

## IN FOCUS

### *Cultural Competency in Human Rights Grantmaking: What's Power Got To Do With It? Examining Our Effectiveness in Working Across Cultures*

*Contributed by Rajasvini Bhansali, Executive Director, IDEX  
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As grantmakers, it is important to take the opportunity to reflect on whether human rights grantmaking -- which attempts to address the root causes of poverty, injustice, and inequity -- actually reinforces or addresses powerlessness and exclusion among our grantees. There are a number of ways in which power and privilege are redistributed through the act of grantmaking.



One important way is evaluating power, partnership, and grantmaking effectiveness through “cultural competency.” Cultural competency is defined as possessing a set of values and principles as well as behaviors and attitudes that enable individuals to work effectively across cultures. It goes beyond “cultural sensitivity” and demonstrates a capacity to value diversity, conduct self-assessment, manage the dynamics of difference, and adapt to the cultural contexts of the communities we serve.

As human rights grantmakers, we have to constantly build our own cultural (and 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.

As such, 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 through the support of grassroots movements, self-help groups, community-based organizations and collectives in the Global South. These initiatives have enabled communities to participate in their own development process and promotion of human rights. 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 priorities.

Most large-scale development and human rights efforts are still, however, initiated and led by people external to the community (including grantmakers), 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 -- nuances that many “outsiders” may

not fully understand.

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 do democratic partnerships look like? What progress have we made towards the goal of democratizing development and human rights? 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, 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 at 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 at IHRFG's pre-conference institute on power, culture, and human rights grantmaking on January 23 in San Francisco:**

- 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?

The pre-conference institute will also explore cultural competency successes and challenges in the practice of human rights grantmaking and draw grantmaking examples from South Asia, Southern Africa, and Eastern Africa, where issues of **politics, gender, caste, and class all play an important role in resource allocation for local communities.**

**[Register today](#) for IHRFG's pre-conference institute and conference!**