INCLO

December 2025

Hard Conversations for the Future of Human Rights

Contents

About INCLO

INCLO is a network of 16 national human rights and civil liberties organizations working to promote fundamental rights and freedoms. We support and reinforce our member organizations' work in their respective countries and foster bilateral and multilateral collaborations within the network. INCLO is composed of multi-issue, multi-constituency human rights organizations that are domestic in focus and independent of their governments. These organizations defend the rights of all persons on their national soil through a mix of litigation, legislative campaigning, public education and grassroots advocacy. As a network, we take pride in combining a collective legacy, experience and expertise to enhance the legitimacy of international frameworks and fortify the global human rights movement.

INCLO's 16 member organizations are the Agora International Human Rights Group (Agora) in Russia; the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) in the United States; the Association for Civil Rights in Israel (ACRI); the Canadian Civil Liberties Association (CCLA); the Centro de Estudios Legales y Sociales (CELS) in Argentina; Conectas in Brazil; Dejusticia in Colombia; the Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights (EIPR); the Human Rights Law Centre (HRLC) in Australia; the Human Rights Law Network (HRLN) in India; the Hungarian Civil Liberties Union (HCLU); the Irish Council for Civil Liberties (ICCL); the Kenya Human Rights Commission (KHRC); the Commission for the Disappeared and Victims of Violence (KontraS) in Indonesia; the Legal Resources Centre (LRC) in South Africa; and Liberty in the United Kingdom.

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INCLO thanks those who generously agreed to be interviewed for this project: Hossam Bahgat (EIPR), Dalma Dojcsák (HCLU), Akiko Hart (Liberty), Paula Litvachky (CELS) and Nicolette Naylor (Ubuntu Global Philanthropy).

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Introduction

The world – and the human rights landscape – is at an inflection point. The effects of armed conflicts, inequality and oppression, the climate emergency and technological disruption are compounded by eroding trust in democratic and human rights values. Serious rights violations go unpunished as multilateral cooperation falters and international rules and systems languish. There is a growing perception that traditional strategies and existing tools for promoting and defending human rights *no longer work*.

We at INCLO – a network of 16 national human rights organizations from the Global South and Global North – feel the impact of these intersecting crises and shifting political realities, at the national and global level. And the pressure on our organizations is heightened by unprecedented foreign aid cuts and a shrinking philanthropic sector. In this context, it is vital that the human rights movement find a collective way forward, questioning our own models and jointly strategizing to devise effective responses. **We must pause to make sense of global shifts together and uncover creative possibilities to continue our fight for human rights.**

In that spirit, INCLO invited allies, partners and experts to join our 2025 Annual General Meeting in Buenos Aires to hold frank, in-depth discussions on these and other topics. This report expands on the key questions that emerged there, with the aim of sharing concrete, strategic insights with others in the human rights field.

To that end, we asked four executive directors from our member organizations in distinct regions, along with sustainability expert Nicolette Naylor, to critically examine various dilemmas for the movement:

1. The upheaval in human rights and what it means for our work (Paula Litvachky, CELS, Argentina)

2. The shrinking fundraising landscape and the need to reimagine sustainability (Nicolette Naylor, Ubuntu Global Philanthropy, South Africa)

3. The confirmation of our identity as political actors (Dalma Dojcsák, HCLU, Hungary)

4. The urgency of escaping echo chambers and expanding our audiences (Akiko Hart, Liberty, UK)

5. The need to create a "quiet room" for long-term planning and rebuilding (Hossam Bahgat, EIPR, Egypt).

We learned a lot from these interviews. To start, the international order – and with it, the international human rights protection system – is facing a prolonged and deepening crisis. Conflicts such as the war in Ukraine and the devastation in Gaza have laid bare the failures and limitations of international accountability structures and forced the movement to confront the inescapable need for new, more effective tools.

The USA, in particular, has worked against multilateralism and accountability efforts, imposing sanctions to undermine the International Criminal Court and crush the vital work carried out by Palestinian NGOs. These sanctions damage the entire human rights movement, stifling our ability to work together freely to fight impunity. The deliberate isolation of rights defenders engaged in legal advocacy not only encourages ongoing violations by muting the voices holding perpetrators to account. It also contributes to a chilling effect on global civil society and directly weakens multilateral human rights institutions.

In this context, human rights leaders are asking: What pathways remain open to us? Should we continue to engage with international or regional mechanisms to pursue justice? Or should we redirect our energy towards national-level struggles where impact may be more immediate and tangible?

Paula Litvachky emphasizes that power lies with the people: in supporting grassroots struggles and strategically using alternative spaces of influence. As she describes, this brings us back to the origins of the movement when the focus was on mobilization and community building. Tactical use can still be made of international and regional rights-protection mechanisms, but the system – imposed by the West to begin with – is clearly in flux.

Nicolette Naylor addresses the related crisis in international funding, advocating for an end to overdependence on US donors – which have their own biases and are subjected to politically motivated US laws and financial restrictions – and for reengaging local constituencies to regain autonomy. She argues this is a pivotal moment for examining how philanthropy has operated, what has failed, and how our funding models must evolve. She believes the future lies in developing strong local funding bases, supported by international solidarity.

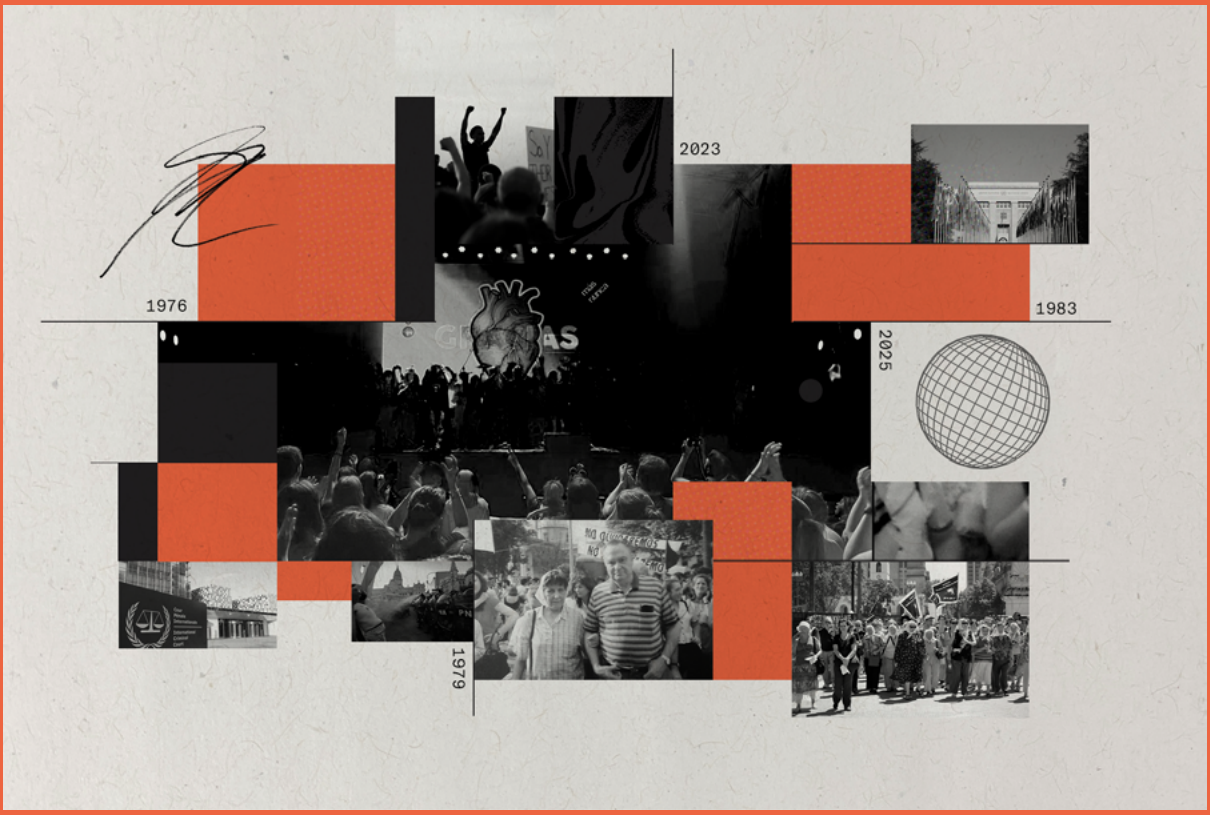
This shift to more local, grassroots action confirms our identity as political actors that engage in political work, as **Dalma Docjsák** tells us. While this does not mean aligning with partisan agendas, it does mean acknowledging that real change comes from organizing and empowering people so they see the tangible benefits of enforcing their own human rights. Part of this work involves using broad, unifying language to convey that human rights are for everyone.

In a similar vein, **Akiko Hart** says we must be able to speak to those outside our immediate communities if we want to expand our impact and effectiveness. This entails breaking out of echo chambers and engaging the "persuadable middle" (the wider public that lies beyond core supporters) rather than prioritizing in-group validation within NGO circles. Rethinking communications and advocacy strategies requires time and vision.

But many human rights organizations are operating in extremely demanding national contexts that leave little time for reflection or long-term planning. As **Hossam Bahgat** puts it, what is needed now is a "quiet room" – a protected space for strategic thinking and collective proposals. Without it, sustainability becomes impossible.

In a sense, this report seeks to contribute to a "quiet room" at the movement level. This is a time for joint critical reflection and action, for upending the status quo, redefining our positions and revamping our strategies. It is also a time to take these debates back to each national context and keep fighting for human rights – which is exactly what INCLO's members are doing. Amid all the pressures, uncertainties and vertiginous changes, our work continues.

Refocusing our work at a *time of upheaval* for human rights



Paula Litvachky
Executive Director

CELS

Paula Litvachky, Executive Director of the Centro de Estudios Legales y Sociales (CELS) in Argentina, talks here about the crisis in the international human rights protection system in a world that is reorganizing, and about what this entails for our organizations. On the national stage, President Javier Milei – a Libertarian who asserts that social justice is theft and an aberration – has made significant rollbacks to human rights. With little chance of influencing public policy for now, CELS seeks to mobilize people and accompany their efforts for change.

Q There is a perception that the international human rights system no longer works. What is happening? Is the system broken?

Many theorists and analysts argue that this is the end of an era regarding the post-WWII consensus and the building of the international order. This is related to geopolitical changes and the decline or weakening of Western hegemony, and especially of the United States. The rules-based order, which is the order that sustains the United Nations and that Western powers were willing to uphold, no longer has that support or the same strength as before. And the human rights infrastructure that was organized around that international order is necessarily affected, because those two things go hand in hand.

Saying that this international order is broken is a provocative way of saying that we are moving towards another kind of global agreement. We are still in transition and no one knows for sure what's going to happen, it's not settled yet. But those who set the rules and financed that infrastructure are no longer backing that order, or they are weaker themselves. Which means that the tool of international law that we have used to defend human rights within our countries, and for international activism, is at stake.

> *If the discussion today centres on force alone, where do we fit in? What place is there for those who are oppressed or suffer injustices?*

Q Did the crisis in that system begin recently, with geopolitical changes and the destruction in Gaza and Ukraine, for example? Or were there always problems?

This structure that is being questioned served to uphold a certain political hegemony, under rules that in some way reproduced the logic of power.

We were always very critical of how the international human rights protection system worked. It had problems in terms of efficacy, and the clear conditionality of being an order that was also ultimately imposed by the West – with all that entails. So everything we contended about the Global North's oppression of the South, and the barriers making it impossible for the South to participate in decisions about how to organize that infrastructure and that international order, or to occupy spaces of relevance – on the Security Council, for example – all that is still valid.

But now, that tool that we have used to fight for certain rules linked to protecting human rights, is being questioned by states themselves and by the United States specifically. And today everything seems to be moving towards the acknowledgement that in reality, only force can give you legitimate power. So if the discussion today centres on force alone, where do we fit in? What place is there for those who are oppressed or suffer injustices? What tools and spaces do people and organizations – the movements that defend human rights – have to make demands and ask for rules that would ensure or promote certain levels of equality?

We don't know how this is going to end. The issue is what to do in the meantime.

Q In this context of crisis, is it important to change the human rights narrative?

I think the change is political, and the discussion about the narrative and how to communicate comes later. I think a very potent political debate is taking place regarding how to defend human rights today, what the strategies are, and there is also debate about democracy.

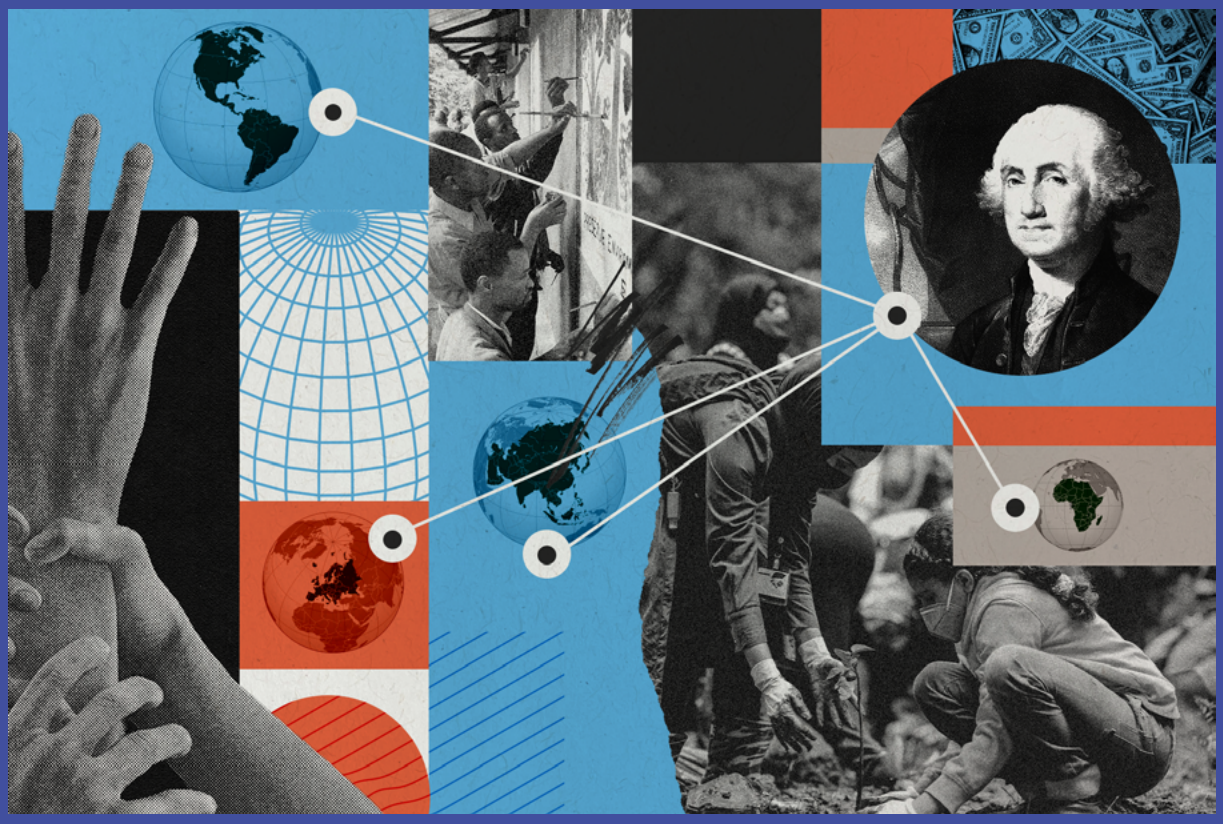
Those of us who defend human rights must focus on building more from the margins, from the bottom up, trying to create alliances and forge a new human rights community. We have to engage in a discussion about the culture of human rights, about empathy, about the value of life, about the value of equality, about the value of the environment. And that discussion is not just a matter of narrative, it is a political discussion, in the sense of having a praxis and a conceptual framework that would define the problems and offer a proposal for transformation.

We have to think about how to use our tools for defending human rights to bolster the efforts of those who are fighting injustices. I think we have to make tactical use of the tools that are available. Is it worth going to the Inter-American System? Is it worth going to the international system? Why? How do we do it? How do we fight?

At a national level, it is also important to remove the state from the centre of the discussion. CELS is not focusing all its work on advocacy before the state, or public policy. Instead, the idea is to think once again about how to defend what is public, how to create community, how to mobilize for human rights. We are reviewing our history, thinking once again about how we organized ourselves at the end of the (1976-1983) dictatorship in order to politically and socially approach a conversation about the dignity of life and human rights.

Social processes of resistance and change take time, and we have to be attentive so we can join forces when they arise.

Reimagining *sustainability* for human rights struggles



Nicolette Naylor
Director

UBUNTU
GLOBAL PHILANTHROPY & GENDER JUSTICE CONSULTING (PTY) LTD

Nicolette Naylor, Director of South Africa-based Ubuntu Global Philanthropy & Gender Justice Consulting, talks here about the need to revamp our fundraising to ensure autonomy and independence. International funding is shrinking, forcing organizations to compete more fiercely for resources. But this crisis may offer a chance to break with the conditionalities of a system with entrenched power and narrow Western notions of philanthropy.

Q Are we witnessing the beginning of a paradigm shift in cooperation and funding for human rights work?

I think the shift started a few years ago. In the 1990s, there was a climate of abundance with a lot of funding for civil society and human rights work. Now we're seeing widespread restrictions by the US government, by European governments, by the development world and the private philanthropy world. So today there is a climate of scarcity.

Also, I don't think we realized just how dependent we were. The loss of funding is resulting in a shutdown of institutions and a decimation of civil society infrastructure that we imagined would have been fairly robust. The humanitarian sector has collapsed, which no one ever expected since the end of World War II. The decline started gradually, but this is the tectonic moment where the world is coming off its axis, and it's affecting the whole civil society infrastructure.

Q Has the current cooperation model constrained activism in defence of rights?

Absolutely. Civil society has become so overly dependent on donor funding that a group of US donors have been driving the agenda. And this has impacted whether movements are organizing for their own organizations to survive, or whether they're organizing for a revolution and a change in power structures. Donors have placed restrictions around acceptable forms of advocacy and which issues you can organize civil disobedience on.

There was a lot of ground lost in terms of the ideological underpinnings of when we challenge power and how we challenge power.

> *There's been a fear of engaging with the politics of human rights work. We've sanitized it and made it more palatable to a donor audience.*

The dominant fundraising model seems focused on investment return, demanding constant impact and indicators of success. What effect has that had?

I think the language of success and impact forced civil society to develop very simplified analyses of the problems and change in society, where they had to say, "I'm going to solve the problem of gender-based violence, say, in 5-year or 2-year grant cycles" – which was completely unrealistic. And everyone bought into lying about what the change agenda was and coming up with unrealistic benchmarks for success.

But I also think it failed to acknowledge that no single organization can bring about social change, and so forcing single organizations to develop theories of change and impact metrics based on how brilliant they are is a very Global North way of thinking about the world. And there wasn't enough pushback around, well, this isn't how change happens, it's much more collective. And what we want to do is going to take 10 to 20 years.

Also, we have bought into a system that says money brings about change – and without money, we'll never bring about change. We really have to interrogate that as a sector. At this moment of crisis, the human rights movement can take a clear ideological position about its relationship to money and power, and on what terms it will take money.

How can the movement and donors move towards another paradigm?

Both at the philanthropy and the civil society side of the equation, there needs to be deep introspection around what are we trying to do? And what is our political and ideological basis for existence? I think we've lost the politics of the work, and there's been a fear of engaging with the politics of human rights work. We've sanitized it and made it more palatable to a donor audience.

We need to ask, what constituencies are we accountable to? Is our constituency donors sitting in the US? Or is it communities, and are we making a difference at that level? Where are we trying to build trust and legitimacy?

There's this myth that in the Global South, you can't raise money from individuals. There is money in the Global South, and in the diaspora, and they will fund advocacy and political organizing and social movements – if there is trust. We've all bought into the idea that wealthy people in the West are the only people that give. And that's made us lazy about studying local philanthropy and what touches the hearts of middle-class people locally.

Collectively, there could be power in the human rights movement coming together across borders and strategizing around how it wants to approach fundraising and philanthropy, and having joint positions around what trust, legitimacy, accountability, power and privilege looks like, versus one organization trying to resist the system. Because the system will perpetuate itself with the same power structures, unless we come up with a different way of thinking.

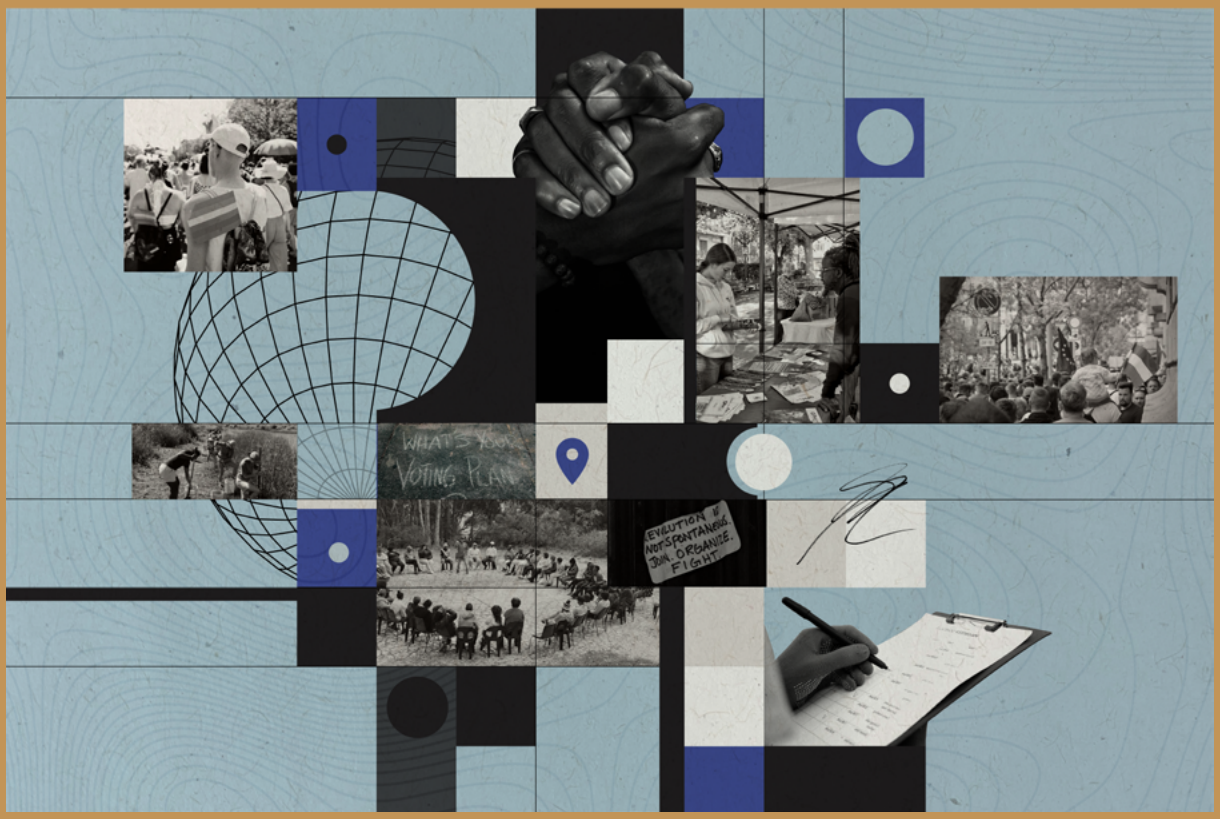
Q How can our organizations reimagine sustainability?

People need to imagine a world where they're not dependent on US funding, that's the starting point. And then they need to ask, where else are we going to get resourcing and what have others done in this position? There are lessons to be learned from people in countries that lost development aid long before USAID shut down. And from Russia, Hungary, China, Ethiopia, when foreign agent laws were passed. The reality is some organizations didn't survive. But where people came together and collectively strategized and merged, and really focused on building trust and legitimacy with local constituencies, that has been successful.

I think the answer lies in *local.* The same way we've said that we need to move to communities and grassroots-led work, we need to focus attention on that in the philanthropy and funding space. International funding should merely supplement what is already happening.

The structure, form and politics of who we are and what we are as a sector has been very driven by what donors want, and the financing has flowed from that. I think we should blow it all up and reimagine it. We've got nothing to lose at this stage.

Navigating *political versus partisan* under a harmful regime



Dalma Dojcsák
Executive Director

Dalma Dojcsák, Executive Director of the Hungarian Civil Liberties Union (HCLU), talks here about how authoritarianism is pushing our sector to redefine itself. In Hungary, right-wing poster child Viktor Orban has been dismantling human rights safeguards and harassing civil society organizations for the last 15 years. In that context, the HCLU has focused more on grassroots and practical action, showing people that human rights can be empowering and translate into tangible protection.

How does the question of whether human rights organizations should be more political, or engage more directly in political work, play out in Hungary?

As civil society organizations, we were pushed into being more political. When the first foreign agents law was introduced in Hungary in 2017, we were called mercenaries and foreign agents of foreign states, and so we had to become political. We had to protect ourselves and speak up and rebut the government's accusations.

The autocratic regime uses this narrative that politics and discussing politics is the exclusive right of elected officials. No one else who wants to take part is entitled to because the regime says they are paid by foreign entities to say certain things. And this is a tool to delegitimize movements and civil society organizations.

In this climate, it is essential for us to talk about what politics are, and what public discourse is. We often say that taking part in politics, being a politician, is not a privilege. Everyone is a politician in the end, because we all participate in the public discourse somehow. And that is our right and obligation as citizens.

In such a hostile environment, can human rights organizations be political without being partisan?

In Hungary, the government is anti-human rights and anti-democracy. It has dismantled the legal system and the institutions that serve to protect human rights through advocacy or litigation. And it has been basically impossible for us to do transparent policy work for more than a decade. We are not allowed in Parliament or in committee hearings anymore. We don't have any access to the lawmaking process. This is a huge problem because we are losing all the skills and experience that the organization has built up since 1994.

This leads to very interesting questions: should we be working to change the government? Should we go door to door to urge people to vote for the political opposition? We define ourselves as nonpartisan and

independent, so that doesn't feel right. Also, to preserve our legal status as a public benefit association, we are required to remain nonpartisan.

But this is an ongoing discussion. Our internal policy is that we have to preserve our nonpartisan nature if we wish to be a watchdog under any upcoming government in Hungary. We offer our services and legal aid to politically active citizens and even parties. Our help and expertise are equally available to every political party, but for obvious reasons, the governing party will not come to us for help. Therefore, at the end of the day, we only aid opposition candidates and communities. We do this very transparently to preserve our independence.

Changing the political reality in Hungary and going back to democracy depends on people. And human rights is a tool and the value that can mobilize people so they can stand up for their own rights.

Q

Your organization has decentralized and engages with people by offering legal assistance and running a hotline, for example. Do you view that as political work?

Yes, we realize that changing the political reality in Hungary and going back to democracy depends on people. And human rights is a tool and the value that can mobilize people so they can stand up for their own rights, enforcing them either through the courts or in political situations, in talking to their representatives, in marching, in organizing... Even small actions, like workshops for just a few participants, are valuable steps towards change.

We've also been engaging more in existing coalitions and forging new ones. We work a lot with grassroots organizations made up of people directly affected by certain issues, such as green organizations that want to protect the environment in their town, or parents who advocate for the rights of their own children. Mothers, especially, are willing to do anything and everything to protect their children, and they are willing to do the political work.

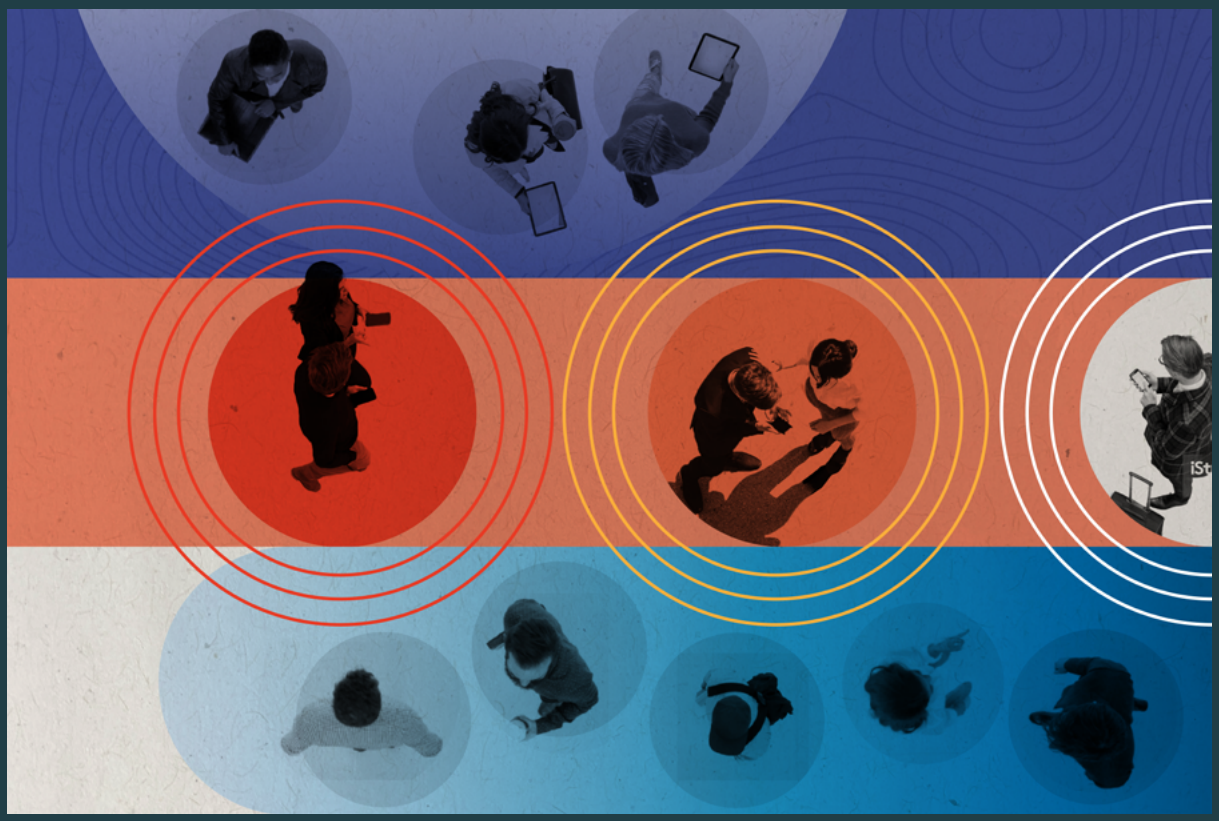
Q Is there anything you have learned in recent years that could be of use to the broader human rights movement?

I think what we need to reclaim as a movement is that human rights are not a matter of left or right. Human rights are essential for everyone, because every person needs dignity, liberty, solidarity. That is what we communicate on the national level, and I think it would be useful to elevate this to the global discourse.

When women give birth in hospitals, no one cares if they are conservative or liberal; outdated hospital policies still violate their dignity, or endanger their lives. Protesters can protest for conservative and liberal ideas, but if they are beaten up by the police, the human rights violation is the same. And there are many examples like that.

So there's a huge opportunity for us to talk about issues that are important for most people and to show them that, actually, human rights are important. And I think we can do this without sacrificing issues that are important for the left, like trans issues. But we have to find a language that is unifying and doesn't allow the far-right to polarize us as they do now.

The *deafening* effect of echo chambers



Akiko Hart
Director
LIBERTY

Akiko Hart, director of Liberty in the United Kingdom, talks here about the dangers of preaching to the choir and the need to engage other audiences, including the "persuadable middle," to advance the human rights agenda. The context is increasingly adverse, with the rise of the right-wing Reform UK party and the possibility of the country exiting the European Convention on Human Rights. Liberty is embarking on an internal process to reevaluate its strategies and goals in light of current threats.

Q Progressive sectors and the human rights movement have been debating the dangers of echo chambers and group-think, which exacerbate the disconnect with the people who have been defining elections recently. What is happening, and why is it a problem?

Liberty is an influencing organization, like most, if not all, members of INCLO. But it strikes me that organizations like ours are not always brilliant at influencing, because influencing isn't about talking to people who already agree with you. It's sitting down with someone who has maybe a different analysis as to why we are where we are, and who might have a slightly different view about where we want to get to.

Like a lot of organizations, we moved to a "digital first" approach, so we've gone really strong on social media. And I think that's great because you get to speak to lots of people in a different way. But what you also get with that is in-group bias. The data suggests that progressive activists are overrepresented on the social media of other progressive activists, which creates a distorted impression of the diversity of views out there, because the algorithm will make us feel that there's lots of people online who agree with us. But that group of people is probably much smaller percentage-wise in terms of the wider population. So on social media, it can mean we are seeing a lot of accounts of people who agree with us strongly, as well as accounts of people who disagree with us strongly, but not much in between. And if we are just talking to people who already agree with us, and possibly enraging people who do not agree with us, we are not really influencing. We might be fundraising, or shoring up support, but we're not influencing.

Also, echo chambers can exacerbate a move towards ideological purity, and a preference for getting in-group validation over trying to persuade other people. And that prevents us from reaching out to people who might agree with, say, 40 percent of what we're saying. It means we might be less amenable to challenging ourselves, and that isn't a healthy place for a human rights or civil liberties organization to be.

One of the problems with all this is that there's a lack of visibility, you don't see what else is out there. And there's a huge risk, because it means that you don't see some of the threats, challenges or events coming up.

Q Can you give an example?

A big example in the UK was the Brexit vote, which took a lot of people by surprise.

Now in the UK, there is a lot of debate as to how much of a threat the Reform vote is, and how people, political parties and the sector should respond. There are people who argue that the Reform vote is a racist or fascist vote, and there are those who think that it's largely a swing vote, a protest vote, people who are fed up with the status quo. It does feel quite similar to the different analyses of the Leave vote during Brexit, including similar shortcomings and biases in the analysis.

I think it's hard, but essential, to distinguish between Reform UK as a political party, and Reform voters. And Reform voters are not a monolith. And of course, what are the differences between Reform UK and some parts of the Conservative party in the UK?

So there's a lot of complexity there. I think people in the sector who have family members or friends who are considering voting Reform will have a far better understanding of how complicated this all is, and of their different motivations. But the NGO world – not just the human rights world – is full of people who do not have connections outside of that world, and that means that we can struggle to understand those motivations. And that has a direct impact on our work and how we communicate.

Q So what can we do to break out of these echo chambers and reach more people?

So as an organization, and as a movement, we need to be thinking strategically about which communities, groups and people we are best placed to influence. We need to ask ourselves: who are we talking about? And who are we talking to? And the answer to that will differ depending on our organization – and that's OK. We shouldn't all be speaking to the same group of people.

For Liberty, given our supporter base and our positionality, I think it's about better engaging the persuadable middle – people who are

not completely opposed to what we're saying, but are not perhaps completely aligned either. And if we can shift some of those people, then we are probably doing our job.

There's a problem with how human rights is perceived, certainly in the UK but I think elsewhere too, in that it can look like we're defending lawyers and marginalized groups, but not anyone else. That has been a very effective smear against human rights for the last few decades, but that is also one that we, as a sector, haven't fully addressed. We've got to find a way of talking about the work that connects to everyone, to people. Which is difficult when marginalized groups are at the forefront of the attack on rights, and that's absolutely where we need to be, that's where the fight is. But we need to find a different way of talking about it that cuts through. This is about people, not institutions.

> *Echo chambers can exacerbate a move towards ideological purity, and a preference for getting in-group validation over trying to persuade other people.*

And then we need to think about what we are trying to achieve. For example, on the issue of protest, the aim isn't to try and get that persuadable middle to get really excited about protest, because they're fundamentally going to see it as quite inconvenient, and a little bit extreme. The aim is to get them to not be hostile about it, and to get them to a position of neutrality about it, so that they're not pushing for restrictive laws. And so you might have to adapt your messaging accordingly to different audiences.

Also, to be able to put forward a progressive offer, and not just be in defence mode, we have to hire very differently and think very differently about the kind of organizations we build. It is difficult to ask people whose entire career is built on defending the status quo to come up with generative new ideas. We must consider who is best positioned to lead transformative work. And we need to consider diversifying teams by hiring people with different political perspectives, including those who might be more conservative, and from different backgrounds – so we don't have a bias towards white, middle-class, and progressive activist people – to broaden the reach and effectiveness of our organizations.

We need a *"quiet room"* to prepare for the future

Hossam Bahgat
Executive Director

Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights

Hossam Bahgat, Executive Director of the Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights (EIPR), talks here about creating a space for reflection at the organization and movement level. In Egypt, under the rule of a former army general, the judicial system has been gutted and rights defenders and journalists are subject to systematic persecution. EIPR is often in emergency mode but is working on ways to do concrete future planning.

What is the quiet room you've referred to, and why is it needed?

There is no bandwidth for the staff that is doing the daily responsive work and the firefighting to forget about the now and reflect about the future. So in my organization we are trying to create the space and resources and staffing for people to do this. And to convince them, sometimes beg them, not to be prisoners of the moment. Because in a country like Egypt, where everything is so bleak, it's really hard for people to do today's work and imagine a different future. We have to actually remove some people from the daily work and say, "You have one job, your job is to think about the future."

We learned from experience how important this is. In 2011, it only took 18 days for (former President) Mubarak to fall after 30 years in power, and we were woefully unprepared. So, imagine something happens now. Imagine there is a change in leadership if (current President) Sisi is dead or incapacitated? What is the next-day scenario?

Now is the time to prepare, because what's happening now is untenable, it's going to change sometime, whether through a crisis or an opportunity. But even if it doesn't change, we owe it to the next generation to leave them with some ideas and proposals.

What are your organization's priorities in that sense?

We have identified three tracks that we need to work on in Egypt – not for the transition between now and change, but for what we, or others, can do once change happens.

One track involves deconstructing the authoritarian or autocratic structure that's been built over the last ten years. So that group is not in charge of documenting or diagnosing the damage, but instead asks, what would it take to undo the damage if we had a democratic government tomorrow? And the centrepiece is rebuilding the justice sector and the rule of law, which have been eviscerated.

Track two is imagining an alternative foreign policy. Egypt has a huge, outsized footprint in the world right now. So the question is, how can we

leverage that and formulate a foreign policy that is both progressive and realistic? Not us as an organization, but the reform movement.

And the third track relates to charting a just economic transition. How can we move beyond a neoliberal economic paradigm, while at the same time staying connected to the global economy?

So, these are things that we think we need to start working on immediately, right now, and for which we need the quiet room.

Q

So the quiet room includes people outside your organization?

Some of us at EIPR can be in the quiet room, but we cannot be the ones formulating these plans and policies, because we are so imprisoned in the moment, and so drained and traumatized. But we also need for this process to be collaborative in drawing on diverse voices and backgrounds and eventually endorsed and owned by a critical mass of democratic actors who hold differing views but agree on a minimum set of core values and proposals. So this is more like a study group, attracting others and providing a space and maybe some background research and questions, and acting as a neutral convener of these discussions. And making sure it's not just a brainstorming exercise, but actual work.

When it comes to the movement at large, I think it has to include people who are part of the movement, together with people that are either retired from it or have studied it. I don't think donors should be part of the conversation, or the international NGOs that have an interest in defending the status quo.

> *My proposition is that this quiet room be limited to people that agree, most importantly, that we are in crisis, and that the causes of the crisis are not all external. We are part of it, and we need to revisit our models.*

My proposition is that this quiet room be limited to those that agree that what we have is not working, that the house is on fire, that we don't

need to improve or fix what we have, but maybe reimagine the whole thing. People that agree, most importantly, that we are in crisis, and that the causes of the crisis are not all external. We are part of it, and we need to revisit our models.

Q

Is this an aspiration or something you are already doing?

It's something we're very actively working on, at the level of my organization and at the level of the movement, where we're cultivating like-minded people.

At the few convenings of human rights defenders that I've been to over the last year, many people realize that there's a need to revisit everything very boldly. They are asking, do we still invest in the UN? Or in national capital advocacy? Do we still do this high-level policy work? Or do we shift resources to community-level, grassroots organizing? Do we keep the current organizational model of the professionally staffed NGO, or do we reflect on other models? Do we have one executive director, or collective leadership? How can we diversify revenue streams beyond foreign funding from major donors in the West?

We are not the only ones asking these questions. I heard this from so many others, especially Global South organizations and activists.

Conclusions

The human rights movement stands at a critical juncture. The erosion of the post-WWII order, the rise of authoritarianism, and the shrinking of civic and financial space have exposed not only an external crisis but an internal one – a crisis of methods, imagination and identity. What emerges from these conversations is a shared recognition that the future of human rights will depend on substantive and structural transformations, not procedural adjustments.

Defending human rights and democratic values today requires a renewed political vision – one that reconnects with people, rebuilds trust, and reclaims the moral and collective power that first inspired the movement. This means moving beyond dependency on Western funding and reframing sustainability as a question of autonomy and political choice rather than financial efficiency.

It also means recognizing that human rights work is inherently political, though not partisan. In the face of reduced civic space and polarization, asserting universal values of dignity, equality and justice is itself an act of resistance. Relevance will depend on the ability to engage beyond traditional allies, to persuade rather than affirm, and to communicate in ways that resonate with the lived experience of broader publics.

Finally, the movement must create spaces for reflection and reimagination. Constant crisis response leaves little room to think strategically or to reinvent institutions and practices that no longer serve their purpose. The capacity to pause, to listen, and to question our own assumptions is essential to renewal.

In sum, standing up for human rights today requires structural and political reinvention – rooted in people, autonomy and imagination. It also requires joint action and solidarity in the face of stepped-up attacks on human rights organizations and civic space, aimed at silencing, suppressing and dismantling our work. Only by *collectively* rethinking our methods, and how we are organized and funded, can human rights remain a transformative force in this new era.