



Theory of Change: Navigating the Human Rights Ecosystem

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1. Visual Overview

The Problem

Human rights and the people who defend them face continuous threats, rooted in entrenched systems of oppression.

Our Approach



We mobilize funding, support, and solidarity.



We deliver critical resources and partnership.



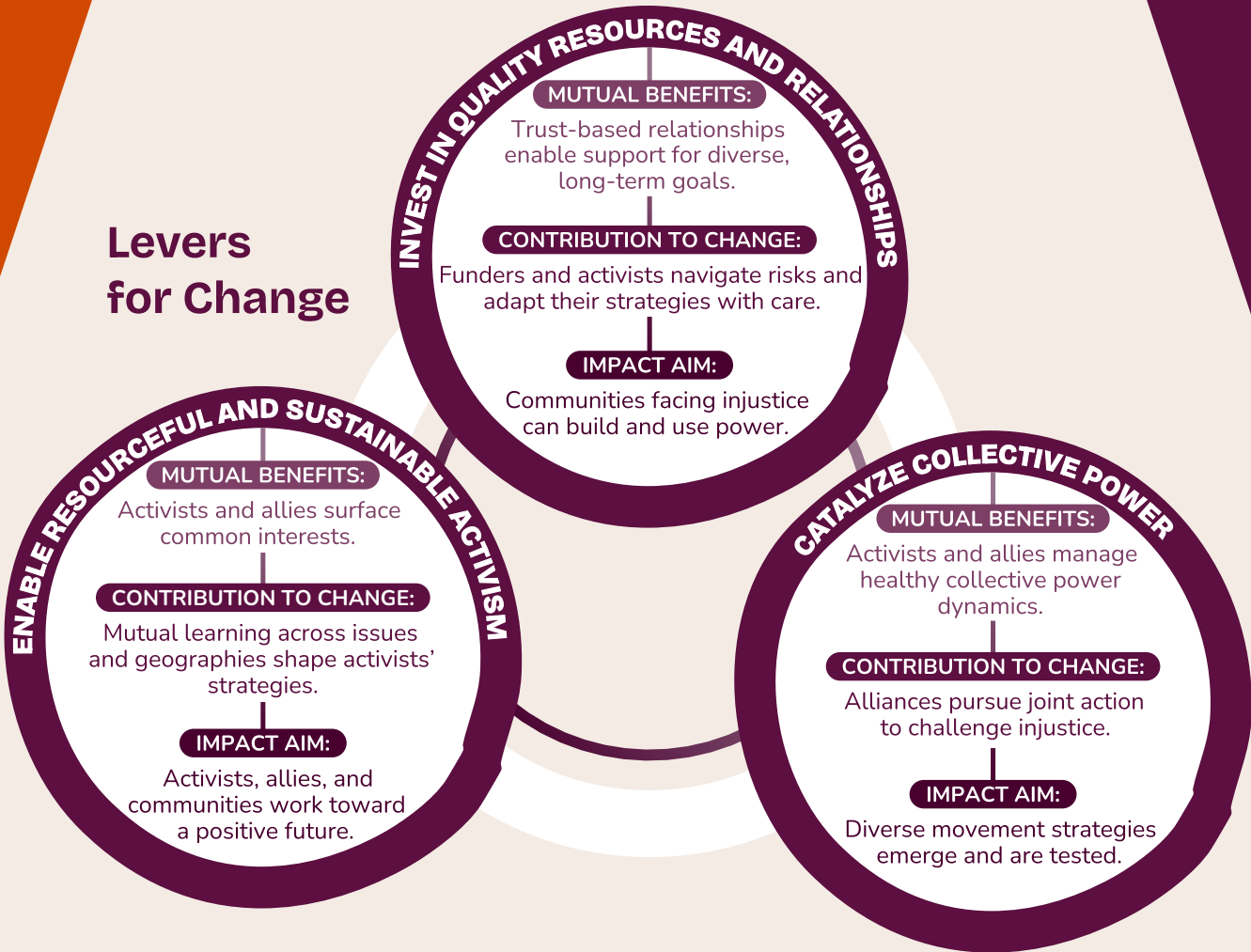
We connect human rights defenders and allies.



We catalyze transformative action against injustice.

Our Values

- RESPECT
- INTEGRITY
- AGILITY
- SUSTAINABILITY
- INCLUSIVITY



Possibilities for Change



Success can take different forms depending on the political conditions faced by human rights defenders in any given context.



TRANSFORM
Redistribution of power toward a more equitable status quo.



REFORM
More equitable conditions are realized within the status quo.



HOLD THE LINE
Effective resistance to maintain status quo and prevent setbacks.



WEATHER BACKSLIDING
Protection and damage limitation during periods of heightened injustice.

2. Introduction

Around the world, human rights movements led by people with lived experience of repression and injustice are challenging structures of power and transforming societies. With a higher quality and quantity of resources, they could have an even greater impact.

Yet across much of the world, hard-won advances have sparked backlash. Civic space has become contested or closed, authoritarianism is rising, and inequality

is growing. Human rights, and the people who claim and defend them, face multiple threats from diverse opponents and linked systems of oppression.

In this context, the Fund for Global Human Rights (FGHR) invests in the power of human rights activism to expand justice, dignity, and fundamental freedoms. We aim to resource and enable activism by communities facing rights abuses.

Our 2025–30 Strategic Outlook sets out the following priority areas for investment:



Resourcing human rights work in closed spaces



Investing in systemic change



Centering lived experience

With these focus areas in mind, our theory of change draws on evidence from funder and practitioner experiences to guide our support for resourceful human rights movements in diverse and complex contexts, including East Africa, Latin America, North Africa, South Asia, Southeast Asia, and West Asia.

While conditions, challenges, and opportunities differ across these contexts, we will use the theory of change to connect our work and learnings. This common framework will help us to ask bold questions, fuel creative adaptation, and act on our insights toward a more just and equitable world.



3. Ecosystem Approach

The challenges facing human rights movements today require solidarity among diverse people and organizations. The possible solutions will stem from long-term, community-driven efforts. We use an ecosystem approach to understand change and inform how we design, adapt, and learn from our efforts to contribute to a more just and equitable future. An ecosystem approach involves understanding and engaging with the practices, regulations, norms, or beliefs that lead to patterns of harm or benefit for ecosystem actors.

In the context of human rights, the ecosystem comprises individuals, communities, civic and private organizations, and public institutions that are involved in or affected by one or more human rights issues.

Rather than a linear pathway to change, an ecosystem approach recognizes the complexity of the world around us and seeks to apply a common set of principles to the specific contexts in which we work.

Guiding Principles

Relationships: Understanding and influencing an ecosystem requires diverse perspectives and working with others. We seek to act with humility and manage power dynamics responsibly.

Uncertainty: Various factors and actors operate in unpredictable ways to influence human rights conditions and outcomes. We must be persistent, creative, and resourceful in pursuing change.

Emergence: Systems are dynamic, and change can emerge suddenly or slowly, stemming from prior preparation and, often, failures. We must be prepared to learn and adapt with care.

4. Theory of Change

We believe that **IF** activists facing human rights violations receive financial and strategic support, **AND** peers, allies, and donors collaborate with activists in solidarity, **THEN** activists will be able to persevere and thrive in their work, respond to injustices, and build sustainable solutions.

Ultimately, this will contribute to a healthy and hopeful ecosystem of human rights activism that uses collective power to overcome interlocking systems of oppression.

Levers for Change

Conditions vary greatly around the world. The tactics that work in one context may not be appropriate in others.

We always aim to meet the ecosystem where it is through local knowledge and understanding of each specific context. Our intention is to equip activists to meet the moment, using one or more of three levers to contribute to change:





Invest in quality resources and relationships

We foster trust-based relationships with grantee partners and donors, mobilizing flexible resources to address interconnected human rights issues toward realizing justice. A holistic framing of rights and justice issues, as opposed to a single-issue approach, facilitates the distribution of philanthropic funding to diverse grantee partners working on long-term goals. These relationships contribute to dynamic approaches for navigating risks and adapting strategies with care. Ultimately, we aspire for all investments to build and support community power among those facing injustice.



Enable resourceful and sustainable activism

We facilitate connections and spaces for reflection to build solidarity among the people pursuing change. The quality, rather than quantity, of connection will surface diverse perspectives and common interests among grantee partners and allies. Reflection and learning across issues, geographies, and generations will contribute to shaping future activists' strategies and shared agendas. Ultimately, we aspire to see the human rights ecosystem infrastructure strengthened by activists, allies, and community members building and practicing solidarity toward a positive future.



Catalyze collective power

We support existing or new initiatives of multiple organizations acting together. Our support strengthens the conditions necessary for alliances to pursue inclusive, joint action—from addressing power dynamics to shaping a shared purpose and plan. These enabling conditions contribute to the quality of equitable joint action, such as how resources are shared and who is involved in decision-making. Ultimately, we aspire to support robust, intersectional human rights movements that build and use collective power to test and improve strategies with an engaged support base.



Possibilities for Change

Progress and success can take very different forms depending on the political, social, or economic conditions that human rights defenders face in any given context. With this in mind, the framework below can be used to set both a clear direction for programmatic work and realistic expectations of our contribution to change. Shifts in the ecosystem may include:



TRANSFORM

Redistribution of power toward a more equitable status quo

Transformative change is a desired and meaningful improvement in conditions for a population facing intersecting human rights abuses relative to the preexisting conditions. Power has shifted such that new mindsets and approaches emerge, and people in this population experience positive changes in their lived experiences. The broader public is also aware of this shift. There is likely room for further improvements in conditions for this population.

Historic examples include the civil rights movement in the United States and the anti-apartheid movement in South Africa. More localized examples could include a previously excluded Indigenous population gaining a voice in decision-making or women significantly advancing their position in society, such as through new access to suffrage or reproductive rights.



REFORM

More equitable conditions are realized within the status quo

Reform is an incremental revision or improvement of existing institutions or rules to include a previously excluded population and produce more equitable and just results. Power is built and leveraged by activists to achieve a new policy or legal precedent or to influence more equitable distribution of services or other resources. Ongoing efforts are likely needed to sustain or deepen reforms achieved.

Examples include legislative decisions influenced by activist advocacy, such as the work of movements in India to win equality protections under the law for LGBTQ+ people or the Mexican government's decision to establish a committee for repatriation and justice for the Pasta de Conchos mine disaster following nearly two decades of intense litigation.



HOLD THE LINE

Effective resistance to maintain status quo and prevent setbacks

Holding the line maintains or stabilizes conditions to prevent rights abuses becoming more prevalent or pervasive. Activists work to build support for and uphold current protections, policies, or practices until opportunities for change open in the future. By definition, this work does not aim to yield advances; rather, it seeks to mitigate potential setbacks.

This can be a useful strategy following a significant human rights achievement or in response to signals of worsening civil or political conditions. This is the situation for communities in many parts of the world, such as Indigenous peoples' efforts to maintain land sovereignty or workers' organizing to keep wage protections in place.



WEATHER BACKSLIDING

Protection and damage limitation during periods of heightened injustice

When conditions have deteriorated or a systemic crisis has occurred, human rights activism shifts to ensuring the survival of individuals, organizations, or populations facing acute threats or repression. Power may be used or shared among activists and allies to pursue holistic protection strategies or manage the effects of profound or rapid decline. While the effects of this work are difficult to measure, support during such periods positions activists to persevere and respond to new moments of opportunity when they arise.

This is typically the situation for activists working in contexts of civil war, armed conflict, or significant internal repression. Similarly, many activists shift their work to address immediate community survival needs during disasters, such as the COVID-19 pandemic or the 2023 earthquakes in Turkey. Supporting activists in challenging contexts to weather backsliding is critical to the long-term potential of civil society to advance rights and justice in the future.

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