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What's it Going to Take? Getting Your Human Rights Priorities to the Top of the Obama Administration's Agenda... and Keeping Them There!

Friday, January 25, 2013
2:30-4:00pm

Facilitator:

- Ellen Dorsey, Executive Director, Wallace Global Fund

Panelists:

- Morton H. Halperin, Senior Advisor, Washington Office, Open Society Foundations
 - Larry R. Cox, Senior Consultant, Sunrise Initiative for Human Rights in the United States
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Ellen Dorsey opened the panel and framed the conversation. While the human rights community has had some successes, she asked, how do we collectively think about the opportunities presented with a second Obama administration? Where do we have opportunities to make real progress? What issues must we maintain a focus on as moral imperatives, whether or not they could be easy victories? How can we maximize our leverage? Do we have a human rights constituency large enough to move human rights on the agenda? How do we as funders avoid diffusing our funds and weakening our impact? How do we navigate special interests, corporate money, and anti-human rights hate-filled politics?

Larry Cox noted that The Arab Spring changed the thinking about the Obama administration's involvement in global movements. Occupy Wall Street also opened the debate on poverty and inequality. That movement reminds us that we can't think about human rights abroad without thinking about human rights at home. Most notably, the immigrant rights movement and the Latino support for the President has presented an opportunity to address immigrant human rights in the United States.

Ellen responding by saying that here are a huge diversity of human rights needs and movements in the United States. We can't tackle them simultaneously, and fund all of them equally. Ellen stated that in our live poll of conference participants' human rights priorities for the Obama Administration, climate change, migrants, and counter-terrorism efforts came in first, second, and third, respectively. Corporate accountability and maintaining the women's rights agenda are tied for fourth.

Larry said that the current administration is not comfortable using the human rights language to describe any of the issues on their agenda. Guantanamo and drones may be an exception, but other than that, the U.S. government doesn't feel accountable for their record on human rights. He asserted that funders need to demand that human rights mechanisms be taken seriously. He shared that 42 million people live in absolute poverty in the United States, and for 6 million people, their only income is food stamps. Yet, there is no discussion of this issue or a plan, as required by international standards,

because we don't have a human rights movement that has made the administration see the consequences of not addressing these issues.

Morton Halperin stated that there is no political pressure or will behind anything other than immigration reform. We need to play the inside game in Washington, he said, but we also need to build a stronger movement outside, and possibly start with immigration.

Ellen directed the conversation to the human rights framework. The revolutionary power of the human rights framework is that it integrates all of these issues and establishes lines of accountability for state and non-state actors. She posed these questions: What will it take to build a wider base of support? Could immigration be a platform? Is the notion of American exceptionalism so deep? Is our notion of civil and political rights so ingrained within us that it's hard to think about economic, social, and cultural rights in a human rights frame?

Morton responded that the relative decline of the economic well-being of the middle class has forced the Democrats to focus on the middle class. He noted that there was no mention of "poor people" in the election campaign. He thinks the tax relief bill that Congress voted on was inappropriate, and that the United States needs more tax dollars to handle the needs of the poor. He sees no sign that we are going to be able to move away from that.

Larry agreed that people have been forced to look at suffering in a way they haven't before. He said that the joyful photos of marriage equality in action had a huge impact on public opinion and the administration's priorities. He asserted that making visible the suffering caused because of climate change is crucial.

Ellen turned a question to the audience: How do we think about building that movement through our work?

One participant said that we have to overcome the idea that economic well-being is determined only by hard work. She noted that when we talk about rights, others will talk about individual responsibility, and she thinks this is an obstacle in the United States especially.

Another participant brought up that she had inadvertently selected priorities in the poll that she does not in fact fund.

Ellen answered that she listed corporate accountability first and she funds it the most, because she thinks economic interests are taking over democratic processes. She asserted that we need to put our money towards tearing down those barriers that makes change in the United States so difficult.

An audience member commented that ratifying international treaties and human rights documents was low on the poll of priorities. She asked that if, as human rights donors, we don't believe in human rights frameworks, who would. She urged everyone to consider this, as there's a possibility that the United States may ratify human rights mechanisms soon.

Larry responded by saying that funders have to demand that the administration take human rights law seriously, and that it reports to the American people what it is doing on the treaties it's already ratified.

Ellen noted that one of the most important things over the last four years has been the human rights movement in the United States, which has involved linking treaties to grassroots movements.

Morton agreed with the audience member that ratifying the disability rights treaty, in particular, is a real possibility. He observed that American exceptionalism dictates that Americans don't need human rights at home, only abroad. He thinks the United States is on its way to abolishing the death penalty, too, which he says is a major issue to focus on going forward. Morton said that it seems we're seeing the end of the idea that democracy and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) are ideas imposed by Westerners. One area we've ignored, he said, is to get human rights activists in emerging democratic countries to care about foreign policy in other countries.

An audience member stated that the United States can't "lead" on human rights when you look at what's going on in the country. Despite the fact that your organizations' grantmaking is going abroad, Americans need to be focused on what's happening in their country.

Ellen agreed, and said that we also need to be attentive to where foundations' assets are placed. She noted that while 5% of a foundation's assets may be spent on human rights grantmaking, if 95% of its assets are invested in areas that facilitate human rights abuses, then that's a problem.

An audience member asked, what's it really going to take to get these issues onto Obama's list of priorities?

Morton answered that the movements wherein people have spoken for themselves have had the most impact, like the DREAM Act movement. He thinks the Muslim-American community has been vastly underfunded, and that they need to be at the forefront of combating discrimination post September 11th. We need to be strategic about whose voices we're lifting, he noted.

Larry responded that he thinks the grantmaker community can be more aggressive about promoting human rights. In his experience, he said, it's key to build genuinely popular movements and talk in the language that people use in their lives. He also asks funders to take more risks. We know grantees are often focused on metrics in order to get funding, he said, but we need to encourage them to take risks, as well as taking funding risks ourselves.

Ellen ended the panel by saying that funders must use their collective voice more often. She thinks that funders must stop differentiating between human rights and the environmental movement, for example, and see the linkages between them. She hopes we can leave this conversation wanting to work more collaboratively and more energetically on human rights issues.