



KENNETH ROTH

Kenneth Roth is the executive director of Human Rights Watch, one of the world's leading international human rights organizations, which operates in more than 90 countries. Prior to joining Human Rights Watch in 1987, Roth served as a federal prosecutor in New York and for the Iran-Contra investigation in Washington, DC. A graduate of Yale Law School and Brown University, Roth has conducted numerous human rights investigations and

missions around the world, and he has written extensively on a wide range of human rights abuses. His twitter account is @KenRoth.

ABSTRACT

The partnership between international and national groups has always had its moments of difficulty, but the typical geographic divide between the two types of groups has usually led to a natural and healthy division of labor. This article analyzes several factors that are now challenging this equilibrium, e.g., these days the largest international groups are placing more of their staff outside the West, and the people conducting research and advocacy for international organizations are increasingly from the global South. Tensions between international and national groups occur primarily in relation to media attention and fundraising. Yet, there are ways to strength partnerships between national and international organizations, such as by active strategizing together, sharing information and resources that may more readily be available to international groups, establishing staff exchange programs, sharing donor prospects and fundraising leads, and speaking and publishing jointly, and assisting each other with the promotion of work through tools like social media.

Original in English.

Received in March 2014.

KEYWORDS

Human Rights Watch – Global South – International organizations – Partnership



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This paper is available in digital format at <www.surjournal.org>.

ESSAY

WHY WE WELCOME HUMAN RIGHTS PARTNERSHIPS

Kenneth Roth

The global human rights movement has long been a partnership between international groups and their national and local counterparts (which for brevity I'll refer to as "national" groups). That partnership is a source of tremendous strength, and it is all the more important as the issues we address become more complex and our adversaries, more sophisticated.

National groups bring an intimate knowledge of their country, closer connections to victims and witnesses and greater access to their country's journalists and officials. They are the first source of advice and strategy for international groups as they set their agendas and carry out research and advocacy. National groups are also better placed to provide direct support over time to victim communities, whether through legal action or educational programs.

International groups, for their part, bring the credibility that comes from having long conducted investigations in many countries and situations around the world. They often have greater access to the international media as well as the Western governments that have been important, if inconsistent, external supporters for human rights concerns. These international connections enable international groups to speak out publicly when security threats might force national groups to be more cautious and to defend national colleagues when they face persecution.

When it comes to foreign policy, international groups have the resources and geographic reach to know about abuses abroad that a national group or its government might want to address. The international groups also frequently have more knowledge about debates in international fora in which national counterparts might want to engage. It is rare that a foreign ministry, let alone a national group, has the resources to know in any detail what is happening on the ground in such disparate places as Syria, Burma, the Central African Republic, North Korea, the United States or any of the scores of other countries that warrant international attention and where international groups like Human Rights Watch regularly work.

The partnership between international and national groups has always had its moments of difficulty—misunderstandings born of different perspectives, priorities and resources. But the typical geographic divide between the two types of groups has usually led to a natural and healthy division of labor.

Several factors are now challenging this equilibrium. To begin with, the

largest international groups are placing more of their staff outside the West. Human Rights Watch, for example, has long sought to locate researchers in the countries that they address. We believe this greater intimacy will produce a closer working relationship with national groups, a more nuanced understanding of rights problems, greater contacts with the government officials whose policies we hope to change and a positive influence on the direction and effectiveness of Human Rights Watch, itself.

Moreover, long gone are the days when international groups were presumptively staffed by Westerners. The people conducting research and advocacy around the world are increasingly likely to be from the country in which they are based, native speakers of the country's language, and fully immersed in its culture. The Human Rights Watch staff of 415 consists of 76 nationalities based in 47 countries. Amnesty International's core staff of 530 includes 68 nationalities based in 13 countries.

That staff diversity eases communication between international and national groups and ensures that international groups are informed of national concerns not only through external partnerships but also through internal discussion. Staff members from the global South have contributed to the gradual evolution of international groups with their greater attention, for example, to economic and social rights as well as to people whose rights traditionally were neglected, such as women, children or people with disabilities. But this change in staff composition also means that, in any given country, international and national groups are less immediately distinguishable, which can complicate a clear delineation of roles.

In addition, as certain governments outside the West grow in influence, Human Rights Watch is making a greater effort to influence their human rights policies, not only at home but also in their relations with other governments, much as we have traditionally worked to influence the foreign policies of the major Western powers. Meanwhile, human rights groups based outside the West are themselves growing in stature and skill, and like Conectas in Brazil, are increasingly interested in addressing human rights issues beyond their national borders.

Despite the obvious partnerships that these developments encourage, the evolution requires new negotiations about the roles of international and national groups, changing the division of labor that had long governed their relationship. There is still enormous complementarity but also the potential for friction.

At a national level, the presence of international groups still tends to be modest—in the case of Human Rights Watch, usually little more than one or two researchers or advocates, possibly supplemented by an assistant. In immediate numerical terms, this limited international presence is dwarfed by most national groups. However, this modest presence is backed by the resources and reach of the international groups—typically far more than a national group can muster.

This evolving relationship has meant a stronger movement, but it has also given rise to certain tensions. The most obvious ones can arise over the currencies for building any rights group—donor and media attention.

The concern over donors is obvious enough. If there were only a fixed number

of donors with an interest in a country—traditionally, institutional foundations—adding another rights group to the mix could force a further division of a finite pool of resources. However, our experience at Human Rights Watch is that neither the number of donors nor the quantity of available donor funds is fixed, particularly in the case of individual donors.

In the Western countries where Human Rights Watch does the bulk of our fundraising, we find that a substantial portion of our revenue comes from first-time donors to the human rights cause. Indeed, this extension beyond an existing donor base has been the primary reason Human Rights Watch has been able to grow. And when the donor pool expands, it does so not only for international groups, but also for others. In several cases in Europe, for example, Human Rights Watch has helped to develop or deepen a donor's interest in the human rights cause, and the donor in turn has become a significant funder of national groups outside the West, as well.

Human Rights Watch has not yet done enough fundraising in the global South to establish a track record there, but I have every reason to believe that as we do so, our experience will be similar. The target of any fundraising effort would not be the institutional foundations that are already funding our national partners, but individual donors who are not yet contributing to the human rights cause. Just as we have drawn on our global network of existing donors to identify prospective new ones in Western countries that we enter for the first time, so we would proceed in any Southern country where we started to raise funds. Because most national groups have made little headway attracting major individual contributors, there is every potential for mutual benefit.

As for media attention, the situation is more complicated but not as black and white as some fear. If the issue is simply who is quoted in a human rights story that journalists are already primed to cover, adding a spokesperson from an international group to the mix could reduce the media opportunities for national colleagues. However, by investigating rights conditions in the country, we try to increase media reporting on rights issues. And by highlighting a government's position on rights issues abroad, we try to generate media attention to issues that were typically ignored. In each of these cases, the effect is to expand media opportunities, not to carve up existing ones.

At the program level, I have found that international and national groups are eager to work together and greatly benefit from the partnership, but there is at least a potential for tension that is worth noting. Although my experience has been that international and national groups consult extensively, and well, in setting priorities and developing advocacy positions, the two types of groups do indeed consider a different set of factors in making their decisions.

The issue is not fact-finding. Everyone in the human rights movement understands that careful, objective, honest fact-finding is essential to our credibility and effectiveness. However, I see the potential for that unanimity of perspective breaking down on other matters.

In Egypt, for example, tensions arose on the question of whether Human Rights Watch should advocate a cutoff of US military aid in light of the July 2013

coup and subsequent brutal crackdown on the Muslim Brotherhood and other critics of the government. Conscious of the fact that Human Rights Watch had advocated a cutoff of military aid in comparable circumstances in other countries (as well as desirous of avoiding US complicity in and support for such a severe, violent crackdown), some members of the Human Rights Watch staff felt it important to advocate a similar cutoff of military aid for Egypt. However, because the Egyptian government was so successful in shutting down independent media in the country and thus portraying its actions as a defense against “terrorism,” there were fears in Egypt—shared in this case by some Human Rights Watch staff—that advocating a cutoff of US military assistance would lose the sympathy of potential allies in the country. In the end, Human Rights Watch delayed its advocacy and Washington suspended some military aid without our involvement, although we later came out against a threatened resumption of military aid so long as the crackdown continued.

I can imagine similar differences of perspective arising when the members of a national group felt they had a right as citizens of their country to express an opinion on an issue but an international group believed that human rights principles did not provide a clear enough answer to justify its intervention. An example might be with respect to competing ways of achieving economic or social rights, such as two different kinds of health-care or educational schemes, each of which might be considered a conscientious effort to achieve the right in question.

Perhaps the biggest source of tension concerns institutional resources. Groups such as Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch are simply much bigger and more established than any of our national counterparts. The front line of an international group in any given country may look thin, but it is backed by a formidable organization with capacities and expertise that can dwarf what is available to national counterparts.

Yet admitting these differences need not mean resignation to fraught relations. I am certainly committed to ensuring that they do not. Rather, in each case, with the proper sensitivity, antidotes exist that can ease tensions and smooth relations.

For example, awareness of fears about competition for donors can be met by active sharing. International groups can also help national counterparts by vouching for their good work with potential donors.

Concern about competing for media interest can be met by active efforts to speak and publish jointly, whether with joint news conferences or simply by quoting national partners in an international group’s news releases or multimedia productions, as Human Rights Watch regularly does. Similarly, our multimedia productions often include the voices of national activists. With the emergence of social media like Twitter, it has also become easy to promote the work of national groups without a formal news release.

National groups will also naturally be more in the media spotlight as newly empowered governments take the lead on global rights issues—as Brazil has done on electronic surveillance and South Africa on LGBT rights. There are often good strategic reasons for such non-Western leadership—namely, the importance of demonstrating that concern about these issues is global, not just Western. The

same factors will encourage national groups to play a leadership role, which will increase media interest in their voices.

The greater institutional resources available to the big international groups are easy to share. My experience is that my colleagues are eager to offer legal, policy, advocacy, research, fundraising and operational advice based on the expertise that they have acquired as staff members of a well-resourced international group. Although Human Rights Watch does not undertake formal “capacity building” programs—other groups and funding streams are devoted to that purpose—we see a strong movement as essential to our common success. An important part of our joint work is its effect in facilitating the transfer of skills and expertise in both directions.

One useful example of such sharing is HRC Net, a network of international and national rights groups that address the UN Human Rights Council. On the one hand, it is a vehicle for an international group like Human Rights Watch, with permanent staff in Geneva addressing the work of the council, to share information about developments and advocacy opportunities there with national counterparts, many of whom do not have staff in Geneva. On the other hand, we all emerge stronger because it has also become a vehicle for national voices to be heard in Geneva, rebutting accusations from abusive governments that council initiatives are pushed by only international groups or the West.

Human Rights Watch recently supplemented that partnership with the establishment of a “Votes Count” website to record how various governmental members of the Human Rights Council vote on key resolutions. This transparency about actions in Geneva that traditionally have remained obscure helps national groups and journalists to address this key element of their government’s foreign policy.

Another example is a program that Human Rights Watch has begun in which we invite colleagues from partner organizations in the global South to spend time in one of our main offices. Beyond benefiting us all by facilitating a sharing of perspective and analysis, the program permits the visiting colleague to become personally acquainted with a range of specialized staff whom they can more easily draw on in the future.

Another example can be found in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, a large and diverse country in which there were obvious advantages for Human Rights Watch to work with many national groups. To facilitate coherent and strategic advocacy, particularly on the need for a national tribunal with significant international involvement to provide accountability for serious abuses in eastern Congo, we helped to organize a Congo Advocacy Coalition involving some 200 human rights and other groups.

The coalition has helped international and national groups to speak with one voice while addressing decision makers at various levels. It has been a superb vehicle for raising media attention to these issues and generating the governmental will to address them. Human Rights Watch has joined similar partnerships with national groups on such varied issues as defending LGBT rights in Cameroon and ending the practice of institutions forcing orphans to beg in Senegal.

Sometimes these partnerships require Human Rights Watch to take a back seat to our national colleagues. We do not enter conversations with our partners with the presumption that we will take the lead, but rather seek to determine the most effective ways to accomplish our common goals. For example, in combating certain African governments' attacks on the International Criminal Court, the voices of African groups were most important. When President Omar al-Bashir of Sudan, facing an ICC arrest warrant, traveled to Nigeria in 2013, Nigerian groups led the effort to seek his arrest while Human Rights Watch and other international groups played a secondary, reinforcing role. The result: Bashir left the country hurriedly to avoid the ignominy of a local arrest effort.

It is often best for national groups to take the lead when national governments try to portray a human rights concern as a foreign imposition. That has been the case for LGBT rights in Uganda, for example, and is often the case in efforts to combat female genital mutilation. Addressing a government's foreign policy will frequently be done most effectively with national groups on the front line.

The tension between idiosyncratic advocacy pressures in a given country and the desire of international organizations to remain relatively consistent in their positions over many countries requires, in my view, a certain flexibility. Again, the accuracy of fact-finding should never be questioned, but international groups should be able to tolerate a degree of variation in advocacy positions from country to country, such as the particular sanctions that we might seek in the face of serious abuse.

After all, the reason for advocacy consistency is a matter not of fundamental principle but of pragmatism—to make it harder for target governments to deflect pressure on the grounds that they are being singled out unfairly. That is a real concern, but because it is a pragmatic one, it must be weighed against other pragmatic considerations such as whether the consistent advocacy position is that one that will work best in a particular country. In this weighing of pragmatic concerns, it is not clear that advocacy consistency will always be the dominant consideration.

Perhaps the most important thing that international groups should do is to treat national colleagues with appropriate deference and respect. International groups should seek out as much as possible the considered views of our national partners, on the understanding that they have an immediate experience of a rights problem that we often lack. The deference to their experience and expertise does not have to be unqualified, but assuming a unity of views among national groups, it should be presumptive. In situations of inevitable difference of resources and capacity, the basic respect implied in carefully listening and deferring to our national colleagues can go an enormous way toward easing any possible tensions.

It is a sign of our movement's strength that both international and national groups are capable of projecting a presence beyond their traditional domains. It is also a positive and healthy sign that we can talk about the evolving nature of our relationships honestly and dispassionately. Above all, we must recognize that despite occasional differences in perspective, any resulting misunderstandings are dwarfed by the values and cause that we serve in common.