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Strengthening Human Rights Worldwide

A learning review summary



FORDFOUNDATION

Executive Summary

In 2012, the Ford Foundation launched the Strengthening Human Rights Worldwide (SHRW) initiative with the goal of strengthening and diversifying the global human rights movement to be able to respond to a changing geopolitical order. This emerging multipolar world saw the United States playing a diminishing role as the leading promoter of human rights and democracy and the rise of various new global players as well as new centers of moral legitimacy.

In 2016, Ford commissioned a review of the five-year, \$54 million initiative to generate lessons both for the foundation as well as for the field.

The review affirmed the assumptions of the SHRW initiative—that given the shifting power dynamics in the world, the human rights movement did need to adapt in order to effectively respond to these changes. The review also provided evidence to further support the growing understanding that unrestricted multiyear general operating support over a relatively long period increases NGOs' ability to be innovative, responsive, and effective. In particular, the initiative's Global South-based groups reported that the stability, autonomy, and flexibility associated with SHRW support enabled them to develop longer-term goals, agendas, and processes while continuing to respond to human rights crises. At the same time, the review found that there was a lack of a common understanding of the initiative's goals and theory of change among members. This lack of clarity meant that not everyone connected to the initiative shared the same assumptions and therefore they were not aligned in motivation and implementation.

Ultimately, the review found that while innovations in discourse, debates, organizational capacity, and leadership were documented, the initiative was uneven in its progress. Ford's initial groundwork was an important step in acknowledging a changing multipolar world and the need for the human rights movement to adapt accordingly. Deeper, more profound change, however, would require more time, actors, and investments, as well ongoing learning to understand how a stronger, more diversified, and global human rights movement could effectively respond to these global shifts.

This report provides further details on the initiative, the areas of focus for the review, and the findings (both at the initiative level as well as at the individual member level), and it outlines how Ford is applying these lessons to its current work.

About the Strengthening Human Rights Worldwide initiative

Signs of an emerging multipolar world and the decline in US leadership and credibility in promoting democracy and human rights have coincided over the past 20 years with growing recognition of the limits of the international human rights system. While enormous strides were made in establishing international human rights law and norms, intergovernmental mechanisms had been much less successful in guaranteeing implementation of those standards or ensuring states and other actors were held

accountable for violating them. On the civil society side, strong NGOs had established themselves in every region of the world, many with significant capacity. Leading organizations in the Global South increasingly suggested that they welcomed partnerships with international NGOs (INGOs) but did not need their “help” to reach national-level policy-making goals. In fact, many were already operating—or had the potential to operate—not only at the national level but as regional, international, and global actors.

Within this global context, the Ford Foundation’s Strengthening Human Rights Worldwide (SHRW) initiative was launched in 2010. The foundation has a long history of supporting the development and effectiveness of civil society institutions, and the SHRW initiative was designed in the vein. Grounded in the assumption that the international human rights movement needed to adjust to shifting global power, the foundation sought to contribute to a new global human rights architecture that would be reflected in a broader and more inclusive global human rights community that included both traditional and new players. Specifically, the goal of the initiative was to strengthen and diversify the global human rights movement, creating and sustaining a new architecture to face the challenges of a changing world.

The foundation pursued several strategies toward this goal. The first, launched in 2012, was a call for proposals that culminated in large, multiyear general operating support grants to seven human rights NGOs based in the Global South. These organizations were chosen because they were poised to make the leap to the world stage and contribute to broader, more inclusive dialogue on the human rights issues facing the world’s poor and marginalized. These grantees were:

- Asian Forum for Human Rights and Development (FORUM-ASIA, Bangkok)
- Centro de Estudios de Derecho, Justicia y Sociedad (Dejusticia, Bogotá)
- Centro de Estudios Legales y Sociales (CELS, Buenos Aires)
- Conectas Direitos Humanos (São Paulo)
- Justiça Global (Rio de Janeiro) (discontinued)
- Kenya Human Rights Commission (KHRC, Nairobi)
- Legal Resources Centre (LRC, Johannesburg)

A year later, the SHRW initiative issued a second call for proposals for grants to support the unique contributions of (largely Global North-based) INGOs to the movement. This strand of the initiative acknowledged the ongoing value of INGOs’ comparative expertise, global solidarity, contributions to norm and standard setting, and ability to work in places where authoritarian regimes made local activism difficult or impossible. As such, the request for proposals sought organizations that were networks or were membership-based, and whose international advocacy had a direct impact on national implementation and enforcement of human rights standards. At the same time, this strand served as an opportunity to critically reflect on INGOs’ strategies and role in the human rights movement. In 2013, the foundation granted \$6.25 million to seven organizations:

- Association for Women’s Rights in Development (AWID)

- Business and Human Rights Resource Centre (BHRRC)
- Crisis Action
- Global Witness
- International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH)
- International Network for Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ESCR-Net)
- International Network of Civil Liberties Organizations (INCLO)

Ultimately, over five years, the SHRW initiative awarded \$54 million in grants. In addition, the foundation supported the initiative with three convenings, including one with other funders with large human rights portfolios. It also provided grantees with capacity-building support in financial sustainability, digital capacity and security, and communications.

Learning review

In 2016, the foundation commissioned a learning review of the SHRW initiative and selected a five-person, Global South-based team¹ to examine the following questions:

1. How well did the initiative contribute to
 - a. Enhancing Southern participation and shifting North-South power relations in the global human rights movement?
 - b. Shifts in debates, discourses, mechanisms, policies, or practices of international or regional bodies or national mechanisms/legal systems?
2. What funding approaches best support the efforts of NGOs and networks in the Global South to influence the human rights movement and international NGOs to facilitate this?

Findings

Initiative-level

The review demonstrated what grantees and the philanthropy literature have been saying for some time: **unrestricted, multiyear general operating support over a relatively long period increases NGOs' ability to be innovative, responsive, and effective.** The South-based groups reported that the stability, autonomy, and flexibility associated with the SHRW funds enabled them to develop longer-term processes and agendas while continuing to respond to crises. They identified time and money—reliable funding for five years—as a key asset for political action, enabling them to be free to respond to more urgent matters. This stability increased their autonomy in determining on what issues, if, when, and how they would use regional and international mechanisms.

¹ The Strengthening Human Rights Worldwide Review team was led by Barbara Klugman (South Africa) and composed of Ravindran Daniel (India), Denise Dora (Brazil), Maimouna Jallow (Kenya), and Marcelo Azambuja (Brazil).

Most grantees welcomed the **relationships the initiative helped them build**—relationships with each other, with other actors in the human rights movement and the international human rights institutions, with their constituents, and with funders.

The review also found that the **assumptions of the SHRW initiative were well grounded**. Given the shifting power dynamics in the world, the human rights movement needed a revitalized structure to effectively respond to these changes. Ford contributed to promising steps toward shifting the power base of the human rights movement through its “big bet” solution: significant, long-term general operating support to key human rights actors in both the Global South and North.

While the initiative strove to provide a host of additional supports, including technical assistance, capacity building, and connections with initiative members, in the end, **there was sometimes a mismatch between what was offered and what was needed**. In one instance, Ford made available to the initiative’s members additional communications support, but largely identified and designed this support without appropriate consultation.

In hindsight, it is also clear that there **may not have been a common understanding of the initiative’s goals and theory of change**. This lack of clarity meant that not everyone connected to the initiative shared the same assumptions—and were not always aligned in motivation and implementation. (The review indicates this was especially true for the second cohort of grantees.) This left grantees unaware of what was expected of them, or even (for some) that they were part of a larger strategy. It resulted in a lack of coherence across cohorts that made it difficult for the two cohorts to crystallize as an initiative with a shared vision. Even internal to Ford, there were points of disagreement and misalignment, particularly between New York, where the initiative was led, and the foundation’s regional offices.

Engagement of Global South SHRW members in global, regional, and national platforms

Support from the initiative contributed to the Global South members’ efforts to advance key human rights issues on both the global and regional stage. Thanks to their work, new debates were taken up in a range of **global and regional human rights forums**, and they were framed in the context of the expertise and experience of these Southern actors. Support from the initiative also contributed to initial shifts of power in the movement “ecology.” Long-term and general support funding helped Global South members work more flexibly, both on national and regional priorities, as well as on the global level. Below are some examples.

- Example 1 – Global South members and INGOs of the initiative partnering to influence a combination of global, regional, and national level platforms
 - **Conectas**, together with Amnesty International, pushed the UN Human Rights Council’s (HRC) Working Group on Business and Human Rights to move beyond a facilitative role and clarify that its mandate included

considering specific violations of the *Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights*.

- **Dejusticia** co-wrote a report with the **Business and Human Rights Resource Centre** on the sometimes-devastating consequences of extractive industries and published it in time for the 2015 Conference of the Parties on Climate Change. Groups are continuing to use the report in diverse forums, including in a Constitutional Court case in Colombia, where Wayuu indigenous groups and Afro-descendant communities halted a coal corporation's work to divert a stream that would have impacted the litigants' water sources.
- At the African Commission on Human and People's Rights, the **Kenya Human Rights Commission** and **International Network for Economic, Social and Cultural Rights** worked with lead litigants to ensure the Kenyan government implemented a 2010 ruling that condemned the expulsion of the Endorois people from their land. This resulted in a landmark victory for indigenous people in Kenya, and Africa more broadly, and for the relevance of the African Commission.
- Example 2 – Global South members of the initiative influencing regional and global platforms
 - **Forum-Asia** successfully worked with national partners to use Mongolia's candidacy for the HRC to push national civil society demands about fundamental freedoms, including the rights to assembly, association, and expression. Forum-Asia provided similar capacity-building support to human rights defenders in South Korea, which then offered input into a Special Rapporteur report on the country as well as during its presentation at the HRC.
 - **Centro de Estudios Legales y Sociales (CELS)** drew attention to the over-criminalization of drugs and its effects on women and people with disabilities in Argentina. They worked with civil society partners to bring a human rights analysis of drug trafficking and drug policies to the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IAHCR), the UN Human Rights Council (HRC), the UN General Assembly, and the Commission on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women.
 - **A coalition including CELS, Conectas, and Dejusticia** worked with other partners in Latin America to jointly advocate with member states to protect the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR), whose existence was under threat as a result of insufficient funding. The coalition's advocacy resulted in preservation of IACHR funding as well as the adoption of a key coalition recommendation: the need for transparency and consultation in the IACHR's strategic planning process.

- Example 3 – Global South members of the initiative influencing Global North human rights forums
 - **Legal Resources Centre**, after winning a right to education case in South Africa, worked with Hungarian counterparts on a case involving equal access to education for Roma children at the European Court of Human Rights.

Engagement of INGO SHRW members in global, regional, and national platforms

For INGOs, the SHRW initiative also generated or strengthened ways of working that foster a more equitable and effective ecology. Below are examples where INGOs participating in the SHRW initiative worked collaboratively with their network members and other local groups on key activities, resulting in positive outcomes.

- Example 1– INGOs of the initiative influencing global platforms
 - **The International Network of Civil Liberties Organization (INCLIO)** and its network members successfully advocated for the establishment of a Special Rapporteur on Privacy by the HRC, in response to concerns about state surveillance, data sharing, and other violations.
- Example 2 – INGOs of the initiative engaging more effectively with their networks to influence change at national, regional, and global levels
 - For more than 20 years, the Sawhoyamaxa community in Paraguay fought to recover its ancestral land from private landowners. Despite a 2006 ruling by the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR), ordering the Paraguayan government to return the land to and compensate the community, progress was stalled. The **International Network for Economic, Social and Cultural Rights'** Strategic Litigation Working Group, in partnership with its network member Tierra Viva, pushed for implementation and, in 2014, the president of Paraguay approved the restitution of over 14,000 hectares of Sawhoyamaxa land.
 - **Global Witness** found that jade mining in northern Myanmar, valued at up to \$31 billion, was not benefitting local communities but rather was causing suffering by financing armed conflict that had driven 100,000 people from their homes. At the international level, Global Witness effectively advocated at the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative (EITI) to make ownership transparency an obligation for its 51 member countries. In Myanmar itself, Global Witness worked with national civil society members of the EITI to take the fight against hidden company ownership forward.
 - To mark the fourth anniversary of the Syria conflict in 2015, **Crisis Action** mobilized 130 members of the WithSyria coalition for the Turn the Lights

Back On campaign, which engaged both traditional global media and social media. For the first time, Syrian groups came together in global coalitions with NGOs from the Global South and North. The coalitions gained the attention of Kofi Annan, Madeleine Albright, Mona Eltahawy, Peter Gabriel, Rashida Jones, and Cristiano Ronaldo, and UN Humanitarian Chief Valerie Amos cited the campaign in her address to the UN Security Council. In this context, the US and the EU committed their largest-ever pledges of humanitarian assistance for Syria.

- **Association for Women’s Rights in Development**, with 5,000 institutional and individual members, provided key support that led to the creation of the Women’s Human Rights Defenders Middle East and North Africa Coalition.
- The 184-member **International Federation for Human Rights** successfully lobbied the European Union to more robustly and flexibly fund the protection of human rights defenders, resulting in a €15 million RFP and the creation of an initiative with a 24/7 hotline and emergency funds, including for third-country relocation.

Lessons learned

Despite many advancements of the kinds illustrated above, **the initiative was ultimately uneven in its progress**. Innovations in discourse, debates, organizational capacity, and leadership were evident, but Ford was unable to achieve deeper structural shifts with its investment. The initiative was ambitious in scope and, while Ford’s work laid necessary groundwork for more significant transformation, enduring change will require more time, actors, and investments. Below are two broad and critical lessons learned for Ford.

1. **A five-year initiative can be a launching pad for transforming organizations, ecosystems, and grant-making practice.**

Some organizations felt that the SHRW initiative was too short: Five years was not enough time to achieve the goals the grantees and Ford set out for themselves. But, at the same time, five years *was* enough time to bring new issues into new forums, demonstrate the effectiveness of new forms of organizing and activism that complement “naming and shaming,” and build new kinds of partnerships. While the initiative may have been ambitious, it was a first step in recognizing and supporting the need for new ways of thinking and working that laid the groundwork for transforming the human rights movement. Within the foundation, the experience gained through the initiative helped shape Ford’s BUILD initiative, a renewed commitment to strengthening civil society institutions. And it continues to inform the foundation’s ongoing thinking about conceptualizing and structuring global grant making.

2. **Visionary thinking demands a nimble grant-making plan.**

During the course of the SHRW initiative, realities changed both externally and

internally in ways that had implications for the successes and challenges of the program. Externally, global political power evolved in unexpected ways, so the initiative's initial strategy of expanding work with states and civil society in the BRICS lost its relevance as authoritarianism expanded in places both predictable and unexpected. Among grantees, there were leadership transitions and strategy realignments. Internally, Ford itself underwent a leadership transition and a reorganization that is pushing programs to advance human rights in other ways. In addition, there were shortcomings in the design of the initiative: As needs of grantee organizations changed, the initiative was not nimble enough to adapt. And the foundation failed to build out supports that were not planned for, such as a stronger shared process of co-creation and learning along the way. The ambitiousness of the initiative demanded a program team that had a great deal of flexibility and latitude to fine-tune capacity building, rethink convenings, refine outcomes iteratively, and cultivate learning along the way.

What Ford takes forward

As the Ford Foundation reorganizes to better respond to an increasingly multipolar, dynamic world characterized by different global players and strong new centers of moral legitimacy, it has already begun to build on what it has learned from each grantee in this initiative and from the portfolio as a whole.

FordForward, Ford's grant-making framework of recent years, has created new substantial investments that apply the lessons and opportunities of SHRW. A key emphasis across Ford's program areas and initiatives is the development of a common understanding of the program's goals, theory of change, and underlying assumptions.

Ford's BUILD program represents an ongoing commitment to, and testing of, the theory that long-term institutional investments and capacity strengthening, particularly for organizations poised to make a leap in impact, visibility, and size, can engender enduring change. Importantly, the BUILD program is building in robust mechanisms for ongoing learning right from the start, in order to apply the SHRW's lessons on nimbleness and adaptation. Finally, with "proof of concept" in hand, the foundation is using the lessons learned from this initiative as it examines the foundation's role in a multipolar world.