

Eight Meeting of the Association of Mediterranean Ombudsmen

26 & 27 June 2014, Tirana

Table of Contents

Official Opening Ceremony	2
Igli TOTOZANI	
Abdelaziz BENZAKOUR	2
Ilir META	2
Christine MORO	3
Rafael Tormo PÉREZ	3
Plenary Session 1: Ombudsmen Institutions and Legislative Power	4
Abdelaziz BENZAKOUR	4
Raymonde SAINT-GERMAIN	4
Musa Jamil Hussein ABUDHEIM	5
Tone DOLCIC	6
Bujar LESKAJ	7
Questions and Answers	9
Plenary Session 2: Ombudsmen Institutions, the civil society and International Organizations	12
Francisco Fernández MARUGÁN	12
José de FARIA COSTA	12
Ioannis SAYAS	14
Markus JAEGER	15
Questions and Answers	17
Plenary Session 3: Ombudsmen Institutions and media	18
Igli TOTOZANI	18
Louiza CHALAL	18
Ixhet MEMETI	19
Lucia FRANCHINI	20



Questions and Answers

21

Conclusion of Meeting

23

Abdelaziz BENZAKOUR

23

Official Opening Ceremony

Abdelaziz BENZAKOUR

AOM President, Mediator of the Kingdom of Morocco

Allow me to extend our thanks to the Albanian people and government. It is a country on the edge of the Mediterranean which saw many civilisations, such as the Greek, Roman and Ottoman, but managed to maintain its traditions despite this history of occupation. I would like to thank the organisers of this forum and to compliment them for their facilitating these proceedings. I am glad to welcome Ms Raymonde Saint-Germain, the Ombudsman of Quebec, and I am confident that she will contribute to enriching these debates. We are honoured by the presence of distinguished personalities from Albania and from the diplomatic corps, such as the French and Spanish Ambassadors, whom we thank for their presence here.

A few months ago we lost our friend and colleague, Dominique Baudis, who gave great service to our association as Secretary General. I offer my deepest condolences on this meeting's behalf to his family and the institute he led.

The Ombudsman has the obligation to respect the will of the people, and its independence from the legislative power must be respected throughout its mission. It possesses, on the other hand, a measure of indirect influence in the legislative area, such as proposing amendments to laws and codes. The second topic relates to our relationship with civil society. We will discuss the relationship between the ombudsman and private regulatory organisations in order to open new horizons, exchange our views and further our efforts. The Ombudsman and the media need to establish smooth relationships, and technology needs to be employed in order to make its work more visible.

Tomorrow the General Assembly will hold its meeting here. The agenda consists of ordinary items like the reappointment of our Bureau and some other issues such as the exchange of experience between various institutions. We will also establish an adhesion commission. The expansion of the operational network is intended to strengthen the mutual cooperation between citizens as well as bilateral experiences. I want to express our deepest thanks to the People's Advocate for hosting this forum, and I hope all the participants have a successful conference in an environment of friendship.

Ilir META

Speaker, Albanian Parliament

Let me congratulate you for organising this conference. The exchange of experience helps to strengthen your independence, which is a very important feature of our democracies. The Ombudsman has a very important role in reinforcing good governance and human rights, thus improving the social and economic standing of citizens. Our constitution gives an important role to the Ombudsman in addressing citizens' concerns with public administration and enhancing individuals' roles regardless of differences. However, citizens need to be informed of their fundamental rights and to be empowered to participate in decision-making. The Ombudsman must be supported in these roles.

The Assembly has strengthened the mission of the Ombudsman; it encourages the Ombudsman to strengthen human rights at all levels and enhancing democratic standards. We appreciate the quality and number of reports submitted to the Assembly; we have expressed a strong will to give the office the room it needs to strengthen the human rights situation in the country. The Assembly considers the Ombudsman to be an independent body which protects the constitutional rights of citizens, and has committed to meeting the

recommendations of the European Commission through an action plan, requiring among other things strengthening independent institutions in terms of financial and human capital. The Ombudsman is key to addressing the concerns of the people and preventing abuses by the government.

Christine MORO

French Ambassador to Albania

Albania welcomes you in the framework of the eighth meeting, and expresses the will to promote exchanges among institutions in the Mediterranean. The Ombudsman is a key role in any democratic system, as it protects people's rights against the government. The extent to which it is heard and the recommendations addressed to state bodies illustrates the maturity and effectiveness of any democracy. Criticism must be accepted as a means of improving the democratic system.

Your association has expanded since its establishment in 2008, which shows great cooperation between the countries and the commitment to share solutions and actions. France has always supported the Albanian Ombudsman's office because it protects human rights, and thanks the Ombudsman, along with Mr Baudis for his untiring commitment. The Ombudsman is supported not only by France and Spain but also by the other countries of the EU, along with the EU. Albania has just received candidate status, and I would like to congratulate it for its cooperation with the Ombudsman. I am happy to have been able to support this activity, and wish you successful proceedings.

Rafael Tormo PÉREZ

Spanish Ambassador to Albania

I am happy that this meeting is taking place at a time when Albania has fulfilled its objective to be a candidate country, which is the result of efforts by the government and opposition, along with the vigilant work of the Ombudsman, who has supported and encouraged social initiatives. I take the opportunity of my final days in Albania to express my political support and provide the technical support of the Spanish authorities to the process. Much needs to be done, but much also has been done in aligning its standards to those of the EU.

Mr Totozani has engaged in untiring efforts to protect human rights in Albania, and has maintained close relationships with the diplomatic community. The Ombudsman has a very important role in terms of human rights, and its good relationship with the corresponding Spanish body plays an important role. Since its establishment in the 1978 Constitution, the Spanish Ombudsman has promoted human rights, and it has made thousands of recommendations; 80% of laws have been amended and over 20,000 complaints addressed as a result. Achievements have included reduced delays in health centres, the creation of residences for the elderly, and many other issues affecting vulnerable communities. It has also given particular attention to maintaining close relationships to national and European bodies.

Plenary Session 1: Ombudsmen Institutions and Legislative Power

Abdelaziz BENZAKOUR

AOM President, Mediator of the Kingdom of Morocco

We will be examining three issues: the relationship between the Ombudsman and the legislative power, between the Ombudsman and civil society and international organisations, and between the Ombudsman and the media. The success of the Ombudsman is based on independence vis-à-vis these three groups. The Ombudsman is intended to be totally independent, and the law and Assembly are supposed to provide the necessary support. The Ombudsman's task is to provide a periodic check on legislative power, and often attends parliamentary committees. The Ombudsman must be reliable and proactive in intervening before certain regulations are adopted.

However, its duties must be precisely determined, respecting the nature of domestic legislation and the constitution. It is inappropriate for members of parliament to interfere with the Ombudsman's powers to address complaints, which is often the occasion for conflict. It is also important to clarify the Ombudsman's duties; its role must be as a consultant and an auxiliary function to the executive and legislative powers. The Ombudsman can propose amendments to or revoke regulations; this can also be done by the administration, but the Ombudsman may not directly interfere in the legislative process. The office has no decision-making role, and its role is to safeguard values and the law.

Raymonde SAINT-GERMAIN

AOMF President, Ombudsman of Quebec

The Ombudsman and intermediaries promote justice, impartiality and equality, and these values join us together, making us stronger in fulfilling our mission to regulate and settle disputes citizens may have about services provided by government. I am here to talk to you about the relations of the Ombudsman with the legislative power in Quebec. The office is there called the Protector of the Citizen; it is an institution which enjoys adequate independence in order to pursue its mission impartially. The exercise of powers in parliamentary democracies is divided into legislative, executive and judicial branches, and in such a system the parliamentary Ombudsman is mandated by the parliament to ensure the rights of citizens and the proper functioning of the legislature. Therefore, the Defender is an advisor to the General Assembly of Quebec.

I will present the environment and context in which our work takes place. The Ombudsman has three main roles; the first is act as an intermediary between citizens and public services, secondly, to control state services, and thirdly, is to regulate legislation. Firstly, the Ombudsman must transmit to MPs the complaints submitted by citizens; this role touches the whole administration and MPs irrespective of their position. Secondly, the Ombudsman must support the MPs in their role as monitors of government. The 11 parliamentary committees have wide scope, and the Ombudsman's analysis and recommendations are based mainly on the conclusions of their enquiries.

Therefore, the Ombudsman complements the MPs' monitoring role over public bodies. The core mission is to ensure human rights and legislative amendments, to ensure a smooth relationship between MPs and voters, to audit public administration, and deliver educational services about which bodies safeguard human rights.

For example, we carried out a study on the health network and presented recommendations, and a year later the parliamentary committee met to determine progress. An audit of the public executives was also carried out, and I presented an estimate of how the recommendations had been implemented. The judicial administration in Quebec has the role of protecting the citizens, and it is not the Ombudsman's role to ensure the decisions are enforced. The Ombudsman has performed as to deadlines for delivering judgements in specific cases, and parliamentary commissions are in place to ensure these are kept.

The third role is the legal aspect, where the office acts to prevent disagreements regarding draft regulations and notifies government of legislative reforms that may be needed. All draft laws are analysed, identifying socio-economic impacts on citizens and recommending improvements. For example, we drafted a report on the independence of the police forces, where we recommended amendments to the law. Regarding taxation, we recommended that citizens be heard when the administration uses abusive methods. Regarding the executive's role, the Ombudsman must always represent the people, and since 2010 it has made interventions on 154 laws, with 48 formal interventions.

The Ombudsman has great influence on MPs in terms of addressing disputes with the public administrations. The office does not take instructions from parliament but provides independent advice. Cooperation with the legislature and the heads of the ministries is very important, and the fact that the parliament supports the Ombudsman is key to any of its functions. It has good cooperation with the executive, and this gives it quite a lot of visibility.

Abdelaziz BENZAKOUR

Thank you for clarifying the three roles of the Ombudsman as intermediary, and for illustrating your vision of the relationship and how it is applied. Let me stress one point. I did not know that you were so involved in decision-making and could make proposals. Our mission has a purpose and wants results, and that is how we establish trust. We can debate with other parties because we want to make our position clear, and we make detailed studies of laws in terms of equality. We must always have a multifaceted approach and give priority to the complaints we receive.

Musa Jamil Hussein ABUDHEIM

Director of ICHR, Palestine

I will talk about the Palestinian experience. The Ombudsman's office was established in Palestine in 1993 on foot of a resolution by the late President Yasser Arafat, and promulgated in the official journal. This decision specified the Ombudsman's duties, tasks and scope of this institution. One of the resolutions by the Palestinian Parliament was the establishment of an institution to defend human rights, which would follow up all complaints received of alleged violations.

However, given the problems at the time, this project did not see the light, though the resolution is still in place pending its coming into force. This institution analyses all the complaints submitted to it, determines the tasks, and gives suggestions as to the proper solutions. The role of the Ombudsman is only consultative, and ensures a link between the parliament and the citizen by providing suggestions.

This institution is also a safeguard which provides the parliament with important documents and suggestions regarding legislation. Another important aspect is that the Ombudsman protects people's rights through dialogue with the parliament, calling on it to reinforce human rights and ensuring smooth relationships with the executive.

This institution has two main duties; firstly, to analyse and promote human rights and principles, and secondly, to provide guarantees that legislation is appropriate for the

desired aspirations and results. It covers all aspects of life, both economic and social, and the law plays a key role here. The institution suggests and analyses agreements on the basis of international principles, and this helps to safeguard human rights. Those entrusted with these complaints have the required competence, and know the legal and social contexts, on the basis of which a suggestion is then made.

The international resolutions on human rights provide the main guidelines for the Ombudsman in overseeing international agreements and treaties. Unfortunately, the Ombudsman has not been able to achieve its full mission and purpose because of the difficult situation in the country. However, it has done its utmost, and has always advised the government and parliament despite the deteriorating situation. The institution is also responsible for realising the goal of improving the lives of citizens, and it provides suggestions to the parliament in order to ensure a good relationship between the two institutions for the benefit of the citizens.

Abdelaziz BENZAKOUR

You have mentioned that one of the roles of the office is to compare domestic legislation with international conventions, and you have established your role with the parliament through examining the legislation which is passed.

Tone DOLCIC

Deputy Human Rights Ombudsman, Slovenia

The Human Rights Ombudsman was established in 1991 under the Constitution, which in principle regulates the scope of its work, these being the protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms vis-à-vis state authorities. The status and tasks of the Ombudsman were specified in the 1993 Act, which determined that it should be independent from the authorities, whose conduct it investigates and assesses.

A 2006 study by the University of Vienna in cooperation with the International Ombudsman Institute indicates that the role and status of the Ombudsman within the system of separation of powers cannot easily be determined. A total of 75 Ombudsman institutions were examined, with the intention of determining the status of the institution, its tasks, and its relations with other state authorities. 43 countries replied that the institution was not part of any state power, but 14 considered it to be part of the legislative branch, and 16 of the executive branch. The Slovenian Ombudsman is part of neither branch; its status is most comparable with that of the Constitutional Court. The Ombudsman supervises the work of all branches of state authority. While dealing with initiatives and addressing wider issues to do with human rights and state security, it overviews all state functioning.

Representatives of the executive and judiciary are invited to discussions which include other authorities and organisations, as well as civil society organisations at the discretion of the Chairman of the working group. The Ombudsman submits the annual report on its work to the President of the National Assembly; the government forwards it to all ministries and state authorities, who adopt positions on its recommendations. The Members then vote on the proposals, and those adopted are published in the Official Gazette. The implementation of these proposals is examined in the next annual report, drawing attention to issues that have not been implemented. Such cooperation enables transparent functioning and appropriate supervision over the implementation of democratic decisions.

The Ombudsman cannot directly implement legislative decisions, but can draw the attention of the Assembly or its working groups to individual issues, and its proposals can then be presented by the government or individual MPs. The idea of giving the Ombudsman a role in drafting regulations was considered in the past, but it was felt to be

inappropriate, as it would reduce the Ombudsman's status to being part of the administrative authority.

The Ombudsman has established itself to the extent that it cannot be ignored or eliminated, though without appropriate support in the parliament it would be powerless, which is why support from civil society is also important.

Abdelaziz BENZAKOUR

You said that, besides your legislative prerogatives, you can also follow up the activity of state bodies. This is an enrichment of the office, and an excellent way to ensure the solution of disputes.

Bujar LESKAJ

Head of High State Control, Albania

Cooperation between the Ombudsman and the state audit institution is based on specific laws. It protects the interests of citizens in the use of public funds by public authorities, to ensure they are used correctly, economically and efficiently. The main weapon on our behalf is full institutional independence.

Besides ordinary financial compliance and regularity audits, the activity is also extending to performance in many countries; these audits seek to ensure compliance and the protection of vulnerable groups. The auditing authorities are also responsible for the protection of democracy and human rights, and so must protect human dignity and human rights and freedoms in line with international conventions. This is stipulated by both the Constitution and in treaties ratified by Albania. These treaties also specify the scope of state audit institutions; an examination of executive power must be audited under both financial and human rights aspects, and this examination should complement, not replace, the regularity audit. This audit can be done with the assistance of the Ombudsman.

The institution sets out the objectives and measures of the auditing activity, which differentiates it from the judiciary, and it is also able to take a more overarching view of the objectives of the executive regarding the protection of human rights. Audit institutions can decide what areas need more attention and intervention, and can initiate long-term assessments, particularly in the case of human rights.

INTOSAI, our international organisation, includes 192 audit organisations worldwide, and we cooperate with these institutions on a regional basis, as well as with civil society and various other bodies, in joint auditing exercises. These exercises have indicated that there are gaps between professed norms and practical enforcement, and we must contribute to filling the gap between what is stated and what is done. Our involvement must always be done in consultation with the Ombudsman. The implementation of human rights must be measured according to results-oriented approaches, which seek to connect the legal plans with the goals enshrined therein.

The auditing body must give assurances that human rights are respected within the country, and we are required to devote our efforts and resources to implementing the Ombudsman's recommendations in the case of certain problems. Therefore, we can give legal recommendations if we see inconsistencies between primary and secondary legislation. We can determine whether audited bodies have been audited correctly, and whether they guarantee human rights. One of our future policies will be to include human rights principles in as many audit processes as possible, but always in consultation with the Ombudsman. For example, we can audit gender equality in the public sector; the legislative framework is comprehensive but not very practical, because it contains some obstacles, especially where government positions are concerned.

We can also audit activities which promote food safety, to address one of the key rights of the most vulnerable people. While we have laws on food safety, their implementation is not very efficient, so it must be promoted and strengthened further.

The Ombudsman and the state auditors have a lot in common, and can create synergies to increase their potential. It is high time for both institutions to conclude a cooperation agreement which defines modalities and joint fields of operation. We have introduced many innovations over the past two years. For instance, we respond to over 400 letters from the public every year, mainly complaints or requests, which is difficult, but we do this to serve as a model institution. We are more oriented toward auditing rather than inspection, but this has not hampered us in responding to these letters. We can cooperate with the Ombudsman so that it can audit our institution in terms of how we have ensured employee rights, gender equality, or access to information.

Abdelaziz BENZAKOUR

We understand that you examine legislation and government programmes as well as practices. The Ombudsman is important for us in terms of human rights, and in this respect you have established close cooperation and are committed to working together in order to improve relations between the administration and the citizens. Thank you for your observations, which will help shed light on our debate.

Questions and Answers

From the floor, Council of Europe

My question is quite simple. We heard some clarifications about the relationship of the Ombudsman with the parliament and also with the state audit institution in Albania. We avoided one question. Who controls the Ombudsman in Albania? Who controls the state audit institution? Who ensures they do their jobs with a certain degree of transparency? What ensures adequate control over the performance of the Ombudsman? Mr Leskaj spoke about performance and financial efficiency auditing, but not about the relationship between the auditor and the Ombudsman. What is the actual relationship between the parliament and the Ombudsman in terms of the performance of the latter?

Many Europe citizens have accused the European Ombudsman of doing bad work, and the Ombudsman has made public some of the elements of the decisions he has taken. Will the Ombudsman make public the fundamental principles underlying his decisions, or does he have the luxury of not making these public? Who controls whether the Ombudsman is efficient and impartial?

Bujar LESKAJ

Regarding the economic and financial activities, the Ombudsman is audited by the state auditing institution, which is the supreme institution for financial auditing. The audit is done once every two years, and it is the most thorough audits as regards the use of public funds. Your other question concerned who controls the SAI. Who audits the auditor? This is also provided by the law of the institution; regarding the economic and financial activity, it prescribes that the parliament must appoint a group of auditors to control the SAI. However, when I took the position, this had not been done, and after repeated requests to parliament, last year it took the decision to audit the funds of the SAI, and they are determining the modalities.

Control of our economic and financial activities is important, but both the Ombudsman and the audit institution are accountable to parliamentary committees, the Ombudsman to the legal affairs committee and the SAI to the committee for economy and finance. Then the parliament proposes improvements to our work. However, these controls must never affect the independence of our bodies.

Igli TOTOZANI

There are always controls over controllers in Albania. The auditing of economic and financial activity is done by the SAI, which audits the activity of my institution. The parliament has a directorate which monitors the work of independent institutions, and this directorate is subordinate to the Assembly administration. It analyses all the work of the Ombudsman, from reports, external relations, number of complaints, how they have been addressed, etc., and it prepares its suggestions and comments for the annual report.

Other institutions may also control the Ombudsman, for example the High Inspectorate of Declaration and Audit of Assets. The work of independent institutions is also monitored by international organisations, and this is also included in their reports. There is also monitoring by civil society, the media and every citizen. I agree that there must be close monitoring, because the independence and impartiality of these institutions are very important. Consolidated democracies not only have laws regulating certain bodies and restrict their scope, but they also have a legal tradition and political culture, whereas in countries in transition, like Albania, these aspects are rather new.

Therefore, laws which regulate the work of our institutions are sometimes insufficient to protect our independence. The laws are not missing, but certain controlling trends are there which seek to use certain powers prescribed by law to create tension between

independent institutions, and this requires both proper enforcement of the law, on the one hand, and a political culture on the other.

From the floor

What was the basis of the complaints that were made to the European Ombudsman?

Participant

There are two distinct aspects. The issue of who manages the office of the Ombudsman should not be a problem. The complaints were directed at the substance, and at openness; the complainants said that had the Ombudsman had good information, it would not have been possible not to make a favourable recommendation, and asked what information had been used to make the decision. This related very much to the substance of the Ombudsman's work, the elements that were used, rather than challenging the fact that this decision was made. These cases are being considered by lawyers in a number of member states, because it is a corollary of the Ombudsman's own recommendations; it raises the question whether or not it is possible to challenge a decision.

Raymonde SAINT-GERMAIN

Regarding control over the Ombudsman, parliament has a special committee which monitors any bodies working with public funds, and the Ombudsman is required to justify all funds used for staff and personnel. I agree with what was said about judicial decisions – the office is subject to administrative justice and must give reasons for all decisions, so if the Ombudsman does not agree with the reasoning of these decisions, there is no other recourse, because the Ombudsman is not an advocate but an independent intermediary. The Ombudsman is the last recourse before judicial complaint, so it is important to be independent; in that respect it is unlike the court of first instance.

Caroline MARTIN, Venice Commission

Regarding transparency, the Venice Commission will organise an intercultural event in Rome on 15 October, and it is the 100th plenary session. I cordially invite you to attend this event.

José Francisco de FARIA COSTA, Ombudsman of Portugal

I am independent as Ombudsman. My responsibility is a political one; I am not a state official, but I am accountable to the MPs while at the same time being completely independent.

From the floor

Regarding the report of the Commission on improving the delivery of justice in Albania, do you see a role for the Ombudsman in this?

Igli TOTOZANI

We are all in favour of transparency and accountability, and the Ombudsman should be no exception. The Ombudsman is not a judge, and so has a special function regulated by special laws, including the fact that proceedings have to be confidential, not public and adversarial. However, situations can arise where someone is aggrieved with the Ombudsman's decisions, and there have to be structures in place for the Assembly to consider the report and ask for clarifications from the Ombudsman, but always in a spirit of confidentiality.

I do not think it is a big issue if handled properly. It is about respecting the functions of the Ombudsman and the relationship with parliament.

Bujar LESKAJ

Regarding your question, it is a situation that often arises, but we try to be careful regarding the independence of the judiciary. Albania does not have a tradition of judicial independence, and this aspect is a point of debate. The Ombudsman deals with some justice related issues, for instance judicial administration, where proceedings are drawn out for a long time. We also see some laws as obstacles to justice for vulnerable groups. We prepare our recommendations in these cases for the competent authorities, mainly the parliament, so they can be addressed.

Another important issue is the enforcement of judicial decisions, which does not have a strong tradition in Albania, and our recommendations often put pressure on the state bodies to enforce rulings delivered by the Strasbourg court. We have concluded an agreement with the two inspectorates, one belonging to the High Council of Justice and the other to the Ministry of Justice, in order to address complaints about judicial corruption. We do not normally address complaints dealing with the content of a judicial decision, because these can be changed by a court of higher instance.

Regarding judicial reform, the European Commission suggested the Ombudsman be involved in order to suggest concrete actions, but we have yet to receive an invitation from the state bodies, which took the lead in implementing this reform. However, when we see that laws go against the Constitution or affect human rights, we have the power to go to the Constitutional Court, and we have exercised this quite effectively in some cases.

What does the Ombudsman do in the case of unjust decisions by the administration? The Ombudsman collects and studies the complaints and the data, and then decides what to do with the complaints, whether they are valid or not. We are not a court, but we must examine the cases in front of us in a spirit of equality. This examination gives the Ombudsman more power and credibility. Each decision is made in writing to ensure transparency, and if the administration is in the wrong we make a recommendation which must be enforced.

There is also the judicial sector, which cannot enforce its own decisions, so we have to put pressure on it, and to put pressure on the administration to execute court decisions. However, when we make a report to the parliament, it is published in full in the Official Gazette. It is our job to prepare these reports. We are guided by the presumption that we are right, and we consider our decisions seriously in order to retain the trust of the people and of the administration.

The financial aspect needs to be managed, because the funds are public, and we are subject to control in this respect. We also have to account to other state bodies, aside from the parliament, to determine whether our actions are in line with the rules and codes that are in place. However, nobody can control us in terms of our mission to safeguard the rights and interests of citizens. What is our role? It is a difficult one; we would not be able to do anything if we did not have complaints, because we act on the basis of complaints. For example, just as the decisions of the court of first instance are examined by the court of second instance or the High Court, we act either as the controller of controllers, or else choose the role of intermediary.

Abdelaziz BENZAKOUR

Thank you for an interesting session.

Plenary Session 2: Ombudsmen Institutions, the civil society and International Organizations

Francisco Fernández MARUGÁN

First Deputy Ombudsman, Spain

This session will address the mechanism of relationships between the Ombudsman, civil society and international organisations. The morning session presented some interesting views, and I would like to recall some of the discussions. The report had to do with the relationship between the Ombudsman and various authorities; in some countries it is not so clear, as it is not a judge or an auditor. It has some connection to the legislative branch in some countries, but in others we are not lawmakers but something different. There are a lot of differences in terms of judicial and financial aspects, but we have an important mission; we seek to go where the parliament cannot, and to detect what is difficult to see.

We analyse cases together with civil society, and when we have a conclusion regarding a specific issue, we refer it to the parliament and suggest courses of action that it could follow. Therefore, we are a parliamentary institution, but simply in order to detect problems within Spanish society. We have existed for 32 years, and have expanded both our scope and methods of intervention, and can address issues such as child payment, cases in prisons which have not been handled properly.

Our work is on a great extent dedicated to vulnerable groups, people who do not have access to justice, and people who want to defend their rights; many of these people address their complaints to the Ombudsman, and we direct their requests to the competent institutions. We have had administrative cases for all kind of people with all political parties. The object of our work is to promote people's welfare without exclusion or discrimination, and we solve these problems with Caritas, the Church, the Red Cross, UNICEF, and a large number of other organisations dealing with the protection of human rights.

What happens when we defend the rights of immigrants? For example, in this part of the world there exists a violent situation, which may be a legacy of the past, but people need help to fight violence, eviction from their land, etc., so this is another issue we are involved in. There are people from other countries who need protecting even now. Therefore, we do two main things: we express concern for those people who experience problems and act as their guardians. When they come to our borders seeking the protection their own countries do not give them, we must take on this challenge.

Secondly, the EU has established the right mechanisms to regulate political asylum, but there are some outstanding issues, and the developed world must develop initiatives to promote economic development and the dignity and rights of people around the world. Spanish society knows that, because we have said publicly that we must concern ourselves with those seeking asylum worldwide, as well as with economic development in the broad sense.

José de FARIA COSTA

Ombudsman of Portugal

What role can and should the Ombudsman have? What are the boundaries of the interventions, and when should it stand back? The answer must be preceded by an overview of the tasks undertaken by the Portuguese Ombudsman. Secondly, regarding the evolution of the Ombudsman's performance regarding the protection of fundamental rights, its mission is not merely to promote justice and legal behaviour on the part of the public administration, but also to raise awareness of legal deficiencies.

The guiding principle of the Portuguese Ombudsman is to ensure just and legal conduct by public administration through informal means, including immediate supervision of its actions. Article 26 of the Portuguese Constitution states that the office is to be appointed by Parliament, and its purpose is to ensure compliance with law. The scope of its intervention in cases of legal and private infringement of rights and freedoms has evolved over the succeeding decades.

Since 1969, the Ombudsman has had the power to intervene when fundamental or related rights, such as social, cultural and economic are placed at risk, regardless of the source of the risk. The Ombudsman exercises powers as the guarantor of rights, freedoms and guarantees in terms of private entities. Following widespread privatisation, the concession of public services, and the award of public powers to private entities, it became more urgent to safeguard and protect individuals against the actions of those entities; though the 1996 amendment of the statute widened the scope of intervention, it cannot interfere directly with private entities in the course of trading activities with private citizens.

The Ombudsman, in addition to monitoring the constitutionality and legality of acts by the public administration, it intervenes in civil society in its capacity as mediator regarding the effectiveness of rights and freedoms under private law. It can raise the constitutionality of laws before the Constitutional Court, both in the case of abstract reviews of regulations as well as the verification of unconstitutionality by omission. Private interests, as a rule, cannot apply directly to the Constitutional Court. Such interventions can cover situations of discrimination on racial, gender or religious grounds in hiring practices, or in cases of violation of freedom of the press. The Ombudsman advises the legislator to adjust the rules to the Constitutional precept, or revoke them if necessary. The Ombudsman can also raise a need to intervene with the Public Defender's office in cases of transactions between private parties that affect fundamental rights.

The Ombudsman ensures the unity of the legal order in the sensitive area of rights and freedoms; this is a delicate balance between private and public, freedom and social intervention, to correct injustices that affect citizens.

The Ombudsman was created in order to defend human rights by monitoring the acts or omissions of public administration, but this is not its only role; it was intended primarily for the protection of human rights, insofar as public administration cannot adopt measures which offend against those rights. Since 1999, the Ombudsman has been accredited as being in full compliance with the various principles of human rights. The variety of rights and attacks on them means that standards need to be envisaged which transcend strict criteria of legality, in a dynamic interpretation of the ultimate goal of achieving rights protection.

The Ombudsman can make recommendations and point to legislative omissions, and also fulfils a pedagogical role in terms of human rights promotion and education. Its importance as a protector of the rights of minorities should be stressed, including their right to difference as well as cultural, social and economic integration.

What is required from the government is not so much the recognition of the intrinsic value of fundamental rights, but rather the problem of ensuring the protection of these rights. The issue is not recognition or acceptance of rights, but rather the distribution of rights, the widespread recognition of the importance of justice, health, security, safety, and housing. The big problem is distributing the means to ensure these rights are complied with. The Ombudsman must be aware of these injustices and resist them, must realise the complexity of today's world, and do everything to ensure that it does not obscure the

importance of rights. The mediation model should ensure that the Ombudsman is not an external element of the conflict but an inextricable part of a multifaceted solution, a balance between the protection of fundamental rights and the assurance of freedom and happiness.

Ioannis SAYAS

Deputy Ombudsman of Greece

I will talk about how the Ombudsman and civil society organisations might work together in order to broaden and strengthen democracy towards a new regime of global governance, which is why I chose to focus on environmental protection. The environmental crisis is our day-to-day reality, and it is both an international and a local issue. This is where civil society organisations, which are active around environmental and other day-to-day issues, and the Ombudsman, the mediator between state and civil society in many countries, can come together to see how to strengthen our democratic institutions and maybe our values as well. I will talk about what civil society groups have done in recent years, how the Ombudsman can be seen in general terms across many democratic states, and what challenges the environmental crisis brings with it. I will propose that networking between the Ombudsman, international organisations like the EU and civil society groups could provide a new, more effective, and more accountable governance regime.

Civil society organisations have represented citizens' interests, especially human rights, in dark times; in recent decades, they have made a number of important contributions and increased accountability on a global scale. They also played a role in setting a political and legislative agenda in international law-making and governance, transnational diplomacy, and the monitoring of a number of crucial issues, such as fair trade, poverty reduction, democratic governance, human rights, peace, the environment, etc.

The Ombudsman is another pillar for monitoring accountability and transparency; the aim is to protect citizen's rights, combat maladministration and guarantee the rule of law. It is a well-respected institution internationally which is competent in dealing with environmental complaints and proposing necessary measures, such as legal changes and good practice for public sector services.

Protecting the environment is a complex task involving a wide range of issues. The environment does not respect boundaries; pollution in one country affects its neighbours, and such problems often become global in scale. Such problems cannot be tackled within the limits of national boundaries, legislations or political agendas; it is necessary to find collaboration mechanisms to promote legislative streamlining. This could be very useful if we could introduce the cohesive legislative framework proposed by the Ombudsman, and it could provide the necessary data and modalities of how other states operate, particularly those whose environmental legislation lags behind. This could create the necessary pressure on international bodies to start making real progress on the application of environmental legislation.

This is a tool which can provide control and enforcement, as well as assist the application of the legislative framework through formal structures or large-scale funding. It also raises awareness, builds mutual strength, and pinpoints the constraints in terms of multilateral structures, empowering both citizens and governmental mechanisms. Networks are needed to tackle diversity and sometimes flexibility is needed to overcome the fundamental differences we find in administrative structures in Europe and worldwide. International and national networks can lead to a fundamentally different governance regime. Such an experiment was attempted in the form of the Athens Network, but it never materialised into a formal network; its goal was to exchange information and work towards codifying environmental legislation, developing common approaches and best practices to

strengthen the role of the Ombudsman. This was to be achieved through closer cooperation between member states, ministries, independent bodies and civil society.

We need proactive mediation, legislative proposals and thematic reports based on case studies which can lead to changes in governance and increase accountability. The first stage is to develop comprehensive laws, and if problems are discovered they must be set right by some means. Instead of individual or bureaucratic solutions, mediation through cooperation and networking means that we do not wait to put it right but make an effort to do so in the first place. We have to empower both institutions and citizens to put it right.

Markus JAEGER

Head of Division, Council of Europe

The topic is strengthening democracy and partnership. This is also the reason the Ombudsman exists, and in the Council of Europe our role is to reinforce democracy. The definition of democracy in our statute includes individual and political rights and the rule of law. We propose to strengthen democracy through partnership. What is the nature of this partnership?

The Ombudsman was instituted in 1985 and promotes and defends democratic institutions. The Council of Europe offers administrative assistance to countries which seek to improve Ombudsman law, the relevant legal framework and constitutional setup. We do not stop here, because where countries want to improve their laws and expand the mandate of the Ombudsman, we also give our assistance.

For example, until recently the French Mediator used to be very weak, but when it was reformed and became the Defender of Rights, it became a very strong institution. The Council of Europe also focuses on providing assistance to Ombudsman institutions. There was an attempt in Serbia to restrict the Ombudsman's access to documents categorised as classified, and we assisted the Ombudsman in gaining that access.

Another important aspect is networking; we want to make networks more inspiring and to speak with one voice. We have created a network which is gradually becoming stronger, which is informal but quite dynamic. We have proposed that the Association of Ombudsmen set up an office at the Council of Europe, and have also established mechanisms for the prevention of torture. Partnership also implies inviting you to participate in the workings of the Council of Europe, in a forum we call the Committee for Human Rights.

There is also a new Convention of the Council of Europe, a new resolution and recommendations on human rights for the 24 member states. This forum also discusses the future of the Court of Human Rights in the form of protocols and amendments. The members can represent their networks and make their voices heard. However, I regret that the International Council of Ombudsmen is not represented due to a number of factors, and we want to enable the Ombudsman offices to be present.

The third axis is participation in our internal processes, and the fourth involves analysis of facts with a view to ensuring human rights in member states. The Commissioner of Human Rights does not get involved in a member state without engaging in preliminary fact-finding with the respective Ombudsman to understand the human rights situation. The European Commission on Racism and Intolerance makes sure to obtain the correct information, and the ECHR in its judgements refers to national reports as well as to information provided by Ombudsman offices.

Another important axis of the partnership is that we have a common platform with governments. Where partners refer to the mechanisms of the Council of Europe, they can reinforce their voice, and we use our positioning with respect to governance to enhance it.

Finally, we have the possibility of taking joint action in the case of dramatic human rights emergencies.

For example, during the war between Georgia and Russia, Vladimir Lukin, the Georgian Ombudsman and the regional Ombudsman helped the Commissioner for Human Rights at the Council of Europe, and these four together saved the lives of 12 people who had been taken hostage at the border, as well as repatriated 12,000 victims for burial by their families.

The Ombudsman in such cases acts as intermediary, and has the right to approach its counterparts and governments in order to solve extreme crises. The same thing happened on 13 June 2013, where the Ukrainian Ombudsman met the Russian Ombudsman in the Oriental Ukraine and spoke about the war. The Secretary General of the Council of Europe went to Ukraine with eight observers of the OSCE. This is another example of partnership, showing that dramatic situations can be resolved.

Another good example of this partnership is where we met with the head of the Athens municipality, along with the Greek Ombudsman; they did not agree about how to refer to Macedonia, and I said that the Ombudsman was entitled to refer to the Macedonian Ombudsman as he wished.

There are some partners who honour us with their presence and who think that they are independent but act unilaterally. We sometimes have incompetent people or people who do not take human rights seriously. For example, some colleagues in Russia refused to protect lesbians and homosexuals because they thought they did not deserve protection, but we said it was their duty according to the Convention of Human Rights.

We also have another problem; we have Ombudsmen who think they can act to protect their citizens by acting outside their jurisdiction; for example, responsibility for the rights of Polish people living in Britain lies with the British Ombudsman, not the Polish. We must always respect jurisdictional rights. Some judges do not care about human rights and deliver bad judgements because of lack of knowledge. It is important to build democracy by respecting powers rather than extending them, and the authority of judges must be respected, but up to a certain point. We must all be examples of transparency, so appointments by your bodies must be transparent and independent.

We are very concerned in the case of candidates for the presidency of the AOM Assembly, because there was only one in previous years. The Council of Europe is in favour of two candidates for such elections; imagine 80% of the vote going to just one candidate.

Questions and Answers

Ms. Maryvonne LYAZID

*Deputy in charge of the struggle against discrimination and the promotion of equality,
Office of the Defender of Rights*

I will complete Markus' points. I would like to repeat what he said, that the French Ombudsman has become stronger in the last three years. Our institution has done quite a lot in the last years by fighting discrimination and violation of the rights of women and children. The partnership with civil society has expanded quite a lot, which has had a catalysing effect.

We have four committees with a diverse composition; we have a committee which protects the disabled, a committee for health, a committee for gender equality, and a committee on the protection of children. The Defender has suggested the establishment of two additional committees, which will sit twice a year, assist in the decisions taken and help to make our work visible. These committee meetings will lead to many working groups, and will address many different categories, as we plan to build a strategic perspective.

Mr Baudis said that we needed to employ more original methods, and in this spirit we will use our official site to make appeals and present examples. We will prepare a report on the activities of the school for disabled children and conduct interviews with people affected by these problems with the objective of providing solutions. We need to be creative in finding new ways to listen to people.

The fourth approach is to set up a pilot committee to perform studies; we have the expertise to do this. We also want to strengthen our partnerships with NGOs. The French National Employment Agency cooperates with us to combat discrimination, and we have extended this approach by setting up a housing barometer. We are expanding our network to ensure citizens are represented, and we are supported by the expertise offered by the Council of Europe, for example in the case of Roma immigrants. We also received support from the European Commissioner for Justice, and thanks to Mr Baudis' initiative, we had a meeting with the top-level executives from all the member states.

Finally, together with our Belgian colleagues, we wanted to show the role of independent bodies in terms of implementing the UN Convention for people with disabilities.

Plenary Session 3: Ombudsmen Institutions and media

Igli TOTOZANI

People's Advocate of Albania

The final topic is the relationship between the Ombudsman and the media. Social life can be divided into three parts – the civil space, the public space and the political space. The civil space concerns people's everyday interests, while the political space includes the government, state bodies and the Ombudsman; the other important space is the public space. The question is what citizens should do during elections, how people power can be used in the best way possible, seeing that most of this power is represented by government. The question is what means do the citizens have at their disposal to express their power in a representative democracy.

The continuous democracy approach sees one of the best measures as being public opinion created in the public space; civil society filters the interests coming out of the civil space by transforming them from special into general interests, and the best way for this to happen is where the agendas of the media and civil society converge. Sometimes this convergence is difficult to achieve, and then we seek to protect our personal and civil interests.

The work of the Ombudsman is difficult, because he has to safeguard citizens' interests, and the law gives it the power to realise this mission. Sometimes the government refuses to listen, or sometimes people lack the political background to understand the recommendations. However, there is always a tool available to advance our mission, and that is public opinion, but the media should have the interests and rights of people at its core, which is not always the case; sometimes it protects the interests of businesses or is involved in politics, so we need to develop strategies and connections with the media to fulfil our duty to protect citizens.

Louiza CHALAL

Member of Sub-Committee of Mediation, National Human Rights Commission of Algeria

An Ombudsman body was created in Algeria in 1996 on the Swedish model, because the public authorities wanted to fight against poor management and restore confidence in public bodies. Three years later, this body, initially established as a regulatory body to hear the voice of citizens, deviated from its intermediation role, after which it was dissolved. The National Consultative Commission for Human Rights was established in 2000 to ensure human rights protection and mediation. While it exercised its mandate, our commission found that mediation services were little known in the country, and there was little response by the authorities to intermediation even as complaints were growing.

We then decided to make the administration listen to us by employing communication strategies. We decided that cooperation with the media would make up for the lack of visibility of our body. The Ombudsman plays a crucial role in building a society which protects the rights of citizens, and to do this it must be recognised by all. Our work needs to become more visible, and the citizen needs to understand the services we offer. The media has an amplifying role, which is why we need to use it as much as possible. It acts as an engine of social change, an intermediation service, and a means to influence dysfunctional public administration.

The media can make a collective and individual impact, and can help with intermediation by focusing attention on certain risks. It is quite efficient at making recommendations public when we want to improve public administration.

Reports are important in presenting the results of our work, and presenting it to the parliament facilitates dialogue with elected representatives as well as raising awareness through the media.

Ixhet MEMETI

Ombudsman of Macedonia

The fact that we are discussing our relationship with the media shows the importance of information transmission as regards protecting human rights and freedoms. Ombudsman institutions have a mandate to protect citizens' rights when they are violated by state bodies, and in order to do so there is a need for a strong partnership with civil society and the media on the basis of a strong legal foundation.

There was no private media in the early years of independence; the public broadcaster was the main transmitter of information, so the Ombudsman had space in the media to present its views on human rights and freedoms. The private media, both print and electronic, developed quite quickly. Macedonia has quite a pluralistic society from an ethnic, religious and linguistic viewpoint. Mr Totozani mentioned various problems in our society which did not facilitate good communication between the Ombudsman and the citizen. A large number of media outlets led to the widespread dissemination of information, and in my first year I directed criticism against the Government and the police forces with support from the media.

However, such is not the case today. Some of the media started reacting vehemently against the Ombudsman, asking why I was interfering with the work of the courts, so it took time to convince the public that my involvement was limited to the scope of my office. The media started to group themselves according to political affiliation with the passage of time, and these divisions also had an ethnic basis. Important political and security events led to this development. It was a big challenge to gain acceptance from all the different groups in civil society.

The media transmitted information differently in some cases; some commended me as being professional and objective, whereas others accused me of bias, and for some the cases, particularly related to ethnicity, were non-existent. Furthermore, information from the Ombudsman is sometimes not broadcast at all, particularly when it relates to social and economic issues to be addressed by government or local authorities. The Ombudsman had to face the challenge of becoming an ally of the media to ensure citizens were informed about these issues and that they trusted the office.

It is important to ensure cooperation between media and the Ombudsman. The private media, which for a while dominated the national media, started to compete for the largest audience, and in this context most of the revenue flows came from the state. This led to a situation where, instead of transmitting information, the media allowed themselves to be used as an instrument of political propaganda.

This leads to the issue of whether the media are free to transmit information and how the Ombudsman should approach them. Firstly, we should ascertain whether we want the media to represent us in a good light, or to represent the Ombudsman as a protector of human rights. However, there is also the issue of what the media want for us. Securing a presence in both printed and electronic media is often important to raise awareness, but the problem is that they often only present the information in a partial manner or distort it to their liking.

Therefore, our practice is to focus on problems which have been publicised by the media, and to inform citizens about similar cases we have addressed. For example, one case was where an actor from the Roma community was not allowed to go abroad; many citizens complained to us, and we referred to this as discrimination in our press release. We also make our voice heard through annual reports, press conferences, public communications, and so forth. However, our relationship with the media is very important, and we need to maintain contact with them, committing to defend their rights in terms of media freedom.

Social media has a key role in transmitting information, and we must focus on it as well. While information is transmitted quickly, it can also present information which is poorly substantiated. The media must maintain intercultural dialogue, because while they can advance the process, they can also set it back. It must make efforts to provide accurate reporting and to respect minorities and cultural sensibilities; the process must also be transparent.

Igli TOTOZANI

Institutional and political life is often polarised, which is reflected in the media, and it seems to us that the same information is presented differently depending on the source's political affiliation. However, there are not only political or ownership factors, but there is also ethnicity, which also complicates the relationship.

Lucia FRANCHINI

President of the Italian Coordination of Ombudsmen

I agree that the mass media plays an important role in the educational and informational roles of the Ombudsman, as well as contributing to the development of a public service culture. The use of social media by the Ombudsman presents a new way to operate and also to be understood. The purpose of our social media policy is to provide guidance and clarification to staff so that they can continue to uphold the integrity and reputation of the office.

Moreover, social media is different from other forms of media in that the latter require significant resources, while the former is relatively inexpensive. These media tools are ideally suited to the Ombudsman, because the institution does not represent just another bureaucratic office; through social media, we can speak to people directly, and educate them about our work and the results we have achieved. You cannot be effective as an Ombudsman unless you are visible, so social media increases the office's power of moral persuasion, which is the greatest power we possess.

Therefore, social media has improved our interaction with citizens. We are able to interact with interest groups and people with similar experiences, and we can keep people informed about our activities. We can also create groups to discuss common subjects. The benefits far outweigh the risks and the costs. We do not accept formal complaints through social media because of confidentiality. Another issue is that of access, and whether social media is truly democratic or limited to those lucky enough to have computers, smart phones and Wi-Fi. It is true that these might be limited by income, social conditions or government policy, and we cannot guarantee that it can reach everyone, but we also should not assume it is only for the young.

Using social media has increased our visibility through a modest investment, saving money on travel and events, attracting new audiences, and increased our ability to listen to people outside the formal complaints process.

DIASPRO is a digital administrative programme that was created by the Lombardy regional office. Using this programme, the workflow of an Ombudsman office can be managed by the staff. It is open-source software which has been adopted by several other

regional institutions. This system enables spending to be kept down, as well as facilitating transparency in the organisation, because citizens can also access the database. Every Ombudsman office in the region uses this platform. The electronic documentation is automatically delivered by email, allowing staff to work remotely.

Questions and Answers

From the floor

Regarding strengthening democracy upholding human rights, we should focus on the goal of ensuring a free and democratic regime. The role of the Ombudsman is to support the citizens and to suggest sustainable solutions. We have some problems with the judiciary and are trying to address them. The Ombudsman in Mauritania processes complaints from citizens and forwards them to the relevant bodies, in this way ensuring that individuals are heard, which is the key principle in a functioning democracy. We provide this guarantee to the citizens – to make their voice heard and to protect their freedoms. We had parliamentary elections last Saturday, in which the Ombudsman played an important role by ensuring campaigning was conducted fairly and the elections went smoothly.

Regarding the discussion on the handling of complaints by the Ombudsman, I would say that it is the core of our work, and that these give us the power to investigate bad management of a situation of a case. We have had some significant successes in terms of defending rights, for instance, those of communities with complex problems. Therefore, we need a multifaceted skillset.

For example, mentally ill people are discriminated against and their rights are violated, and the search for a solution to this is ongoing. Complaints are the core of our work, but we should not limit ourselves to them – we must use the media to make our voice heard, to publicise problems of communities which have not complained to us, and to promote values. It is true that we can give our opinion on some political issues, but impartially. We say things which need to be said, for example, on behalf of the children of low-income families, people deprived of liberty, street children, etc. We have been in existence for 35 years, and we have dealt with global political problems and with vulnerable groups.

José Francisco de FARIA COSTA

I want to say two things. Firstly, I am viewed as a politician, but in terms of the constitutional role, the Ombudsman is a state body. Complaints are the key instrument but not the only one; while the media is a key instrument in strengthening democracy, but we must not be used by the media. The Ombudsman in Portugal is fully independent and not accountable to any state body. Only the democratically elected state power has the competence to control the other elements of state power.

This balance is a fragile one, and it fluctuates; the media is an important tool for exercising our role, so we have to reflect deeply on the control the media can exercise at times when we lack the moral strength to say no to them.

Maryvonne Lyazid

Dominique Baudis was a journalist and a TV reported, quite well-known to the French public, and we managed to build a communication strategy with the national media outlets along with the media from the different regions, because it was important for us to reach as many people as possible. We have posted representative cases on our website for information purposes. While we think the strategy is a success, in studying how human rights have been safeguarded over different periods, we have found that people who are poor or in hardship, as well as disabled people, often do not use the tools available to them to make their voices heard.

Therefore, we must consider their access requirements, and ensure we are understood by them. We have created informational articles that are clearly and simply phrased so that they are accessible to all. I am very happy to exchange our experience in order to reach out to as many people as possible, including the young, those with disabilities, and all other groups.

Participant

It is not the function of the Ombudsman to antagonise the media. We believe in the freedom of the press; they have their opinions, and there is bound to be conflict, so we should be ready to defend our position. However, we are not an NGO or a pressure group; we state our decisions and our reasoning, and we stop there. However, I agree that we should be as accessible as possible to people who need help.

Markus JAEGER

We have received a proposal for the International Ombudsman Institute, and I wish to tell you that we have gone through the document and will have an internal meeting in the Council of Europe. We think this idea is really worthwhile and will try to put the fundraising possibilities of the Council at its disposal.

Secondly, I understand that one of the resolutions concerns the 'Bring Back Our Girls' affair. The Council is in favour of doing this, but I submit that you should do something much more spectacular which would explain to the media that your association does make a difference, that it wants to be intercultural. My solemn appeal is that you link tomorrow's declaration to all children who are abducted, regardless of political background.

Participant

We will do our best to cooperate on the project; it is intended to be an international project, concerned with laying the basis for a learning institute where the principles of good administration are taught and propagated.

Igli TOTOZANI

These panels are important for discussing issues of particular relevance, such as the media, not only in terms of a country's everyday life but also our work. We all discuss possible solutions on what our relationship with the media should be; it is difficult to find a solution because there are many variables at play and many phenomena which affect this relationship. These are not identical from country to country, but the relationship must be built in line with a certain strategy. The media is an important means of building public pressure, and it is also an important means through which our work is recognised. The media is also important in terms of alerting us to problems which concern citizens in the most remote parts of our countries.

The other aspect is that we can also serve the media; the risk is being used by the media. It is quite difficult to find a formula applicable to different realities across countries, but the important thing is to understand the role of the media and try to build a fair relationship with it as far as possible. This applies to both traditional and social media. We use Facebook and Twitter in our organisation, as well as web TV, along with traditional media. This relationship will be perfected with time, particularly in countries where democratic culture is in its early stages. There are many factors at play, such as politics, ethnicity and religion.

I would like to close this panel. Following your discussions I would conclude that there is no single formula, and anyone can reach their own conclusions; that is the beauty of such open meetings, because we see the realities in different ways. I will give the floor to our President.

Conclusion of Meeting

Abdelaziz BENZAKOUR

AOM President, Mediator of the Kingdom of Morocco

This day allowed us to share abundant new information, ask questions and reflect. We also heard about the Ombudsman offices in many countries. I would like to thank you all for your interventions, along with the organisers and moderators of these sessions. I must thank all the speakers for presenting their overviews, as well as the speaker during the debates.

We are a community; this was quite beautiful, and I would like to congratulate all of you. The debates we heard here will help us improve our practices and enrich our experience, and establish contacts and networks to help one another improve our relationships with parliaments and the media, as well as in our efforts to improve laws and regulations.

We also heard about cooperation with civil society and international organisations, most of which are our partners, and our relationship with the media, which is quite an important partner. Next year there will not be a General Assembly, but there will be meetings, so we must maintain contacts and develop topics which will enable us to improve our work. Our next meeting will be prepared with the input of all, because any work done jointly can only be positive.