

IN FOCUS:

***Human Rights and International Justice -
Challenges and Opportunities at an Inflection Point***

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Background

About eighteen months ago, we embarked on an effort to obtain a better understanding of trends in human rights funding, needs identified by those on the front lines, and the degree of alignment between donors and grantees. At the request of Gara LaMarche, former President of The Atlantic Philanthropies, we spoke from June 2010 through January 2011 with almost 140 individuals involved in human rights and international justice around the world. Based on these conversations with donors, NGO leaders and others knowledgeable about the field, we have drafted an overview of the state of the human rights and international justice field along with concrete recommendations we hope will stimulate more giving from existing donors and attract new donors.

We think that when the history of the human rights field is written fifty years from now, the next five years will be seen as an inflection point. A new generation of leaders is taking over from those who were present at the creation of the modern movement; the field has a more robust and diverse set of local actors; and technology and sophisticated tools are available to advance the cause. The foundation is strong, with good basic treaties and covenants, an emerging system of international justice, and strong NGOs ready to do more.

Our bottom line conclusion, however, is that the needs and opportunities vastly outpace the trends in giving. Our interviews did not suggest an upward trajectory of the overall number of donors or the amounts to be given. There is a danger that the momentum for the wider realization of rights will stall unless new sources of funding are identified and existing donors do more.

Some Key Findings

Our interviews revealed several common themes and concrete suggestions for investment and action. While we cannot mention all the ideas here, we want to highlight some key points. For the full range and further details, please see the discussion paper itself.

Funders should aim to build and support strong, sustainable NGOs (with room for risk-taking on smaller start-ups) moving away from the prevailing project-based approach. But, not all small, local NGOs can be sustained over time; we must make tough choices. We believe the field will have greater force if NGOs are less frequently pitted against each other for funding and instead encouraged to build networks to allow for cooperative action. Coordination between fields is also key: the gap between human rights groups and humanitarian organizations and between human rights groups and development groups should be bridged. These intra and inter-field networks will help build what many called for: a broad-based



movement, amplified by the intelligent use of technology, which makes rights relevant to people's daily lives. Energy should be spent on prevention and enforcement of existing human rights instruments, rather than the creation of more treaties and covenants. More attention is due to rising powers like Brazil, South Africa and India. Tactically, the field needs to move beyond "name and shame" to a more complex set of approaches that includes working with reform-minded elements of governments prepared to make improvements. Finally, there is concern about the expanded use of the term "human rights:" its use raises expectations, but also can dilute the focus on the most serious abuses and on those people and places where concerted pressure could make a difference.

Interviews with donors revealed that funding for human rights and justice will be less centralized in the period ahead, with public charities, small foundations, online giving, and individual donors playing an increasingly important role. As giving by major foundations that were early donors in human rights are in aggregate flat or slightly down, as European governments cut back, often sharply, and as indigenous giving to human rights in the Global South fails to materialize, leadership in the field will begin to shift to newer, growing foundations such as Oak and Humanity United. However, for the immediate future, Open Society Foundations, also growing, will remain the most important source of human rights and international justice funding.

Recommendations for Funders

Just as NGOs would be strengthened by working more in concert, so too would funders have a greater impact if they coordinated efforts, each playing their unique role in the ecosystem of giving. We recommend that donors meet to coordinate a strategy for underserved places, such as Asia, for how to best apply new technology tools, and for how to tackle particular issues, like abuses by non-state actors. These convenings would be opportunities to recruit new entrants or encourage smaller donors capable of increasing their support. We suggest that another way to attract new donors would be to frame "gift opportunities" in language that is targeted to specific, non-political purposes and is not explicitly human rights-based. A broader base of donors can be recruited for human rights work if we understand that indirect investments, including transparency measures, also lay the basis for improvement in human rights. Major foundations should also increase staff assistance to new and smaller foundations. We also propose creating and utilizing pooled funds, such as the Fund for Global Human Rights, or regional intermediaries such as the Arab Human Rights Fund and TrustAfrica.

We think it would be helpful if a group of leading donors in the human rights and justice fields met to discuss the future. Among the agenda items we recommend for this meeting are:

- A strategy for strengthening NGOs long-term (rather than forcing NGOs to chase the hot funding of the moment);
- A strategy for supporting research, including think tanks and university training programs;
- A discussion of how to think about geographic investments;
- A review of special opportunities and issues that need more attention or are ripe for movement (e.g. additional emphasis on prevention or how to apply technology more fully);
- A strategy for strengthening domestic and international justice systems; and
- A strategy for recruiting new donors to the field, as we believe that leading donors are the best vehicle for attracting new donors to human rights work.

We are at a moment of hope and opportunity. We have a comprehensive architecture of covenants, treaties, and institutions dedicated to advancing human rights; an increasingly robust network of effective NGOs; a determined group of leaders; and a sense that the tide of history is moving in the direction of respect for human rights. But nothing is inevitable. How much and how wisely we invest in the human rights field is critical. It will shape our future.

Resources for Funders

- 1) To read the full report, contact [Jonathan Fanton](#) and [Zachary Katznelson](#)
- 2) Contact Jonathan Fanton with questions or comments at jonathanfanton@gmail.com.
- 3) The International Human Rights Funders Group and the Foundation Center are partnering on an initiative to map and analyze contemporary global human rights grantmaking. This research will result in the creation of an online interactive map of human rights funding and printed briefings that utilize both quantitative statistics and qualitative information to illuminate the current scope and landscape of human rights grantmaking. Funders will be able to use these tools to better understand funding for different human rights issues, priorities of peer funders, and gaps in human rights funding – by issue area, population, and geographic region. This research will be released in July 2012. Contact Christen Dobson with questions or for more information at cdobson@ihrf.org.