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Future of the Human Rights Movement Series

SUSTAINING THE HUMAN RIGHTS MOVEMENT IN THE ARAB REGION: MOBILIZING RESOURCES AND COMMUNITIES

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The Arab Reform Initiative is an independent Arab think tank working with expert partners in the Middle East and North Africa and beyond to articulate a home-grown agenda for democratic change and social justice. It conducts research and policy analysis and provides a platform for inspirational voices based on the principles of diversity, impartiality, and gender equality.

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Cover photo: 6 August 2020: Lebanese volunteers band together to clean up and give aid in Beirut Downtown after the tragic explosion in Port of Beirut on 4 August 2020 – Beirut, Lebanon.

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Table of Contents

Turning Inward to the Region	5
Community Philanthropy: Moving Beyond Local Fundraising	7
Community Philanthropy and Human Rights	8
A New Human Rights Funding Initiative	10
But What Now?	10

Resourcing human rights organizations has never been easy anywhere. The challenge has been even greater in the Arab region. Government restrictions have long prevented many human rights organizations from accessing available, though limited, foreign funding. The recent cutoff of US and other bilateral aid is exacting an enormous additional toll on human rights and other civil society organizations, forcing many to downsize, end programs, or close entirely. Together, these factors now make foreign grants even less of an option for the human rights movement in the Arab region.

This makes looking inward to the region more necessary than ever. Efforts to cultivate local giving are not new but have been only moderately successful for a variety of reasons, with obstacles erected by governments among the key ones. But there is another important factor. Over decades, organizations invested in developing the know-how and capacities necessary for external institutional donors, which proved unhelpful in cultivating local giving. Just as it took time to attain that know-how, it will take time to develop effective local fundraising practices and capacities. In that regard, there is much to learn from the community philanthropy movement, including how the work is resourced, which is as important as the work itself. I would say this is particularly true for the human rights movement. By demystifying and democratizing funding and fundraising, the new approaches bring human rights organizations and initiatives closer to the very communities whose rights they champion and lay the foundation for building active constituencies.

What follows are some reflections on resourcing the human rights movement in the region and beyond. The starting assumption is that movements cannot hope to succeed without mobilizing people, making people the single most critical resource. Mobilizing this vital resource, however, will not generate the financial resources that human rights organizations, in their current forms and structures, need today. The prevalent models and practices may meet foreign donors' requirements, but they are financially costly and do nothing to inspire people's trust. In the current funding environment, these models are likely unsustainable, and the competition for funding is damaging at a time when collaboration and movement building are needed more than ever. *As such, rather than asking where*

human rights organizations can find the resources they need, we might ask what work we need to do to achieve human rights. These questions are related but point us in different directions regarding how to resource the human rights movement and what resources we need to mobilize.

Turning Inward to the Region

In 2023, the Arab region accounted for 5.9% of the world's population but received only 0.5% of funding dedicated to human rights.¹ There are many reasons for this incongruence and neglect, particularly among private US foundations. The recent further contraction in funding from the US and other bilateral donors has thrust civil society organizations into an unparalleled crisis everywhere. Private philanthropies are inundated with requests to fill a gap that is only growing with rising authoritarianism around the world, a gap they cannot possibly fill, even if they wanted to, and they have not shown such inclination, even at the best of times, in the Arab region. Although it is a worn cliché, I take genuine comfort in knowing that in this challenging situation lies a valuable opportunity.

A plethora of excellent critiques of prevailing funding models have diagnosed the risks, frustrations, and in many cases, harms of dependency on external resourcing for vital work.² In the development field

1 That year, 368 MENA organizations received a total of \$273 million in funding for "Human Rights" from private foundations and bilateral and multilateral donors combined. This amount includes organizations in Cyprus, Iran, Israel, and Turkey. Excluding Israel alone reduces MENA's share to \$43.3 million, or 0.5% of worldwide "Human Rights" funding in 2023. Although the amount increases when funding for specific rights (e.g., women's rights, children's rights, refugees) is included, the pattern remains the same. For references, see the following: Candid, *Foundation Directory*, available at <https://foundationdirectory.candid.org>; and Candid and Human Rights Funders Network, *Advancing Human Rights: The State of Global Foundation Grantmaking*, available at <https://humanrightsfunding.org>

2 I suggest that prevailing funding practices have inadvertently hampered the human rights movement everywhere by fostering competition, when collaboration is needed; siloing rights and issues at the expense of the holistic vision of human rights; privileging certain methodologies and approaches over others, when all are needed; and narrowing our attention

in particular, the turn inward to communities to lead and design the initiatives and interventions that affect their lives has produced demonstrated success and better outcomes.

Turning inward to the region and its vast resources is not a new idea. In the early aughts, the Ford Foundation supported the formation of new funding entities around the world to bring funding programs and decisions, as well as fundraising, closer to home. In the Arab region, two initiatives were launched: the Arab Fund for Arts and Culture (AFAC) and the Arab Human Rights Fund (AHRF). AFAC successfully enlisted hundreds of jurors who are experts or practitioners in relevant art forms and are entrusted with selecting the most promising projects for funding. It has also reached and supported thousands of grantees across the Arab region and diaspora, many of whom contribute valuably to increasing awareness of and attention to human rights.³ Although AFAC made inroads into raising funds from the region, it continues to depend on external funders, who remain supportive. Regrettably, AHRF proved unsustainable. There were self-inflicted problems, to be sure. Still, in hindsight, it was a flawed model: centralized and therefore unable to reach grassroots or nascent organizations, and expensive, making it dependent on external funders for operations, whom it failed to retain. It also failed to secure significant support from donors in the region.

Individual human rights organizations and activists have themselves tried a broad array of approaches to secure local support. Table 1, which shows the findings of a 2021 survey of human rights organizations and activists in 16 Arab and six diaspora countries, reveals the many different methods they pursued – such as reaching out to and enlisting individuals, businesses, and communities to support their important work – with varied success.⁴

It goes without saying that the region has ample

resources to support human rights organizations and a wide range of work. Leaving aside those who benefit from or support the status quo, there are businesses and wealthy individuals across the region who would objectively benefit from fully rights-respecting governments. Large numbers in both groups might even want to support efforts toward such a goal. Their limited giving is generally attributed to the absence of an enabling environment, such as tax incentives, and to the fear of government reprisals targeting their businesses. Others, ordinary people and communities, are deemed too poor to contribute meaningful support. Fortunately, an early claim that the region lacks a culture of giving has been successfully debunked by the facts about Arab philanthropy.⁵ In any case, efforts to enlist businesses, well-to-do individuals, or communities also suffer from a general lack of direct experience with, or knowledge of, human rights and organizations. This particular shortcoming is not unique to the Arab region but also applies to the US and elsewhere.

These and other approaches are now needed more than ever. Is it realistic to aspire to secure greater local giving, including for human rights? Human rights advocates have no choice but to try, and if we fail, we try again until we have a range of approaches and lessons that can be shared across the region. All such efforts are vital. But those that reach and engage local communities are especially important. In the burgeoning global movement of community philanthropies, we have a great ally. Its proponents promote not only a turn inward but also a shift in power downward to communities.

to what is more easily measurable, thereby diverting our attention from the long view and larger goal of all rights for all people.

3 Arab Fund for Arts and Culture (AFAC), “Who We Are,” available at <https://www.arabculturefund.org/About>

4 Although 206 respondents began the survey, only 115 (56%) completed it in its entirety.

5 Global Fund for Community Foundations, *Philanthropy in the Arab Region: Summary Report*, March 2018, available at <https://globalfundcommunityfoundations.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/Philanthropy-in-the-Arab-region-summary-English-1.pdf>

Table 1. Income-generating strategies tried inside the Arab region*

	Respondents who tried	Respondents who tried as % of total respondents**	Tried successfully as % of those who tried
Joint funding proposals with one or more partner organizations	102	73%	72%
Membership dues	75	53%	76%
Individual donors (small gifts)	58	43%	67%
Income-generating services or activities (e.g., renting space, consulting)	59	42%	73%
Corporate giving	46	34%	35%
Community giving	37	28%	51%
Diaspora giving	35	27%	40%
Events (in-person or online)	34	25%	53%
Individual donors (large gifts)	31	23%	42%
Online crowdfunding	17	13%	65%

* Survey question: "Please tell us if you've tried the following income generating strategies inside the Arab region, and whether they were successful/unsuccessful."

**Excluding Don't Know (DK)

Source: Working Group, "Survey of Human Rights Organizations and Activists in the Arab Region: Report on Findings," (December 2021), p. 14.

Community Philanthropy: Moving Beyond Local Fundraising

Working with communities is not new to human rights organizations; many are engaged in grassroots organizing and/or in tackling human rights abuses targeting particular communities. As noted in Table 1, many of the region's organizations and activists have sought local donors to support their work. However, the community philanthropy movement goes well beyond local fundraising or funding, to cultivating and strengthening community resources, capacities, and agency.⁶

Community philanthropy has been described "as both a form of and a force for building local assets,

capacities, and trust, ultimately, as a way to shift power closer to the ground so that local people have greater control over their own destiny."⁷ The movement grew largely from critiques of conventional approaches to economic development, which have long privileged the interests and views of donors in foreign capitals over those of the affected communities in target countries. The Global Fund for Community Foundations (GFCF), a pioneer and leader in this movement, captured the dilemma succinctly: "For local civil society, international aid has been a double-edged sword. On the one hand, it has cushioned local organizations against the immediate anxieties of resourcing their work. On the other hand, it has overshadowed and undermined the existence of local resources, perpetuated power imbalances, and alienated organizations from local constituencies."⁸ However, rather than abandoning foreign funding entirely, proponents of community philanthropy advocate a blended approach that combines external and internal sources of support. No longer entirely dependent on foreign

6 Jenny Hodgson and Anna Pond, *How Community Philanthropy Shifts Power: What Donors Can Do to Help Make That Happen*, Foundation Center, 2018, p. 11, available at <https://globalfundcommunityfoundations.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/HowCommunityPhilanthropyShiftsPower.pdf>

7 Ibid.

8 Jenny Hodgson and Eshban Kwesiga, "Light in times of darkness: Community philanthropy offers a way forward," GFCF, 8 May 2025, available at <https://globalfundcommunityfoundations.org/blog/light-in-times-of-darkness/>

funding, empowered communities and civil society organizations can more confidently communicate with external donors, including their criticisms, concerns, and preferences.

There are many and varied benefits to resource mobilization at the community level. Valuing community resources – financial, knowledge, time, skills, experience, and more – and cultivating them in service of the human rights priorities identified by the communities is empowering and preserves their dignity. Mobilizing local giving, in whatever form communities are prepared to deploy, strengthens their ownership, which is essential for sustainability, and their civic participation, which is fundamental for movement building. Moreover, with the time organizations generally spend on learning about, engaging with, and accounting to foreign donors now turned inward to learning about, engaging with, and accounting to the communities they serve, vital bonds and trust can be established. In the development field, greater accountability to communities has contributed to stronger, more enduring ties with the civil society organizations with which they work, as well as improved development outcomes.⁹

One particular strategy, participatory grantmaking, helps further demystify and democratize fundraising and funding by providing communities with a direct view of and a say in grantmaking processes and decisions. For example, communities and grant applicants may review and discuss proposals together and jointly decide how the funds are to be disbursed. A 2020 report identified a variety of ways in which community philanthropies have engaged communities in giving and incorporated participatory processes: Dalia Association (Palestine) required community grant applicants to raise at least 25% of the budget from local funds and/or non-cash contributions; the Twerwaneho Listeners' Club (Uganda) pooled small contributions from individual community members and then brought them together to decide how the money would be spent; and UHAI EASHRI (East Africa) trained activists to serve as peer reviewers of proposals.¹⁰ Direct knowledge of the resources that

have been mobilized, including those from foreign donors, and a say in how they will be used can foster stronger ties with and trust in civil society organizations and their important work.

Clearly, establishing credibility with local communities is essential to building human rights constituencies. Admittedly, however, most community philanthropies around the world focus on community and economic development and on services, not on human rights. So, one can legitimately question the applicability of such models to human rights.

Community Philanthropy and Human Rights

Communities most commonly form around shared geography, identity, or experience. They are not monolithic and certainly not inherently or necessarily “good.” Human rights advocates know too well the costs of sexism, sectarianism, homophobia, ethno-nationalism, and other biases and divisions that can plague communities. For a variety of reasons, however, communities warrant greater attention from human rights advocates.

Resource mobilization is the focus of this reflection. Organizations that gain a community's trust can benefit greatly from contributions of time, skills, space, expertise, and even donations. More importantly, the single most critical resource for the human rights movement is simply civic participation by communities. Indeed, trust and engagement at the community level are vital if the movement is ever to successfully influence public opinion, build constituencies for human rights, and strengthen the movement overall.¹¹

the Arab Region: Participatory Models for Grantmaking and Local Resource Mobilization”, 15 October 2020, pp. 14–16, available at <https://globalfundcommunityfoundations.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/Human-Rights-Funds-Final-Nov2020.pdf> (Fifield and Sarmac, “Human Rights Funding in the Arab Region”).

9 Sustainability Directory, “Why Should Community-Led Initiatives Be Prioritized?” available at <https://sustainability-directory.com/question/why-should-community-led-initiatives-be-prioritized/>

10 Mary Fifield and Abigail Sarmac, “Human Rights Funding in

11 There is a new human rights resource (PRISM: Platform for Rights Impact Strategy Mapping) that is being tested that many may find of value. The tool is designed to enable organizations to reflect on their contributions through the lens

The agency of empowered communities is unrivaled in efforts to achieve the transformations we seek. Indeed, the goal of rights-respecting governance is unattainable without ordinary people, including neighbors, colleagues, teachers, workers, farmers, and everyone else, accepting nothing less than human rights from those who govern. Arguably, the human rights movement's single biggest failing, nearly everywhere in the world, is its failure to reach and engage the vast majority of ordinary citizens, the ultimate beneficiaries of fully rights-respecting governments, in the project to realize human rights. That suggests that the success of human rights movements everywhere hinges upon human rights advocates, activists, defenders, and organizations earning the trust of ordinary citizens. Once established, trust opens up all sorts of possibilities, including giving in all its forms.

Community philanthropy can contribute greatly to our resource mobilization and work with communities. The Arab region would benefit enormously from the establishment of community foundations¹² and other forms of localized philanthropies throughout the region. Some of the inspiring examples and models around the world are described in the report prepared by Mary Fifield and Abigail Sarmac, "Human Rights Funding in the Arab Region: Participatory Models for Grantmaking and Local Resource Mobilization".¹³ In the Arab region, we have two exemplars, both in Palestine: Dalia¹⁴ and Rawa.¹⁵ However, as noted, most of these initiatives have been devoted to community and economic development rather than human rights. Indeed, there are many challenges to adapting

community philanthropy strategies to human rights ends.¹⁶

Government hostility to human rights complicates efforts to establish community philanthropies dedicated to supporting human rights work. Community foundations that support human rights work in challenging environments around the world have adopted a variety of strategies, including avoiding explicit human rights language.¹⁷

Another challenge lies in long-standing, entrenched communal biases that are stubbornly impervious to the principles of equality and justice. Indeed, it is in communities that the human rights of women, minorities of all kinds, people with disabilities, and others have been violated over generations, and thus where human rights organizations are called upon to demonstrate the value of human rights.¹⁸ If the movement fails there, it stands no chance anywhere. There is also a lack of trust in, or suspicion of, human rights advocates, cultivated assiduously by governments. In parallel, democratic participatory processes are slow, laborious, and messy, which can be particularly frustrating in contexts of acute human rights violations.

Community philanthropy can support human rights organizations by funding their community-based human rights work or projects that engage communities in protecting or achieving human rights. Community philanthropies may be more successful at securing funding from local donors who might be hesitant to give directly to human rights organizations. Having established trust with communities, such philanthropies can help human rights defenders do the same. Most importantly, by bringing communities and human rights advocates together, they can help affirm the credibility of advocates and their work.

If successful, the gains could be tremendous, including the possibility of communities standing with human rights defenders under threat as they

of what we need to do together as a community to achieve the long-view goal of all rights for all people. It focuses on seven essential areas: engaging communities, influencing public opinion, building constituencies, bridging rights, deepening collaboration, creating power and building movements. For more information, INTRAC, "Rethinking Rights Impact," available at <https://www.intrac.org/projects/rethinking-rights-impact/>

12 Community foundations can be found in a variety of forms, but generally they are civil society initiatives that pool donations to support projects that serve a given community or location.

13 Fifield and Sarmac, "Human Rights Funding in the Arab Region".

14 For more information, see <https://www.dalia.ps/>

15 For more information, see <https://www.rawa.ps/en-home>

16 An early exploration of community philanthropy and human rights can be found in Mona Younis, *Community Philanthropy: A Way Forward for Human Rights?*, GFCF, February 2017, available at <https://globalfundcommunityfoundations.org/resources/community-philanthropy-a-way-forward-for-human-rights/>

17 Ibid.

18 Ibid.

become advocates for their own human rights. An active, engaged populace and human rights movement will inspire courage in others. Indeed, as the movement advances, so too will the courage of businesses and like-minded wealthy individuals, because nothing breeds success like success.

A New Human Rights Funding Initiative

Following the closure of AHRF, the region's sole institutional funder explicitly devoted to human rights, a working group of human rights advocates began exploring ways to fill the gap. The group started by taking stock of what could be learned from AHRF's important experience. Inspired by community philanthropy and participatory grantmaking, they explored how such a strategy could be adapted to support human rights organizations in the Arab region.

The primary aims of the initiative are to cultivate resources from the region for the region; replace centralized grant decisions with participatory decision-making; and build constituencies for human rights while fostering bridges between human rights advocates and communities across all aspects of the initiative. The initiative is envisioned as a new funding mechanism that will incorporate participatory grantmaking as a strategy to bring communities and human rights advocates together to decide how grants will be allocated for projects and recipients. Two pilots have been designed to test these and other ideas. However, since the genocidal assault on Gaza, efforts to mobilize resources to implement the two pilots have been temporarily suspended as the organizers agreed that mobilizing resources for Gaza and Sudan had to take priority over securing funding to test a new model of grantmaking.

The eventual form the initiative will take will depend on the implementation and lessons learned from the pilots. However, as currently envisioned, it will facilitate the identification and sharing of effective strategies and lessons across the Arab region. It will not be easy, as there are innumerable obstacles. It is also likely to fail. Even in failure, there will be lessons on which to build the next initiative, and

then the next, and so on, until the region's human rights community has a range of examples, lessons, and community philanthropies from which to draw.

But What Now?

It will take time to develop vehicles like this and others to support human rights work and advocates in the Arab region. In the meantime, what are human rights organizations to do?

There is no doubt that organizations and activists will need to continue seeking funding from like-minded donors outside the region. Fostering local giving is not intended as a rejection of giving from abroad but rather as a rejection of harmful conditions, constraints, and dependency. In this regard, we can also greatly benefit from the work of the GFCF and others (e.g., [Spring](#)) on how to pursue healthy, beneficial, and dynamic relationships with donors.

The array of initiatives captured in Table 1 will also need to continue and accelerate. No doubt, organizations are already doing so. Equally important, what is learned about successful strategies and approaches should be reflected on and shared with others across the region. That kind of exchange and mutual support is essential to building the region's human rights infrastructure.

Beyond rethinking relationships with donors, we need to take stock and reassess our organizational models and their sustainability. A good starting point is to ask: What do we need to achieve human rights? I contend that the answer is the mobilization of people and communities, as repeatedly demonstrated throughout history. In that effort, all human rights organizations can play a part and will gain from doing so.

However, rethinking organizational models and the need to gain the trust of communities does not mean that all human rights organizations should abandon their work and become grassroots or community-based. Every organization must continue to play to its strengths. But every organization can also benefit from partnering with community-oriented human rights counterparts. In an environment of resource scarcity, we need to be creative in exchanging resources, expertise, know-how, contacts, and more. Indeed, an advance in human

11 Sustaining the Human Rights Movement in the Arab Region: *Mobilizing Resources and Communities*

rights anywhere in the region, by any organization, will benefit human rights everywhere in the region.

About the Arab Reform Initiative

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