
Article

Can Human Rights Organizations in the Global South Attract More Domestic Funding?

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Abstract

Human rights groups in global South countries rely heavily, but not exclusively, on funds from abroad, and this pattern has created a number of vulnerabilities. Conventional explanations for this pattern include political repression, poverty, and cultural particularity. We argue that these do not tell the whole story, however, and offer evidence that local rights groups receive more public support than many assume. Other, less common, explanations for rights groups' reliance on external funds include habit and routine, fear of political manipulation by co-citizens, and, potentially, a failure to provide services that local people deem sufficiently valuable. To broaden their funding base to within-country sources, local rights groups in the global South will have to hire new staff, experiment with new methods, and better define their value added.

Keywords: domestic fundraising; foreign funding; global South; local funding; local human rights NGOs

1. Introduction

Human rights organizations in the global South depend heavily, but not entirely, on external funds. This dependence has multiple causes, many of which are well known, including global economic inequalities, political repression, and cultural differences. Our research,

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however, suggests that these explanations do not tell the whole story. Instead, other factors, such as fear of local elites, organizational routines, and the utility of rights groups to ordinary people, may also play a role. Importantly, surveys suggest that there may be more domestic support for human rights ideas and organizations than we suspect. Aided by new research, human rights groups can capitalize on this support to grow their local human rights funding base.

2. How dependent are local rights groups?

When non-profit organizations are dependent on any single category of donor, they are vulnerable to disruption, instability, and undue pressure. This is even more true when that one category of funders are foreign citizens living in other countries, with different priorities, histories and cultural preoccupations. Receiving funding from one's fellow citizens is, in itself, a guarantee of nothing, but a heavy reliance on foreign money is unhealthy. At the very least, it forces non-profit leaders to prioritize the interests of people and agencies living far away, rendering the group less accountable to their own citizens, and vulnerable to accusations of unpatriotic behaviour. This is especially true for groups concerned with human rights, an activity requiring them to often criticize their own government. Levelling accusations against one's own domestic authorities while simultaneously relying on overseas money is no easy task.

Are human rights groups in the global South really all that dependent on foreign aid? To date, there has been surprisingly little systematic research on the funding sources of human rights groups, despite many allegations and counter-allegations. Aside from our own studies, we know of only two English language publications on the topic. In 2006, Canada-based legal scholar Obiora Okafor published a study of 20 of Nigeria's estimated 100 domestic rights groups, and found that 'most' were dependent on foreign aid (Okafor 2006). He did not provide more precise statistics, however. In 2008, two Israel-based social scientists published a study based on interviews with 16 of the estimated 26 human rights groups located within the country's internationally recognized (1967 ceasefire line) borders (Berkovitch and Gordon 2008). Over 90 per cent of these groups' operating budgets, they wrote, came from donors located in Western Europe and the United States. Neither the Nigerian or the Israeli study relied on representative samples of human rights organizations, however.¹

To broaden the geographic scope of these studies and provide more statistically representative data, our research team has conducted three distinct investigations, with more planned for 2017. During our first investigation, from 2006 to 2010, we interviewed 128 human rights workers and key informants from 60 countries in the global South and former Communist areas.² Our team met these men and women at a human rights training conference in Montreal, the International Human Rights Training Program, run by the Canadian human rights education group Equitas, with funding from the Canadian government's development agency (which has since been merged with the foreign ministry). Some of these

1 Both used purposive sampling rather than proportional sampling. There are good reasons to do this, but purposive samples cannot—by definition—produce statistically representative findings. For discussion of the pros and cons of purposive sampling, see Patton (2001).

2 For details, see Kindornay et al. (2012). This research was funded by the Canada Research Chairs Program and the Canadian Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council.

128 respondents worked for local rights groups in their own countries, some worked for rights-related government agencies, and others were local employees of international organizations, governmental or non-governmental. Respondents in this 60-country sample were purposively selected for regional, gender, linguistic, and country balance. As such, findings from this survey are not statistically representative of any particular NGO population.

In our second investigation, from 2010 to 2014, we launched a more statistically representative effort, compiling comprehensive lists of all the 252 domestic rights groups we could find in six urban centres located in four countries and world regions—Rabat, Casablanca, Mumbai, Mexico City, San Cristóbal de las Casas, and Lagos. These lists include every organization our team could identify through exhaustive multilingual internet searches and in-person interviews with activists and key informants. Our research team then interviewed representatives of 135 of these organizations, a figure comprising 54 per cent of the relevant organizational population.³ For the purposes of this study, we defined domestic human rights organizations as groups legally registered with the relevant national authorities; formally non-governmental; and domestically headquartered. Each of these groups used the term 'rights' in the description of their vision, mission or main activities. Our definition excluded government agencies, local affiliates of international organizations, and informal entities, including social movement-style organizations. These urban NGO samples were statistically representative of each city's domestic human rights sector.

Our third research effort, currently under way, focuses on human rights NGOs in Mexico City. It involves a partnership with human rights researchers at the Facultad Latinoamericana de Ciencias Sociales (FLACSO) and with public opinion pollsters at the Center for Teaching and Research in Economics (CIDE), both leading Mexican universities.⁴ The FLACSO team reviewed the list of 50 Mexico City groups we had originally compiled, and accepted only 40 of these as fully functioning domestic human rights organizations. FLACSO researchers contacted all 40 and successfully interviewed senior personnel at 34 of them.

The first two studies mentioned above began with a general country condition question. *In your opinion, we asked, what percentage of human rights organizations in [your country] receive substantial funding from foreign donors?* As Fig. 1 indicates, the median human rights worker estimate ranged from a high of 83 per cent in Rabat/Casablanca to a low of 60 per cent in Mumbai, with other estimates of 80 per cent (60-country sample), 66 per cent (Lagos), and 64 per cent (Mexico City/San Cristobal).⁵ The Indian and Mexican figures were statistically indistinguishable, given the small sample sizes and close point

3 For details, see Ron et al. (2016). This research was funded by the International Development Research Centre of Canada; the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada; the National Science Foundation; and the University of Minnesota's Stassen Chair of International Affairs.

4 Our partners at FLACSO-Mexico are Professor Karina Ansolabahere and Dr Jairo López, and our partners at CIDE are Professors David Crow and Gerardo Maldonado. This research is funded by the Open Society Foundation, and involves public opinion surveys as well as NGO questionnaires. We plan to replicate the research in Bogota in 2017.

5 All figures in this article first appeared in James Ron, Archana Pandya and David Crow's 2016 article in the *Review of International Political Economy* (Ron et al. 2016) The *Review of International Political Economy* is a publication of Taylor & Francis Ltd., available online at: <http://www.tandfonline.com>.

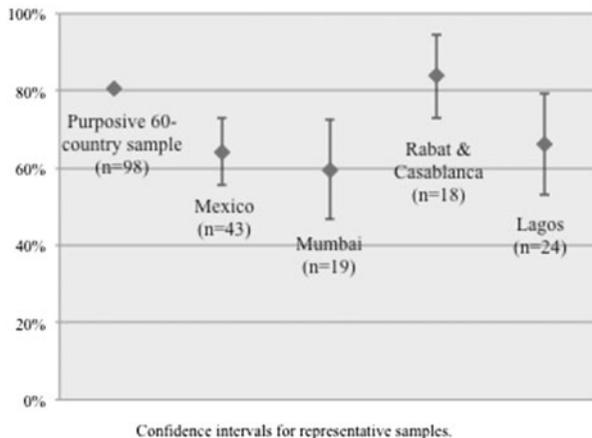


Figure 1. Mean key informant estimate in response to the question, ‘In your opinion, what percentage of human rights NGOs in [your country] receive substantial funding from foreign donors?’

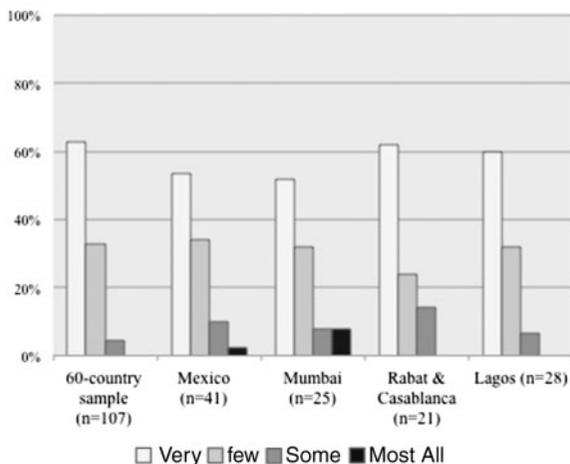


Figure 2. Mean key informant estimate in response to the question, ‘In your opinion, what percentage of human rights NGOs in [your country] raise substantial local funds?’

estimates. What this means, in essence, is that the difference between the Indian and Mexican estimates could be real, or could be due to statistical chance.

We also asked respondents in the first two studies, *In your view, how many human rights organizations in [your country] raise substantial local funds?* As Fig. 2 indicates, ‘very few’ was the majority response, ranging from 62 per cent in the 60-country sample and Rabat/Casablanca to 59 per cent in Lagos, 55 per cent in Mexico City/San Cristobal, and 52 per cent in Mumbai. Estimates from respondents in our representative city samples were once again statistically indistinguishable due to the closeness in point estimates and small sample sizes.

Finally we asked respondents in the first two research investigations whether their own organizations received foreign funds. As Fig. 3 notes, the number of positive responses

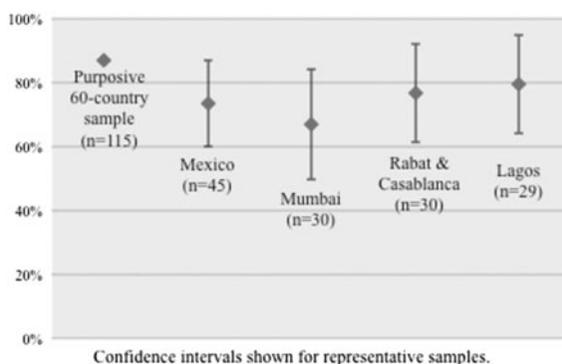


Figure 3. Percentage of respondents answering 'yes' to: 'Does your organization receive foreign funds?'

ranged from 89 per cent in the 60-country sample to 79 per cent (Lagos), 78 per cent (Rabat/Casablanca), 72 per cent (Mexico City/San Cristobal), and 67 per cent (Mumbai).

Using these imperfect measures, our first two investigations thus established that across multiple countries, locally headquartered rights groups are substantially, but not entirely, dependent on foreign funds. In other words, foreign funding is not the entire story, but is a substantial part of the budgetary equation for non-governmental human rights organizations in the global South.

Our third, Mexico City-specific, investigation in 2016 lends further weight to this conclusion. As noted above, we interviewed 85 per cent of organizations in our slimmed-down Mexico City sample. They reported that their average budget was 6.5 million Mexican pesos, valued at roughly 312,000 US dollars in July 2016 terms. Of this, roughly 65 per cent came from foreign foundations and NGOs, and a further 20 per cent came from foreign governments. Not surprisingly, given these figures, 87 per cent of these NGO leaders told our research team that they 'strongly agreed' with the statement, *foreign funding is necessary for my organization*.

The general finding, then, is reasonably clear: foreign aid plays an important role in the budgetary lives of non-governmental human rights organizations in the global South. This is not radically new; many have long suspected this was the case. Still, our research marshals the most precise cross-national data to date in support of this claim.

3. Why does foreign funding predominate?

The reasons for the dominance of foreign funding are myriad, and can be divided into those that are more or less intuitive, and others.

3.1. Intuitive explanations

Global inequality is clearly one key explanation. The very term 'global South' is linked to lower per capita incomes compared to those in the global North. If much of the money for human rights work comes from the North, this must be, in part, for simple economic reasons; it is much easier to make a significant impact with modest donations in US dollars or Euros than with much larger contributions in pesos, naira or rupees. Still, global economics cannot be the whole story. For example, the above-cited study by [Berkovitch and Gordon](#)

(2008) discovered that the budgets of local rights groups within Israel's internationally recognized borders were almost entirely funded by external sources. In that same year, Israel's Purchasing Power Parity (PPP)-adjusted per capita income was 25,600 US dollars, placing it in 38th place out of 180 countries globally. Whatever the reason for Israeli rights groups' dependence on foreign aid, per capita income was not among them.

In addition, as illustrated in Fig. 1, Moroccan respondents thought rights groups in their country were more likely to receive 'substantial funding' from foreigners than did their Indian counterparts. Morocco's per capita income, however, is roughly 25 per cent higher than India's. Thus although Morocco is wealthier than India, its human rights groups receive more, rather than less, external support. Furthermore, while estimates of 'substantial funding' for domestic rights groups in India and Mexico were statistically indistinguishable, Mexico's per capita income was a whopping 77 per cent higher than India's. Given this, global inequality is undoubtedly only part of the puzzle.

Politics are another obvious explanation; in many cases, people are too scared to donate to human rights groups, fearing retribution by governments who view civil society as an existential threat.⁶ As Egyptian activist Hussein Baoumi notes, 'In some authoritarian contexts, legal and structural challenges to local fundraising' make local fund-raising 'impossible or counter-productive. 'One such challenge', he notes, 'is the persecution of LHROs [local human rights organizations] through legal and extralegal measures', while another is 'the problem of severe power inequality' (Baoumi 2016). Government crackdowns on civil society have escalated, and in countries from Ethiopia to Russia it is increasingly risky to support groups vocally opposed to government policy (Dupuy et al. 2015; Henderson 2011; Mendelson 2015; Roth 2016).

Political repression cannot, however, fully explain the dearth of local funding. In Morocco, for example, political conditions improved substantially after 1999, and none of the representatives we interviewed suggested that repression was preventing Moroccan citizens from donating to human rights work (with the possible exception of activities linked to Western Sahara). And while crime-related violence in Mexico has indeed reached epidemic proportions, none of the rights activists we interviewed, either in Mexico City or elsewhere, said citizens were too scared to donate. In India, moreover, some human rights topics are indeed highly sensitive—especially those related to abusive security force behaviour—but other human rights issues are much less likely to trigger harassment. Fear of government repression explains dependence on foreign funds in some settings, but is not a comprehensive reason.

Finally, publics in the global South may strongly dislike liberal, cosmopolitan, human rights *ideas*. In Israel, for example, Jewish citizens often associate the term 'human rights' with the interests of Palestinians rather than those of all people, or of Jews (Gordon and Berkovitch 2007; Montell 2013). Jews of Middle Eastern descent, moreover, may view human rights as elitist tropes wielded by Jews of European descent seeking to stigmatize Easterners as uncultured barbarians (Mizrachi 2016).⁷ In some countries, moreover, publics may be strongly opposed to specific human rights ideas, such as equal rights for LGBTI persons. As the Belgrade-based human rights professional Marko Ivkovic argues, 'On average in Western Balkans countries . . . 58 per cent of citizens believe homosexuality is a sickness, 54 per cent believe that if homosexuality is normal then religion would approve it,

6 For discussion of this logic and its impact on government legislation, see Dupuy et al. (2016).

7 For the broader intra-Jewish ethnic struggle, see Khazzoom (2003).

and 50 per cent believe that in a “normal” family, a child can’t become homosexual’ (Ivkovic 2016). Or as Cameroonian human rights lawyer Alice Nkom argues, most of her co-citizens view homosexuality ‘as an abomination in religious terms’ (Nkom 2013). As a result, it is impossible for her to raise funds locally for human rights work, as ‘no one [in Cameroon] wants to finance what they see as a crime’. The problem, many scholars argue, is that liberal human rights belong to a false universalism peddled by westernized elites, but without strong local roots (e.g. Calhoun 2002; Englund 2006; Hopgood 2013; Mutua 1996, 2001).⁸

However, a closer look at the relevant survey data suggests that moral relativism and mass-elite cultural differences do not tell the whole story. Let’s begin with Israel. In 2003, one survey found that 53 per cent of respondents thought it was ‘very important’ (20 per cent) or ‘somewhat important’ (33 per cent) to protect Palestinian rights, while in 2008, another found that 52 per cent believed Israeli NGOs were either ‘very’ (9 per cent) or ‘somewhat’ (43 per cent) reliable sources of information.⁹ In 2011, moreover, a telephone survey of 600 Jewish Israelis discovered that 65 per cent held favourable views of the term ‘human rights’, 41 per cent held favourable views of ‘human rights organizations’, and 21 per cent favourably viewed ‘Israeli human rights groups working for Palestinian rights’ (Scheidlin 2015). Even if we focus only on the smallest of these estimates—21 per cent—this is still one-fifth of the population in a relatively wealthy country. Why, given this level of public support, do Israeli rights groups still raise 90 per cent of their funds from external, rather than domestic, sources?

Other surveys also show that human rights ideas and organizations enjoy public support worldwide. In 2008, for example, a global polling consortium, World Public Opinion, asked 47,241 people in 25 countries and territories for their views on specific human rights, including torture, political rights, women’s rights, religious freedom, and economic and social rights (WorldPublicOpinion.org 2008). Of these, 19 were in either developing or non-Western countries. In every country, the pollsters found, the norms enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights received ‘robust support’, as did the notion of United Nations intervention to promote these ideals. Importantly, the survey teams found little support for the notion that people around the world lived in ‘different moral universes’.

Moreover, in Russian polls conducted from 2001 to 2014, a leading American sociologist, Theodore Gerber, found consistently high levels of support for economic and social rights, along with growing levels of support for civil and political rights (Gerber 2016; see also Gerber 2017). ‘Although from a policy perspective the 2000s witnessed a clear narrowing of civil space and rollback of civil liberties’, Gerber notes, ‘public support [in Russia] for freedom of expression, religion and assembly grew steadily. By the early 2010s, over 40 per cent of 20–59 year olds surveyed were strong supporters of civil rights, and over 70 per cent supported them at least weakly’ (Gerber 2016). Given the strength of the government’s backlash against Western-supported policies and ideas, this increasing Russian public support for civil and political rights is remarkable.

In South Korea, sociologist Jeong-Woo Koo and colleagues polled 1,500 members of the public in 2011, and discovered that roughly 44 per cent expressed ‘endorsement’ for

8 The debate over universalism is vast, of course, and includes many more scholarly contributions.

9 Figures provided in private conversations with Israeli NGOs. These surveys were commissioned by Israeli rights groups, and were not made public. We do not have details on sample sizes and procedures, and thus cannot comment on the strength of their methodology.

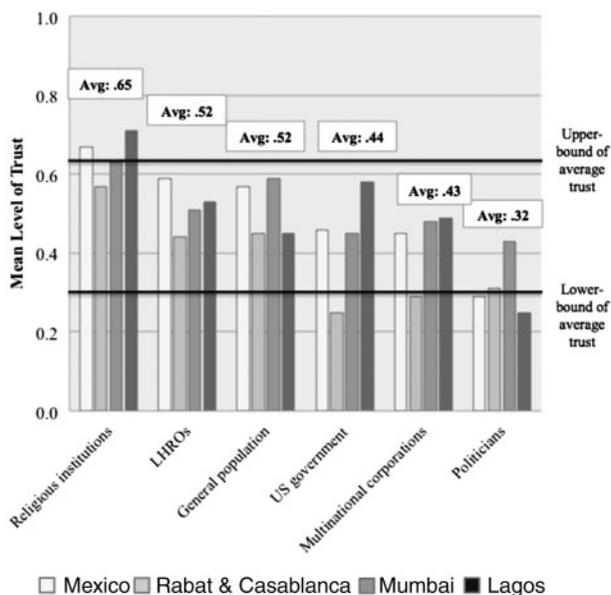


Figure 4. Mean responses to the question, ‘Please tell me how much trust you place on the following institutions, groups, or persons: a lot, some, a little, or none at all?’

varying human rights principles (Koo et al. 2015; see also Koo 2015, 2017). In another, similarly sized survey, Koo found that ‘over half’ of his Korean respondents had participated in, or were willing to participate in, human rights-related activities, including ‘signing petitions, posting opinions online, participating in protests, and funding civil society organizations’ (Koo 2017).

A 2015 Freedom House-commissioned poll of over 2,750 Kenyans also reported that 60 per cent believed human rights groups contributed ‘a lot’, in positive ways, to ordinary people. In fact, 42 per cent of respondents said they had ‘benefited personally’ from the work of rights groups; and 54 per cent said they would be concerned if the government shut local rights groups down (Freedom House 2015).¹⁰

Our own surveys in multiple countries also find support for human rights ideas and organizations (Ron and Crow 2015; Ron et al. 2016). In 2012, 2013 and 2014, we asked 6,100 people—in Mexico nationally, in Rabat and Casablanca and their rural environs, in Mumbai and its rural environs, and in Lagos and its rural environs—about their trust in several domestic and international actors, including their country’s human rights organizations. We used accepted social science polling practices, including questionnaire translation and back-translation, face-to-face interviews with trained local enumerators, and representative samples selected in conjunction with established local survey companies. In each case, one or more members of our team worked in person with the survey company, helping to pilot the questionnaire and train the enumerators.

As portrayed in Fig. 4, our surveys revealed that on a scale of 0 to 1, in which 0 represents ‘no trust at all’, and 1 represents ‘absolute trust’, respondents awarded human rights groups

10 We cannot assess the methodological strength of this survey, as no details are available online, and Freedom House has not responded to our queries.

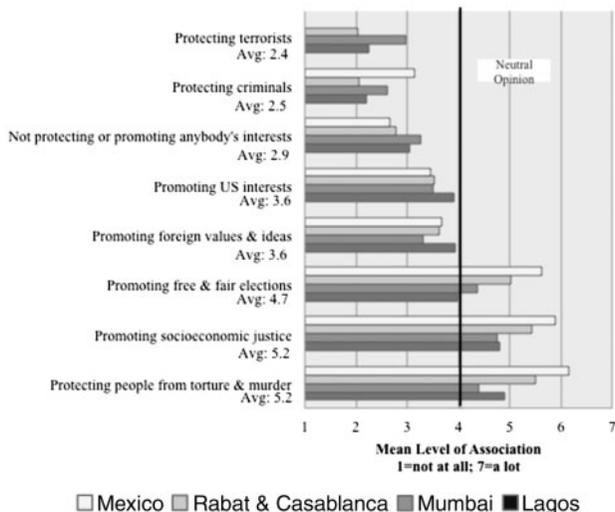


Figure 5. Mean responses to the question, ‘In your opinion, how strongly do you associate ____ with the term “human rights”?’

in their country an average score of 0.52. In comparative terms, this level of trust is reasonably high. The most trusted actors tended to be religious institutions, with an average cross-sample trust score of 0.65, while the least trusted actors were national politicians, with an average cross-sample score of 0.32. By scoring local human rights organizations at 0.52, on average, publics in these four locales placed rights groups in the upper third of their revealed trust spectrum. In Fig. 4, this spectrum is demarked by two lines; the upper bound, which denotes the highest average trust awarded to religious institutions, across samples, and by its lower bound, which denotes the highest average trust awarded to politicians, across samples.

We also asked these publics for their associations with the term ‘human rights’. As Fig. 5 demonstrates, we discovered much stronger support for the positive-sounding associations. The public’s average association of the term ‘human rights’ with ‘protecting terrorists’ and ‘criminals’ on a 1 – 7 scale (in which 1= no association ‘at all’ and 7= associate ‘a lot’) was 2.4 and 2.5 respectively. Its average association of human rights with ‘protecting people from torture and murder’ and other positive sounding phrases was much stronger. And contrary to our expectations, associations of human rights with ‘promoting US interests’ or ‘promoting foreign values and ideas’ were also comparatively low.

Thus while differences in culture, moral philosophies and ideas of justice and equity may be part of the reason for human rights organizations’ dependence on foreign aid, it is not entirely persuasive. Across cultures, world regions, and countries there is some—and perhaps much—support for human rights ideas and organizations among ordinary people.

3.2 Less-known explanations

Global inequality, fear of repression, and cultural diversity may all matter, but not as much as we might assume. Other, less discussed, reasons are also important causes of human rights organizations’ budgetary dependence on foreign aid in the global South.

In some cases, respondents said, in the global South human rights organizations don't want to raise money locally because they want to avoid the concomitant political pressure. People, political parties and businesses in their own country may be willing to contribute money, respondents said, but these might also demand much in return. Distant international donors, by contrast, often exert less political control than local benefactors. This explanation, interestingly, turns ordinary criticisms of external aid on their head. Whereas many critique external aid for distorting the interests, activities, and loyalties of domestic civil society, these respondents suggest that it is local, rather than foreign, aid that can be most distorting. Domestic supporters are close, knowledgeable, and powerful, whereas donors in Europe, Canada or the United States are distant and, perhaps, more accommodating of organizational autonomy. As an Egyptian rights activist argues, the 'power mismatch' between donors and human rights organizations can be 'more severe within the global South' than between South and North (Baoumi 2016). In the developing world, wealth is often 'concentrated in the hands of a few families, corporations or individuals', and this forces rights groups seeking domestic funding 'to adapt their discourses to appeal to big donors from their communities', making them 'accountable to a small rich elite within their countries', rather than to the population at large. More local funding, in these cases, leads to less rather than more autonomy for local rights groups. Understanding this, human rights groups in the global South avoid donations from their co-citizens in favour of money from the global North.

Another possible explanation is vast difference in local and international philanthropic routines. Although every country has a charitable sector, most individual and institutional donors in the global South prefer to channel their funds to concrete projects such as schools and hospitals, or tangible services such as the provision of food, shelter and clothing. The advocacy work of human rights groups, by contrast, seems intangible and alien to potential global South donors. Here it isn't the human rights principles that are the problem, but rather the human rights organizational routines, based as they are on research, documentation, policy advocacy, and political or judicial lobbying.

In international donor circles, by contrast, these activities have become a recognized and legitimate category of 'development assistance' behaviours, largely due to the rights-based approach to development that was mainstreamed into the UN and other international agencies since the late 1990s (Cornwall and Nyamu-Musembi 2004; Kindornay et al. 2012b; Schmitz 2012). These agencies now have earmarked budgets and a stylized language for human rights, involving widely used terms such as 'governance', 'citizen empowerment', and 'the rule of law'. Individuals in the global South may need convincing that human rights activities are worth funding; international donors no longer do. For a decade if not more, 'human rights' work has become a recognized category in their budgetary spreadsheets. As a result, it is far easier for human rights groups to appeal to foreign rather than domestic sources.

Finally, it is possible that the work human rights activists do is simply not sufficiently useful to ordinary people. Development critic William Easterly argues that much international aid is wasted on projects for which there is little popular demand, much like the former Soviet Union's five-year plans pumped out ill-fitting shoes that no one wanted or used (Easterly 2006). Wherever genuine demand exists, he argues, social entrepreneurs will figure out a way to supply that need. If contemporary human rights work isn't attracting many local 'buyers', perhaps this is because it has yet to discover how to offer a 'product'

or ‘service’ that sufficient numbers of local people want, need, and are willing to support financially.¹¹

4. A future research agenda

To raise more domestic money, human rights groups will have to hire new kinds of people, develop new social ties, and build new fund-raising capacities. They may also have to figure out a better ‘market niche’, in which they offer something so valuable that local donors, big and small, will want to pitch in. Across the developing world, domestic rights groups have convinced international donors that their work is valuable, meaningful, and worth supporting. Now, the real task lies in convincing their publics, rich and poor, of the same thing.

In ongoing and planned work in Mexico City and Bogota, our team is researching the possibility for local human rights fund-raising. In addition to surveys of domestic rights organizations, we are asking the general public when, why, and how might they contribute to the work of domestic human rights groups. These surveys include ‘discrete choice experiments’, in which we offer respondents a list of hypothetical NGOs with different attributes, and ask them to distribute hypothetical sums of money between them. We are also conducting an actual cash experiment, in which we give respondents a small but not insignificant sum of money, and ask them to consider donating to a human rights organization. In the latter experiment, we vary our description of the hypothetical human rights organization to emphasize different attributes and styles, and will tally the amount awarded to each.

Our research aside, the more general point is this: to thrive, human rights organizations are going to need to develop a broad mix of resources, including both external and domestic funds. Human rights organizations in the global South have spent at least 20 years building their capacity for international fund-raising; the time has come to build the capacity, and the research base, to support fund-raising at home. Domestic resources are not appropriate at all times, for all issues, and in all places, but they must become a bigger part of the human rights budgetary toolkit.

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11 For a similar approach to advocacy organizations in general, including human rights groups, see Prakash and Gugerty (2010).

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