

**SEMI-ANNUAL CONFERENCE  
NEW YORK  
JULY 11-12, 2013**

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**Who Calls the Shots? Local, Regional and International Human Rights  
Organizations Amid Shifting Global Power Dynamics**

July 12, 2013

3:00 – 5:00pm

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

***Session Organizers:***

- Louis Bickford, Program Officer, Global Human Rights, Democracy, Rights and Justice Program, Ford Foundation
- Emily Martinez, Director, Human Rights Initiatives, Open Society Foundations

***Facilitator:***

- Louis Bickford, Program Officer, Global Human Rights, Democracy, Rights and Justice Program, Ford Foundation

***Panelists:***

- Atsango Chesoni, Executive Director, Kenya Human Rights Commission
- Iain Levine, Program Director, Human Rights Watch
- Emily Martinez, Director, Rights Initiatives, Open Society Foundations
- César Rodriguez, Founding Member, Center for Law, Justice, and Society (DeJusticia)

***Sponsors:***

- The Ford Foundation
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Louis Bickford, Program Officer at the Ford Foundation, introduced the session by explaining its place in the context of the other conference sessions. Earlier sessions have discussed how to communicate the human rights brand or identity, he said, and this panel will pose the question of what that identity actually looks like.

Bickford then shared some background on the human rights movement. As the international human rights movement has developed over the last 20 or 30 years, he said, small non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in the Global South would document human rights abuses and then send to larger, international NGOs that would conduct advocacy around these issues. However, more recently there have been four major changes within the global human rights movement:

- Inclusiveness of other, previously unrelated, fields;
- Emergence of strong, better-resourced Global South-based NGOs;
- Expanding influence of certain states like China, Brazil, and India, and a diminishing role of Washington, D.C. and other world capitals; and
- Digitization, social media, and other technological advances present particular opportunities and challenges for organizing.

Bickford then introduced Christen Dobson from the International Human Rights Funders Group, who gave a brief overview of research on human rights grantmaking. She noted that 54% of human rights funding goes to organizations based in North America, whereas 9% of human rights funding goes to organizations based in Africa. Most of the top 20 recipients of human rights funding are located in the United States, and 69% of funding was awarded to U.S.-based organizations. She said that 20% of funding to the Caribbean went to organizations located in the Caribbean, which was a trend she saw happening across the Global South.

Bickford commented that some international organizations are moving towards establishing larger presences in the Global South, whereas others are moving the opposite direction and may even be closing field offices. He then posed several questions to the panelists:

- What are the relevant challenges and opportunities when international organizations work hand in hand with locally-based organizations?
- What happens with resources and funding?
- Do international organizations strengthen or deplete human rights struggles in the Global South?
- Who is at the table and how is the agenda set? Or, is there an agenda?
- What does all of this mean for donors?

César Rodriguez, Founding Member of the Center for Law, Justice, and Society (DeJusticia), began his remarks by agreeing that Global South organizations are strengthening and having more and more influence in the human rights field. He sees this happening in Colombia, India, and Brazil, but he still sees the agenda as being set by international organizations located in the Global North.

Atsango Chesoni, Executive Director of the Kenya Human Rights Commission, commented that the global human rights agenda is developing along with young states in the Global South, and that she sees the agenda as being relatively responsive to what is happening on the ground in the Global South. However, she noted, it is not always useful to have international organizations respond to and advocate on behalf of issues like the political situation in Kenya.

Iain Levine, Program Director at Human Rights Watch (HRW), explained that he sees the human rights community as an ecosystem rather than a movement, since the word movement implies coordination and common priorities. There are times when the ecosystem can be proactive about what is put on the agenda, but much is shaped by events, he said.

Rodriguez commented that within the human rights ecosystem, there are minnows and big fish in the same tank, speaking to the often perceived divide between international organizations and local ones.

Louis turned to the audience to take comments. One participant noted that within the United States, local NGOs have begun to use the Global South model of holding government accountable for human rights abuses. This parallel, he said, indicates the importance of national movements coming together as a powerful model to which funders should be paying attention.

Another participant expressed her view of the tenuous relationship between local and international organizations. She noted the “tokenization” of local voices that can happen within international organizations, for instance, having local people present a report that was not written by them, but by an international organization. She said that local issues, such as the International Criminal Court (ICC) indictment of the Kenyan President and Vice President, are most important to local people.

Bickford asked the panelists how ideas were prioritized within the human rights movement. Ten years ago, he noted, the human rights community pushed for the creation of the ICC, but that could have been differently prioritized with other groups helping set the agenda.

Rodriguez responded that everyone in the human rights community is interested in strengthening the legitimacy and efficacy of human rights. Being more inclusive of Global South organizations, he emphasized, will make movements more efficacious. For example, Global South organizations made socio-economic rights relevant when some Global North organizations weren’t very aware of them. Business and human rights advocacy, as well, originated in communities affected by infrastructure and extraction processes.

Emily Martinez, Director of Rights Initiatives at the Open Society Foundations, questioned the claim that the human rights community has one agenda. She stated she doesn’t believe there is a consensus within the human rights ecosystem. As a funder, she said, one tries to move various issues onto the agenda. She questioned whether donor coordination is a good thing, and asked if funders are interested in funding a single approach or an entire ecosystem of human rights actors.

A participant commented that since no one has the answer, it’s doubly important that funders and advocates work across boundaries and fields.

Another participant stated that if most funding is going to U.S.-based organizations, these groups have a disproportionate impact on the developments in the human rights field. Recently, she said, there seems to be greater donor interest in funding groups in the ground.

Levine commented that the ‘us versus them’ mentality isn’t useful to the discussion. He noted that HRW is setting up an office in Brazil to continue their work there but also to engage in Brazilian foreign policy, given Brazil’s rising political influence. One Brazilian organization he knows of works around human rights and foreign policy, and it has a \$3 million budget, where as HRW has a \$70 million budget. He has

spoken with the head of the Brazilian organization about how they can work together to advance their similar aims. He advocated for working together and bringing each organization's comparative strengths to bear on human rights work.

A participant noted that it may be very difficult for local organizations to work with larger international organizations. Establishing international organizations in the Global South may deplete the ability of local organizations to do their own work, she said. The participant asserted that international organizations have to be willing to help local organizations become stronger.

Another participant noted that large international organizations like Amnesty International and HRW are now setting offices up in the Global South because the imperative of human rights requires us to lift up voices from across the spectrum. Given the changing global socio-political dynamics, she continued, being in conversation and collaboration with local organizations is the only way to effectively work on the global stage. The participant asserted that the human rights community is at a critical juncture at which funders have the opportunity to create the biggest tent possible. She ended her comments by saying that funders must act disruptively enough to find answers to the problems that have historically plagued the human rights movement.

Another participant expressed it is critical that funding channeled to local, national, and international grantees is coordinated and aiming for the same goals.

Chesoni said that she has trouble believing that anyone can be better at representing anyone else; that is, that local organizations are their own best representative and advocate. She noted that international organizations based in the Global North historically have had more access and resources, and asked if this meant they also have more visibility and power, or are more knowledgeable. She questioned the need for HRW to locate an office in Brazil, and asked how HRW and other large international organizations may engage other smaller actors in order to be more effective.

Rodriguez commented that what matters in the HRW case is whether the New York or Brazil office is making decisions about the work in Brazil. The kind of decision-making process has consequences, he said, when international organizations are under pressure to be consistent across countries. When power becomes decentralized, he continued, a new model emerges.

Rodriguez further explained the case study of action around the Inter-American Court, which he said has been instrumental to protecting human rights. Latin American organizations wanted to support the Inter-American Court and Commission, and because the United States has never ratified the relevant treaty it does not have influence around this issue. Rodriguez explained how, within this different landscape of power, a network of national human rights organizations across Latin America worked together to pressure their own governments to fund both the Court and Commission. Due to Brazil's eventual support after this campaign, the network achieved its goal of funding the Court and Commission. However, he noted that coordinating a network like this is extremely time and resource intensive.

Martinez discussed the questions associated with funding networks like this. Not all groups have the bandwidth to address some issues, like foreign policy, she said. They may not want to move into certain areas that funders may be interested in. She noted that the practicalities involved in collaboration like this can be very difficult and asked how funders can initiate interaction between organizations.

Levine said that international organizations can help break down the idea of human rights as a Western idea. He emphasized the importance of finding ways that different organizations' strengths can be brought together to create a sum that is greater than its parts. He also brought up the importance of technology as a transformational force, and discussed how social media and ease of digital communication are impacting power dynamics in a serious, long-term way.

A participant commented that collaborations are long-term relationships and must be nurtured as such. He brought up the point that fundraising in the Global South can be difficult and problematic, particularly when international organizations are able to do this much more easily. Global South organizations may not have endowments, capital investments, and the like. He asked about strategies on how to mobilize funds in the Global South.

A participant noted that money for local groups in South Africa has decreased. Local organizations see that large international funders are making grants to large international organizations, which can result in problems around partnership building. She expressed that local organizations should lead the agenda for their communities, but said that when newsworthy events happen, international organizations are the ones asked to comment. As a funder, she continued, it is easy to perpetuate a cycle that privileges international organizations, and funders must be prepared to take responsibility for that.

Chesoni noted that the funding available to Global South organizations is not always earned through ways that respect human rights (such as funds from corporations), so that is one challenge local organizations face. She also discussed the long term nature of human rights work, and questioned how to keep up momentum around human rights as a funding framework.

Rodriguez echoed Levine on the issue of technology changing the way organizations collaborate. He noted that on his Twitter account, he re-tweets HRW, but he wants HRW to re-tweet him, as well.

Levine commented that he thinks the human rights movement will redefine itself, and that no single group of people would redefine it. He emphasized that the human rights ecosystem has never been as broad and innovative as today. He expressed his deep belief in the value of deliberate collaboration.

Martinez closed with her thoughts around how funders must be attuned and responsive to how messaging on human rights is evolving. She said that as a funder, she is becoming more aware of different models of fundraising and of organizations' varying capacities to do fundraising work. She suggested that perhaps fundraising should be part of what "core human rights work" means.

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**To view the recording of the session:**

Visit IHRFG's [Vimeo](#) channel (you will need to enter the password "humanrights").