

International Development

What Human Rights Watch can teach us

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Two weeks ago, American financier George Soros announced a \$100-million donation to Human Rights Watch, a New York-based group whose 300-odd staff regularly shape global policy through research and advocacy.

The announcement turned heads worldwide as this is the first gift of its size to a private organization like HRW. Usually, big donations of this sort go to mega-institutions such as universities and museums, not human rights NGOs.

Soros's money will be spread over 10 years, and the Hungarian-born currency trader is urging HRW to scare up matching donations. HRW hopes Soros's challenge will boost the group's annual budget from \$48 to \$80 million, and allow them to recruit up to 120 new staff. HRW plans to use these new resources to deepen its research capacity worldwide and strengthen its presence in the capital cities of regional powers such as India, South Africa, and Brazil.

In a world where media-savvy NGOs often supply more information than Western news agencies, Soros's gift is a potential game-changer. HRW's impact already tops that of global peers such as Amnesty International and the International Crisis Group. With this new money, HRW will wield more influence than most middle-power foreign ministries.

HRW's remarkable, 30-year trajectory from small-time NGO to global information powerhouse offers globally-minded Canadians two lessons about building influence.

First, it teaches that private donors can, under certain circumstances, do a better job

than public servants at building influential civil society organizations. Although America is a deeply unequal place, it raises vast, privately-donated sums for good causes. As a result, many American institutions are world class. In Canada, however, our higher tax rates lead to more government than private spending on public interest organizations, especially in the domain of international affairs.

Although taxpayer support of this sort may have many good qualities, it has one fatal flaw: the potential for political interference. HRW avoids all government funding on principle, and insists that its private benefactors respect HRW's ethical commitments.

In Canada, by contrast, many of our best NGOs rely heavily on government grants. As a result, Canadian politicians can pull the plug whenever they want, or exert subtle influence and censorship in myriad ways.

Harper's government has proved a trail-blazer on this count, slashing public funding to groups working on women's issues, abortion, international development, and legal advocacy. It has also sent tacit messages to agencies and NGOs country-wide, warning them to get with the program or face a cut-off in funds.

This difference between American and Canadian NGOs is particularly evident when it comes to Israeli policy.

Although HRW has been lambasted for its work on Israeli military behavior in Lebanon and Gaza, the organization has stood its ground. It has done so even though many of its biggest supporters are Jewish, including George Soros.

In Canada, by contrast, one organization after another has fallen prey to the Harper government's odd love affair with Israel's



Embassy: Diplomacy This Week (Ottawa, ON)			Order/Commande 83116
Date 22.09.2010	Circ. 12373	Page 8	2 / 2

worst hard-liners. This includes non-governmental agencies such as KAIROS, as well as nominally-independent Crown corporations such as Rights and Democracy.

Even the respected International Development Research Center, may have been affected. An Israeli-Arab organization alleged in Federal Court that the IDRC may have defunded it to pre-empt government criticism. The case has since been settled out of court, with a mutually-agreed upon gag rule.

The reasons for all this are structural. When so many of our internationally-oriented institutions are dependent on public funding, vulnerability and self-censorship are bound to follow. Privately-funded NGOs can appeal to a range of donors who share their views, but publicly-funded groups have nowhere else to turn.

HRW's success offers another lesson for internationally-minded Canadians. The New York-based group flourishes, in large part, because its staffers constantly roam the world in search of rare, hard-to-get and timely information.

Staffed by high-energy lawyers, journalists and former aid workers, HRW is able to put an investigative team in place within days of a major human rights event. Soon after, its workers begin sending accounts and analysis via satellite and the Internet to interested parties worldwide.

International Canadian actors, by contrast, rarely generate information of this kind. Our news providers have cut overseas bureaus to the bone, and our diplomats are demoralized and under-funded. Although defense bureaucrats may be getting new money and toys, our overseas policy analysts most certainly are not.

Yet power, the HRW experience suggests, may often stem more readily from the laptop than the gun. Clever, timely, and comparatively modest investments in cutting-edge research capacity can thus yield large benefits.

To best learn from HRW, we must not simply pump more taxpayer money into existing organizations; this would only reinforce current problems of vulnerability, self-censorship and dependency.

Instead, we should ensure that our tax laws are as supportive as possible for private donations, and then ask our governments to provide no more than modest seed monies for privately funded social startups. Some of these groups will be liberal, others may be conservative, and still others will be neither.

More importantly, Canadian individuals and businesspersons must dig deeper into their own pockets and offer more time and cash to the groups they hold dear. Raising private funds in this way is no pipe dream, as HRW's Toronto office has already shown. In recent years, the organization's Canadian fundraisers have mobilized significant sums from local individuals and corporations.

A country as wealthy, talented, and as educated as ours can surely produce fearless and fiercely independent NGOs. To do so, however, we will have to spend more personal money, ask bureaucrats for less, and redefine our understanding of the word "independent."

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