



Community Philanthropy: A Way Forward for Human Rights?



Introduction

The paper is a synthesis of preliminary research that looks at the current state of play around human rights among three clusters of organizations: local human rights funds, community philanthropy organizations that explicitly fund human rights along with other work, and community philanthropy organizations that fund human rights under a different rubric.¹ It offers a look at what exists and how a framework for advancing this work might be developed to engage different community philanthropy organizations in different ways according to their relative strengths and capacities in each context. It concludes by arguing that external funders and local actors together can design effective interventions by building on insights from community philanthropy experiences – including constituency building as well as local resource mobilization – around the world.

¹ The research includes interviews with 23 community philanthropy leaders, international human rights funders and other knowledgeable observers (see Appendix 1 for list of interviewees), and a review of GFCF reports, community philanthropy organization materials, and published articles (see Appendix 2 for bibliography).

Locally-designed and led philanthropic initiatives that value local assets and engage, strengthen and mobilize communities to act on their needs can now be found throughout the world. The experience of this emerging field of community philanthropy offers some insights regarding how empowered communities can achieve effective, locally-owned and sustainable development outcomes. Today, a few international funders that once only funded northern groups to carry out work abroad, then gradually added some of the larger southern groups based in capital cities to their portfolios, are now entrusting funding decisions to southern funding intermediaries to support work in the south, in a process described by one international funder as 'democratizing' funding. Although this practice is still the exception rather than the norm, these funders recognize the value of investing in local philanthropic initiatives embedded in communities.

Among the diverse and growing family of community philanthropy organizations, which include local grassroots organizations that pool and distribute local resources, as well as those that blend external and local resources for grantmaking, is a particular set of funds and foundations focused on human rights. Designed to shift grantmaking closer to the ground, the Arab Human Rights Fund, Brazil Human Rights Fund, and the now defunct Russia Human Rights Fund, among others, were also conceived to foster local giving for rights work. However, more than a decade later, external funding remains their primary source of support, rendering them and their grantees vulnerable to government obstruction of access to funds from abroad.

From their inception, human rights funds and mainstream human rights organizations, with their focus on standard setting and legal frameworks, have depended on northern donors. Indeed, they have yet to build local public support, let alone a local donor base that can sustain their critical work. Low public support for human rights is of deep concern to advocates and funders alike, particularly under the mounting threats. This discussion paper explores the need and opportunity for increased intersections between human rights and community philanthropy, not just as a funding strategy but as a way to grow public support for vital human rights work.

The paper takes as its starting point the assumption that building local constituencies for rights issues – no matter how hard – is vital to protecting organizations working to achieve them. Not only does the erosion of rights have wider implications for all citizens, but without local buy-in or support for human rights, organizations are left vulnerable to targeting by governments who can question their local legitimacy. In this regard, local, multi-stakeholder, participatory philanthropy can be seen as a critical strategy for establishing and demonstrating a local support base.

A further assumption of this paper is that with its focus on universal frameworks and international mechanisms, human rights work often still remains at best remote from, and at worst unknown to, larger publics and communities. In fact, the vast majority of humanity is still unaware of the relevance of human rights to their lives. Community philanthropy, with its emphasis on growing local ownership for development processes through strengthening and mobilizing local groups, has a vital role to play in bridging the gap between universal human rights and day-to-day realities at the local level, a role that is particularly urgent in challenging environments of increasing government assaults on civil societies' space and their access to external funding.

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a look at what exists and how a framework for advancing this work might be developed to engage different CPOs in different ways according to their relative strengths and capacities in each context. It concludes by arguing that external funders and local actors together can design effective interventions by building on insights from community philanthropy experiences – including constituency building as well as local resource mobilization – around the world.

Local Funding for Human Rights

As noted, CPOs can be found that support local human rights work either explicitly or implicitly, and/or directly or indirectly. One of the strategic questions that faces even CPOs that value human rights is whether or not to use that language. Human rights funds obviously use the language, as do their grantees. However, community foundations and CPOs more generally vary greatly, even when the concept of human rights ‘is in the DNA of the foundation,’ and directors themselves are advocates. Instead there is a preference for language that is ‘broader,’ ‘softer,’ ‘less political,’ or ‘more inclusive’ than human rights, such as social justice, equitable development or empowering the disadvantaged.

Feeling some pressure from human rights organizations, CPOs have described advocates as ‘impatient,’ often behaving as though ‘anything else is less helpful, or less strategic, or less serious’ than bona fide human rights work. Yet there are a number of important advantages to the CPOs’ approach that may serve human rights organizations well beyond possible grants.

CPOs’ adoption of alternative language may well obscure their support for human rights but also protect their funding for that work. Moreover, CPOs make their grants for human rights along with those for a much broader range of issue areas, such as development, environment, education, among others, potentially providing a further measure of protection. In most cases their funding supports human rights initiatives by organizations that are not themselves human rights organizations, and often work that mainstream international human rights organizations and funders might not recognize as human rights, in the process helping to expand understanding of human rights in practice.

These features of CPO funding for human rights suggest important implications for efforts to build human rights constituencies. The ‘more flexible’ language is likely to reach and engage a greater number of people. By integrating grants for human rights initiatives into their general grants portfolios, CPOs signal their value and provide human rights advocates with a platform to reach and engage with the wider community. There they have an opportunity to demonstrate the relevance of human rights to issues that are important to those communities – a step that is integral to building the long-elusive human rights constituencies.

Communities and Human Rights

Communities that are hostile or indifferent to human rights either do not know what they are or already enjoy their rights. Some may even benefit from denying others the rights they themselves enjoy. However, far and away the main reason that communities have not embraced human rights is a lack of information or prevailing misconceptions.

CPO leaders interviewed for this paper cited some common local misconceptions regarding human rights that include its association with a former political system (e.g. socialism) or with one of two previously warring communities now focused on reconciliation (e.g. Northern Ireland), or simply its 'bad brand' due to association with protecting criminals and terrorists (e.g. Brazil, UK) or with a foreign government that simultaneously espouses and violates human rights (e.g. the US in the Arab region). Reductionism in these and other forms demonstrates that human rights organizations have more work to do in communities.

The explanation for still limited public understanding and embrace of human rights around the world, including in the global north, begins with language. Human rights advocates have honed the language of standards, treaties and law, enabling them to make enormous strides at the level of global capitals and the UN. In contrast, advocates have struggled with the inaccessibility of conventional human rights language at the level of communities.

The solution is not more work on human rights language. Describing the seemingly endless attempts to better define abstract concepts of human rights, social justice, even empowerment as unhelpful, an astute community philanthropy practitioner urged instead that actors articulate 'exactly what we mean' in concrete terms. Working with communities, human rights advocates need to describe exactly what universal human rights would look like, what precisely would change, in each local context. Doing so will make for more effective communication essential to build a base of support.

Additional factors hamper efforts to expand public awareness and appreciation of human rights. For one thing, human rights work is widely regarded as that which is practiced in courts in nations' capitals, or else at the level of the UN, far from where people live, work, raise families, age and die. Communities that never have an opportunity to see human rights organizations at work are unlikely to know and value what advocates do on their behalf, let alone pool and contribute resources to it. In fact, there is evidence that where human rights organizations have worked directly with communities – on discrimination, domestic violence, landlessness, environmental degradation, and more – they have been embraced and supported. For another, the lamentable bifurcation of human rights into civil and political rights (CPR) on the one hand and economic, social and cultural rights (ESCR) on the other hand, has distorted the human rights agenda, undermined its power, resonance and relevance for communities, and hampered advocates' efforts to reach and engage them effectively. Without more direct knowledge of, and experience with, human rights organizations, communities are unlikely to support or contribute to them, let alone come to their defense when they are maligned or even attacked. In the effort to build this vital base of support there is much to learn from CPOs.

Community Philanthropy as Strategic Resource

There is no blueprint for community philanthropy. CPOs come in many different forms and pursue a variety of strategies that reflect the inherent diversity of communities, their needs, capacities and contexts around the world. Underlying their diversity, however, are three shared elements: developing local assets, strengthening local capacities and building local trust.² Together these form the basis of partnerships between effective CPOs and the communities they serve in the true sense of the word – two-way giving and receiving.

HRFs and human rights organizations will find in CPOs attention to local assets, capacities and trust an invaluable framework for their efforts to better cultivate public support for and giving to human rights. An underlying premise of this paper is that rights will only be secured and protected when publics expect those who govern to fulfill their human rights responsibilities. Human rights organizations have expended tremendous effort and resources to establish universal standards and secure states' commitments to meeting these. Considerably fewer resources have been invested in fostering local awareness of states' human rights obligations, let alone building capacities of communities to hold them to those standards.

Arguably, working directly with communities is the only way to effectively tackle widespread misconceptions regarding human rights. Doing so will likely also strengthen and deepen human rights advocates' understanding of human rights. Indeed, advocates who work with communities can attest to the power and imperative of the indivisibility of the full spectrum of rights, if only because people tend to approach their lives and the world around them holistically. Moreover, as social movements across the world and history have repeatedly demonstrated, informed, organized and mobilized communities are the most critical resource behind all significant and successful social and political transformations.

Nevertheless, substantial funding, primarily available from northern sources, remains necessary to carry out much of the work that is needed. This is of course why governments devote so much effort to impeding access to funds from abroad. CPOs and HRFs that view themselves primarily as grantmakers are particularly vulnerable, having concentrated their fundraising efforts there. Indeed, as grantmakers first and foremost, they are compelled to focus on securing large grants and quickly for grantees that rely on that support. Failing to do so, they would be hard pressed to justify their continued operation.

With more than a decade of experience, organizations are practiced in fundraising from primarily northern institutional donors, and fluent with their funding guidelines, processes and procedures. Lacking both comparable experience with and guidelines for raising funds from members of the community or individual donors at home, organizations find local fundraising considerably more challenging to do. That lack of experience and know-how and the need to raise substantial amounts for their grantees together reinforce the prevailing reliance on external funding, making their outward focus and efforts inevitable, with implications for accountability and sustainability in the long-run.

Naturally, donors only fund work they value and organizations they trust. This is true of both foreign and local, and both institutional and individual donors. However, what is required to build credibility and gain the trust of foreign and institutional donors

² GFCF, 'A Snapshot of the Global Field: The Community Foundation Atlas.'

is markedly different than that needed to establish the same in local communities. Each entails an entirely different set of organizational structures, skills, staffing, and, yes, language.

Building local trust and credibility is essential if local human rights work is to be protected and sustained, and not only for financial support. More importantly, local trust and credibility are vital to effectively counter government efforts to fuel public suspicion of human rights advocates as foreign-funded organizations that promote foreign values to serve foreign interests. Maligning rights organizations in this way has been relatively easy where local communities have no direct experience with these organizations and lack knowledge of how they use funds, even when they do so on their behalf. Annual reports and published audits are poor substitutes for direct engagement with communities for earning trust. So consequential is that trust that human rights organizations that gain it may well find communities defending even their receipt and use of funds from foreign sources, because they know how those funds are used.

Indeed, as HRFs and local human rights organizations seek to build a local donor base, potential donors and supporters need to see what these organizations do, understand it, and be a part of it. In their local fundraising, HRFs have tended to target wealthy individuals who often benefit from the very systems that violate the rights of others. The experience of CPOs suggests that approaching fundraising as an integral part of their work to promote public awareness and embrace of human rights is much more effective in securing funds while also contributing to advancing human rights goals. When successful, combing local fundraising with public awareness and advocacy will more than compensate for the added effort entailed in raising many small donations as compared to raising a few large ones.

Finally, human rights advocates would benefit from recognizing the shift in power to local communities that CPOs represent – even CPOs that may never fund human rights. By laying the foundations for, and strengthening, civic engagement, CPOs are rendering an invaluable service to efforts to advance human rights. Indeed, ultimately an engaged and vigilant citizenry is the only guarantee that human rights once secured will be protected.

Human Rights as Strategic Resource

It is difficult for human rights advocates to see people letting their governments off the hook from their legally binding obligations, which is essentially what they are doing when they do not claim their rights. In human rights, advocates see the means for ending not only discrimination but also poverty and other grave abuses that plague humanity. Moreover, having secured agreement on the minimum standards to which all human beings are entitled to live in dignity, the failure of communities to claim these is tantamount to saying that they or some of their members are less deserving than other human beings. This is especially possible where communities do not know what human rights are, let alone how their realization would alter their daily lives.

But there is an immediate and urgent need for CPOs to turn to human rights advocates in contexts where ‘community values’ are problematic. As one interviewee noted, ‘local values always seem to serve the powerful; they never serve the vulnerable.’ Indeed, the solidarity at the heart of building community is never automatically – let alone equally –

extended to all members. In too many cases, historically entrenched power disparities, exclusion and marginalization of women, the poor, and minorities of all kinds accompany 'community.' Without mechanisms to prevent or overcome exclusion and inequality more generally, these will persist and enervate communities, often forcing marginalized members to split off and separate.

Human rights advocates recognize that in the drive for communities to act on their collective interests, the inevitable compromises will be made at the expense of the historically powerless members. To avoid 'lowest common denominator' compromises, CPOs can greatly benefit from cultivating an understanding and embrace of human rights, or at least the underlying principles, as part of their work with communities. This can be human rights advocates' contribution, as active and engaged members of larger communities. In the process, they can also build vital linkages between local and global and among the worlds' communities – linkages that are urgently needed to confront the global challenges facing the Human Community.

Moving Forward

This preliminary look at community philanthropy and local efforts to protect, sustain and eventually even advance human rights work in countries rapidly shutting down space and funding for that work suggests some ways forward. Whether in their current or potential roles, or through their direct or indirect contributions, CPOs present a range of strategic options and opportunities that warrant exploration by human rights organizations and funders, both local HRFs and external donors, in efforts to surmount the increasing impediments to human rights work around the world.

This preliminary review also points to questions that deserve further exploration:

- 1** External donors: Overcoming pervasive misconceptions, expanding awareness, and building support for human rights at the local level are arduous tasks that will take time and resources. They also require embedding more human rights work in communities.
How well does external funding for human rights support organizations to work at the level of communities? Does the funding support efforts to look inward and take root in local communities, strengthen local capacities and build local trust? What would be required to make external funding through local intermediaries a strategic, rather than merely a practical, choice? What might be gained in the process? How might external support strengthen the infrastructure of funding intermediaries to expand and deepen local giving and philanthropy?
- 2** Local human rights funds: Local grantmaking organizations are supporting human rights work that is unlikely to be funded otherwise. Through their investment in the requisite grantmaking structures, processes and procedures, they have secured the trust of northern funders. Their attention is now needed to establish local trust and buy-in, essential to cultivating local giving.
What can be learned from the experience of CPOs in building local trust, buy-in and giving? What are the requisite structures, processes and procedures for these? How might exchange, even collaboration, with CPOs benefit both human rights grantees and communities more generally?

- 3** Local and global human rights advocates: The international human rights movement is beset by imbalances in strength and capacity between northern and southern groups, CPR and ESCR work, and global and local work, among others. Northern human rights organizations are by far better funded and stronger than their southern counterparts, and southern organizations that work to influence centers of power in the north are better supported than those devoted to challenging power locally. Rights organizations that emerge from, and work in, local communities, be they southern or northern, fall far below the radar screen of leading mainstream human rights organizations and funders alike.

At a time of increasing recognition of the vital role of local human rights work, how can local and global advocates together support and strengthen communities and human rights efforts there? What can be learned about more effective communication and constituency building? How can linkages between local and global be strengthened to advance vital work on both fronts? What can local constituencies for human rights contribute to efforts to advance human rights globally?

- 4** CPOs: Responsible CPOs move with care, keeping sight of where their communities are and what is possible. Indeed, CPO success is a function of this inward focus and accountability to communities. CPO leaders who are aware of persistent inequality and discrimination in the communities they serve should be supported to address them.

Which community practices harm or obstruct the realization of human rights? How can CPOs and the communities they serve benefit from greater engagement with local human rights organizations to identify and remedy these? In what ways can human rights contribute to further empowering and strengthening communities? How might the universal values of human rights be introduced to and integrated effectively in communities? By connecting local with global communities, how might human rights contribute to more resilient and inter-connected communities?

Appendix 1: Interviews

- 1** Haki Abazi, Program Director, Western Balkans, Rockefeller Brothers Fund, 22 August 2016
- 2** Jo Andrews, Former Director, Ariadne and Co-Founder, Equileap, 16 August 2016
- 3** Ana Valeria Araujo, Brazil Human Rights Fund, 18 August 2016
- 4** Julie Broome, Director, Ariadne, and formerly with Sigrid Rausing Trust, 3 Aug 2016
- 5** Chris Cardona, Program Officer, Philanthropy, Ford Foundation; Louis Bickford, Global Human Rights Program Officer, Civic Engagement and Government (CEG), Ford Foundation; and Monica Alemán Cunningham, Senior Program Officer, Building Institutions and Networks (BUILD), Ford Foundation, 4 August 2016
- 6** Maria Chertok, Director, CAF Russia, 16 August 2016
- 7** Dana Doan, Founder and Strategic Advisor, LIN Center for Community Development (Vietnam), 9 August 2016
- 8** Jon Edwards, Charity Director, private trust, 25 July 2016
- 9** Anderson Giovanni Da Silva, former Director, current Board Member, Instituto Comunitário Grande Florianópolis (ICOM)(Brazil), 8 August 2016
- 10** Beata Hirt, Director, Healthy City Community Foundation, 10 August 2016
- 11** David Jacobstein, Democracy Specialist, Bureau for Democracy, DCHA/DRG, USAID, 1 August 2016
- 12** Hope Lyons, Director of Program Management, Rockefeller Brothers Fund, 11 August 2016
- 13** Greg Mayne, Programme Officer, Oak Philanthropy (UK) Limited, 27 July 2016
- 14** Andrew McCracken, Chief Executive, Community Foundation for Northern Ireland, 12 August 2016
- 15** Yousry Moustapha, Board Member, AHRF and Project Manager of the GTZ Project: Promotion of Women's Rights in Egypt, 8 August 2016
- 16** Chidi Anselm Odinkalu, Senior Legal Officer for Africa Program, Open Society Justice Initiative, 19 July 2016
- 17** Regan Ralph, President and CEO, Fund for Global Human Rights, 20 July 2016
- 18** Chandrika Sahai, Coordinator, Philanthropy for Social Justice and Peace Network, 28 July 2016
- 19** Theo Sowa, Chief Executive Officer, African Women's Development Fund (AWDF), 22 August 2016
- 20** Tulika Srivastava, Executive Director, South Asia Women's Fund, 15 August 2016

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The GFCF works with individual community foundations and other local grantmakers and their networks, particularly in the global south and the emerging economies of Central and Eastern Europe. Through small grants, technical support, and networking, GFCF helps local institutions to strengthen and grow so that they can fulfill their potential as vehicles for local development and as part of the infrastructure for sustainable development, poverty alleviation, and citizen participation.

About the Author

Mona Younis is a human rights advocate and strategic planning and evaluations consultant. A sociologist by training, she has extensive experience in research, philanthropy and the work of non-governmental organizations in the U.S. and abroad (www.monayounis.com). This paper was prepared with contributions from Jenny Hodgson, GFCF Executive Director.

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Global Fund for Community Foundations

4th Floor
158 Jan Smuts Avenue
Rosebank
Johannesburg 2196
South Africa

www.globalfundcf.org
info@globalfundcf.org

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