

IN FOCUS: ENGAGING THE UN HUMAN RIGHTS MECHANISMS IN GENEVA AND BACK HOME

Contributed by: Participants in IHRFG's Funders' Learning Visit to Geneva: May 4-6, 2010

IHRFG's recent Learning Visit to Geneva provided twenty-four grantmakers with the opportunity to learn how the United Nations human rights system can help solve pressing human rights problems at the national and international levels. The trip also sought to foster relationships among human rights funders from around the globe. Grantmakers from the U.S., Britain, Haiti, Brazil, Germany, Ireland, India, Switzerland, and the Netherlands met with more than two-dozen activists, experts, and government officials, as well as with Kyung-wha Kang, the UN's Deputy High Commissioner for Human Rights, and with Betty King, the U.S. Permanent Representative to the United Nations.

We asked five participants -- Diana Samarasan of the Disability Rights Fund, Teyo van der Schoot of Hivos, Marie St. Cyr and Karen Ashmore of the Lambi Fund of Haiti, and Susan Myers of the United Nations Foundation -- to explain their grantmaking strategies that engage the UN and what they took away from the Funders' Learning Visit that will enhance those strategies. We asked:

Q. What are your organization's grantmaking strategies that support the application of UN human rights mechanisms to advance human rights efforts?

Q. What did you take away from the IHRFG Funders' Learning Visit to Geneva that you hope will enhance these strategies?



Teyo van der Schoot, Program Manager, Human Rights and Democratization, Hivos

Given Hivos' involvement in setting up Ariadne-European Human Rights Funding Network, I gladly accepted the invitation to join IHRFG's Geneva Learning Visit. I saw it as an example of how like-minded funders can share strategies and jointly analyze the opportunities that, in this case, the United Nations human rights mechanisms offer in bringing about the changes for which many of our partner organizations in the Global South are fighting. Hivos' mandate prioritizes core funding for local community-based groups in the Global South, rather than funding the larger international NGOs. The Learning Visit absolutely helped to confirm that most national NGOs need capacity-building support to make effective use of the UN Universal Periodic Review [evaluation of the human rights record of UN member states] or UN treaty body mechanisms [such as the Committee Against Torture or Committee on the Rights of the Child]. So we do encourage our grantee partners, especially from repressive and restrictive contexts and for whom the international diplomatic sphere is where most gains can be achieved, to engage with the UN bodies and do joint projects. And definitely, for controversial issues like LGBT rights, participating in the UN system offers important backing and legitimacy for their work at home as well. A positive development that Hivos would like to support more is the increasing presence of representatives of human rights NGOs from countries like India, South Africa and Argentina in Geneva. It is a sign of the growing capacity and maturity of the worldwide human rights movement.



Diana Samarasan, Director, Disability Rights Fund

The Disability Rights Fund (DRF) was founded in the wake of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), which was adopted in December 2006 with the active participation of global disability rights activists. The Convention mandates the participation of persons with disabilities and their representative organizations, disabled persons' organizations (DPOs), in implementation and monitoring. DRF's mission is to support this DPO participation in the Global South and Eastern Europe. We do this through two funding streams. The first supports DPO coalitions at national levels to advocate for ratification of the CRPD, to advocate for legislative and policy changes—once the CRPD is ratified—that are in accord with the treaty, or to monitor State implementation through alternative reporting to the CRPD Committee in Geneva. The second funding stream supports grassroots, emergent, or marginalized groups of persons with disabilities to build skills and (internal or external) understanding around rights as outlined in the CRPD.

The visit to Geneva, which included learning about the new Universal Periodic Review (UPR) process at the UN, inspired me to think about broadening our support for DPOs to not only address the rights of persons with disabilities in the context of the CRPD (and the CRPD Committee), but also to use the CRPD to report on rights abuses to other UN monitoring mechanisms, like the UPR or the Committees of Experts for CEDAW (Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women) or CRC (Convention on the Rights of the Child) or CESCR (Convention on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights). Broadening support in this way will enable the voice of persons with disabilities to be heard in many circles, better countering the invisibility of these 650 million people around the world.



Marie St. Cyr, Board President and Karen Ashmore, Executive Director, Lambi Fund of Haiti

A comprehensive understanding of the United Nations human rights mechanisms has allowed Lambi Fund to broaden its vision of advocacy, a newly created program within our organization. We particularly want to strengthen our advocacy amid Haiti's current crisis, so it was most timely and unequivocally useful for us to attend the IHRFG learning visit and connect with key representatives of the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, as well as form new relationships with other IHRFG members.

The Deputy High Commissioner for Human Rights encouraged the Lambi Fund to leverage the UN mechanisms more fully, since they are engaged with Haiti on a number of levels, from country mandates to treaty bodies and thematic issues, to the UN peacekeeping force. We hope, for example, to follow up with the UN Independent Expert on the situation of human rights in Haiti. We also plan to follow up with the UN Special Rapporteurs on housing, poverty, the right to food, internally displaced persons, violence against women, and water.

Clearly, this is a tall order to fill and will need to be implemented in a phased approach. Since this is a newly created program, the Lambi Fund is seeking help from our peers on technical assistance, financial resources, and advice from experienced mentors in implementing an efficient and productive advocacy program. In the rebuilding and recovery of Haiti after the earthquake, leveraging the UN mechanisms on human rights is another tool to be used to ensure that rebuilding is done with and by the voice of the Haitian people.



Susan Myers, Executive Director, The United Nations Foundation, New York Office

The UN Foundation (UNF) found the Geneva trip extremely useful both in what we learned from the UN, government and NGO speakers but also from the other participants. Because UNF is a platform for connecting people, ideas and resources with the UN, we learned that there is room for even greater cooperation in the area of human rights as we connect funders and their grantees with the resources the UN has to offer in Geneva. We are looking at ways to move toward that goal and welcome ideas and collaboration on this important front.

Resources for Funders:

- 1) Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, [“The United Nations Human Rights System: How to Make it Work for You”](#)
- 2) Office for the High Commissioner for Human Rights, [“Working with the United Nations Human Rights Programme: A Handbook for Civil Society”](#)
- 3) US Human Rights Fund and IHRFG co-sponsored [Teleconference](#) on the Universal Periodic Review, held April 7, 2010

Photos by Loulourien Siwa