



Meeting Report
TOGETHER WE ARE LOUDER PILOT
Date: Wednesday December 7, 2022
Venue: Ekurhuleni Katlehong Family Skills Centre

The Campaign for Free Expression (CFE) is planning to roll out a nationwide awareness-raising campaign in 2023, to educate grassroots communities about their right to freedom of expression and access to information, and how to fully exercise these rights in ways that can help them in solving some of their everyday challenges. The project, titled *Together We are Louder*, is a one-and-a-half-year project aimed at contributing to bridging the inequality gap by giving grassroots communities platforms to speak out and be heard by those who lead them or those in positions of power to influence positive change in their local communities. As part of the project launch, CFE is conducting a pilot of the project, focusing on community-based organizations in the Gauteng province. The pilot kicked off on Wednesday 7 December with a meeting of 20 community activists, representing 20 community-based organisations (CBOs) from Johannesburg and surrounding areas like Pretoria. The organizations focus on different areas such as poverty alleviation, assisting elderly citizens, feeding schemes, orphaned children, sport and culture, digital skills, people living with disabilities, alcohol and drug recovery programs, community skills development, employment creation and gender equality, among others.

The purpose of the meeting was to:

- Evaluate communities' level of understanding of their rights to freedom of expression (FOE) and access to information (ATI);
- Evaluate the status of freedom of expression and access to information within communities;
- Identify challenges confronting communities; hindering their ability to speak out to hold leaders to account; and
- Identify opportunities for potential collaboration with CBOs on these issues.

CFE Executive Director, Anton Harber, opened the meeting by introducing CFE and defining the work that the organization does. Anton specified CFE's mandate as to promote freedom of expression without fear or favour; including representing those whose views may not be popular, as long as their form of expression was considered legal. Anton recalled his days as a journalist during apartheid, where media reports were censored, and propaganda was the order of the day. He said it was from this experience that his mission to defend freedom of expression developed, leading to him eventually founding the organization, Campaign for Free Expression. Regarding the timing and essence of the organization's founding, he explained that there was a need to safeguard the hard-earned freedom that South Africa won after 1994, which allowed for the equal treatment of all citizens regardless of their colour or economic background. He cautioned that there had been a rise in potential threats to this freedom as seen by attempts to intimidate non-governmental organizations and to limit civic space in the country in recent months. He emphasized the importance of safeguarding the right to freedom of expression and access to information by referring to the role that protests played in toppling apartheid and ensuring that South Africans can have the constitution that it has today – which guarantees equal rights for all. He urged those in attendance to uphold and observe these important rights because they were the enablers of the enjoyment of all other rights. He concluded by calling

upon anyone with a concern around the violation of their right to FOE to feel free to contact CFE for appropriate intervention and support.

Hanifa Manda, a Project Manager at CFE, facilitated the next sessions, which included an information session around FOE and ATI, their importance, and why CBOs should care about defending these rights. She also explained that the *Together We are Louder* project aimed at promoting ‘people power’, meaning empowering communities to participate in public life. She underscored the importance of citizen participation in public life by explaining that, as a democratic state, South Africa should be governed by the will of the people and this can only happen if the people are free to express themselves, either through voting or holding government (and peers) accountable. She outlined the project goals and objectives, stressing that the project would strengthen the individual capacities of CBOs to engage in advocacy around the right to freedom of expression and access to information within their communities. This would consequently equip those communities with tools to protect and exercise their rights effectively. “Exercising freedom of expression without fear or unlawful interference is central to living in an open and fair society; one in which people can access justice and enjoy their human rights”, she said. “It serves public debate and supports a free and independent press, informed citizenship and the transparent functioning of the state”, she added.

Manda warned against state attempts to stifle freedom of expression using draconian or punitive laws; emphasizing that, although freedom of expression can be limited, its limitations should only be in so far as they do not infringe on citizens’ rights. She mentioned that, under the project, CFE intended to lobby lawmakers to address some of the challenges brought about by the information gap resulting from unequal access to certain products and services driving information circulation. Without the opportunity to access information, such as the printed press, radio and TV or social media, people would not be able to receive different viewpoints on issues in society and state policies, she pointed out. This was needed for people to form their own opinions about issues and to discuss them. Manda informed the community activists that society should expect government to provide access to at least some information that explains and justifies its policies and actions. For example, why the authorities have decided to construct a road instead of a public toilet or to explain and provide documentation on how a planned rubbish factory will affect the environment.

Manda concluded by opening a discussion around the barriers or challenges that communities were facing in exercising their rights to freedom of expression and access to information. She urged participants to not only think about their personal challenges, but issues that affect their communities at large. The main issues that participants raised were:

- **Activists giving in to bribes** by those in leadership positions. This was said to be a ‘**silencing**’ tactic used by many in positions of influence if they needed to have their way and avoid accountability.
- **Lack of education and awareness created self-censorship** as some citizens struggled to articulate their issues.
- **Fear of speaking out** – some citizens were afraid of being targeted for speaking out. They want to be guaranteed protection first.
- **A broken society** – A shared sentiment amongst the participants was that a large section of the South African community is still in need of healing for past hurts. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission was said to not be doing enough to address the deep-seated anger and bitterness that is gripping most black communities. It was pointed out that platforms for

venting or addressing this anger were necessary as a way of amplifying the voices of these angry communities and acknowledging their hurt.

There were two specific cases of intimidation and harassment that were mentioned as examples of community members' challenges in exercising their rights. One was by an arts activist who mentioned being hurled with insults and threatened with death after protesting the management of the COVID grant for artists in 2021. The participant shared their first-hand experience of how they were chased from the Luthuli House and told by the Minister of Arts that they would be killed if they did not leave immediately. Another was by a woman dealing with gender-based violence, who said she had tried to hold certain individuals in her ward accountable by following all legal channels, but it was not forthcoming, instead, she was facing death threats for speaking out. Another case of a failed attempt to hold leaders to account was by an activist for people living with disabilities, who had tried various channels to advocate for the rights of these people by providing ease of transport. However, this was not yielding any results. The participant requested CFE for assistance with taking the matter up until it is heard by those who can influence change. It was emphasized by another participant that there was need to not only focus on educating citizens about their rights but also their responsibilities. This would address the "entitlement" mentality amongst the youth.

The meeting was concluded by some remarks from CFE Executive Director, Anton Harber, who thanked participants for their valuable contributions and stated that these contributions would be useful in mapping a way forward. He referred to the specific cases of harassment and futile efforts to hold leaders to account, that were mentioned during the discussion, and assured participants that there would be a follow-up to these cases in order to determine how CFE can assist. Participants thanked CFE for the opportunity to reflect on such an important topic and expressed keenness to participate in future activities under the project. Anton adjourned the meeting after announcing that there would be a meeting to discuss the findings from that day's gathering, where a way forward would be discussed and later communicated with the group.

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