

In Focus:

**Recognizing the Power of the Local in
Preventing Human Rights Abuse**

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Human rights violations are intensely local. People suffer abuse or denial of their rights in a particular place and time. Occasionally the impetus comes from outside. Central or local governments, or the army, have a particular person in their sights. Far more often, the cause is a negative one: a lack of protection against impunity, absence of fair and effective justice mechanisms, and no free flow of information about abuses of power.



It follows then that any human rights funding strategy must consider what can be done to address these widespread, but local human rights abuses. International intervention can be hugely effective, whether through quiet diplomacy in the crafting of constitutions, legislation or peace agreements, or through campaigns directed at the government concerned. Yet these provisions, hard won, need to be enforced. No international organization has the reach, or the local knowledge, to do this, the UN included. Local civil society organizations, however, have the capacity to achieve what international organizations cannot.

The Role of Local Actors in Intervention and Prevention of Human Rights Abuses

There are a number of reasons to focus on local organizations. For one, in many developing countries, there is no effective justice system. Laws are passed, provisions enshrined in the constitution, but there is no transmission mechanism to translate them down to the rural communities where the majority of the population lives. For them, the system of justice is a “bottom up” system, which links traditional justice mechanisms to the lowest reaches of the formal justice system. Local groups can effectively communicate local realities to the media, international organizations and donors while using the media and other communication tools to publicize within their own communities that justice has been achieved.

To give one example, in Nepal pressure from an armed group led all 46 district development committee officials in Khavre Province to resign their positions. Peace Direct’s partner, YAPE, alerted the UN agencies and the media, and the resulting pressure persuaded the armed group to discuss the situation with YAPE and ultimately withdraw their threats. YAPE then organized media coverage of the return of the officials, so that everyone would see that intimidation can be resisted.

Local organizations are also extremely important in countries where the international community has little interest, or interest but no leverage. Zimbabwe is a case in point. Despite regular denunciations by the international community, sanctions and other punitive mechanisms, human rights abuses continue unchecked. Examples of where the international community has limited leverage are China and Russia. As these two countries become increasingly influential allies and donors, the voice of the West has decreasing influence. Other approaches are needed alongside international advocacy and intervention if there is to be any progress in protecting citizens, particularly at the time of elections, when violence peaks.

Human rights funding and advocacy can viewed in terms of the following matrix:

Advocacy	Prevention
International X	X
Local	

By far the largest share of attention is on international advocacy, though there is much international prevention work as well (for example, election monitoring.) Local advocacy receives some attention, through programs to protect local human rights defenders. But local prevention of human rights abuses hardly seems to feature as a highly prioritized category in human rights funding. Local actors can play an increasingly important role in preventing abuses in addition to protecting defenders.

The Role of Local Actors in Peacebuilding and Human Rights

Local people are the key to preventing, resolving and healing conflicts. They are the best way to break recurrent cycles of violence and make peace last. And increasingly they want to move away from depending on outside help, towards building their own futures. At Peace Direct, we see our local partners working at the intersection between peacebuilding and human rights protection. As the examples below show, we see no distinction between them. And indeed *International Alert*, one of the world's leading peacebuilding organizations, was founded by Martin Ennals, the former Secretary General of *Amnesty International*, as a way of "operationalizing" Amnesty's work by preventing human rights abuses developing into violent conflict.

For example, when Ashima Kaur, in Kashmir, brokers an agreement between stone throwing youth and the police who have been firing live rounds at their regular Friday demonstrations, is she doing peacebuilding or protecting human rights? Can she do the second, without the first?

Challenging impunity in Nepal

The example from the Khavre Province in Nepal where local organizations were able to alert the media regarding the intimidation tactics of the SJMM political party also illustrates the ability of a local organization to challenge impunity. YAPE, a local civil society organization, was able to stage a public event where all 46 retracted their resignations, thus demonstrating forcefully that political intimidation can now be challenged.

Asserting land rights in DRC

Mama Kabibi is 78 years old. She has watched her children die one by one. Alone, she could not defend her land and was powerless when a former combatant forced her from her home and her one source of food: her cassava field. She approached the authorities, but heard nothing more. A local lawyer disclosed that of the 2,000 cases that had gone to the state court last year, only 8 had been resolved: lawyers can make a lot much money by keeping the case open. Hence the Fondation Chirezi is implementing a village-level system of justice based on traditional structures, which allows local people to air their grievances at no cost. They have trained impartial observers to manage the cases, and plan to set up three community courts. Mama Kabibi came to see the volunteers of peace in February. After just two hearings, the former combatant agreed to give the land back. The land was returned to Mama Kibibi in a ceremony of reconciliation in front of the whole community --

reinforcing notions of justice and fairness.

Changing the dynamics of power

In Zimbabwe, the army, security service and police are often the perpetrators of politically motivated violence. Yet a local organization of women from different political parties have started to offer professional and university accredited training in non-violent conflict transformation. They have succeeded in getting a foothold by building on personal connections developed during the guerilla war of the 1970's and by presenting the training, not overtly as pro-human rights, but as a way of extending the professional skill set of those involved. Traditional chiefs have seen the results and asked for training, for themselves and for the village leaders whom they control.

Envision Zimbabwe plan to bring together their three programs:

- Training traditional chiefs in non-violent conflict transformation,
- Deflecting youth from careers as political thugs
- Building solidarity between supporters of different political parties

Although initiatives like this start small, with encouragement they can grow to cover whole districts, and become role models for other parts of the country. Over a number of years, YAPE's work has grown to cover the whole of Khavre District in Nepal. The next step is to build capacity at a village level so that abuses of power can be dealt with locally, but with the expertise and reputation of YAPE staff as back up. In a single district of 330,000 people, to test whether this holistic approach reduces human rights abuses around the next election.

To conclude, we believe that local actors and organizations should play a bigger role in the prevention of human rights abuses as well as in peacebuilding. We hope to see it further prioritized in future funding strategies.

Resource for Funders:

- Contact Carolyn Hayman (carolyn@peacedirect.org) at Peace Direct or visit their website: www.peacedirect.org
- Visit the website of Insight on Conflict, a project of Peace Direct, which provides information on local peacebuilding organizations in areas of conflict: <http://www.insightonconflict.org/about/>.
- Read the Concept Papers on supporting local communities to direct their own programs and find their own solutions: www.peacedirect.org/about/influencing-and-policy/concept-papers/.