

## IN FOCUS

### *An Interview with Sigrid Rausing*

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The Sigrid Rausing Trust was founded in 1995 to promote international human rights.

**Q: Why are you involved in grantmaking to support social justice and human rights?**

Because I believe in the idea of civil society playing an important part in holding governments to account. In open societies, NGOs have in some respects taken over the role of the free press - Human Rights Watch and other NGOs essentially do the kind of in-depth investigative reporting that most newspapers are now doing less of. We have seen recently how quickly democracies can abandon clear principles, like the ban on torture in the Geneva Convention. The resurgence of torture by Americans...in the context of national security and the war on terror, was exposed by human rights institutions before the press picked up the story.

**Q. Do you think it's important for donors in emerging markets to support these areas themselves rather than leaving it to western private foundations, democracy programmes, etc?**

It's a mistake to club all emerging markets together in this respect. It's impossible to support human rights and democracy in Burma or North Korea; difficult and dangerous in China, and to some extent in Russia; and easier in India or Brazil. The notion that human rights is a western concern is an argument often used in China and in authoritarian Muslim states. But this is in itself an expression of a profoundly western concept, cultural relativism. We must remember, too, that culture is not static. The culture of China, after all, changed dramatically after the revolution. Human rights...is a progressive ideal which all countries active in the UN ought to strive for.

**Q: What do you feel about the idea of 'private social responsibility'?**

Well, I believe in fair trade certification and consumer responsibility, which is an area we have been active in, and I have seen how the language of corporate responsibility can translate into positive changes on the ground.

I am, however, very aware that different cultures have genuinely different moral codes and beliefs about social responsibility...I will never forget a document written by a German girl in the 1930s. This girl had a Jewish friend, but her Aryan friends and teachers explained the crimes of the Jewish people to her. The story ended when she picked up a stone, and threw it at her friend...The Universal Declaration of Human Rights was of course in large degree a result of the Holocaust. If it had existed before the war, and the German girl had been brought up to respect it, she would have understood that her conduct contradicted the very first article...

**For more information: [www.sigrid-rausing-trust.org](http://www.sigrid-rausing-trust.org).**