



Case Study #1: Urgent Action Fund–Africa



CHRIS SATTLBERGER/PANOS PICTURES

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## Seizing the Moment to Advance Women’s Rights

In 2004 a team from the Center for the Protection of Underprivileged Women in Cameroon paid a visit to Kondengui maximum-security prison in Yaoundé, the nation’s capital. Brought in to provide skills training to female inmates, its members were troubled by the conditions they found — including a rash of politically motivated arrests, lengthy pretrial detentions, severe overcrowding, and minimal health care.

The team saw a pressing need to investigate and document cases of abuse and unjustified detention of women at the prison. But time was short: the center had only been granted access to the facility for five months, and its clearance could be revoked at any moment.

Luckily, peers put the center’s staff in touch with Urgent Action Fund–Africa, which makes small but timely grants to safeguard women’s human rights throughout the continent. Since its inception in 2001, the fund, which is based in Nairobi, has made dozens of swift, smart grants to help women’s rights groups seize vital opportunities or avert imminent risks.

Although no more than US\$5,000, some of these grants have saved the lives of female activists in Somalia, Ethiopia, Uganda, Kenya, and Zimbabwe; others have helped set important legal precedents in Cameroon, Kenya, and Uganda and secure women’s participation in peace negotiations in Liberia, Sierra Leone, and Somalia.

Less than three days after receiving a proposal from the women’s group in Cameroon, the fund approved a grant of US\$4,200 — enabling the center’s staff to quietly collect data on conditions at Kondengui, provide legal assistance to women inmates, and mount a media

campaign to publicize its findings.

As a direct result of this work, the prison released 304 female inmates who had been illegally detained or faced overdue trials. What’s more, it began to separate male and female inmates and established an ombudsman’s office to handle complaints from inmates.

“We fund opportunities — not programs,” says Kaari Betty Murungi, a celebrated human rights lawyer who directs the fund. “The idea is to enable an organization to take advantage of an opportunity that would otherwise be lost.”



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## Background

UAF–Africa is an offshoot of the Urgent Action Fund for Women’s Human Rights, a global organization that has pioneered the practice of rapid-response grant making. This emphasis on prompt decisions allows activists to respond quickly to unanticipated events and emerging opportunities that threaten to undermine their work or make it possible to achieve sizeable gains.

Now fully independent, UAF–Africa is putting this concept to work throughout the continent. The fund is based in Nairobi, with a network of advisors and board members that spans dozens of African countries. Together, they seek to promote the human rights of women and girls, particularly those confronted with violence and conflict.

Financial and technical support from TrustAfrica enabled the fund to spin off from its parent organization, which is based in Colorado, and establish itself as a lean, responsive African institution. Moreover, some of TrustAfrica’s first convenings allowed UAF–Africa to forge fruitful partnerships with other African organizations that support women responding to violent conflict.



TIMA HETHERINGTON/PIANOS PICTURES

**Liberians returning home after women peace activists helped broker an end to the country’s brutal civil war.**

## Grant Summary

### Urgent Action Fund–Africa

US\$200,000 (2003)

To strengthen women’s peace advocacy through training, technical assistance, networking, and grants.

## Strategies

The fund’s grant-making process is remarkably rapid. Decisions are typically made within 72 hours, with input from a network of advisors and approval from the director and at least three of the four other board members — all of whom communicate by e-mail from across the continent.

But the process is also strategic. In making grants, the fund responds to discrete opportunities by supporting immediate actions that can promote human security, lay a foundation for lasting peace, or strengthen the women’s human rights movement. Such moments arise when outside events alter the situation, creating a space where quick intervention may have a sizeable impact.

These grants generally fall within three categories:

- Addressing situations of armed conflict, escalating violence, or political volatility;
- Pursuing precedent-setting legal or legislative action; and
- Protecting women whose lives are threatened because of their human rights activism.

Along with making rapid-response grants, the fund undertakes collaborative initiatives to support women’s organizations responding to conflict in the region. Much of this work aims to strengthen the role of women in peace negotiations, transitional justice processes, and reconstruction. By helping these groups share knowledge and information about their experiences and the legal mechanisms available to them — from local tribunals to

the International Criminal Court — the fund seeks to ensure that women can effectively contribute to building peaceful, just societies.

The fund’s policy work dovetails quite well with its grant making. Close contact with grass-roots activists helps it stay abreast of developments on the ground, providing knowledge and insights that inform its efforts around policy advocacy. At the same time, its relationships with regional organizations — like the African Women’s Development and Communication Network (FEMNET), which has shared expertise on the African Union that would have taken years to acquire — have helped the fund identify new resources and strategies for assisting local activists.

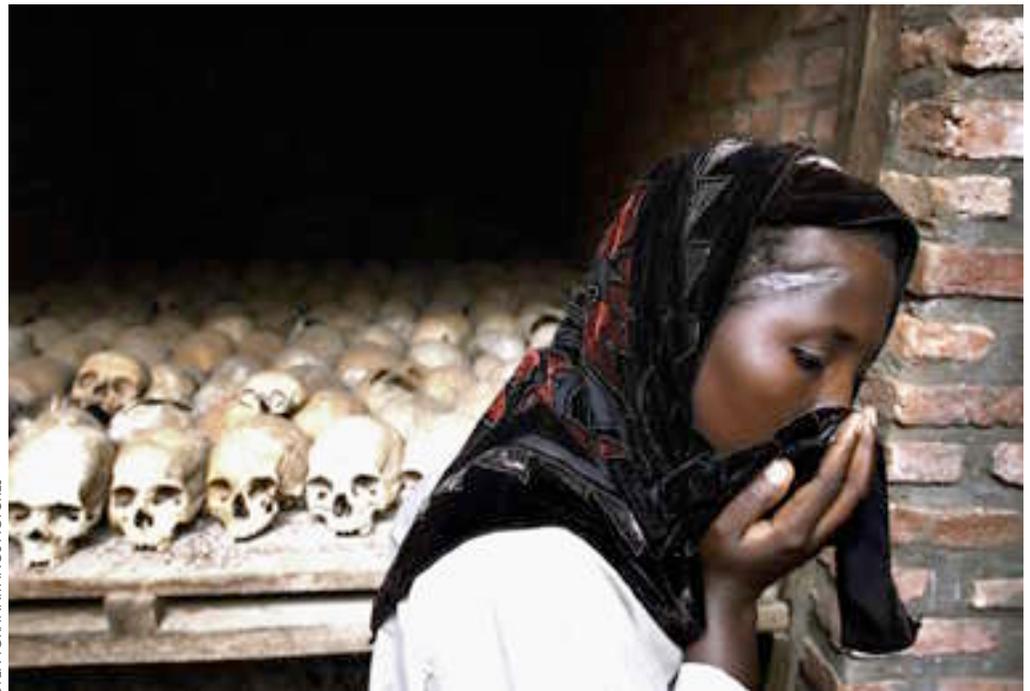
The fund often calls on its partner organizations when it needs to vet potential grantees. And it undertakes joint missions with groups like Isis–Women’s International Cross-Cultural Exchange. In four short years, it has become a central player in a burgeoning community of organizations working to build a broader and more effective movement for peace and human rights in Africa.

## Results

With timely support from UAF–Africa, the Center for the Protection of Underprivileged Women was able to win the release of 304 women from Kondengui prison and prompt systemic changes within the facility. Now there is talk in Cameroon’s Parliament of reforming prisons nationwide.

The fund and its grantees have also helped set a precedent that peace negotiations must be inclusive, with women’s groups playing a vital part. In Liberia, for example, the Women in Peace-building Network

(WIPNET) drove the warring factions to the bargaining table by holding daily sit-ins, organizing a massive peace rally, and petitioning for a cease-fire. When talks began to break down, the network’s members physically blocked the mediators, warriors, and politicians from leaving the room. After Charles Taylor resigned the



SVEN TORFINN/PANOS PICTURES

**A network of women who survived the genocide in Rwanda urged fellow citizens to testify against the perpetrators.**

Presidency in 2003, WIPNET played a significant role in the transitional government, as some of its members joined the National Human Rights Commission and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

The fund has also succeeded in promoting women’s participation in transitional justice processes in the aftermath of violent conflicts. For example, a grant to the Rwanda Women’s Network, an alliance of women who survived rape or other violent crimes during the genocide, helped combat the intimidation of survivors preparing to testify in the Gacaca courts set up to assess the atrocities. The grant allowed the network to present a motivational play in towns where reports of harassment and intimidation of witnesses were especially prevalent. Called “Byiringiro” (Hope), it reminded audiences that if they declined to participate in the Gacaca process, perpetrators would not be brought to justice and the

process of national reconciliation would be compromised.

Another grantee, the Lady Mermaid’s Bureau in Uganda, has expanded perceptions of women’s human rights by focusing on issues of sexuality — particularly issues faced by sex workers, such as access to health care and H.I.V./AIDS testing. After petitioning Parliament to take steps to end the harassment and abuse of sex workers by police, its staff was asked by the Parliamentary Legal Committee in April 2003 to gather comprehensive information on sex work in the Kampala district over the next month. With support from UAF–Africa, it was able to conduct a survey, compile the data, and submit the findings to Parliament before its deadline.

Finally, a series of protection grants has saved the lives of human rights activists in Uganda, Kenya, Ethiopia, Somalia, and Zimbabwe. (Given their vulnerability, the details are kept confidential.)

In light of these achievements, it’s little wonder that the fund’s director, Betty Murungi, was given the 2005 International Advocate for Peace Award — whose past recipients include Archbishop Desmond Tutu and President Bill Clinton — by the Cardozo School of Law in New York. Murungi, who also received Kenya’s highest honor, the Moran of the Order of the Burning Spear, for her work on human rights issues, traces the fund’s efficacy to a convening that TrustAfrica (then



KAARI BETTY MURUNGI

**Kaari Betty Murungi, UAF–Africa’s director.**

known as the Special Initiative for Africa) hosted in Maputo, Mozambique.

“That was when we clarified our themes,” she recalls. “Those discussions offered a space where we could really talk with a donor who was not interested in imposing a project or program on us. They set in motion a process of thinking strategically about how to advance our work.”■

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### Learn More

“Funding Social Justice: Interview with Betty Murungi,” *Alliance* magazine, June 2005.

“International Advocate for Peace Award,” *Cardozo Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Nov. 11, 2005.