



Interview with Steve Riskin, United States Institute of Peace  
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*The International Human Rights Funders Group turns twenty in 2014. We spoke with Steve Riskin, one of IHRFG's founding members, to discuss how the network and the field of human rights philanthropy have changed over the past two decades.*

**You've been with IHRFG since its birth twenty years ago. Can you speak a bit about the inspiration behind the formation of IHRFG?**

The early 1990s were framed by the collapse of the Soviet Union and the perception that the world had moved into the age of liberal democracy – that we had reached the “End of History,” as Francis Fukuyama characterized it. There were worries that funders were exiting the field and that human rights would be neglected, and there were feelings of isolation among grantmakers active in the human rights field. These shared concerns were the context and impetus for some collective action that would one day result in the emergence of IHRFG.



In 1993, in consultation with other human rights grantmakers, it was Margo Picken, then the Ford Foundation Program Officer for International Human rights, who commissioned me to conduct interviews and draft [a paper](#) identifying recent trends in the human rights field and, in June of 1994, a small group of foundations came together to discuss the changing nature of the global context and the rights agenda. There was a clear sense that work needed to be done to reverse the decline in human rights funders, strengthen the sense of community, and be responsive to both existing and new challenges in efforts to advance human rights around the world.

**IHRFG has grown from a handful of foundations to a diverse global network. How have you seen the field of human rights philanthropy change over the past two decades? Have those changes been reflected among IHRFG's members?**

There has been growth in IHRFG, but there have also been real changes in the human rights movement generally, and I think IHRFG reflects some of that. Many events over the last 20 years have either brought human rights issues into sharper relief or triggered greater work on them. There has been greater appreciation for the indivisibility of human rights, with economic, social and cultural gaining greater prominence—those rights having been somewhat of a victim on the Cold War. We've seen more organizations taking root, particularly in the Global South (a development that has been greatly fostered by the Fund for Global Human Rights, an initiative conceived and developed through IHRFG and some of its members that has provided over \$45 million to on-the-ground human rights groups around the world). And we've seen the breakdown of what was described as a “wall” between social justice and civil rights work in the United States and work in international human rights elsewhere. IHRFG's membership has grown in parallel—in the kinds of foundations, for example, those with a focus on

gender, persons with disabilities or indigenous peoples, as well as in their geographic diversity. This reflects the importance of global perspectives, the universality of human rights, and the need to work together to achieve a more just world. After all, we are the *International Human Rights Funders Group*.

[“Funding Human Rights: an Invitation”](#) was one of IHRFG’s first publications—an effort to expand the base of human rights donors across issue areas. The brief booklet looked at different spheres – education, women, disabilities, housing, the environment – and provided examples as to how grantmakers could strengthen their programmatic work by applying a human rights lens or component to their grantmaking. Initially, there was concern that a group of human rights donors would come together and try to cook up some shared funding scheme or singular approach, but that was never the purpose of IHRFG. It was to bring together diverse voices, views, and approaches-- to enrich and reinforce, to learn, to share experiences and to collaborate.

**Our New York conference last July looked at the evolving global human rights agenda. In your view, do the words “human rights” hold the same meaning as they did 20 years ago? Where does a human rights frame fit in philanthropy today?**

The diverse funders and cultures in this field give rise to different ways of understanding and pursuing human rights. The agenda has expanded to include more of the substantive areas whose work is touched by rights. The phrase “human rights” may imply that everything has to fit through a narrow definitional frame. The Universal Declaration and the core international human rights instruments provide the framework, but there is more elasticity in getting there. Looking at human rights funding 20 years ago, you would see more of a focus on what was viewed as “bread-and-butter”—civil and political rights—a least by most U.S.-based funders. But, again, a human rights lens applied to issues like equity or welfare can add a critical and necessary component that reinforces work on these issues.

**Looking back at the last two decades, what are one or two things that surprise you? Has an unexpected issue or region emerged? Have others fallen off our radar?**

The emergence of technology is a new frontier for human rights. It was picked up in [IHRFG’s report](#) on global funding for human rights, and we’ve seen it in action. Technology has been a great tool for advancing work in this realm, but at the same time, it’s been used by governments and others to violate rights. It can be a double-edged sword.

We also saw intrastate conflict arise to a greater degree after the collapse of the Soviet Union and the East-West divide, adding urgent new dimensions to human rights work. The “Responsibility to Protect” (R2P) concept didn’t figure into conversations 20 years ago. There is today greater recognition that the state has a responsibility to protect its citizens from violent conflicts, and when it can’t, the responsibility lies with the international community. The idea is simple enough, but complexities like conceptual definitions, legal challenges, political will and other implementation issues all pose challenges that need to be addressed.

As a Middle East specialist, I cannot but mention this region--the last to experience wide-scale efforts to democratize, open up civil society, and end authoritarian rule. We knew change was inevitable, but no one could predict the time and the breathtaking speed with which events unfolded in 2010-11. But it

was also deceptive—deceptive in a sense that democratic change would be far more difficult and take much more time than hoped. Indeed, the setbacks have been disappointing, not least for the millions of victims. The massive killings and the inability of the international community to play a more impactful and positive role is a sober reminder of the inadequacies of early response to large-scale human rights violations and such widespread violence.

**IHRFG members are increasingly grappling with the emergence of new actors and donors. Can you discuss shifts in the “who” – alongside the “what” or “how” – of human rights funding?**

“New actors/donors” are tough to specify, because there are new actors on all sides and there are older actors coming into sharper focus. There are donors new to human rights grantmaking. There are new transnational crime networks and other non-state actors, including corporations. On the one hand, we see greater corporate philanthropy and, on the other, corporate violators, be it through extractive industries and the struggle over land and resources or harsh labor conditions in the global south as well as in many industrialized countries, including the United States.

There are governmental and government-funded donors working in the human rights space. The priorities of private philanthropy can align with such agencies, and I think it’s important to engage those donors. Whether bilateral, multilateral, or quasi-governmental – primarily North American or European—they are major funders working on human rights or in closely allied fields. But governments are also violators, and therein lies the rub. As with corporations, governments have other (national) interests, and their bottom line is often different from that of private philanthropies committed to human rights. Still, it is important to understand the work of these major funders and even explore ways of engaging in areas where interests overlap or where complementarity can more effectively advance human rights.

**Can you share an IHRFG experience that stands out?**

One of the funniest recollections (humor is important!) actually came at a critical turning point for IHRFG, at a meeting in New York in 1999. There were a handful of foundations represented around the table, including the Joyce Mertz-Gilmore Foundation, represented by Mona Younis. We were discussing the future of the group (in the first years, the Seattle-based Henry M. Jackson Foundation served as the institutional home, but the “secretariat” would now be heading back East), and Mona piped up and said, “Look, if we’re going to make a go of this, we need to have some sort of body to guide it. I think we need to set up some kind of guiding committee, and I’m looking for volunteers.” I must have reached up to scratch my ear and Mona pointed at me and said, “Okay! There’s one. Who’s next?”

Now I may not have been the first to “volunteer,” but, in any case, Mona proceeded to go down the line to “capture” more willing volunteers than I. Thus, the original “steering committee” was formed. It turned out to be an important moment for IHRFG because the committee, now formalized, would begin to convene regular conference calls, clarify a mandate, develop a set of primary goals and projects, including semiannual funders group meetings, and, not too long after, identify someone to lead the organization and take it to a new level. That would end up being Mona Younis, described later by Larry Cox, then of the Ford Foundation, as “a force of nature.”

**In 50 words or less, what will the next 20 years of human rights grantmaking hold? In all seriousness, where do you think IHRFG should focus its attention?**

I am but a single voice and others will have more informed views on this important question. But something that figures centrally into advancing human rights is the question of power—a notion that, in my view, is not sufficiently understood. Who has it? What forms does it take? How is it generated? How is it enhanced or weakened? How best to “speak to” or address it? More specifically, what forces benefit from human rights violations, which institutions, governments, companies, or networks, have a vested interest in rights violations or ongoing conflicts? Not unrelated to this is the question of how foundations invest their corpuses and whether such investments (which usually far outstrip grantmaking budgets) align with their respective human rights missions.

A key role of IHRFG is the venue it creates to share lessons learned and best practices across regions and contexts. IHRFG has devoted increasing attention to impact and evaluation. “Benchmarks” and “theories of change” can sound a bit sterile, but it is important to see what works in advancing human rights around the world, understand how we know it works, and be able to refine and adapt various approaches to new challenges and changing contexts—mindful that one size does *not* fit all and appreciative of the adage often attributed to Einstein: “Not everything that counts can be counted, and not everything that can be counted counts.”

We should also be creative in advancing a growing trend toward working across political or other divides and “silos” to engage unlikely or, as one thoughtful grantmaking colleague better described it, “unfamiliar” or “overlooked” allies to build coalitions around key issues. (Human Rights First was an early pioneer in this, reaching out some years ago to former U.S. prisoners of war, like Senator McCain, and other former senior military leaders to build a diverse anti-torture effort.)

My fifty words are up, but did I mention climate change? Water rights? Poverty and the unequal distribution of resources? And the need for more effective national, regional and international mechanisms to address these key issues. There’s a long list of challenges and priorities, all of which bear directly on human rights, and all of which come in the context of a shrinking and increasingly interconnected world. IHRFG will continue to play a critical role for philanthropy in identifying and advancing these important conversations in the decades beyond its 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary.