

ADVANCING HUMAN RIGHTS

FOUNDATION FUNDING FOR HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS

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Launched in 2010, the *Advancing Human Rights* research tracks the evolving state of global human rights philanthropy. It is the single most comprehensive analysis of where philanthropic funding goes to support human rights around the world.¹

In this briefing, which Human Rights Funders Network (HRFN) developed for the 2022 Dublin Platform for Human Rights Defenders, we present analysis on foundation funding for human rights defenders (HRDs) within the human rights funding landscape. Our findings indicate both hopeful signs of growth and significant under-resourcing. We also address challenges in tracking human rights funding, particularly for HRDs and frontline defenders.

THE STATE OF FUNDING FOR HUMAN RIGHT DEFENDERS

Since we began our *Advancing Human Rights* research, we have seen foundation support for HRDs increase 158% from \$9.3 million in 2011 to \$24 million in 2019, our most recent year of comprehensive data. This growth partly reflects the greater breadth of our data collection. However, based on verification by a matched subset of funders,² we see this growth as a reliable trend in human rights philanthropy that points to growing recognition among funders of the critical role activists play in the struggle to protect and promote human rights.

¹ *Advancing Human Rights* is led by Candid and Human Rights Funders Network (HRFN), in collaboration with Ariadne–European Funders for Social Change and Human Rights, and Prospera–International Network of Women’s Funds.

² In our analysis, we use a matched subset of funders that are consistent across research years to compare trends and track changes over time. By focusing on the grantmaking of this narrower group, we can control for annual variations in the list of funders that submit grants data and establish a reasonable and reliable measure of actual year-to-year changes.

ABOUT HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS

Human rights defenders protect and promote human rights. They may collect and disseminate information on violations, support victims of abuse, or seek accountability and an end to impunity. Human rights funding for human rights defenders supports their protection needs, enhancing their resilience and developing a more enabling environment for their work. See more on funding for human rights defenders on our research hub at <https://humanrightsfunding.org/>

We also see other trends, including in grantmaking approaches. For instance, foundation funding for HRDs declined in our matched subset by 36% between 2018 and 2019. However, the drop was due to a number of large, multi-year grants awarded in 2018 – the largest year of HRD funding on record. In 2019, several other key figures related to HRD funding actually increased: The number of grants grew by 45% from the previous year and the number of funders supporting HRDs expanded by 17%. This suggests that, despite the dip in grant dollars, funders’ commitment to resourcing human rights activists has continued to grow.

Even with these encouraging trends, philanthropic support is extremely limited for communities on the frontlines of human rights struggles. Of the \$4.1 billion global human rights grant dollars we mapped in 2019,³ only 0.6% went to HRDs and these grants were awarded by just 54 funders. This constitutes a meager 7% of the total 761 funders supporting human rights work in our data set but, more worryingly, a tiny fraction of overall philanthropic dollars. As intersecting crises and closing civic space compound the threats that HRDs face, the lack of explicit focus in this area is a red flag.

THE CHALLENGES OF MAPPING HRD SUPPORT

The low figures overall for HRDs in part reflect the considerable challenge of mapping this kind of support. In our methodology, we review nearly 200,000 grants to identify all human rights grants in a given year.⁴ For HRDs, we include all grants where the funder or recipient has a specific focus on human rights defenders or the grants explicitly use the terms “human rights defender” or “HRD.” As a result of this narrow, cautious approach we are likely underestimating the true level of support.

One of the challenges in tracking this information is the blurriness between other forms of activism and HRDs specifically. For example, we know that human rights defenders are at the forefront of movements for gender justice, LGBTQI rights, and the defense of land and the environment, among other critical human rights struggles. Yet, funding at these intersections is very limited. When we look at annual foundation support for women and girls’ rights (\$928M), LGBTQI rights (\$215M), or environmental and resource rights (\$468M) we would expect to see significant overlap with HRDs. Yet, only between 0.5% - 2.2% of the funding earmarked for these topics also mentions human rights defenders. While we apply a working definition and key terms to map funding for HRDs, how funders conceptualize and talk about their work has a significant impact on our ability to accurately identify and categorize these grants.

Establishing an accurate picture is even more complicated given the sensitive nature of this funding. In some cases, HRD grants may not be reported as such due to security concerns. We also encourage funders to anonymize information that is not safe to be made public and could place grantees or communities at risk. Sometimes, that means they cannot provide information about their grantees’ general locations or scope of work. This limits our ability to build a more comprehensive picture of the issues these grants address and communities they reach.

³ This figure excludes 341 grants totaling \$104 million awarded by foundations to other foundations included in the 2019 data set. These grants have been removed to avoid double counting.

⁴ For more on our methodology, see [this report](#), pages 21-22.

WHO FUNDS HRDS?

Within the field of human rights philanthropy, we see a number of foundations at the forefront of HRD funding. Several smaller, public feminist funds, such as the sisterhood of Urgent Action Funds, play a significant role in supporting HRDs, as well as dedicated funders such as Front Line Defenders and the Euro-Mediterranean Foundation to Support Human Rights Defenders. Sitting amongst the top funders in terms of grant dollars and grant numbers, these funders are often the first (and only) to provide emergency funding to activists facing immediate threats.

Those private foundations amongst the top funders are also revealing. From our engagement in the field, we know that many of them have dedicated portfolios or programs related to civic space or HRDs. We see the need to more deeply explore how funders explicitly or implicitly prioritize HRDs and the implications this has for reaching activists on the frontlines.

TOP FUNDERS FOR HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS BY GRANT DOLLARS IN 2019

Foundation	\$	% of HRD \$
1 Schmidt Family Foundation	\$4,665,500	19%
2 Foundation for a Just Society	\$4,080,000	17%
3 Oak Foundation	\$2,931,818	12%
4 Ford Foundation	\$2,700,000	11%
5 Euro-Mediterranean Foundation of Support to Human Rights Defenders	\$2,019,053	8%
6 Open Society Policy Center	\$1,856,773	8%
7 Foundation to Promote Open Society	\$1,735,000	7%
8 Front Line Defenders	\$1,701,194	7%
9 Wellspring Philanthropic Fund	\$1,425,000	6%
10 Urgent Action Fund Africa	\$1,173,648	5%

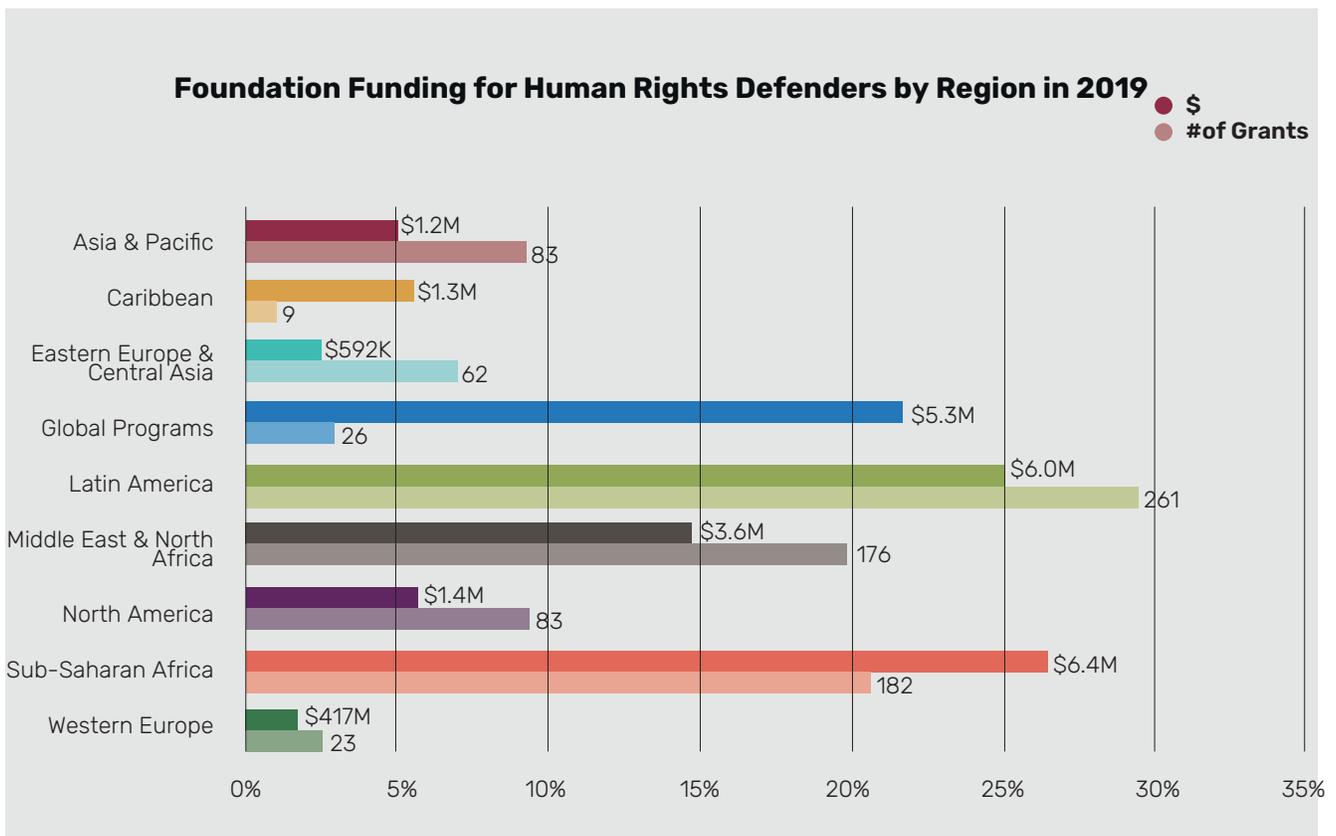
TOP FUNDERS FOR HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS BY GRANT NUMBERS IN 2019

Foundation	# of Grants	% of HRD Grants
1 Urgent Action Fund Africa	184	21%
2 Urgent Action Fund for Latin America and the Caribbean	166	19%
3 Urgent Action Fund for Women's Human Rights	165	19%
4 Euro-Mediterranean Foundation of Support to Human Rights Defenders	105	12%
5 Urgent Action Fund Asia for Women's Human Rights Asia & Pacific	50	6%
6 Brazil Human Rights Fund	33	4%
7 American Jewish World Service	26	3%
8 Schmidt Family Foundation	25	3%
9 Fund for Global Human Rights	19	2%
10 Norwegian Human Rights Fund	14	2%

The amounts presented in these tables reflect the full value of each funder's grantmaking for HRDs, including grants to other foundations in the data set.

FUNDING BY REGION

Foundation support for human rights defenders varies significantly by region. We see the highest levels of support in Latin America (\$6.0M) and Sub-Saharan Africa (\$6.4M). More funders support HRDs here than in any other regions, and several locally-based funds prioritize working with HRDs, including grantmakers like Urgent Action Fund for Latin America and the Caribbean, Brazil Human Rights Fund, Urgent Action Fund Africa, and UHAI EASHRI. Interestingly, though we map considerably more funding for human rights work in North America than any other region, just 0.2% of the funding meant to benefit North America supports human rights defenders – a smaller proportion than in any other region.



Region totals include both grants directly to recipients based in the region specified and grants to recipients located in other regions to do work benefiting the region specified. The full value of a grant is assigned to each region specified in the grant.

CONCLUSION

We are heartened by the growth in foundation grant dollars we've documented for human rights defenders but reiterate that this is a community that remains significantly under-resourced. We know there are challenges in tracking human rights grants, especially for frontline defenders. Is foundation funding reaching HRDs through other portfolios or programming? Possibly. But we believe it is unlikely that there is substantial funding reaching HRDs or any other communities that are not expressly named and prioritized by funders.

This shortfall has real implications for the level of support HRDs can access. It also raises questions about whether human rights defenders are receiving the specific forms of funding they need, including emergency grants and support for their physical and digital security. What can funders do to more directly address the needs of activists on the frontlines? A good start is adequately resourcing them by getting more direct and flexible funding into their hands.