CLOSING SPACE FOR CIVIL SOCIETY: COUNTERING THE TOXIC NARRATIVES
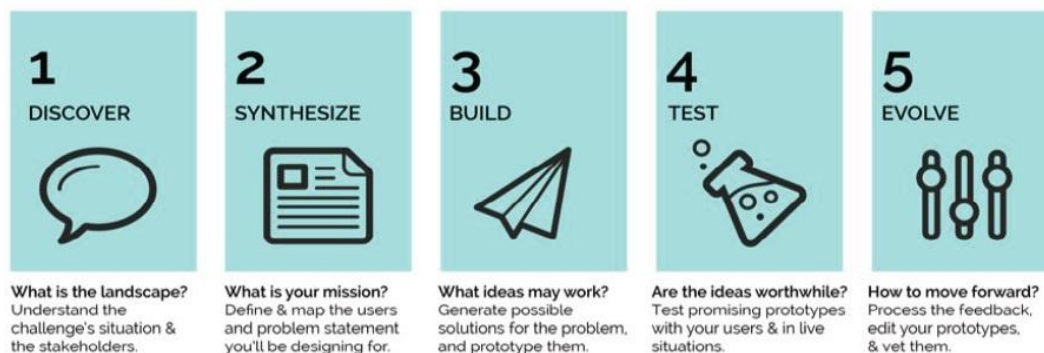**January 22, 2016**
San Francisco, USA
Organized by IHRFG and Human Rights Lab

As part of the effort to address increasing repression and restrictions on civil society across the globe, 35 human rights funders, activists, and advocates from 12 countries came together on January 22, 2016 at an IHRFG-hosted workshop in San Francisco organized by Human Rights Lab. The Lab guided the eclectic mix of practitioners through a dynamic problem-solving process to brainstorm workable strategies that address one element of tightening civil society space: the corrosive narratives that feed it.

These narratives have served to delegitimize human rights organizations and have provided cover for policies that target these organizations directly and indirectly through funding restrictions. These narratives are: civil society actors aid and abet terrorist organizations; civil society actors are foreign agents undermining national sovereignty; civil society is anti-development.

To arrive at strategies to counter the narratives, the funders and activists in the workshop applied "design thinking" – a highly interactive and collaborative method of collective problem-solving. Design thinking seeks to create and fine-tune models of tools or programs that are responsive to the stated needs of the "end user" – or the ultimate beneficiary, the target audience. In seven groups of five people, the participants used props, constructed paper models, and drew pictures to work through a series of questions and challenges to identify their end user, then generate, test, and iterate a prototype of their counter-narrative strategy.

DESIGN PROCESS:
how to generate new solutions

1 DISCOVER	2 SYNTHESIZE	3 BUILD	4 TEST	5 EVOLVE
What is the landscape? Understand the challenge's situation & the stakeholders.	What is your mission? Define & map the users and problem statement you'll be designing for.	What ideas may work? Generate possible solutions for the problem, and prototype them.	Are the ideas worthwhile? Test promising prototypes with your users & in live situations.	How to move forward? Process the feedback, edit your prototypes, & vet them.

Objectives

1. Build on momentum generated to date by human rights funders and practitioners to collaborate on halting and reversing the global mega-trend of closing civil society space.
2. Lay the groundwork for concretely addressing closing civil society space by generating and vetting prototypes of real strategies and solutions that build counter-narratives.
3. Experiment with design in action in the world of human rights and social change and experience first-hand the problem-solving methodology of human-centered design.

Outcomes

The seven prototypes created by the small groups revealed a pattern of themes or guidelines for funders to consider when developing counter-narrative strategies:

- Be grounded at the community level.
- Enlist and actively engage allies, particularly from the community, such as family members, religious leaders, and teachers.
- Devise creative but careful messaging that dispels myths and misconceptions by appealing to people's personal sentiments.
- Use the full range of info-sharing and media platforms, such radio, posters, and mobile phones, as well as the unconventional (if resources permit), such as television ads, sitcoms, and soap operas.
- Adapt funder-grantee procedures to the context and be flexible with bureaucratic expectations.

Here is a sampling of the strategies developed:

Kenya: Prototype for Human Rights Activists to Reclaim their Legitimacy in the Community

This group identified the end user as an anti-corruption campaign organizer, who had been slandered by the national government as a foreign agent. This strategy challenged toxic narratives indirectly, by involving religious leaders and other members of the same community where the campaign organizer lived in an anti-corruption march to the Kenyan parliament.

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

This group proposed a public information campaign involving ads and other media, and recruiting trusted family members of the advocates to engage their neighbors, fellow parishioners, and school teachers. The aim was to reframe LGBTI and feminist advocates in Uganda as familiar members of the community, such as neighbor, mother, and caregiver.

Mexico: Prototype for New Modes of Disbursing Funds to Reduce Burdens on Grantees
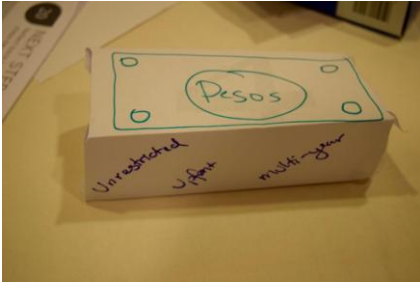
This group looked at how they could address restrictive funding laws in Mexico and developed a solution geared toward grantmakers. To counteract the paralyzing audit requirements on foreign grant funds that the government has imposed on NGOs, this group proposed that funders make multi-year grant disbursements in one lump sum, rather than multiple disbursements, to ease the reporting and audit burden on grantees.

Broadly speaking, the exercise revealed new insights on the toxic narratives themselves and on closing civil society space. One group, for example, decided it was more fruitful to redirect their efforts from national centers of power to local governments because public opinion at that level was more malleable with appropriate interventions. Another group, in dissecting their context's problem, realized that the problems CSOs were facing were in fact unintended consequences of an otherwise valid law. Under this new assumption, the group felt freer and more hopeful to generate more concrete strategies.

Evaluation and Reflections

After a day of training in human-centered design, many participants found the methodology very useful to apply back home in their own institutions in other problem-solving and strategy development situations.

According to participants' evaluations, the Human Rights Lab experience seemed not only to provide human rights practitioners with a useful tool, but also unforeseen perspectives on how they carry out their human rights work. For example, several participants from civil society organizations noted that engaging in this dynamic, productive way with allies outside of their sector, namely *funders*, was very valuable and a pleasant surprise.

In addition, focusing on the "end user" compelled some participants to apply a new lens to their work and involve more participation of stakeholders and devise solutions that were within the power of that user to implement. The practice of "testing" and "iterating" also impressed on funders and activists the need to monitor regularly, learn from mistakes, and change course accordingly.

Constructively, we note a few lessons learned should this methodology be applied again. First, as this workshop was the first time most participants were introduced to the human-centered design approach, an extra half-day could have facilitated their fuller understanding through, for example, a dry-run of a full design cycle on a low-stakes challenge. Next, breaking down the abstract issue of "toxic narratives" to more discrete, easily definable challenges could have

helped participants more successfully generate actionable solutions. Finally, more concentrated time should be devoted to selecting which prototypes are realistically scalable and outlining necessary next steps to keep the momentum of the exercise going when the session ends.

This workshop was a productive step for human rights funders in strengthening their toolkit on ways to concretely deal with closing civil society space. The joint IHRFG, Ariadne, and EFC Funders Initiative for Civil Society may learn from these prototypes and outcomes designed in this Lab as well as explore the possibility of conducting labs on other levers to halt the disabling environment for civil society.

<u>Advisory Committee</u>
The following funders, also members of the Cross Border Philanthropy working group's steering committee, provided guidance and advice on the content and make-up of the workshop:
- Jenna Capeci, American Jewish World Service
- Louis Bickford, Ford Foundation
- David Mattingly, Fund for Global Human Rights
- Poonam Joshi, Fund for Global Human Rights
- Iva Dobichina, Open Society Foundation
- Julie Broome, Sigrid Rausing Trust

<u>Sponsors</u>
The following institutions provided generous support to make this workshop possible:
- American Jewish World Service
- Fund for Global Human Rights
- Human Rights Lab
- Levi Strauss Foundation
- Open Society Foundations