin”). As a result, the number of girls dropping out of school has increased since the emergence of the terrorist group. They are known in the media for their numerous kidnappings of schoolgirls. What truly shocked us was the fact that sometimes even parents organise a kidnapping

operation through Boko Haram if their daughters refuse to get married. This highlights even more how important it is for ALDEPA to engage the community so that everybody becomes aware of the importance of education also for girls.

Angelika Weber unfortunately confirmed these very dark truths. While both organizations face different external conflicts in their daily operations, connections could be drawn between them. Unlike ALDEPA, Mission 21 primarily operates in the southwest of Cameroon and is therefore not affected by the brutal actions of Boko Haram. However, they must deal with a different type of conflict, namely the consequences of the active civil war between separatist groups and state forces. Many people lose everything they had, including their homes, loved ones, and sources of income. Both men and women, boys and girls, are equally affected by these circumstances, but women are the primary targets of gender-based violence in this context. They often have to sell their bodies in order to obtain food and shelter, which makes them even more vulnerable to sexual assaults such as rape.

However, both Marthe Wandou and Angelika Weber provide examples of empowerment despite the challenging local situations. This empowerment is made possible through education and engagement with the communities. ALDEPA introduced the idea of girls clubs in schools, where girls and young women can discuss the role of education, share their experiences with gender-based violence, and support and empower each other. The aim is to help each other overcome any trauma and become more resilient. Lea Chilian relates to this concept and stresses the importance of role models. She explains that people who receive care can become caregivers themselves, highlighting that everyone has the capability to feel empowered and in turn, empower others. Education is crucial as it helps to activate these capabilities.

Both the approaches of Mission 21 and ALDEPA are very community-based, meaning that local actors are included throughout the process to ensure that the needs of the people living there are met. This includes not only the parents and peers but also the police and religious leaders. ALDEPA for example cooperates with religious leaders and parents. Religious leaders can inform ALDEPA when a marriage is about to happen and teach parents and societies how to interpret the Quran properly and in a way that doesn't prohibit education but highlights its importance. Marthe and Angelika also stress the importance of international cooperation and networks. While engagement is crucial, Marthe Wandou clearly advocates for action – action on a state as well as a global level.

What we take away from this evening is that we have seen from very different perspective how important education is, not only for girls and women, but for the entire society to flourish and be sustainably empowered. We also realized that even though we are in the 21st century, girls and women are still facing severe disadvantages and that we are still far from achieving gender equality. This makes the work of organizations like ALDEPA and Mission 21 all the more crucial. As action is needed both locally as well as globally it is also vital for us in the Western world to educate ourselves more on what is happening in Cameroon.