A Human Rights Funding Tragedy Foretold – James Ron

By **James Ron, PhD** May 5, 2025

The new US administration has sharply revised its foreign aid portfolio, and many European donors are following suit. As a result, the overseas development assistance sector is undergoing a substantial contraction. Some of the hardest-hit groups will be those working on human rights, women's rights, and democracy. Among these are many faith-based civil society groups, which now face financial challenges. Yet, these groups also have the resources to address these challenges, including high levels of trust among their co-citizens.

About 10 years ago, my colleagues and I began worrying about the global human rights community's increasingly heavy reliance on funds from Western governments. Although this international enthusiasm for human rights work was encouraging, it was also creating a set of tacit incentives that were skewing NGO funding models, particularly in low and middle-income countries.

Now, those economic chickens have come home to roost.

The Ethiopian Canary in the Mine

Our first major piece on the issue – a 2015 article in the academic journal *Review of International Political Economy* – was co-authored with Kendra Dupuy and Aseem Prakash. We looked at the consequences of new, restrictive government regulations on foreign funding for local NGOs in Ethiopia.

For this research, Kendra traveled to Ethiopia soon after the government published a 2009 law specifying that groups working on politically sensitive topics, including human rights and democracy, could not receive more than 10% of their money from foreign sources.

She learned that in 2011, one year after the law's implementation, the total number of registered NGOs in the country had dropped by 45%, from 3800 to 2093. More troublingly, the decline among human rights groups was even more profound. In 2009, 125 registered Ethiopian NGOs were working on human rights; by 2011, only 12 or 13 remained. The new government law had sparked a crushing 90% drop in the nation's human rights-oriented NGO sector.

Alarmed, Kendra, Aseem, and I began tracking a wave of similar government restrictions across the globe. We learned that the number of countries following Ethiopia's regulatory example was growing rapidly, and we published those results in another academic journal, *World Development*. We warned that if current trends continued, local NGOs of all kinds would be increasingly choked off from their main source of financing.

Public Opinion Is Not the Issue

Why weren't human rights NGOs in low and middle-income countries raising more money from co-citizens? One theory was that human rights ideals were just too foreign and "Western," and that ordinary people in non-Western countries were simply uninterested.

To learn whether this was true, David Crow, Shannon Golden, Archana Pandya, and I launched a series of representative opinion surveys around the world, asking ordinary people for their views on human rights ideas, organizations, and policies. We began with over 6000 interviews in India, Mexico, Morocco, and Nigeria, and then later extended our work to Colombia, Ecuador, and the United States.

In India, our polls were representative of the adult population in Mumbai, with an oversample of rural residents in outlying areas. In Morocco, our surveys were representative of the adult population living in Rabat and Casablanca, boosted once again by a rural sample. In Nigeria, we surveyed the Lagos population with a rural sample, and in Mexico, we piggybacked on the efforts of a national research team at CIDE, a local university, to develop nationally representative data. Our surveys in Colombia, Ecuador, and the US were also nationally representative.

Our research was motivated by a central question: Was the lack of local financial support for human rights activities due to the public's disinterest in, or even dislike for, human rights ideas?

An early version of our findings appeared in 2016 in the *Review of International Political Economy*, and a later, more developed version focused on results in India, Mexico, Morocco, and Nigeria appeared in 2017 in our co-authored book, *Taking Root: Human Rights and Public Opinion in the Global South*.

Our surveys told us that public support for human rights ideas in these four countries was quite high. On average, the public had strongly positive associations with the words "human rights"; they did not think of the phrase, on average, as a foreign or negative imposition. The public's trust in local human rights NGOs, moreover, was quite strong. Although "religious institutions" were the most trusted entities, "human rights NGOs" also polled quite well.

And yet, those same surveys also indicated that very few people had ever donated money to their local rights advocacy groups. For some reason, there was a vast mismatch between the public's stated support for human rights and their charitable giving.

To learn more, we supplemented our opinion surveys with questionnaires sent to hundreds of human rights NGOs worldwide, including representative samples of rights-oriented groups in Lagos, Mexico City, Mumbai, and Rabat/Casablanca.

This second research effort strongly suggested that most rights groups in low and middle-income countries were indeed mobilizing funds from foreign sources, either from international agencies or from individual European and North American governments.

If public opinion was strongly pro-human rights, why were local NGOs getting most of their money from Western governmental sources? Our review of the secondary literature suggested that charitable contributions were common, even in low-resource countries. Most of those donations, however, tended to flow to traditional religious charities, not the "modern" or "liberal" groups working with international-style discourses and activities. Most charitable money was going to soup kitchens and aid to orphans, not to Westernized advocacy groups writing policy papers on human rights policies.

The NGO dependence on foreign aid, we believed, was due to the fact that most of these groups had emerged in an era of comparatively abundant foreign aid for liberal causes. Although each NGO had to compete with great difficulty for foreign money, international funding was nonetheless available. As a result, comparatively few local rights NGOs had been forced to develop the skills, human resources, and social ties required to raise money from their co-citizens.

But Will Citizens Donate? A Unique "Real Cash" Experiment

Whenever we suggested that local NGOs could do more to explore local funding opportunities, professional rights activists would tell us, "Our co-citizens won't have money for our work. International donors are the only viable and reliable source of funding."

But was this true? We couldn't find any serious research on citizens' "willingness to donate" to human rights advocacy in low or middle-income countries.

In a third round of research, my colleagues and I conducted representative surveys among adults in Mexico and Colombia to test whether ordinary people might, in theory, actually donate money when asked.

With the help of a research grant from the Open Society Foundations, we sent teams into the field to conduct new versions of our lengthy, face-to-face human rights survey in Mexico City and Bogota. Upon completing our 40-minute interview, we offered respondents a modest but meaningful cash reward as thanks for their cooperation.

Before leaving respondents' homes, enumerators offered the people they had interviewed an opportunity to confidentially donate some, all, or none of our cash gift to a local human rights group. The groups we described were not real, but respondents did not know that. We offered different descriptions of a hypothetical rights group to four different groups of randomly selected respondents. Each description emphasized different organizational qualities. The first focused on efficacy, the second on trustworthiness, and the third focused on positive impact on the lives of individuals. (The fourth description was a "neutral" baseline for comparative purposes.)

Jose Kaire, David Crow, and I published those results in 2017 in *Open Global Rights*, an online journal, and then produced a short video summarizing our findings with a fourth colleague, Archana Pandya.

Our research findings were clear: People would indeed donate money to local human rights advocacy groups if asked, and this was true across income and educational strata. On average, respondents tended to donate more money to groups we described as either financially trustworthy or particularly effective. The strong sense of trustworthiness of religious institutions, as noted above, suggests that donations might flow especially readily to religiously based human rights groups.

The Open Societies Foundations then funded us to work with Mexican and Colombian NGOs on our findings and even developed a small program to aid local NGOs in raising local funds. They hesitated to invest in the effort in a major way, however, for fear of signaling local groups that they intended to eventually abandon the sector.

The Current Collapse

Fast forward to 2025. Donald Trump and his colleagues have disbanded USAID and cut off most foreign assistance programs, including for human rights-related NGOs. European governments are following suit, shifting their spare Euros to rearmament and defense.

As a result, the dangers my colleagues and I identified over a decade ago have materialized beyond our worst fears.

Human rights became a global discourse in the 1980s and 1990s, as my colleagues Howard Ramos, Timo Thorns, and I showed in previous quantitative work. These ideals then infiltrated international discussions of war, peace, diplomacy, trade, development, aid, investment, and more. For a time, it seemed everyone was using "rights-based," aligning their corporate and governmental rhetoric with the ideals of international human rights law. Official donors followed suit, pumping more money into the world's burgeoning human rights NGOs sector.

Although these human rights do enjoy public support, the local groups promoting these ideas gravitated too quickly towards the comparatively easy money made available by Western governments, UN agencies, and international charities. As a result, the global movement of local civil society groups rested on a narrow and geographically remote financial base.

Now, that money is disappearing as we speak. Fifteen years ago in Ethiopia, 90% of local human rights groups disappeared when the foreign aid spigot was cut off. In a few years, scholars will tally the results of the Trump tidal wave and are likely to learn that a similarly disastrous culling has occurred among local rights groups worldwide. Perhaps not 90%, but certainly more than 50% will likely have disappeared.

What Next?

If the human rights world wants to rebuild, it will have to do it entirely differently, from the ground up, using different methods, language, and human resources. NGOs will have to persuade co-citizens to donate small amounts of money, likely by focusing on the issues they care most about, in their immediate environments. The days of foreign funders and international consultants lecturing local activists on international best practices, evaluation log frames, and complex theories of change are likely numbered.

Gone too will be the cadre of local NGO fundraisers who knew how to network with Canadian, American, and European governments, or with the staff of UN agencies and international charities. They will have to be replaced by a new generation of local fundraisers and community mobilizers who know how to pitch the issues to co-citizens in persuasive ways that resonate with local priorities, beliefs, and discourses.

Human rights ideas may still be popular, but human rights organizations, agendas, and working methods will have to be entirely reinvented. The contemporary human rights system has died, not because its ideals were too "Western," but because the financing model was wrong-headed.

Every disaster, however, creates opportunities. Now, perhaps, a more locally grounded, locally financed, and more sustainable human rights world may emerge.

Faith-based actors will have a huge role to play in this process. As our surveys showed, religious organizations are often the most trusted institutions in their societies, and many are already deeply engaged in charitable work that is congruent with human rights ideas and practices.

Catholic institutions may have a special role, as our surveys in India, Mexico, Morocco, and Nigeria suggested that Catholic respondents were slightly more likely, on average, to trust human rights NGOs than their co-citizens from other faiths. More importantly, personal religiosity across all faiths was associated with greater trust in local rights organizations.

Not all religious interpretations and actors are human rights-friendly.

Still, the potential for real funding synergies is there.

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