

Building a Broad-Based Advocacy Campaign: U.S. Ratification of the Disability Rights Treaty

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Human Rights Funding News, IHRFG e-Newsletter, April 8, 2013

Human rights advocacy campaigns rarely get second chances. In late 2012, the United States Senate fell short of ratifying the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) by just 5 votes. Yet the U.S. human rights community will be afforded the unusual opportunity to try again this year. Defeat provides a unique opportunity to assess what went well in the first campaign, understand weaknesses and support a stronger, more collaborative, more strategic and more hopeful campaign in 2013.

The United States has not ratified a core international human rights treaty since 1994.¹ In addition to the CRPD, activists are working toward U.S. ratification of the Convention for the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC). Failure to ratify the CRPD, however, could mean that forward movement on other international treaties will be stymied for the indefinite future. Given the current polarized political climate in the United States, any effort to advance human rights will require a broad-based advocacy campaign that links diverse communities and consolidates a strong progressive community to advance its goals. Human rights funders must break down “silos” separating issue areas and fund programs to win these ratification fights.



The CRPD ratification campaign presents an enormous challenge but also a timely opportunity for significant impact on rights in the United States and throughout the world. Ratification could catalyze dramatic inclusion of people with disabilities in U.S. foreign aid and human rights policy and allow the United States to contribute to advancing international standards on the rights of people with disabilities. Domestically, it would provide a global human rights standard to support U.S. disability advocacy and build upon the civil rights model enshrined in the American with Disabilities Act (ADA). Ratification will ultimately demonstrate whether the United States holds itself accountable to internationally-recognized human rights standards, not just for people with disabilities, but for any identity group.

What went well in the 2012 campaign for ratification?

Advocates convened a diverse coalition of more than 375 disability, faith, business and veteran organizations. The campaign bridged these diverse constituencies by highlighting the benefits that ratification would bring to different constituents as well as how it would bolster American values on equality and non-discrimination globally. Campaign advocates judiciously managed high-level advocacy, building a bipartisan coalition of Senators who worked to secure the treaty resolution's passage, including senior-ranking Senators Reid, Kerry, Lugar and McCain. They carefully crafted messages about why ratification was important: 1) The United States could play a more active leadership role in promoting disability rights and equality around the world; 2) It would increase accessibility for Americans with disabilities to work, study, and travel abroad; and 3) It would level the playing field for U.S. businesses by holding other countries accountable to CRPD standards, which many U.S. companies already meet.

¹ See University of Minnesota's resource on Ratification of International Human Rights Treaties – USA at <http://www1.umn.edu/humanrts/research/ratification-USA.html>.

Lessons learned

Beyond the present dysfunctional political climate, several additional factors limited the 2012 campaign's success: 1) Last minute dissemination of false claims about how the UN would regulate home schooling mobilized thousands of constituents in the most conservative states. Activists had not anticipated home schooling as an issue and were not prepared to counter this opposition with support at the state level; 2) Access to just \$250,000 in funding impeded the campaign's ability to effectively utilize media and mobilize constituencies; 3) Focus on national level policy advocacy, with limited state work to educate the public; and 4) Disability-controlled leadership of the campaign, while aligned with "Nothing About Us Without Us," limited ownership by more mainstream human rights organizations.

Moving forward

Leaders of the ratification campaign have reorganized, and the current structure enables what activists believe is the winning strategy for 2013: a broad coalition in terms of geography and diversity. The campaign is seeking to further diversify with partners drawn from local, state and national levels. While the United States International Council on Disability (USICD) will continue its coordination role, the campaign leadership now includes the Leadership Conference on Human and Civil Rights (LCCHR) in addition to the Disability Rights Education and Defense Fund (DREDF). LCCHR is one of the country's largest human rights coalitions bringing together indigenous peoples, African-Americans and women – among many others. It brings many capacities, is inclusive of disability groups, yet also has influence on communities that have not yet been reached by the campaign.

The campaign has also recognized that, in addition to powerful national allies like Vietnam Veterans of America, state-level civil society organizations must be educated about the CRPD and the rights of people with disabilities. The coalition will engage and educate its members in key states to ensure that a larger constituency can be mobilized to advocate for the CRPD and respond to any opposition to the treaty.

What can funders do to advance CRPD ratification?

- Invite a leader of the ratification campaign to educate your grantees, board, or other funder colleagues on the CRPD and U.S. ratification. Contact Morton Halperin at morton.halperin@opensocietyfoundations.org;
- Provide funding to existing and new grantees so that they can [join the ratification coalition](#) and understand how their perspectives and capacities can strengthen the ratification education campaign and advance their own advocacy efforts (they may already be participating, but without any funding support); and
- Contact the IHRFG Disability Rights Working group to learn more about donor collaboration to support CRPD ratification.

What can funders do to make their funding more inclusive of people with disabilities?

- Learn more about human rights and people with disabilities. The IHRFG Disability Rights Working group can customize a "Disability 101" session for your organization;
- Request information from grantees about the inclusion of people with disabilities (and other marginalized groups) in programs, staff and boards;
- Start a conversation with your grantees about how they include marginalized populations, like indigenous peoples or people with disabilities. They may be already doing it!!

To learn more about the 2013 CRPD campaign, contact Morton Halperin, Open Society Foundations, at morton.halperin@opensocietyfoundations.org.

For more information, or to join IHRFG's Disability Rights Funders Working Group, contact Mona Chun, IHRFG Deputy Director, at mchun@ihrf.org.

Additional resources:

Disability-inclusive grantmaking

A Screening Tool for Disability-Inclusive Grantmaking. Disability Funders Network. Found at: <http://www.disabilityfunders.org/screen>

Beyond Charity: A Donor's Guide to Inclusion. Disability funding in the era of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. Disability Rights Fund, 2012. Found at <http://www.disabilityrightsfund.org/donor/donorguide.html>

Human Rights and Disability: Embracing a paradigm shift, A Funder Opportunity/NGO Opportunity. Disability Funders Network. Found at http://www.disabilityfunders.org/webfm_send/3 and http://www.disabilityfunders.org/webfm_send/4

CRPD and the United States

A Rights Perspective in the United States: Disability Civil to Human Rights. Disability Rights Education & Defense Fund (DREDF). Found at <http://www.miusa.org/exchange/resources/rightsresources/dredf/view>

CRPD Teaching Kit. Handicap International. Found at <http://www.handicap-international.fr/kit-pedagogique/indexen.html>

CRPD Myths and Realities of the CRPD. United States Council on International Disability, 2012. Found at <http://67.199.83.28/doc/CRPD%20MythsFacts%202013.pdf>

Finding the Gaps: A Comparative Analysis of Disability Laws in the U.S. to the U.N. Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. National Council on Disability. Found at <http://www.ncd.gov/publications/2008/May122008#aa25>

What is the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities? United States Council on International Disability, 2012. Found at <http://www.usicd.org/doc/CRPD%20One%20Pager%202013.pdf>

United States Ratification of Human Rights Treaties, Human Rights Watch, 24 June, 2009. Found at <http://www.hrw.org/news/2009/07/24/united-states-ratification-international-human-rights-treaties>