

Learning from each other

Yousry Moustafa

The four emerging human rights funds involved in the Ford Foundation's International Initiative to Strengthen Philanthropy (IISP)¹ – the Arab, Brazil and Russian funds, and the newly founded Kenya Human Rights and Social Justice Fund – met in London in April. It was the representatives of the new funds who pressed for the meeting, feeling that they needed a specific learning space within IISP to discuss the aspirations and challenges that their newly pledged initiatives have in common. Why was this separate meeting necessary and what was discussed?



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IISP is a community of foundations with different histories and mandates. It is useful for the new human rights funds to engage in discussions with more developed foundations, but it has become clear that the new funds have particular needs, not only because they are new but also because they face shared challenges created by the hostile legal and political environments they work in. They therefore need an identifiable space and time to address these needs. The London meeting was proposed as such a space, and it also served as a preparation for the most recent IISP plenary meeting, held in Dakar in June 2006. In brief, it is part of the IISP learning process.

Many topics on the agendas of the collective meetings (Budapest, June 2005 and Puerto Rico, November 2005) also appeared on the agenda of the London meeting, such as fundraising and communication strategies. The issue, then, was not the nature of the topic but how to approach it. For the new funds, any topic needs to be linked to the setting-up process and institution-building. Those gathered at the London meeting also have a shared identity as 'non-Western' human rights entities, and they need to adopt strategies appropriate to their own social, cultural and political environments. For these reasons the new funds need to have their own space within IISP.

What are the common concerns?

The new human rights funds are established to support human rights activities in the Arab region, Brazil, Russia and Kenya. Despite the different locations, there is much common ground – socio-economic context, adverse political environment, and not much tradition of giving to human rights and social justice. In London, two main interrelated

areas of concern were discussed, namely institution-building and relations with local and international human rights and philanthropic communities.

Human rights activities in the South are rarely supported by local resources. Human rights movements comprise mainly NGOs, supported by Western non-profit, philanthropic, governmental or international sources.

This has given rise to three main issues, which form the rationale for the emergence of the new human rights funds. The first relates to the *credibility* of human rights activities and defenders. The authorities have often used foreign funding as a means to attack human rights defenders and to delegitimize their efforts.

Second, there is the issue of *sustainability*, in other words, the limited capacity of civil society organizations to be real partners, and in turn to form a long-term strategy, because many of them, either implicitly or explicitly, 'follow the money'. It is also difficult to develop skills and expertise in the field of human rights grantmaking and indigenous fundraising.

Finally, this situation has produced an unvoiced issue about *social responsibility* to support human rights. Activism has rarely been associated with a visible movement to promote philanthropy for human rights and social justice in the South.

These three issues were the common concerns that emerged at the London gathering.

Institution-building

For the Arab, Brazil and Russia funds, institutional soundness is an issue. It is not only a functional requirement, it is a matter of credibility. The main question is how to establish an effective, efficient and democratic institution which will have domestic and global credibility as a human rights grantmaker, will be able to think and act strategically, and can disseminate the culture of social responsibility at the local level.

Three main points were made at the London meeting. First, positioning the emerging funds in an unfriendly political and cultural environment is a big challenge and makes it difficult to adopt practical strategies to build their profiles. Second, the structure and diversity of the governing bodies is critical. Governing bodies will need to include equal ethnic, cultural and gender representation as well as bringing in the human rights, financial and management

¹ See *Alliance*, March 2006, p7.

expertise needed to achieve effectiveness. Third, adopting strong and effective consultative mechanisms with local actors is both difficult and urgently necessary.

Local resources

The other topic that dominated much of the London discussion was mobilizing local resources. What are the best strategies to mobilize local resources? How should the emerging funds approach the business community? What roles should board members and staff play? Should the funds adopt strategies to disseminate the culture of philanthropy for social justice before asking for money? How can these funds approach diaspora donations?

Many of these questions remained unanswered, but the discussion nevertheless clarified challenges and opportunities. Basically, the money is there, but the wide gap between local sources of giving and human rights causes poses real challenges. There are political, cultural and legal impediments that need long-term strategies to overcome them. The Arab Human Rights Fund is a good example in this regard. While there is a significant tradition of giving in the region, it is basically charity-oriented and politically and legally restricted. Collecting money for political activities is a criminal offence in all Arab countries, and human rights causes are definitely seen as political activity.

The opportunities exist mainly because the new generations in the business communities are looking for change and determined to succeed. The question is, how can the funds reach out to them? Not, felt participants, on the basis of a money-driven relationship, rather on the basis of partnership in philanthropy for social justice. The task is not an easy one, because the funds essentially want to change the way people give by putting out a politically and culturally sensitive message.

Making a learning space

The unspoken message from the meeting is that the new funds want to learn. They can learn from the international philanthropic community, from initiatives such as IISP, and in particular from each other and their own experiences in their different countries. The London meeting showed that there is a

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crucial need for opportunities to do this, through exchanges and study visits as well as meetings.

Activists have succeeded in creating awareness of human rights in the societies where the funds operate. Now the funds themselves will have to work hard to build the identity of philanthropy for social justice. @

Comment

Filiz Bikmen



I could not agree more that credibility, sustainability and social responsibility are essential to raising local resources for rights-based work. As this article suggests, raising local resources is just a means to an end – which is ultimately securing broader and deeper involvement of citizens in creating a more just society. But what are we doing to secure this involvement, and how much will talking with colleagues in other countries affect the situation at home?

My lingering suspicion – and, Yousry Moustafa's too, I gather – is that public awareness of human rights is quite limited, especially in the South. Public opinion polls would likely reveal a low percentage who know what 'human rights' are, much less what constitutes an offence. Yet if we are aiming to raise awareness, to what degree are current tactics and language resonating with target audiences?

Perhaps rights-based initiatives can be decoded with public awareness campaigns and messages that resonate culturally and socially. Rather than using the amorphous catch-all phrase 'human rights', which has indeed become extremely politicized (and in some cases abused), maybe we should be referring to access to health, education and other basic 'rights'.

Yousry also mentions the significant tradition of giving in the Arab region, which seems to exist in other regions too. Yet I question the extent to which these traditions are understood, and used to develop new tactics for raising local resources for rights-based initiatives.

While IISP will certainly be useful for peer learning and sharing across borders, it seems equally important to engage in closer dialogue with local stakeholders about increasing the contextual relevancy of these issues in an effort to mobilize greater involvement and support.

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