

## The Grantmaking Strategy of the US Human Rights Fund

In September 2005, the US Human Rights Fund released its first Request for Letters of Inquiry (RLOI). The open RLOI generated nearly 350 applications from organizations across the country, working on issues ranging from civil liberties, to immigrant rights to economic justice, via a variety of strategies including community-based organizing and education, policy advocacy and litigation, and legal and judicial training. The requests totaled \$52.7 million for \$1.5 million in possible grants, revealing both a broad interest in learning about and carrying out domestic human rights work and many of the related capacity needs. The Fund's subsequent research of domestic civil and human rights organizations (*Voices from the Field*) surfaced similar patterns within the field and confirmed that the Fund enjoys significant opportunities and faces considerable challenges in crafting an effective grantmaking strategy.

The Fund recognizes the opportunity of responding to and supporting such broad based interest in carrying out domestic human rights work. Although domestic human rights advocates have long been active and engaged in domestic social justice work, it is unlikely that a few years ago so many groups would have self identified as a U.S. human rights organization or would have sought out support for work that explicitly centers on human rights methodologies and strategies. Social justice advocates are increasingly recognizing the potential for human rights to affect policy, legal and cultural change in the United States, and their interest in the Fund reflects an eagerness to join peer organizations in integrating and implementing human rights strategies into their overall organizing and advocacy work.

Contained within this opportunity however, is also one of the Fund's most central challenges: the demand for support of domestic human rights work far exceeds the available resources. This disparity surfaces not only in the Fund's own grantmaking program, but in the overall funding community as well. While it is true that every field experiences such a gap between the overall requests and the available resources, the US human rights field is perhaps unique in the degree to which that is true, given the relatively small number of funders that provide support for domestic human rights work and the enormous expectations placed on them as a consequence.

In crafting a grantmaking strategy, the Fund must also account for an additional type of disparity. Domestic human rights groups are increasingly interested in learning about and carrying out domestic human rights work, yet they generally lack the in house expertise and staff capacity to conduct an independent human rights campaign. Rather, many groups design advocacy and organizing campaigns that rely on partnership opportunities with peer organizations that do have the necessary expertise in human rights standards and methodologies. The number of these latter peer organizations however is still quite limited, and currently they are simply unable to meet the large and broad number of requests for training and partnership support.

Therefore, the Fund's approach to grantmaking reflects the dual challenge of responding to a wide breadth of interest in domestic human rights work with limited resources, coupled with the importance of deepening human rights knowledge and awareness amongst domestic social justice advocates. In the absence of being able to provide sufficient and direct support to the vast range of actors that populate the field, the Fund seeks to instead help build the infrastructure to which those US human rights organizations and their other rights based counterparts can turn, as they seek to learn more about human rights work and its application within the United States. As such, the US Human Rights Fund has made substantial investments in regional and national networks, as well as human rights education and training initiatives.

The former enables US human rights groups to develop linkages and partnerships with peer organizations across a variety of issue areas and organizational sectors, as well as engage in resource sharing, peer-to-peer learnings, and strategizing work. More fundamentally, networks help to achieve cohesion and effectiveness amongst domestic human rights groups while still preserving and promoting the diverse and broad nature of the US human rights movement. While the Fund's support for regional and national networks help to build the breadth of the domestic human rights movement, its support for human rights training and education is aimed towards achieving deeper expertise in human rights amongst US social justice organizations and the capacity to carry out related work. In this priority area, the Fund provides grants for cross sector and cross issue training in human rights standards and norms,

as well as more specialized trainings that focus on the use of human rights within issue specific organizing and advocacy. In both instances however, the Fund places particular emphasis on those advocates and organizations that supplement these broader trainings with sustained partnerships to assist individual organizations in carrying out specific human rights advocacy or campaign work.

The Fund's support for communications research and coordinated messaging is aimed towards understanding how domestic social justice organizations can more effectively message human rights values and norms within the United States. Similar to work in its other grantmaking priorities areas, support for U.S. human rights communications ultimately can only be effective if it emphasizes how advocates in different regions and issue areas coordinate how they communicate about their own domestic work. Therefore, the Fund's grants in this area have so far encouraged a participatory, collaborative process that enables the field as a whole to gather qualitative and quantitative information on the best use of human rights in domestic social justice work. As this work continues, the Fund expects to expand its grantmaking in this area towards the development of materials and training, and other types of support, that enable advocates across the domestic human rights field to develop innovative and effective media work and shared messaging strategies.

Closely linked to its grantmaking in national and regional networks; human rights education and training; and communications and coordinated messaging, is the Fund's final grantmaking priority area: Strategic Thought and Advocacy. Thus far, the Fund has provided only limited support in this area. However, as advocates continue to carry out work in the other areas and human rights norms are increasingly integrated into U.S. legal and policy arenas, the Fund anticipates that the field will be even better positioned to carry out effective advocacy work that relies, at least in part, on human rights. In turn, the Fund will accordingly increase its support for advocacy work that builds on the core capacities of meaningful and timely use of human rights strategies; tightly integrated communications plans; and collaborative work that engages multiple constituencies and sectors in achieving the related policy goals.

It is the US Human Rights Fund's hope that this four-pronged approach to grantmaking will help provide advocates with the necessary capacities and resources to learn more about and carry out effective and strategic U.S. human rights work; and ultimately will enable the domestic human rights field to grow and mature – not so that it supplants all other social justice approaches, but rather that it supports them and lends towards a set of shared principles and commitments.

Critical to the success of this grantmaking strategy however is close coordination with donor partners, both within and outside the Fund, and an increase in support for domestic human rights work overall. The Fund's emphasis on field building capacities means that issue specific domestic human rights work and projects that are aimed towards learning how to integrate human rights into an organization's ongoing work receive limited direct support from the Fund itself. Yet these are the very sites where domestic human rights will most critically be used in conjunction with other advocacy and organizing strategies, and where the potential to have an impact on social justice in the United States is most significant. We therefore encourage donors to support human rights as a complement to the strategic funding they are already doing. Donors can support the movement by joining the USHRF collaborative, or by providing support directly to groups in their fields who are interested in these strategies.

For those interested in learning more about interest in U.S. human rights work and providing related support, please contact Puja Dhawan, at the US Human Rights Fund, 212-764-1508 x204 or [pdhawan@publicinterestprojects.org](mailto:pdhawan@publicinterestprojects.org).