**Concept Note**

**Witchcraft and Human Rights**

Experts Workshop

UN Headquarters, Geneva, 21st & 22nd September 2017

**Background / Context**

In numerous countries around the world, witchcraft related beliefs and practices[[1]](#footnote-1) have resulted in serious violations of human rights including, beatings, banishment, cutting of body parts, and amputation of limbs, torture and murder. Women, children, the elderly, and persons with disabilities particularly persons with albinism, are particularly vulnerable. Despite the seriousness of these human rights abuses, there is often no robust state led response. Often judicial systems do not act to prevent, investigate or prosecute human rights abuses linked to beliefs in witchcraft. This institutional failure perpetuates impunity.

Beliefs and practices related to witchcraft vary considerably between different countries and even within ethnicities in the same country. There is overall limited understanding of beliefs in witchcraft, how it may be practised in some cultures, and why. The Special Rapporteur on Extrajudicial, Summary or Arbitrary Executions, Philip Alston, states in his 2009 Report that human rights abuses carried out due to beliefs in witchcraft have “not featured prominently on the radar screen of human rights monitors” and that “this may be due partly to the difficulty of defining ‘witches’ and ‘witchcraft’ across cultures - terms that, quite apart from their connotations in popular culture, may include an array of traditional or faith healing practices and are not easily defined. The fact remains, however, that under the rubric of the amorphous and manipulable designation of ‘witchcraft’, individuals (often those who are somehow different, feared or disliked) are singled out for arbitrary private acts of violence or for Government-sponsored or tolerated acts of violence.” (A/HRC/11/2, 2009). Currently, no normative framework or formal mechanism exists to conceptualize record, monitor or respond to such violations (WHRIN, 2014).

The exact numbers of victims of such abuses is unknown and is widely believed to be underreported.[[2]](#footnote-2) At the very least, it is believed that there are thousands of cases of people accused of witchcraft each year globally, often with fatal consequences, and others are mutilated and killed for witchcraft-related rituals.[[3]](#footnote-3) The literature asserts that these numbers are increasing, with cases becoming more violent, the practices spreading, and new classes of victims being created (Adinkrah 2004, Bussien et al. 2011, Cohan 2011, Gardini 2013, Geschiere 2008, Horowitz 2014, Jorgensen 2014), although the difficulty in proving such claims quantitatively is acknowledged (Forsyth 2016). These practices are also increasingly a challenge for countries in the global North, mainly within migrant communities (Edwards 2013, Garcia 2013, Powles & Deakin 2012, *The Economist* 2015).

Witchcraft beliefs, practices and related consequences have been reported in the UN by various high level officials and experts—although from a specific perspective and often in a specific country and context. These include the Special Representative of the Secretary General (SRSG) on Violence against Children,[[4]](#footnote-4) the Special Rapporteur (SR) on violence against women, its causes and consequences, the SR on freedom of religion or belief, the SR on torture and other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment, and the SR on extrajudicial, summary or arbitrary executions. Some experts have also sent communications to states on the matter including the SR on the independence of judges and lawyers, as well as the Independent expert on technical cooperation and advisory services in Liberia. The Independent Expert on the enjoyment of human rights by persons with albinism has also broached the topic in her last two reports, and considers that a more holistic approach to the phenomena is necessary.

The workshop is ground-breaking as it is the first-ever to discuss witchcraft and human rights in a systematic and in-depth manner at the UN or international level. It will bring together UN Experts, academics and members of civil society to discuss the violence associated with such beliefs and practices and groups that are particularly vulnerable. It will highlight the various manifestations of witchcraft beliefs and practices, including accusations, stigma and ritual killings, before looking to identify good practices in combatting the phenomena. The meeting will also be an opportunity to discuss whether current legislative frameworks are sufficient to meet State legal duty to prevent, punish, investigate and provide remedies for harm caused by beliefs in witchcraft.

It will mark an important step towards mainstreaming the issue into the UN Human Rights system, whilst providing impetus and practical guidance to the numerous international and regional mechanisms, academics and civil society actors that have been working to raise awareness and understanding of these challenging issues.

**Objectives and Expected Outcomes**

**Overall Objective:**

* To enable greater understanding of witchcraft related beliefs and practices, and their impact on the enjoyment of human rights, with a view to developing solutions to prevent further abuses from taking place

**Substantive objective:**

* discuss violence, highlight manifestation, identify good practice and discuss the adequacy of existing legal framework to ensure State legal duty.

**Institutional objective:**

* mainstream the issue into the UN Human Rights System and provide practical guidance to relevant actors.

**Outcome document/report:**

* An outcome document containing the substantive discussion as well as a synthesis of recommendations will be produced and ready for distribution before the end of the year.

**Location: Geneva, Switzerland**

To take advantage of the presence of numerous State delegates, international human rights and development agencies.

**Date: September 21 & 22, 2017 (Thursday & Friday)**

On the margins of the 36th session of the Human Council to take advantage of the presence of a wide range of stakeholders and UN experts.

**Organizers**: This event is organized by the following (confirmed): Ms. Ikponwosa Ero, the Independent Expert on the enjoyment of human rights by persons with albinism, Ms. Ikponwosa Ero, Gary Foxcroft, Director of the Witchcraft and Human Rights Network (WHRIN); Dr Charlotte Baker, Lancaster University.

Co-organized by the following (confirmed) the SRSG on Violence Against Children, the Special Rapporteur on the rights of persons with disabilities, the Special Rapporteur on violence against women, its causes and consequences. As well as others (TBC).

**Partners and Sponsors**: Confirmed sponsors: The Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, Under the Same Sun, Lancaster University, Witchcraft and Human Rights Information Network, Permanent Missions of the United Kingdom to the UN in Geneva and the Permanent Mission of Sierra Leone to the UN in Geneva

**Method of Work**

* The format of intervention will follow the process of similar international meetings
* Therefore a limited number of presenters will be asked to be expert panellists: responding to the identified questions and topics.
* Each session will have a different moderator, who will introduce the topic as well as the expert panellists. The moderator will also facilitate the exchange of ideas among panellists on the one hand and between the panellists and all participants on the other hand. Finally the moderator will keep the time while making final remarks reflecting the main conclusions.
* Discussions under each agenda item will be open to all expert participants beginning with state parties, followed by UN experts and then civil society (NGOs, faith-based organizations and academics)
* In order to allow for the largest possible substantive contributions and to enable a more interactive dialogue, expert participants will be requested to limit their interventions under each topic **to no more than 2 to 3 minutes**
* It is highly recommended to all expert panellists and expert participants to bring a full written version or summary of their intervention to ensure effective and accurate incorporation in the outcome report.
* Further details on participation will be provided closer to the event

**Proposed Agenda and Speakers (Subject to Change)**

**Day One**

10.00-10.30 **Opening Remark by Dignitaries and Sponsors**

**Part 1 – Conceptualization of witchcraft**

10.30-11.30 **Panel 1a: Manifestations of Witchcraft Beliefs and Practices**

Dr Birubala Rabha, Human Rights defender, Assam State, India

Mardouche Yembi, Survivor of witchcraft accusation, Democratic Republic of Congo/UK

Mariamu Staford, person with albinism-survivor of attack, Tanzania

Allan Sembatya, Survivor of attack, Uganda

Question(s):

How have witchcraft beliefs and practice impacted you/groups your represent?

11.30-13.00 **Panel 2: What is `witchcraft`?**

Prof. Jean La Fontaine, London School of Economics

Rev. Prof. Samuel Waje Kunhiyop, General Secretary of Evangelical Churches Winning All (ECWA), Nigeria

Dr Simeon Mesaki, specialist in witchcraft studies, Tanzania

Rev. Abel Ngolo, Secrétaire-General-Représentant Légal, Equipe Pastorale auprès des Enfants en Détresse, RD Congo

Dr Robert Priest, Trinity International University

Question(s):

What does “witchcraft” include or encompass?

Note:

The purpose of this session is not to have a closed list of elements describing witchcraft but to identify what it includes and how these may be recognized.

13:00-14.30 **Lunch break**

**Part 2 – Harmful Practices**

14.30-16.00 **Panel 3: Witchcraft Accusations**

Marta Santos-Pais, SRSG on violence against children

Dr Dubravka Simonovic, Special Rapporteur on violence against women, its causes and consequences

Catalina Devandas Aguilar, Special Rapporteur on the rights of persons with disabilities

Question(s):

1. How have witchcraft beliefs and practice impacted the human rights of the group you advocate for?
2. Lay out government's human rights obligations in relation to these violations.
3. What recommendations do you propose for stemming these violations? (you may make recommendations addressed to various actors and stakeholders)

16.00-17.30 **Panel 4: Civil Society Perspectives**

Gary Foxcroft, Witchcraft and Human Rights Information Network

George Thindwa, Activist, Malawi

Sashiprava Bindhani, Lawyer and Odisa State Government Commissioner for Information, India

Monica Paulus, Human Rights Defender, Papua New Guinea

Barrister James Ibor, Basic Rights Counsel, Nigeria

Question(s):

1. How have witchcraft beliefs and practice impacted the human rights of the group you advocate for?
2. Set out government’s obligations in relation to these violations.
3. What recommendations do you propose for stemming these violations? (you may make recommendations addressed to various actors and stakeholders)

**Day Two:**

**Part 3 – Non-State actors’ perspectives**

9.00-10.30 **Panel 5: Ritual Killings**

Marta Santos-Pais, SRSG on violence against children

Peter Ash, Under the Same Sun, Canada

Leo Igwe, Human Rights advocate, Nigeria

Pastor Peter Sewakiryanga, Kyampisi Childcare Ministries, Uganda

Question(s):

1. What is ritual killing and how is this related to witchcraft?
2. Set out government’s obligations in relation to these violations.
3. What recommendations do you propose for stemming these violations? (you may make recommendations addressed to various actors and stakeholders)

**Part 4 – Witchcraft in Regional Contexts**

10.30-11.45 **Panel 6: Regional focus – Africa**

Commissioner from the African Commission on Human and Peoples’ Rights

Dr Patricia Lund, Coventry University

Malawi Law Reform Commission Representative, TBC

Jehu Tom, Way to the Nations, Nigeria

Question(s):

Focusing on the region being discussed:

1. What steps have you/your organization taken to successfully curb the violations stemming from witchcraft belief and practices?
2. What are the subsisting challenges?
3. What regionally-specific recommendations do you propose?

11.45-13.00 **Panel 7: Regional focus – Asia and Pacific**

Dr Miranda Forsyth, Australian National University

National Commission on Human Rights, Indonesia (representative) Dr Dinesh Mishra, Chhattisgarh, India

Father Philip Gibbs, Divine Word University, Madang

Representative, Department of Justice and Attorney General, Papua New Guinea

Others TBC

Question(s): As above

13.00-14.15 **Lunch break**

14.15-15.45 **Panel 9: Regional focus – Europe**

Leethen Bartholomew, University of Sussex

Oladapo Awosokanre, Africans Unite Against Child Abuse (AFRUCA)

Andy Desmond, Anti-Trafficking Consultants

Question(s): As above

15.45-17:00 **Faith Based Organizations**

Dr Steve Rasmussen, Africa International University

The Holy See, TBC

The Lutheran Federation, TBC

Carolyn Gent, Stop Child Witchcraft Accusations Coaltion

Elizabeth O’Cassey, International Humanist and Ethical Union

Question(s)

1. What is your organization doing to address these issues?
2. What is left to be done by your organization? By other stakeholders?

17:00-17:15 Coffee break

17:15-17:55 **Presentation on Preliminary Outcomes** by Rapporteur of Day 1 and 2

\*Followed by final comments from the floor

17.55-18.00 Closing Remarks - Ikponwosa Ero

1. The concepts e.g. “witchcraft” and “witchcraft beliefs, practices and consequences,” used in this note are preliminary alone. They are indicative of the ideas been conveyed and are not being used as the final and only means of expressing those ideas. For these preliminary purposes, the term “witchcraft” is taken to include “muti” and similar ritual killings and ritual attacks. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. # See for example, Karen McVeigh, Child witchcraft claims increasing as ‘hidden crime’ is investigated, 8 October 2014, <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2014/oct/08/child-witchcraft-claims-hidden-crime-met-police-under-reported> Also see, Ruth Evans, `Witchcraft abuse cases on the rise, 11 October 2015, http://www.bbc.com/news/uk-34475424

   [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. See Philip Alston, “Of witches and robots: the diverse challenges of responding to unlawful killings in the twenty-first century”, *Macalester International*, vol. 28 (2012) and Jill Shnoebelen, Witchcraft allegations, refugee protection and human rights: a review of the evidence, UNHCR, Research paper No. 169, http://www.unhcr.org/4981ca712.pdf [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. See <http://srsg.violenceagainstchildren.org/page/850> [↑](#footnote-ref-4)