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Original Article

Wallaga University School of Law Legal Aid Center 2024 Report: The Success Stories and Challenges

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1. Introduction

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development recognizes “the need to build peaceful, just, and inclusive societies which provide equal access to justice and are based on respect for human rights.” Goal 16 and its target 3 highlight the importance of ensuring “access to justice for all” in achieving sustainable development goals. Free Legal Service (Legal Aid) means giving legal services free of charge to those who cannot afford regular legal services for different reasons. Government organs, non-governmental organs, and higher education institutions may provide this service. Therefore, access to legal aid is central to ensuring access to justice, especially for the poorest and most vulnerable people. As emphasized by the United Nations Principles

and Guidelines on Access to Legal Aid in Criminal Justice Systems, legal aid is essential to a fair, humane, and efficient criminal justice system based on the rule of law. Without access to legal aid, millions of people around the world are at high risk of having their rights ignored or violated because of lack of legal knowledge or lack of financial capacity. FDRE constitution and other domestic laws also grant the right to access to justice for all. Even though this right is provided under the constitution, certain groups of individuals may face difficulties in enjoying this right because of their vulnerability, lack of legal knowledge, and because of their low economic status. These groups need legal aid services from concerned organs such as public universities. These categories are Women, children, victims of HIV/AIDS, disabled persons, poor people in

the community as well as internally displaced persons/returnees.

Wallaga University Free legal aid was established to ensure access to justice for indigent societies. Apart from helping society, the centers are meant to help students know how the law is being practiced and implemented in real-life society. Generally, the centre is designed to address societal needs and to enable students to acquire practical knowledge by actively involved in the real life of law in context.

2. Background

Wallaga University is a Public University located in the western part of Ethiopia. As a public university, it has the mandate to teach, conduct problem-solving research, and provide various community service activities. The School of Law is a specific unit of the university that renders free legal aid services for the surrounding community in addition to other community service activities/engagements. Besides producing legal professionals, the School of Law is also engaged in delivering free legal aid services to the indigent sector of the community since 2011, by establishing one legal aid center in Nekemte town. Currently, the school has 23 active and functional legal aid centers out of eight centers located in the conflict zones to assist IDPs/Returnees and Host communities. The centers are located in *East Wallaga Zone*: Sasiga, Gida Ayana, Haro Limu, Jimma Arjo, Sibu Sire, Aanno, Kiramu, Nekemte Prison Center, and Nekemte towns.; *West Wallaga Zone*: Gimbi Woreda Court, Gimbi Prison Administration, Kiltu Kara, Boji Birmaji, Nejo, and Mandi/Mana Sibu, *Horo Guduru Wallaga Zone*: Shambu High Court, Shambu Prison Administration, Amuru,

Harato, Guduru, *West Shoa Zone*: Bako and Gedo/Calliya Woreda. Wallaga University legal aid centers have been playing a pivotal role in making justice accessible to those who are in need; particularly the poor and vulnerable groups of society.

To ensure and realize the objective of establishing free legal aid, Wallaga University free legal aid has been working in collaboration with various stakeholders – Local civil society organizations (CSOs), UN agencies particularly UNHCR and UN human Rights, International non-government organizations (NGOs), and the general public and other relevant bodies - within the ambit of the legal establishment. Since its inception, the Wallaga University free legal aid has recorded appreciable successes in defending the masses, especially those who are affected by conflict. In expounding access to justice, it has intervened and undertaken litigation before regular courts and other administrative institutions to issue civil documentation for internally displaced persons. Besides, Wallaga University's free legal aid and other partners have conducted different multi-sectorial assessments and monitoring on matters of human rights abuses on behalf of many defenseless communities in three Wallaga Zones and two districts of West Shoa Zone.

3. Partners of Wallaga University Free Legal Aid

Wallaga University's free legal aid centers have been working in collaboration with different stakeholders like Civil Society Organizations and other relevant bodies within the ambit of legal jurisprudence. Since the work and objective of free legal aid is related to the

promotion and protection of human rights, this task cannot be fully executed by a single institution which in turn requires the collaboration of different institutions for effective and quality service.

Currently, Wallaga University has a memorandum of understanding with the Ethiopian Human Rights Commission (EHRC), Oromia Justice Bureau, and Oromia Supreme Court. Furthermore, UNHCR has been an active partner and supporting legal aid centers since the middle of 2020 to intervene with persons of concerns in the areas of housing, land, and property for IDPs, Returnees, and Host Communities. That means, UNHCR has been supporting Wallaga University's free legal aid centers through different mechanisms such as donating vehicles, motorcycles, computers, generators, and finance for the effective implementation of quality service for the communities.

4. Linkages with the Stakeholders

To be effective, rendering legal aid services requires the cooperation and coordination of various stakeholders. Wallaga University's free legal aid has many stakeholders with which its cooperation is vital in the accomplishment of the center's objectives. Accordingly, the Zonal High Court, woreda courts, and prison administrations provide offices for the center, the East Wallaga Zone Justice office issues special licenses for the center, Women and Children Affairs Offices, and kebele administrations issue support letters that request service from the centers are among the main stakeholders with which Wallaga University has a linkage.

5. Services that centers provide:

- ✓ Legal Advice(Legal counseling)

- ✓ Drafting legal documents such as Statement of Claim and Defense, Memorandum of appeal
- ✓ Advocacy (Representation Service)
- ✓ Participating in Alternative dispute Resolution representing clients.
- ✓ Awareness Creation through different platform
- ✓ Facilitating the issuance of civil documentation such as ID cards and birth certificates for Internally displaced persons

6. Target Beneficiaries are:

- Women
- Children
- Vulnerable and poor people
- IDPs
- Refugees
- Elders
- People who live with HIV Virus
- People with disability

7. Strategies/Methodology for Implementation

Recruiting legal aid experts and social workers at each center on a contractual basis which is subject to renewable twice annually. Creating awareness about legal aid services and rights of Vulnerable groups including IDPs/Returnees within the affected communities by using different media such as FM radio, TV, Internet (social media), Flyers, and courtrooms during court sessions) to create a conscious community to prevent and pro-act on the problem. Besides, the center also uses volunteer law school staff and licensed lawyers. The center doesn't compromise the service quality and employs different service quality controlling mechanisms to these ends.

To this end, Feedback and complaint mechanisms such as suggestion boxes were included in the legal centers (report gaps in service provision and access constraints). Organizing capacity development training for project staff (legal experts and social workers from the University) by law school staff and other experts from other concerns on identified gaps while delivering services. This capacity building also extended to local government officials and traditional/Customary Leaders as well as religious leaders and community representations.

To ensure that the legal aid centers/clinics are discharging their responsibilities inconsistent with the objective of their establishment, the Wallaga University School of Law and Free Legal Aid Coordinator office assign a monitoring and evaluation staff.

8. Summary of 2024 Performance Report

The **Wallaga University Free Legal Aid Service** shows tremendous progress from time to time in quality and accessibility and during 2024, some vulnerable groups are benefiting from the service of the center annually. Resisting all the challenges it faced, the center has managed to reach **22,141 individuals**. The service distributions were **3,719 Males** on Counseling/Advice, Representation, and drafting legal documents, and **4538 women** on Counseling, representation, and drafting legal documents. Besides, **6513 Males and 7371 women had** legal awareness's individual reached.

9. Opportunities

As a result of working with different stakeholders and partners, there are several opportunities gained while executing the performance of the 2024 budget of Wallaga University free legal aid. For instance, Women and children especially on Gender Based Violence (GBV) and Child in Emergence were reached by social workers of Wallaga University free legal aid. Participating in the protection cluster led by UNHCR, being a technical committee of the Protection of sexual exploitation and Abuse task force and Access to Justice and Rule of Law technical working group has contributed to free legal ID centers to execute the service effectively and with quality aspects. The UNHCR project has supported the persons of concern by intervening in their needy, particularly Witness per diem and court fees for persons of concern facilitating the implementation of access to justice. The mechanism and procedure of referral pathway cases of GBV and child protection were developed from the coordination and collaboration of both government organs and NGOs

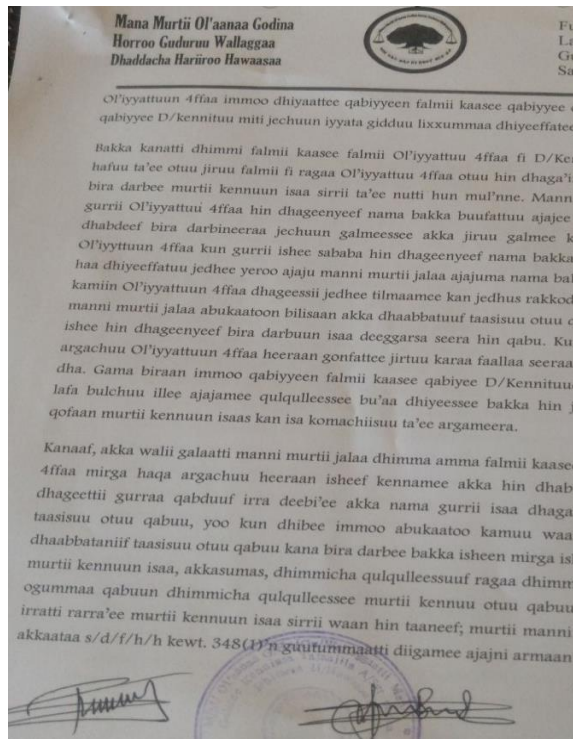
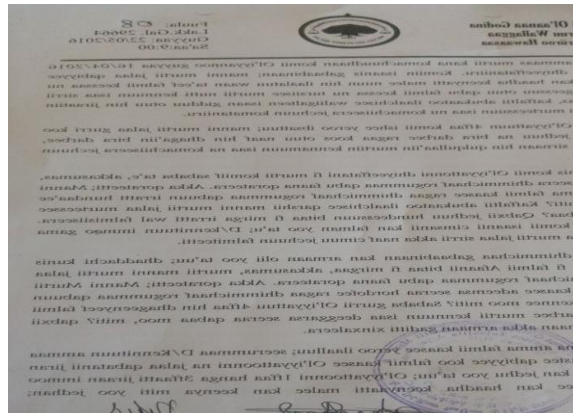
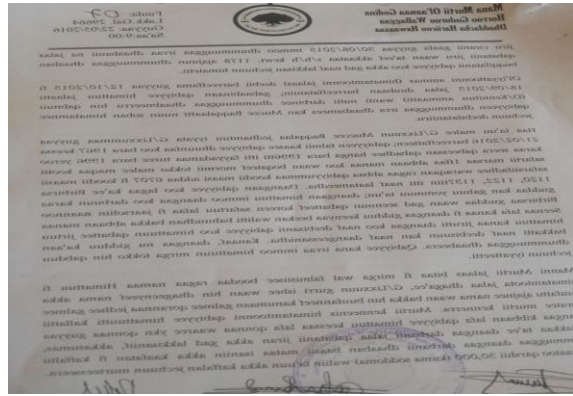
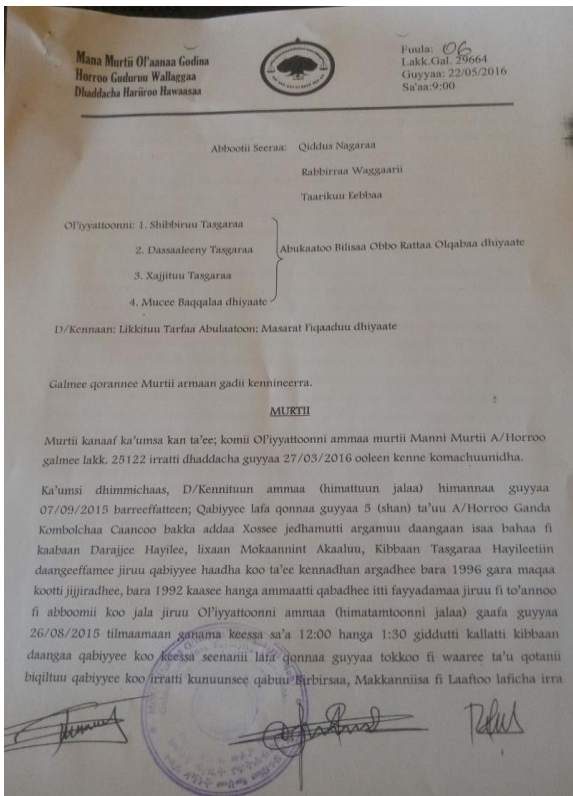
10. Challenges

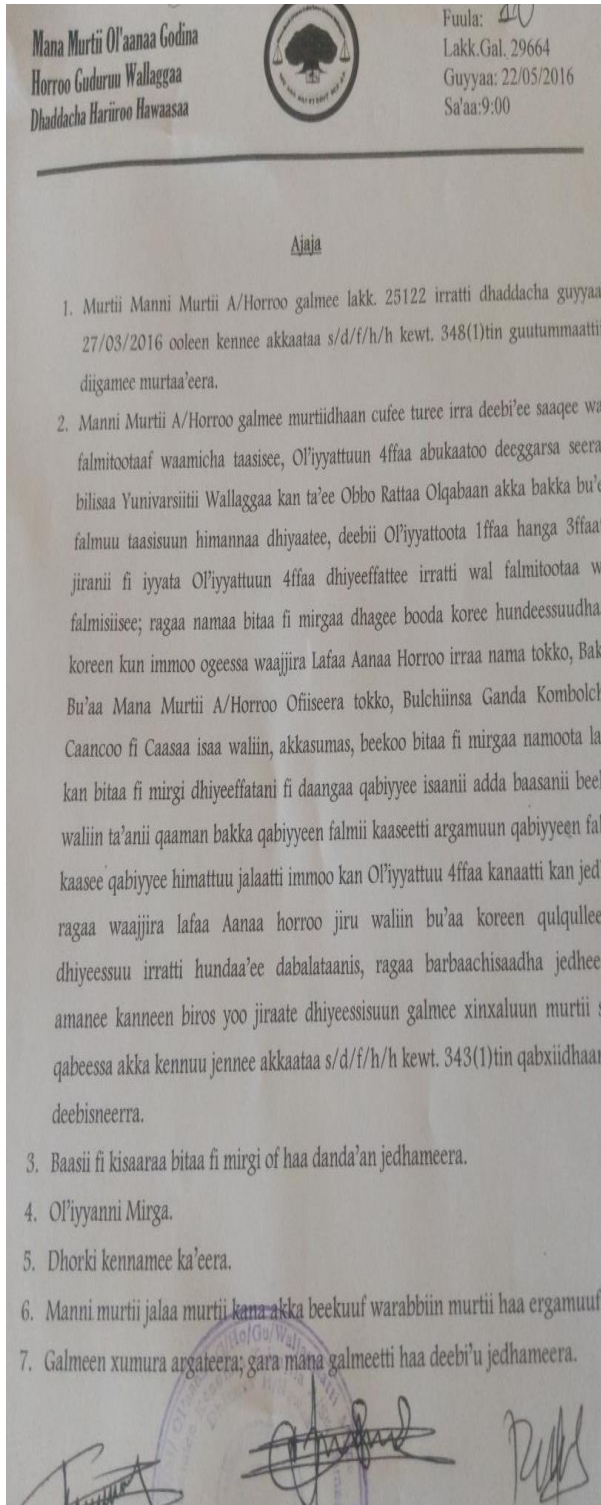
- ✓ Lack of budget to increase access to centers and have competent staff
- ✓ Security problems with monitoring and supervising the activities at lower levels, particularly Woreda and Kebele. Besides, some centers were closed to function due to volatile security situations and the destruction of office equipment in the center.
- ✓ High employment turnover due to low salary.

11. Summary

Wallaga University's free legal aid center provides legal services such as counseling, drafting legal documents such as claims, defense, and representation on litigations for children, women who are victims of domestic violence, people living with HIV, Persons with Disabilities, IDPs, etc. In addition, the center admits students for clinical courses and externship programs and they acquire basic knowledge of the practical world. Moreover, the center is providing basic legal education and awareness to hundreds of thousands of residents of East, West, and Horo Guduru Wallaga zones and two districts of West Shoa Zone.

Sample of Case Representation conducted by Wallaga University Free Legal aid Service.





Picture showing while Gimbi Free legal aid center workers are Rendering Legal counseling service for Persons with Disability





This is while Sibusire Free legal experts provide Legal Awareness for communities within the Compound of the court



While UNHCR donating Generators for free legal aid center