



Key Takeaways

Map → Resist → Support

HRFN 2017 New York Conference

From July 10-13, over 250 funders from 29 countries gathered in New York to map challenges, share concrete tactics to resist, and chart a new course for support.

The convening kicked off with two day-long institutes: **When the Going Gets Tough: A Funder-Activist Dialogue**, in which participants used case studies to highlight creative organizing tactics, alliance-building strategies and holistic security practices, and **Values to Action**, in which participants reflected on how grantmaking practice can further human rights values. HRFN welcomed first-time attendees at a half-day **Newcomers Gathering**, where they heard perspectives on human rights funding trends and the HRFN community from longstanding members.

This report offers highlights of our 2017 convening and links to videos of selected sessions. Session notes are available upon request; please contact [Xin Xin](#).

Get a snapshot of the conversations and activities that took place through a recap of tweets on [Storify!](#)

Reflections from Members



Political Actors in a Political Context

Maíra Junqueira,
Brazil Human Rights Fund



How Funders Can Support Nonviolent Action Amid Crackdowns

Dr. Maria Stephan,
U.S. Institute of Peace



Reflections from the HRFN 2017 Conference

Nyambura Gathumbi,
Hivos East Africa



Lessons from a Frequent Conference Flyer

Merrill Sovner,
Center on Philanthropy and Civil Society, City University of New York

Voices and Perspectives

Funders must think outside the box and across silos that dominate our field in order to counter the challenges of new authoritarianism. View the [video of the opening plenary to hear more](#).



“The ray of hope is that even the NGOs who are focused on delivering services are having a conversation with us on the political landscape we are all in. And so there are alliances that are being formed. That is something we need to harness and develop.”

–Judith Pasimio, Coordinator,
LILAK – Purple Action for Indigenous Women’s Rights



“Since 2015, more than 64 laws passed that restrict registration, operations, or ability to receive funding for NGOs. In Latin America, there is the ambiguous criteria in the law where the government can shut down or close the organization. It’s a change that happens little by little—you start being burnt-out and it comes to a point where it’s difficult for you to look at the whole environment and start analyzing that what’s happening to you is happening to the rest of us.”

–Laura Garcia, Executive Director, Semillas



“The starting point is to convince human rights proponents that issues of resources and of distribution are actually a part of the human rights agenda. At least until very recently, Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International both said “We don’t look at issues of redistribution.” And I think that’s exactly what we’re seeing: it’s all about redistribution away from human rights and toward the monopolies.”

–Philip Aston, John Norton Pomeroy Professor of Law,
New York University School of Law



“The closing space agenda requires us to think and work systemically, outside our silos. We need to be proactive rather than defensive. How do we move to offense? To a strategic approach to pushing back and opening up? Don’t forget your hearts as activists.”

–Deborah Doane, Director, Funders’ Initiative for Civil Society (moderator)



Journalist Masha Gessen introduced the concept of “squishy reality,” reflected on the staying power of old-fashioned activism, and shared an important rule for surviving autocracies: institutions will not save you but you can push them to act. Watch her remarks [here](#).



In our closing plenary, HRFN members held a frank dialogue with the High Commissioner for Human Rights Zeid Ra’ad Al Hussein on the challenges facing our community and the changing role of the United Nations and the Office of the High Commissioner. Zeid spoke from the heart, describing the stories he’s heard and how the pain and resilience of human rights defenders compel us to speak out.

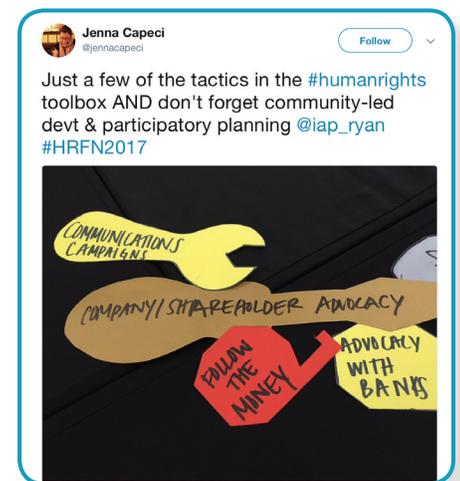


Key Takeaways – RESIST



- As activists navigate difficult political environments in closed, semi-closed, or closing societies around the world, funders are tasked with reimagining and testing out new approaches to better support social movements. When activists and social movement leaders felt there was an equal power balance, their partnerships with funders led to stronger and expanded connections and increased knowledge sharing.
- Misinformation and propaganda are undermining public faith in core democratic institutions, such as an independent press. Violence against journalists and human rights defenders is on the rise. Funders should support programs that include holistic security, activate the public through campaigns, and push for legislation to protect both civic and digital spheres.
- Many feminist lesbian, bisexual, queer, and/or gender non-conforming activists and organizations working to shift social norms have historically operated in closed spaces in countries where mainstream representatives of civil society are just starting to face this trend. Activists emphasized the need for funders to be bold and to build their own internal collaboration within movements in order to influence the philanthropic sector.
- Funders identified the importance of mobilizing and organizing at state and local levels to build up support for coalitions at smaller scales.

“Bringing in the voices of activists to the conference was very important. It allowed funders an opportunity to appreciate the context in which human rights work is happening.”



“I found it useful to have specific country discussions and the stress on how authoritarianism affects our work.”

Looking for more? Watch the videos for our lightning talks!

Protecting Human Rights Defenders in the Face of Non-State Actors



Preaching Beyond the Choir: Engaging Faith Leaders on LGBTIQ Rights in Southern and Eastern Africa



Resisting Militant Masculinities and Big Nuclear Arsenals: Harnessing Intersectionality for a New Nuclear Disarmament Movement



(Password for videos: hrfn2017)
Software and Human Rights: The Road Ahead



Key Takeaways– SUPPORT



Strengthening Movement Building

- The critiques of the human rights movement that are most concerning to activists include limited legitimacy and over-legalization. Human rights activists are actively adapting in response to these challenges by nurturing new and deeper alliances, learning from other sectors and movements, and diversifying funding models.
- Speakers and participants alike consistently highlighted the importance of knowledge sharing, skills building, and networking for activists when exploring new forms of collaboration and funding mechanisms.



“I really enjoyed having a space to learn about non-US specific funding practice and hearing a global perspective on current political situations.”

Improving Grantmaking Practices

- Grantees call for more core support for general operating purposes, which allows them to build infrastructure within movements and organizations for long-term activities.
- Organizations are increasingly reaching out to public foundations to fund their work on the ground because of their lower profile and ability to fund unregistered groups.
- Funders’ efforts should be redirected toward eliminating written proposals, supporting holistic security, and nurturing local expertise and resources through more one-on-one training and mentorship.



More videos for our lightning talks (Password for videos: hrfn2017)

From the Inside Out: Creative Models for Local Funding for Civic Engagement and Human Rights



Rise to the Occasion: Supporting Movements through Streamlining and Alternative Structures



#ShiftThePower: Putting Community Philanthropy at the Heart of Human Rights Work



Strengthening Our Community

HRFN members built community and strategized together through concurrent sessions, lightning talk debriefs, and a range of innovative small-group-oriented sessions, including Community Problem Solving and Open Space.



“[As a newcomer] I was most struck by discussions around local philanthropy and innovative grant-making practices that colleagues are exploring.”

Highlights include:

- A fantastic kick-off reception hosted at the Ford Foundation!
- A moving dinner performance *Beyond Sacred: Voices of Muslim Identity*, exemplifying the unique power of arts in weaving together personal, historical, and political narratives.
- The [Funders’ Initiative for Civil Society strategy launch](#), with remarks by Ken Roth, Executive Director of Human Rights Watch. FICS will strengthen philanthropic capacity to support civil society’s efforts to create a more enabling environment and coordinate donor-led strategies to push back against the closing trend.



Turning Thought Into Action

What's On Members' Minds?

"I learned that I could build a participatory process with our grantees to find out how to fund new issues."

"I think our proposal could be shortened and we could omit written interim reports, in place of phone calls and a short write-up by the program leader."

"I learned how necessary it is for North and South funders to really sit down together and talk about strategies."

"I will explore ways to safely send funds in more restrictive environments."

"I want to engage our fund with more peace and justice issues linked all the way up to nuclear arms conversations."

"We talked about supporting creative hubs as alternative spaces for organizing."

"If HRFN is part of some international collaborations, it can be a champion in bring to light some innovative approaches in the South that others might not be so aware of."



Members utilized Open Space to strategize on the following questions, among others:

- How do we ensure we have diversity in our foundations?
- How do we balance the need for flexible, multi-year core funding with annual, measurable impact evaluation?
- What is the collective architecture we need as foundations — private and public — to enable a coordinated response to closing space and the current global context?
- Rethinking / Reimagining / Renaming Intermediaries — Why? What for? Relevance to new context?
- How, if at all, has the human rights community contributed to this age of authoritarianism?



How will HRFN continue to advance the field of human rights philanthropy?

- Serve as the consistent bell-ringer for emerging issues
- Provide a platform for funders interested in transforming grantmaking practice
- Analyze the funding landscape and connect members in strategic ways

Tell us how we can best serve you!

