

**Grantmaking on the Frontlines of Human Rights  
and Democracy Struggles in Zimbabwe**

*Contributed by Briggs Bomba, Project Director, Zimbabwe Alliance  
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For more than a decade, Zimbabweans have been struggling for democracy, decent livelihoods and basic human rights against a political elite determined to hold on to power and privilege at all costs. Heroic activism and international solidarity has put the Zimbabwe regime on the back foot. However, as in the words of one activist, “The regime is shaken but it has not fallen.” The year 2013 will be a watershed for Zimbabwe. The country will hold a referendum on a new constitution, followed by general presidential and parliamentary elections. These two important events will give Zimbabweans an opportunity to break with a past characterized by state repression and incredible poverty and chart a new path toward a more secure future and respect for human rights. And yet the risks for human rights defenders only increase.

This historic moment also presents opportunities for human rights funders to accompany human rights activists through a decisive moment in the country’s transition to democracy. The Zimbabwe Alliance provides an established framework that allows new funders to seize the moment and make a difference. A collaboration of TrustAfrica, Wallace Global Fund, Schooner Foundation, and International Development Exchange, Zimbabwe Alliance works to strengthen civil society and promote human rights and democracy in Zimbabwe. Its collaborative model allows funders of any size to partner and leverage limited resources for greater impact. For the past three years, the Alliance has supported local initiatives through grants, capacity-building, technical assistance and mobilization of international solidarity.

**Working for Change in Zimbabwe**

In contexts like Zimbabwe, human rights grantmakers can have a big impact. Working on the frontlines of change, we have learned that, to be effective, human rights grantmaking must provide that essential solidarity element to grantee partners in order to help tip the balance of power and curve the arc of history towards justice. This means investing in relationships, meeting communities at their point of need and deeply sharing in the struggles for change. Essentially, responding effectively means believing in the agency of communities with whom we work, taking time to learn and understand the context and responding at multiple levels. Proverbially speaking, we must look “downstream” to help those who have fallen in the river, while also looking “upstream” to prevent others from falling in the river in the first place.

At the most basic level, or working “downstream,” we have seen the need to put on our firefighting gear and get close to the fire in order to save lives. One example of a situation that required quick and direct action from the Zimbabwe Alliance was on February 19, 2011. The state arrested a group of 45 activists, including prominent lawyer Munyaradzi Gwisai, for watching Arab Spring videos and discussing the implications of the North African revolutions on the struggle for human rights and democracy in Zimbabwe. For something as innocuous as this, the activists were tortured and charged with treason, which carries a death sentence in Zimbabwe.

We found ourselves at the heart of the political and financial mobilization efforts needed to free the political prisoners. Working with activists and other solidarity partners nationally and internationally, we organized the *Free Them Now!* Campaign in order to put pressure on the regime and highlight that the

world was watching and condemning such gross violations of basic human rights. Our response included solidarity mobilization, securing lawyers and bail, and -- given the deplorable conditions of Zimbabwe prisons -- humanitarian support to the detainees, including sanitary clothing, clean water, food, and medication. The campaign contributed to the activists receiving bail after languishing for a month in prison. Despite this success, six of the activists were convicted of lesser charges, made to pay fines and sentenced to hundreds of hours of labor and were given suspended prison terms. If it were not for the vigilance of local activists and international attention, the outcome would have been worse. In situations such as this, in which we are required to respond quickly to unforeseen threats, rapid-response grantmaking mechanisms, in addition to the usual standard grant procedures, are essential.

A good example of “upstream” work for us, or work to change the structures of oppression, is our involvement in the constitutional reform process in Zimbabwe. Seeing this as an opportunity to help Zimbabweans develop a charter for good governance and democracy, the Zimbabwe Alliance engaged with key parliamentarians and created a team of technical experts – including constitutional law experts and researchers – to incorporate international best practices and standards into the constitution drafting process. In addition, we supported civil society participation in the drafting process through one of the main national civil society coalitions. The resultant draft constitution will be put to a referendum in March 2013. While in need of further improvements, the proposed new constitution is recognized as a significant step in advancing democracy and human rights.

Another component of our “upstream” work, is investing in both short- and long-term strategies with social transformation in mind. In a transitional situation like Zimbabwe, we have seen the need to simultaneously develop the capacity of activists and build strong civil society organizations that can hold government accountable and work for long-term democratic and social transformation.

### **What Funders Can Do**

Funders who want to seize the moment and make a difference in Zimbabwe can do so individually or by working with others through established structures. The Zimbabwe Alliance offers an existing collaborative framework that allows funders of any size to join hands with others and increase the impact of their giving. With a full-time presence in Zimbabwe, the collaboration allows for timely action and eliminates the need to invest in building a costly parallel grantmaking infrastructure.

Whatever route human rights grantmakers take, there are several areas for human rights funders to get involved in Zimbabwe either in a partnership or individually. As the referendum and elections approach, funders can help secure immediate democratic gains by supporting initiatives to promote a safe environment for voters. Voter registration and mobilization is another area of need.

Furthermore, cases of targeted police harassment and victimization of human rights activists and organizations viewed as threats to the state are on the increase. Thus there is a growing need to support legal defense and protection of activists.

Funders can also help by facilitating regional and international learning exchanges between Zimbabwean activists and those in comparable contexts. For example, human rights activists in Kenya and Ghana will have a lot to share with their Zimbabwean counterparts on harnessing new media technologies during elections and strategies to mitigate violence and rigging.

**For more information on the Zimbabwe Alliance, please contact Briggs Bomba at [bomba@trustafrica.org](mailto:bomba@trustafrica.org) or visit [www.zimbabwealliance.org](http://www.zimbabwealliance.org).**