

URI Professor Presents at Conference in Africa on Youth Unemployment

KINGSTON, R.I. – August 19, 2013 – Youth unemployment is quickly becoming a global issue, and diplomats from all over the world met in Africa to discuss its challenges – including a University of Rhode Island professor.

Donald Cunnigen, professor of sociology and anthropology, recently presented at a conference in June on Emerging Democracies in Africa: Challenges and Opportunities in Abuja, Nigeria.

Cunnigen's presentation, titled "Youth Unemployment in a Global Context: Change in the Modern Age," focused on contemporary unemployment patterns in Nigeria with reference to American youth unemployment. His paper included a definition of youth unemployment, a general exploration of the issue globally with emphasis on America and Nigeria, and a discussion of some of the suggestions to address the problem of youth unemployment in new democracies, offered by organizations such as the United Nations Education and Scientific Organization (UNESCO) and the International Labour Organization.

"It was an exciting opportunity to go to Nigeria," the Kingston, R.I., resident said. "The conference focused on a number of different topics relating to government, transparency, and other global issues facing emerging democracies."

The conference was organized by the National Institute for Legislative Studies in collaboration with the Association of European Parliamentarians for Africa and Parliamentarian Centre, Canada. Its aim was to "explore the threats faced by emerging democracies in Africa and identify opportunities for nurturing and consolidating these democracies," as well as to discuss the challenges that exist in strengthening democracies in "fragile and post-conflict contexts." The ultimate goal was to better equip government representatives to deal with the challenges and opportunities that they will face in democratization in their own countries. Among those present for the two-day conference were various members of the Nigerian government, as well as Diane Abbott, the first black female member of the British Parliament and current Shadow Minister for Public Health, and Kim Phan, executive director of the International Law Institute in Washington, D.C. Cunnigen was able to speak with both.

"I actually rode into the second day of the conference with Director Phan," Cunnigen said. "We were able to have some very interesting conversations during our time together."

Cunnigen was also given the opportunity to be a part of a documentary being filmed about youth unemployment. He was interviewed for the documentary while at the conference. "Youth unemployment is not an issue that is unique to Nigeria or America," Cunnigen said. "I was happy to be interviewed for a documentary that will showcase this global issue."

The conference itself was a success. The president of the Association of European Parliamentarians with Africa signed two memoranda of understanding, one with the National Institute for Legislative Studies and the second with the Parliament of the Economic Community of West African States. In these agreements, the Association of European Parliamentarians with Africa promised to strive to support both institutions as they work to reduce poverty and strengthen the democratic process. Cunnigen says he was pleased to be a part of the historic moment.

"It was truly an exciting and interesting chance to hear different scholars speak about the issues facing Africa, especially youth unemployment," he said. "I was honored to have this opportunity."

Cunnigen graduated from Tougaloo College in Mississippi with a dual major in sociology-anthropology and Afro-American studies. He went on to receive an M.A. and A.M., both in sociology, from the University of New Hampshire and Harvard University, respectively. Cunnigen received his doctoral degree in sociology from Harvard University. He has been at URI since 1993.