



SEMI-ANNUAL CONFERENCE  
SAN FRANCISCO  
JANUARY 28-29, 2008

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## The Hurdle of Donor Fatigue

**Tuesday, January 29, 2008, 1:15 – 2:45 pm**

*Facilitator:*

**Bess Rothenberg**, Associate Director, Center for the Study of Human Rights, Columbia University

*Panelists:*

**Brian Joseph**, Director for South and Southeast Asia, National Endowment for Democracy

**Otto Saki**, Projects Lawyer, Zimbabwe Lawyers for Human Rights

The moderator, Bess Rothenberg, introduced both panelists and asked them to make short introductions before the session was opened up to a larger engagement and discussion with the session attendees.

Brian Joseph notes the challenges of funding in areas where there is a low likelihood of success in the short-term. Donor interest drops dramatically once the focus is on the long-term perspective. The challenge is not so much that donors are present in difficult countries and are just getting tired of being there; rather the issue is how to convince all donors that where the challenges are the greatest and the rewards are the least is the place where their support is most needed. “Donor fatigue” as a term is often used as a marketing tool by organizations trying to raise money in specific situations like the South Asian tsunami or Hurricane Katrina to push for even greater amount of support. What this panel addresses is parts of the world (Burma, Tibet, Pakistan, DRC, Sudan, Uganda, North Korea) where there is not a large presence of funders. An example is provided of an organization working on rape in Burma that did impressive work and was “successful” even though it did not in any way affect regime change. Brian suggests that the definition of success must be adjusted in such complex and often discouraging political climates.

Otto Saki describes the extent of the challenges in Zimbabwe and suggests that with the extreme levels of inflation it becomes difficult to effectively use funding. He notes that since 1998 funders have steadily left Zimbabwe as they have been unsure how they can spend money within the country. The challenges are particularly great for NGOs; ZLHR, for example, currently spends \$9500 a month on Internet services alone. This exorbitant cost indicates the complexity of working in Zimbabwe as Internet could be gotten for cheaper on the black market but then ZLHR would run afoul of the authorities. It is therefore incumbent upon ZLHR to convince funders that this is a worthwhile cost (recognizing that paying this gives aid to a repressive government, as NGOs have become a vital source of income for the government). Otto also points out the challenges of defining success in such an environment.

The conversation then opens up to the participants and addresses the challenges of both repressive and failed states. One audience member notes that in such repressive states as Belarus the act of funding an organization can put an NGO at risk. And those that are often allowed to receive money are often no longer seen as relevant.

Otto Saki notes that it can be difficult to even acknowledge support and that ZLHR is officially classified as 6 different kinds of organizations (a trust, legal clinic, association, etc.) so that it can be allowed to operate in a variety of different ways in order to do its work. Even then, workers are still regularly aware that they could run afoul of anti-terrorist laws.

Brian Joseph notes the importance of a long-term strategy. There is a small Burma Donors Forum that has funded Burma for the last 10-15 years, but their investment has often been viewed as a lost cause. But when Burma hit the front pages of newspapers in 2007 and it was clear that an opposition existed, there was a sense of a tangible payoff. Such funding requires faith in “knowing it’s there, even though it can’t be proven.” Similarly, Pakistan has also been seen as such a lost cause but the 2007 protests by lawyers and civil society provided evidence to an international audience. Brian notes that these mass movements and public displays of dissatisfaction are often the only ways in which success gets recognized.

A discussion continues on the question of how success gets measured in such circumstances and the importance of providing general support to NGOs. Otto Saki notes that without such support Zimbabwe would be in grave trouble. At present 60 lawyers leave Zimbabwe each month where only 700 are registered. The need to keep lawyers is therefore vital.

A session participant asks what the goal of funders should be in such a challenging environment. Is it enough to “just” sustain organizations? She suggests that it would be good to talk to funders who were active during the Soviet era as it took them decades to see the payoff of their work.

Mona Khan of the Fund for Global Human Rights points out that it took 20 years of advocating for forest rights in India before the government passed a law just recently. She argues that we must trust activists to tell us what kinds of funds are most useful and then provide sustained and unrestricted funding.

Another participant notes that one must be committed to long-term funding, pointing out that the issue of property and inheritance rights have had more success in Africa than in Asia but this does not mean that funders should only focus on Africa.

Brian Joseph notes that funders are faced with a finite amount of money to spend and that their tendency is to want to spend it where they will see the greatest amount of movement and payoff.

Mona Khan asks how best to support movement building. Is that through funding projects or organizations?

Otto Saki encourages a more unorthodox definition of success where small victories can be celebrated. He notes that in Zimbabwe that can mean simply getting someone released from detention. ZLHR has represented 4000 individuals, none of whom have been successfully convicted. The challenge for organizations like his, however, is in finding ways to measure and report on success. While he applauds reporting, he notes that elaborate reporting systems for funders keep activists from doing their most important work.

Mona Khan suggests that evaluation work would benefit from focusing on how we create change, asking what are the changes that we want to see take place. Evaluation should be understood more as an art than a science.

Brian Joseph notes that right now we are all preaching to the converted but that funders must make the argument to others. What gets spent in these very difficult places is just a fraction of what is spent in much easier places, like India, where the payoff is more apparent. The investment simply needs to be greater.

David Rothschild of Goldman Environmental Foundation asks what the deliverables are that we can offer to donors to encourage them to support such work. Katrin Wilde of Channel Foundation suggests gathering the stories of how successes are made. Lesley Carson of Wellspring Advisors suggests asking what might have happened if a specific NGO did not exist as a way of measuring success.