



INTERNATIONAL **HUMAN RIGHTS FUNDERS** GROUP



## **SAN FRANCISCO CONVENING KEY TAKEAWAYS**

San Francisco Institute | January 19, 2016

San Francisco Conference | January 20-21, 2016

Human Rights Lab | January 22, 2016

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Notes from IHRFG's San Francisco 2016 Convening can be found on our [resource archive](#)!

View [highlights](#) from the convening.

## IHRFG'S 2016 SAN FRANCISCO CONVENING

From January 19 to 22, nearly 200 funders from 17 countries gathered in San Francisco, not far from what many call the technology and innovation capital of the world: Silicon Valley. In light of the theme of our conference (January 20-21), ***What's New? Innovation and Iteration in Human Rights***, did we find inspiration there? Or did we find that innovation and Silicon Valley bear no relevance to our world of philanthropy and human rights?

The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines innovation as “the introduction of something new; a new idea, method, or device.” But we know that, in human rights and philanthropy, innovation is not absolute. It is contextual, and that there really is no one definition or single understanding of what is “innovative.”

The Stanford Social Innovation Review's definition of “social innovation” might be more useful when looking at innovation in the human rights movement and philanthropic sector: “A novel solution to a social problem that is more effective, efficient, sustainable, or just than existing solutions and for which the value created accrues primarily to society as a whole rather than private individuals.”

At our San Francisco 2016 conference, we asked, “What's new?” in human rights activism and grantmaking. We embraced the spirit of innovation in the hope of finding a way to take the field to a new level by disrupting or changing the curve on social change. In addition to learning, networking, and having fun, we aimed to showcase how human rights philanthropy can most effectively “up its game,” featuring new, fresh, and different actors, ideas, strategies, voices, perspectives, tools, and techniques in human rights and grantmaking.

The conference was preceded by the one-day institute (January 19), ***Responsible Data Forum for Human Rights Funders***, in which participants shared challenges they faced with handling sensitive information, and collaborated to develop tools and guidelines to address them.

The convening closed with a workshop organized by **Human Rights Lab** (January 22), in which 35 funders, activists, and advocates applied “design thinking” problem-solving processes to brainstorm strategies to counter the narratives feeding the tightening space for civil society.

**What follows are the key takeaways from the three events at IHRFG's San Francisco Convening, as framed by the peer-organized sessions and lively interactions.**



What is the relevance of innovative processes to human rights? What happens at the intersection of innovation and philanthropy? Does the push for new ideas and solutions undermine the long haul of human rights struggles? Human rights practitioners from the academic, technological, activist, and grantmaking sectors around the globe addressed these and other questions as they looked at how innovation can be applied to human rights, in terms of the projects that funders fund; the processes that create innovative projects that funders support; and innovative practices in grantmaking and philanthropy. These speakers emphasized the following points:

- It's widely assumed that Silicon Valley (or the technology and corporate sector) is the sole driver of innovation. **Innovation is a human process that sometimes involves technology.**
- **Innovation for innovation's sake should be avoided.** Focus on creativity and flexibility and risk-taking. Innovation must actually fulfill a need, rather than be a buzzword.
- **Labeling something as "innovative" is laced with privilege.** Communities with few resources are innovating all the time as they persevere and adapt to challenging situations. In many cases, to outsiders, these innovations are just considered "makeshift." By shifting our understanding of what constitutes innovation, we can find creative solutions that may otherwise be overlooked.
- In the Global South, there is a lot of replication in technology as it relates to "innovation." Are 500 apps that are all doing similar things having an impact on the problems? **It's important to bridge online activism and offline activism**, while also understanding that not every problem requires a technological solution.
- "Human-centered design," one method for spurring innovation, starts with identifying and understanding the needs of the "end user," or the person who will ultimately benefit from a solution. Foundations are often more in touch with their own internal, institutional needs rather than the lived realities of their beneficiaries. To expand the possibilities of solutions, it's important for **funders to be clear about who their end beneficiaries really are.**
- "Iteration"—the process of learning and adapting—is also important for achieving results. Some funders are adjusting their monitoring and evaluation processes to involve constant learning and regular fine-tuning throughout the life of a project, rather than just at the end of it. It's rare that funders talk publicly about failure, or mine their own failures for lessons. To do so would be an important shift, as it would allow critical reflection to help *avoid* repeating mistakes. **Funding innovation involves embracing failure, learning from it, and iterating.**
- "Community involvement" in grantmaking decisions, or participatory grantmaking—while not really new—remains unconventional. **Genuinely involving grantees means more than just "listening" to them. It's about trusting them, which involves giving up some power.**

View the full video of the opening plenary [here](#).



## MEMBER-LED SESSIONS: KEY TAKEAWAYS



### What Philanthropy is Missing: Youth-Led Ideas and Innovation

**Involve young people in the development, design and implementation of human rights programs, and not just in the idea generation process.** Their participation throughout programming processes brings in creative thinking, fresh perspectives, and new approaches, and therefore greater potential for social transformation.

Read the [full notes](#) from this session.

### A Fishbowl Conversation: Self-Led Organizing, Their Unique Challenges, and Our Role as Funders

Often, philanthropy follows its version of the Golden Rule: "The person with the gold makes the rules." **To challenge this, consider adopting a capacity-building mindset and adjusting grantmaking processes to be more accessible to and supportive of applicants along the way.** This is particularly important when working with self-led groups, as those most affected by the issues that funders are seeking to address will often have the deepest understanding of the real issues and the most creative solutions. Examine underlying assumptions about what grantees need and the priorities to fund.

Read the [full notes](#) from this session.

### The Role of Grantmakers in Addressing Challenges with Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism in the U.S. and Globally

In preventing/countering violent extremism (P/CVE) initiatives, there are many opportunities for funders to get involved—and governments are actively reaching out and asking for help, as they acknowledge that they don't have the resources or expertise to work at a local level. **Some effective ways for funders to engage are around elevating the voices of women, focusing on inclusive peace processes, and changing narratives in the media.**

Read the [full notes](#) from this session.

	MEMBER-LED SESSIONS: KEY TAKEAWAYS (Continued)
<p>The Role of Public Foundations: Serving More Pieces of the Human Rights Pie, or Just Smaller Ones?</p>	<p><b>Public and private foundations can be each other’s strongest allies when their work is coordinated deliberately and harmoniously toward a common agenda and shared understanding of funding priorities and objectives in strengthening and expanding the resources supporting human rights.</b> Private foundations can support the creation of new funds, and diversify and democratize funding in a way that transforms power dynamics. At the same time, both public and private foundations can engage in fruitful dialogue about whether the funding of issue-specific public charities supports or fragments the global and universal values of the human rights movement.</p> <p>Read the <a href="#">full notes</a> from this session.</p>
<p>Deepen Your Impact without Deepening Your Pockets: A Workshop on Funding Across Movements</p>	<p>Many of the groups funders work with have intersecting identities. <b>In these cases, grantees may have different ideas about the most beneficial allocation of funding, which sometimes may be outside of normal funding priorities.</b> For example, when a group of funders convened a meeting between environmental activists and women’s groups, it came to light that there was a lot of overlap between the actors involved, and support was needed to strengthen the collaboration between these two movements. <b>Remaining flexible with funding targets (movements, issue areas, population groups) may uncover new and powerful ways to solve problems.</b></p> <p>Read the <a href="#">full notes</a> from this session.</p>
<p>Consolidating Gains in Human Rights: Community Agreements with Extractive Industries</p>	<p>Some indigenous communities are interested in <i>exploring the possibility</i> of having a mining project on their land to gain revenue. <b>Agreements between communities and extractive industries can be a tool to empower those communities to become co-owners of mining developments on their land.</b></p> <p>Read the <a href="#">full notes</a> from this session.</p>

## MEMBER-LED SESSIONS: KEY TAKEAWAYS (Continued)



### Closing the Gaps: Funding Anti-Trafficking Initiatives in the Context of Labor and Migrant Rights

The speakers in this session discussed the landscape of anti-trafficking initiatives, and proposed that funders think about trafficking as a labor issue. Different approaches to trafficking may lead to different outcomes. **Linkages among stakeholders who follow human rights-based approaches to address trafficking need to be strengthened in order to support the full spectrum of responses.**

Read the [full notes](#) from this session.

### Provoking Community-Based Innovation: Raising Awareness of Human Rights Through Community Philanthropy

Community philanthropy lends credibility, especially for work in post-conflict situations. **Because community foundations are staffed, led, and often funded by people from within the communities they support, they are able to generate local ownership over human rights principles.** Community foundations can help raise controversial issues within their communities, and come up with self-generated solutions.

Read the [full notes](#) from this session.

### Participation is Key—But How? Working Through Common Challenges in Participatory Grantmaking

A move toward “participatory grantmaking”—involving grantees/beneficiaries in grantmaking decision processes—within an institution may seem difficult because it means that donors must give up some of their decision-making power. **Setting clear terms and parameters of the relationship may assuage that concern, demonstrating instead that first-hand knowledge and perspectives of activists make the decisions more strategic.**

Read the [full notes](#) from this session.

As funders, do we dumb down our political positions? Do we force our grantees and constituencies to depoliticize or de-emphasize politics in their struggle for equity, rights, and justice? What impact does that have on defending human rights? The mid-conference plenary aimed to unpack these questions and explore the landscape of opportunity yet to be seized and to be put in the service of human rights.

The speakers in this session presented a range of definitions of “political” as it relates to their work, but most agreed that being political means challenging structural, economic, and social power. Being political also may include taking the time and energy to explain the political context of a lot of the issues that are being funded to other donors, and taking a more outspoken activist role to stand with grantees and their work.

Funders are political actors, but can be ambivalent about accepting this fact, as shown by several tendencies noted by one of the speakers:

- **Many U.S.-based funders are uncomfortable looking at the role of U.S. government intervention in the regions where they fund**—whether military, economic, in disaster relief, or through philanthropy.
- **Funders often resist connecting domestic issues with international issues.** In the case of immigration issues, there is a lot of attention paid to supporting immigrant rights and reform, but few resources going to the root causes of (forced) migration on an international level, such as trade deals.
- **Funders may misdiagnose a problem as policy-related** when the nature of the issue is more fundamental, and involves civic participation. Some problems are best approached through base-building or political power-building, rather than with a policy solution.

Instead of facing these and other uncomfortable issues head-on, some funders support projects that address community needs but leave power structures in place. Choosing to support these responses, rather than challenging the dominant power structures, is in itself a political act, since it is a choice to *not* address the causes of human rights violations that are happening right in front of us.

**Multi-year, general operating support is both political and innovative.** It can be a tangible, actionable way of challenging structural power, and shows that those with the money trust their grantees.

**Recognize and make use of political opportunities.** A political opportunity is when you see the world *outside* of your specific movement, cause, or organization, and make use of it *inside* your specific movement, cause, or organization. According to this speaker, the funding community often misses these opportunities by working in silos or holding a narrow world view. Being political doesn’t mean being partisan; it means being in tune with your society and capitalizing on the opportunities that are out there. Pay attention to what is not in the theory of change. Seize “movement moments” rather than wait for the next one to come along.

View the full video of the mid-conference plenary [here](#)!





IHRFG's San Francisco Institute, organized by the Engine Room, brought together 30 funders to develop tools and strategies for dealing with sensitive information. Funders discussed topics around collection, management, and analysis of data, as well as how they can be key players in fostering a culture of responsible data within their institutions and amongst their grantees.



Data—or facts, statistics, and information—is everywhere in the work of the funder community, from grant proposals and reports to evaluations and communications. **“Responsible data” involves examining the full range of ethical questions raised by handling sensitive information, including and beyond digital security challenges.**

Participants discussed the following topics and questions, as they related to their institutions and responsible data practices:

- **Power differentials:** What are the internal (within foundations) and external (funder-grantee) power dynamics that exist in instilling and maintaining responsible data collection and storage? **Funders should regularly question whether they actually need all the data they request from grantees. They should also always be transparent with their grantees about why they are asking for certain data, and what they will do with it.** Does the often imbalanced relationship between grantmaker and grantee lead to grantees providing more information than what they are comfortable sharing? Who “owns” the data once it has been shared? Responsible data requires trust and collaboration.
- **Risk analysis:** What are the underlying principles for supporting grantees to conduct the risks of sharing sensitive information with their funders and more broadly? Will a prospective grantee view a question marked “optional” on a grant application as genuinely optional, or will they feel compelled to answer it because they think it will improve their chances of receiving the grant? **Funders should consider what elements of the information they ask for from grantees are actually necessary for their work, and what might be risky.**
- **Internal organizational policies:** What steps can funders take to develop policies that are in line with responsible data practices? How can institutions create cultures of responsible data practices among the staff and leadership? **More data isn’t necessarily better.**
- **Grantee education:** How can grantmakers initiate a conversation around responsible data management with their grantees? **Grantee education starts with grantmaker education.** It is crucial for foundations to have conversations among their staff about their own data practices. As they evaluate their own policies toward data, they should also listen to grantees about what they identify as the key data-related gaps and challenges they face, and provide support to address them.
- **Digital security:** What are the best (or better) practices around secure communications with grantees working in high-risk areas? Implementing the right security tools must involve all of the above. Digital security is an iterative process, responding to changing circumstances, and must constantly be reevaluated.

View the [Wiki created by the participants at the Institute](#) to learn more details about the specific group discussions that took place.

The final day of IHRFG’s San Francisco Convening took the form of a collective problem-solving workshop, organized by Human Rights Lab. The Lab introduced human rights funders and representatives of civil society to “design-thinking” and related collective problem-solving methodologies, and to generate, test, and iterate prototypes of tools to challenge three toxic narratives that have contributed to the mega-trend of closing space for civil society, namely:



- Civil society actors aid and abet terrorist organizations;
- Civil society actors are foreign agents undermining national sovereignty;
- Civil society is anti-development.

“Design-thinking” methodology is a collaborative process, which seeks to create and fine-tune models of products or programs that are responsive to the stated needs of “end-users,” or those who are the target-audience or final beneficiaries. By the end of the day, each group had created a prototype of their counter-narrative strategy. The results of three projects are listed below:

**Kenya: Prototype for Anti-Corruption and Human Rights Activists to Reclaim their Legitimacy in the Community**

This group developed a campaign to restore legitimacy to grassroots organizers, which took the form of a march against corruption from the village of a local activist to Kenyan Parliament, joined by community members and religious leaders.

**East Africa: Prototype for Countering Narratives that Frame LGBTI and Feminist Activists as Outsiders**

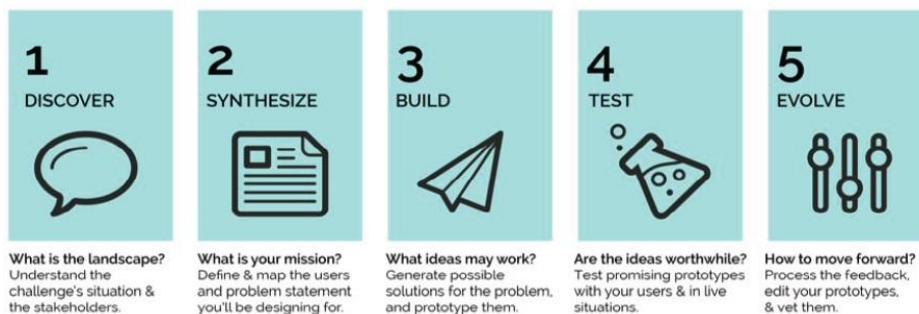
This group proposed ads and information campaigns that reframed LGBTI and feminist advocates in Uganda as familiar members of the community, such as neighbors, mothers, and caregivers.

**Mexico: Prototype for New Modes of Disbursing Funds to Reduce Burdens on CSOs**

This group looked at how they could address restrictive funding laws in Mexico, and developed a solution geared toward grantmakers: making larger disbursements less often and adjusting their reporting requirements, among other processes to ease the burden on their grantees.

After a day of training in design thinking problem-solving methodology, a number of funders planned on applying it to their work in their institutions and to other challenges that they face.

## DESIGN PROCESS: how to generate new solutions



## **THANK YOU TO**

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...whose participation makes these convenings possible

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