INTERNATIONAL HUMAN RIGHTS FUNDERS GROUP

SEMI-ANNUAL CONFERENCE
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Who Owns the Human Rights "Brand"? Building a "Market Profile" and a Broader Global Human Rights Constituency

Thursday, July 11
9:30am – 12:00pm

Note: This conference session was recorded. Information about how to access the video recording can be found at the end of these notes.

Facilitator:

- Jo Andrews, Director, Ariadne – European Human Rights Funders Network

Panelists:

- Kathleen Cravero-Kristoffersson, President, Oak Foundation
- Gareth Henry, Former Co-Chair and Lead Advocate, Jamaica Forum of Lesbians, All-Sexuals, and Gays (J-FLAG)
- Andrew Posey, Principal, Blend Communications

Sponsor:

- Oak Foundation

The opening plenary began with a video of interviews conducted in Bangladesh, India, Uganda, and the United States about perceptions of "human rights," followed by a discussion with funder participants about their reactions.

Comments following the video:

- All interviewees were English speaking. This limits the diversity of perspectives.
- Jo Andrews shared that after WITNESS conducted the interviews and showed them the final product, they realized that the cameramen had spoken to an elite. Comprised mainly of true believers in human rights. For example, interviewees were professors and NGO staff in the human rights field. Perspectives shared on the video were not representative of understandings of human rights from those who don't work in the human rights field.
- It was interesting that even though the interviewees worked in the human rights field, they didn't always express support of rights for all.

Andrews shared findings from recent research on perspectives of human rights conducted via polls in Mexico, Colombia, Morocco, and India.

- 80-90% of "elites" have heard of human rights. A high proportion has also met a human rights worker.

- 40-50% of the general public has heard of human rights. Between 1% (India) and 18% (Colombia) had ever come in contact with a human rights worker.
- Conclusion: Human rights workers have a tendency to cluster in the upper realms of socio-economic space. Essentially, those in human rights spend a great deal of time talking with one another. Those who stand to benefit the most from human rights norms -- the poor, powerless and oppressed -- have less access to human rights than they need.

Research in the United Kingdom has shown:

- 95% of those polled have heard of the Human Rights Act.
- 74% think that "some people take advantage of human rights."
- The Human Rights Act is deeply unpopular with 37% of the population.
- 26% have strongly negative attitudes toward human rights overall. 22% have strongly positive views and 41% neutral.
- 50% do not trust human rights spokespersons.

Andrews also shared that in Europe, the terms human rights and social justice are not used and European foundations are reluctant to engage with human rights work. In the United Kingdom, many people feel as though human rights only support people who have done something "wrong," such as criminals or illegal migrants. There has been less focus on how human rights can be used to improve the lives of other populations that people feel more connected with, such as the elderly.

Similar examples were shared from Mexico and Brazil. In Mexico, the mass media has used human rights language when speaking about people who have committed crimes. However this is changing, as with increased violence associated with the war on drugs, language about human rights defenders is more common. In Brazil, human rights were mostly discussed during the dictatorship when many in the middle class were sent to jail. Human rights were framed as rights of prisoners. This perception has continued with that generation and they see human rights as primarily serving criminals. The younger generation does not remember the dictatorship, so that perspective is less present.

Kathleen Cravero-Kristoffersson shared that Oak Foundation is supporting groups in the United States to engage in online activism and connect beyond a narrow group of elites. She said that while it is a challenging, long-term endeavor that is difficult to evaluate, it is an extremely important area of grantmaking.

Other participants raised the importance of examining where we are having these discussions. Advocates have not explained the human rights framework in a way that is relevant for local communities, that clearly shows how human rights will change someone's situation, e.g. make them less hungry. In Africa, governments are adverse to human rights and governments have a bigger voice than civil society. Their message is that human rights are only used to prosecute leaders. There is a need to engage in messaging work to change that rhetoric.

Another participant pointed out that the research findings challenge our assumptions. There has been an assumption that human rights are a western construct, a new form of colonialism. However, this research shows that Europe isn't even pro-human rights. And now people's movements across the globe are using human rights language.

With regard to the United States, there are foundations that support what we may see as rights issues, but they don't frame it in that way. They seem to be less oppositional than European foundations to the idea of human rights grantmaking.

Andrews then directed the conversation toward the panelists and asked Gareth Henry, a Jamaican rights activist, how useful the human rights frame is in Jamaica.

Henry responded that using human rights language does put you at risk and increases your likelihood of being monitored, as you are seen as someone who will challenge the state. The communities he works with have a positive view of human rights because they are seen as providing opportunity. The Jamaican government understands human rights to a certain degree, but does not want to apply this framework across issues. LGBT rights, as one example, are seen as a "different set of rights."

The Church is similar; it sees sexual identities beyond heterosexuality as a sin, even though it is active on some human rights issues. Henry has found that using human rights as a broad framework with the message of "dignity and respect" with issues that apply to everyone works well, such as police violence and vigilante killings. In order to persuade someone from a church group that LGBT people have human rights, he "humanizes human rights" by asking questions such as 'Do you think this individual, regardless of his identities, is deserving of equal treatment and for his dignity to be respected?' One recent example is of a gay homeless man being kicked out of a building. The Church agreed that the core issue was homelessness. Henry noted that you can make headway, but have to tell stories to do it. When telling a story, it is important to consider the audience, think about what is "human" to the audience.

Andrew Posey continued by saying that donors already have great tools and need to apply them to communications. Identify what the current conversation is, and then change it. Advocates need to consider whether they have internal agreement about where they want to go and what they want to do. The message, definitions, and desired outcomes need to aligned, with a huge network of people ready to "move" in support. He sees much of communications work in the non-profit space as reactive.

He provided a few examples of successful communications and the required levels of investment from the corporate sphere.

What corporations invest in communications:

- Kaiser Family Foundation found that for every dollar invested by Big Pharma in advertising they make $4.20 in sales.

- Drug companies spend twice as much on marketing as they do on research and development (a 330% increase since 1996).
- McDonalds spent a billion on communications and made 20 billion.
- U.S. Conservatives: Heritage Foundation spent over 1 billion since 1990; funding for communications by the Bush administration more than tripled that of the Clinton administration.

How effective communications lowered smoking rates in California:
With aggressive advertising and public relations campaigns, along with community and school-based programs:

- Adult smoking rates tumbled from 22.7% in 1988 to 14 percent in 2005.
- Consumption of tobacco products decreased by more than 64% (in spite of Big Tobacco outspending the public health programs by 20 to 1).
- For every $1 California spends on tobacco control, it saves $3.62 in direct medical costs alone.

Andrews expressed some concern with calling "human rights" something else to attract people, as this could mean it doesn't really matter if we get rid of international human rights conventions, or call them something else. Posey responded that we should not get hung up on language and instead focus on how relevant the message is to the self-interest of the individual. Posey noted, "If you are going to tell me about something that's horrible, you need to tell me what I can do about it. If not, don't tell me in the first place." With regard to human rights, he said, "What we have is a global brand with no attention to it." The human rights field should reflect on:

- Whether or not it is prepared to devote the time and financial resources to truly build the "brand," and whether the brand is needed in the first place.
- Define priorities, use local data and tactics.
- Be organizationally ready, understand the power of networks.
- Be realistic – it's hard and will take investment. Know what you want. Communications most often fail because of lack of organizational agreement or effective utilization of networks.

One participant raised that the human rights movement does a great job at talking about the problems, but not about hope and opportunities. She recommended returning to the root: states have a responsibility to their people and people have rights that they can claim against governments. Another participant voiced that the human rights movement has focused more on litigation than education and information. And when education has been the focus, it has been conducted via mass media in urban centers. The information does not arrive in poor communities in local languages.

Another participant asked how to best determine the most effective words to use, with the example of "oil companies" now being called "energy companies." Posey suggested first conducting research on the words that resonate with people. If research is too expensive, ask 12 people to ask 5 of their friends. It is critical to be thoughtful about the connective tissue between the audience and organizational message.

Another participant reflected that the conversation was partially about communications and partially about where the human rights movement is. There are communities, such as people with disabilities and the elderly, who would love to feel more included in the rights movement. How can the movement bring these communities in so that they feel like equal partners? What about the option of appropriating human rights language – this is our language, this what it means and we are taking it back, instead of finding new words that resonate with you. Posey responded that right now the movement needs to communicate in words that resonate in order to open doors. Then, once people are engaged, introduce the rights language.

Another participant responded that it is difficult to pursue a one-size-fits-all approach. It is easier, for example, to develop a communications strategy for specific issues than it is for the whole field. He also pointed out that many human rights organizations craft their messages for funders, rather than for the public. What can funders do to encourage organizations to message to society, and not to them?

Is it up to funders to directly engage in communications and crafting a message or do they fund grantees to do that work? Can movements have one brand? Or do organizations within the movement have a brand? Does the human rights movement have its own identity? Or is it a mix of identities of its parts? Posey believes that because of its complexity, the human rights field needs to have a consistency to it, even with all of its differences. It is problematic when people "twist" human rights to make it mean something it doesn't.

Cravero-Kristoffersson ended the session by summarizing ten key points:

1. The human rights field needs to move beyond elites and usual suspects. Get out of its comfort zone and don't dismiss those that don't agree. Shift, adapt, and remain open.
2. Consider the positioning of arguments, e.g. talk about decriminalizing same sex relationships as the right of people not to be discriminated against because of their identities, not LGBT rights. When is this smart strategy and when is it compromising?
3. To change the conversation, advocates need to first understand the conversation. Understand the historical context and how perceptions have developed.
4. Need to know the consumer and use messages and messengers that appeal to that consumer, even if they are not your first choice. Do what you need to do to be heard.
5. Give people dreams instead of nightmares. Get attention by sharing solutions and opportunities for positive action.
6. Good communication costs money. Think of communications as a program that requires investment.
7. Communication actually works. Make connections and get help when needed. At what point does building community need to be underpinned by formal communications work?
8. Data and research are critical, need to prove what is true.
9. Build upon differences to broaden entry points.
10. What are the grantmaking implications for all of this? Someone has to fund gathering data and conducting research, someone else needs to fund building organizations' communications capacity, and another needs to fund outreach to unlikely partners and spaces to take risks. How

do grantmakers build the energy and allow partners to get job done (rather than suck life out of them)?

To view the recording of the session:
Visit IHRFG's Vimeo channel (you will need to enter the password "humanrights").

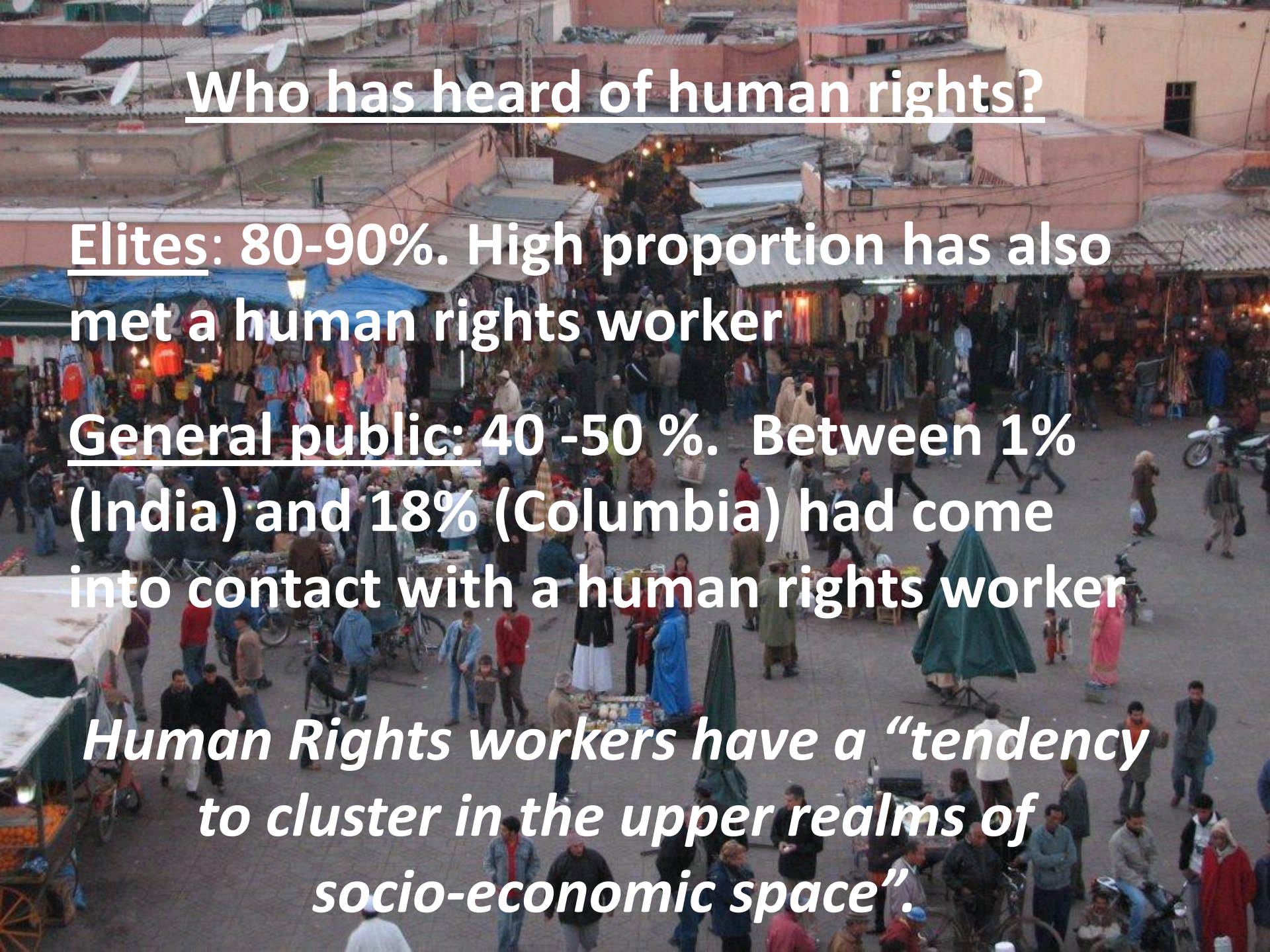
To view the video, "What Do Human Rights Mean":
Visit IHRFG's Vimeo channel (you will need to enter the password "humanrights").

Resources:

- Ron, James, David Cros, and Shannon Golden, "The Struggle for a Truly Grassroots Human Rights Movement," Open Democracy, 18 June 2013.
- Stone, Chris, "The Power of Rights" Open Society Foundations, June 13, 2013.

A Grassroots Human Rights Movement?

Mexico, Columbia, Morocco and India



Who has heard of human rights?

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General public: 40 -50 %. Between 1% (India) and 18% (Columbia) had come into contact with a human rights worker

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“Those who stand to benefit most from human rights norms: the poor, the powerless and the oppressed have less access to human rights than they need”.

United Kingdom

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50% don't trust human rights spokesmen and women

“The wrong language deters engagement and discourages potential members from engaging”

A “linguistic gap between Ariadne and French speaking funders.”

The term human rights is seen as inappropriate and the term social justice is simply never used