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Supporting Human Rights Defenders in Urgent Situations: Global Perspectives for Funders

Wednesday, July 14, 2010, 9:00-10:30 am

Facilitator:

Terry Greenblatt, Executive Director and CEO, Urgent Action Fund for Women's Rights

Panelists:

Jelena Djordjevic, Co-founder and Deputy Director, Anti-Trafficking Center, Belgrade

Hanny Megally/Bahey eldin Hassan, Members of the Board, EMHRF

Regan E. Ralph, Executive Director, Fund for Global Human Rights



Panelists discussed how they provide support to human rights defenders around the world who find themselves in emergency situations

Question for Bahey El Din Hassan: How does a foundation like Euro-Mediterranean Foundation to Support Human Rights Defenders (EMHRF) manage to respond to needs of HR defenders in urgent situations in repressive environments such as in the MENA region?

Bahey El Din Hassan: A male lawyer, 76 years old, was not involved with human rights activism. One day, one of his clients went to prison, and was subjected to severe torture. This was the beginning of a long road of activism for Bahey. His client had a trial and was sentenced to five years in prison. This is

not an exception in the Arab region. His wife and children had to go and live with her family so that they could have financial support. After five years in prison his health had deteriorated. He needed surgery which was not provided in his country so he had to move outside of the Arab region.

This situation is not rare, but common in the MENA region (Syria, Libya, Sudan, Yemen, etc.). According to the Freedom House index, no country in this region has more than a “5” for being a free country. Human rights defenders are subjected to harassment. Even the law cannot help in these situations because it becomes dangerous to advocate for legal rights. According to the findings, these situations are getting worse. How should we deal with a case such as the one described? What is the best way to provide financial means for this individual to obtain medical treatment? Does the donor/foundation have the ability to make a small fund (\$1000-\$5000)? Most donors do not have the ability to support an individual and to provide small grants. In emergency situations, a decision needs to be made in just a few days (72 hours). Other important questions are: How will the money be transferred? Should the money be transferred to a bank account (what if it is intercepted)? There are a number of challenges and dangers in transferring the money.

Regan Ralph: After hearing the case described by Bahey and some challenges in funding such a case, were funders able to identify any cross-regional commonalities?

Human rights work is dangerous and entails risk. People who do the work on the ground are most aware of that. Human rights defenders operate in situations where they are not equipped to protect themselves. The Fund for Global Human Rights has made grants in emergency situations in countries where they have programs and those where they do not.

The Fund for Global Human Rights gets emergency requests from current grantees or organizations that are not grantees. They get referred by another donor, human rights organization, etc. More typical requests come from current grantees. The way they do it internally is as follows: the Program Officer, “PO,” who is responsible for the region does due diligence. An expedited process is created, whereby Regan works with the PO to determine if they want to designate a grant. A board member is dedicated to approving grants depending on the size of grant. There is money set aside for these types of situations (\$1,000-\$5,000). The emergency fund has gone up to \$10,000, but not very often. Grantees need the money quickly and it needs to be delivered in ways that are not typical. The Fund for Global Human Rights is currently spending money that they set aside each year and there is a need to allocate more money to the emergency fund. This could benefit greatly from collaboration.

Example: In 2008, when the Eastern Congo was descending into more conflict, many grantees were targeted by rebel leaders because they were participating in documenting the processes and exposing bad things people were doing. Emergency grants were being requested for evacuations, security needs, to continue their work, etc. Requests were going to many funders. Funders developed a plan for a coordinated response. They designated different donors to be in contact with different grantees. They identified who could move the money quickly. OSI made a grant to the Fund for Global Human Rights, who covered it from operating expenses. They transferred the money to Western Union, where it was picked up and distributed to everyone. They were able to move out to Uganda and then return when conflict died down. The cost was \$25,000. This process required constant monitoring by the PO responsible for that. Donor collaboration can provide more systemic response than one foundation acting by itself.

Some of the needs that are apparent are as follows: barriers against attacks (such as bars on windows),

evacuation plans, creation of safe houses, medical care, legal defense, body guards, information security (sensitive information that poses risks to grantee safety).

Jelena Djordjevic discussed the importance of taking gender into account when thinking about security and protection of human rights defenders.

Jelena discussed the case of a single mother living in Serbia who spoke out against allowing society to put pressure on her. The leaders of her municipality threatened to kill her and rape her daughter. She realized she had to move. She called Jelena and asked her where she should go and how. Jelena was able to mobilize rapid response grantmaking and help this woman escape.

Another case is of a woman from Nepal who was a feminist activist for many years. She was found dead in a river. It became known after her death that for the entire time she was married, she was abused by her husband, but she was not able to talk about it. By the time women in her organization realized she needed support, it was too late. A self-sacrificing attitude is not acceptable anymore among human rights defenders. Human rights defenders should be able to do their work and also live meaningful, safe lives.

Grantmakers should try to get to know what is happening within their grantee organizations – to discuss their personal risks and security issues. Have safe gatherings where women can discuss what it feels like, what it means to live and work in compromising situations (private life connected to public work). Small grants can make a big difference in providing safety and well-being amongst grantees. These types of grants and support would be an integral part of the overall support given to human rights defenders.

Question and Answer session:

Q: How do grantmakers reduce the chance of their support exacerbating the situation in emergencies? How do we know they are not moving to less secure place or being exiled?

A: Grantmakers should refer to advisors/experts in specific contexts so that they know what is going on. Many people are ashamed to discuss security (do not think they deserve to be safe), so grantmakers should ask the questions.

Q: From the Global Greengrants Fund's perspective, most threats come from corporations. How do we balance transparency of grantmaking and what information we put on websites for the protection of advisors and grantees?

Q: How do you assess the risks and support HR defenders to assess risk when they are not making choices to make themselves safer? How can we provide psychological support?

Q: Many groups find themselves in unsafe situations and feel that security precautions cannot really provide safety. How do you encourage groups to take threats seriously without undermining their courage?

Comment: Digital Security – many HR defenders are putting bars on window in offices, but they should also keep in mind that everything is already compromised, so how do you take a step back?

Q: How do you coordinate with each other to make sure that other grantmakers aren't working on the same emergency situation at once?

3 strategies being explored by Fund for Global Human Rights:

- Support groups of human right defenders' networks (assessing risks, determining security plans). There is not a lot of willingness to engage in these issues (one of the things people are confronting now is that their lack on security puts more people at risk then just themselves so it is important to have a conversation about that).
- Encourage organizations to do security audits (technological and physical).
- Think about skill-building initiatives. Developing field manual on how they can work collaboratively in repressive environments.

Transparency: In such contexts no one can guarantee full transparency because transparency also increases the risk of human rights defenders.