

IN FOCUS

The Practice of Human Rights Grantmaking *Contributed by Rajasvini Bhansali, Executive Director, IDEX*

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Sixty years ago, the UN adopted the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the first international declaration on the inherent dignity and equal rights of all people regardless of national, ideological or cultural divides. However, gross inequities between the rich and the poor of the world – exacerbated by political crises, war, economic collapse and climate change – mean that the Declaration’s vision of individual freedom, social protection, economic opportunity and community development remains largely unfulfilled. Approximately one billion human beings live in poverty, unable to meet their daily needs for adequate shelter, food, health care, clean water, or education for their children.



Over the last fifty years, ending poverty has become a goal of many international organizations, political and business leaders, philanthropists and even personalities from popular culture, including rock singers and actors. We have learned, however, that more development aid, freer international trade, and higher foreign investments are, on their own, insufficient to promote dignity in the lives of people living in poverty. The UN Millennium Development Goals, which aim to halve poverty and hunger by 2015, have yet to fulfill their promise -- to date the results appear disappointing with regard to large multilateral interventions to alleviate poverty. Poverty is now widely understood not only as economic deprivation but more holistically as a lack of conditions -- and in fact, a lack of human rights -- that promote social, cultural and ecological balance and well-being.

Human rights grantmaking organizations attempt to address the root causes of poverty, injustice, inequity and disadvantage by allocating resources to models, partnerships, alliances and grantee organizations that tackle these issues. As human rights grantmakers, we have to constantly build our own cultural, social, political, geographic, economic and environmental competency to work most effectively with our grantees. Human rights grantmaking supports the initiatives of community partners and fosters an understanding of rights and responsibilities of local people to tackle powerlessness and exclusion.

In recent years, there has been a growing movement on the part of individual funders and grantmaking organizations in the Global North to incorporate a more democratic approach in their work. The establishment of grassroots movements, self-help groups, community-based organizations and collectives in the Global South has complemented this effort, enabling communities to participate in their own development process. Local, national, and international alliances allow grassroots organizations around the world to better influence policy, secure resources, and share solutions to the pressing issues of

extreme poverty, women's disempowerment and exploitation, misuse of land and resources, and degradation of the environment. While their approaches vary by organization, most recognize and affirm the value of indigenous community knowledge, and incorporate these insights into their development priorities.

Most large-scale development efforts are still, however, initiated and led by people external to the community, the results of which are often limited or short-lived in value. Local initiative ensures readiness for change and ownership of the change process; it usually reflects cultural, social, political, geographic, and economic realities, which are all nuances in understanding that outsiders cannot fully possess.

For 25 years, IDEX's theory of social change has put local people at the forefront -- people working in an organized way for better conditions and effective, alternative, practices that build towards democratic, equitable and environmentally sustainable solutions. While development challenges for the twenty-first century seem more complex and demanding, an essential, viable path to sustainability lies in simple, healthy lifestyles, efforts that are small-scale, locally-owned and respect communities, participatory processes, and our increasingly fragile ecology.

Throughout its existence, IDEX has attempted to minimize traditional power imbalances, and strike a balance between mutual trust and accountability in its relationships with partners in the South. Despite these efforts, a number of questions remain unanswered: Is this ideal being achieved? What progress has been made towards the goal of democratizing development? What do democratic partnerships look like? And, finally, what are the benefits and drawbacks for both the grantor and grantee of such an approach?

To this end, we have learned some key lessons worth sharing about grantmaking practice to advance human rights. What matters is this:

- Cultural Competency: The ability of grantmakers to demonstrate knowledge and capacity to operate with cross-cultural awareness, value diversity, conduct self-assessment, manage the dynamics of difference, acquire cultural knowledge, and adapt to diversity and the cultural contexts of the communities we serve;
- Trusting and respectful relationships developed over long periods of time with grassroots partners, and a contextual understanding of what works;
- Active participation in alliances and networks between civil society organizations in the United States, Latin America, Africa and Asia;
- Commitment to supporting partners in carrying out their own innovative and high-impact projects that truly meet the needs of their communities;
- A results orientation that looks at the process of change, as well as outcomes that are identified by grassroots partners themselves;
- Active invitation to grassroots partners to provide candid input into funding practice, protocols and criteria – such as assessment, due diligence, monitoring and evaluation, site visits and other tools of grantmaking used by Northern grantmakers.

As we continue to grapple with questions of cultural competency, power and privilege in our own grantmaking practices, we invite our peers and colleagues in philanthropy to reflect on some related questions:

- What assumptions do we make about power, partnership and grantmaking effectiveness? What are the gaps between our rhetoric and practice? How deeply do we implement our values within our institutions, as well as through our philanthropic practices?
- How can donors examine power dynamics, build contextual knowledge and create effective alliances that enhance grantmaking partnerships?
- How does cultural incompetency stand in the way of the goals we seek to fulfill with our grantmaking? What would it take to address them?

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