

RESOURCING FOR RESILIENCE: LESSONS FROM FUNDING WOMEN'S RIGHTS MOVEMENTS

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INTRODUCTION

The last few years have seen two related trends: a marked shrinking of civil society space in a number of countries, and a greater recognition of the need for targeted and appropriate resources to support enabling environments for civil society to thrive.¹ Shrinking space for civil society has entailed severe attacks on women's rights activists, women human rights defenders (WHRDs) and women's rights groups and movements. Meanwhile the focus on enabling environments has meant that increased attention is being paid to the funding mechanisms needed to resource civil society, including women's rights movements, to resist these attacks.

This article discusses how the kinds of work women's rights social movements are undertaking exposes them to risks in some predictable ways, why a focus on resourcing resilience is a responsible and effective means of supporting them to handle these risks, and the ways in which Mama Cash and the Urgent Action Fund are collaborating towards a 'continuum of funding' approach to do this well.

WOMEN'S RIGHTS ACTIVISM IS RISKY

Since 2005, the Women Human Rights Defenders International Coalition has been generating knowledge and awareness of how WHRDs are subject to particular threats "because of their gender and/or the work that they do on gender-related issues."² The UN

Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders focused her 2011 annual report on this topic, to highlight some of the most common threats WHRDs face, and make recommendations about how governments could better respond.³

The work WHRDs undertake almost inevitably places them at risk of attack because they are challenging deeply entrenched societal norms, which are then perceived as highly controversial, and because they are women, whose activism itself may be a challenge to prevailing gender roles, e.g. by taking on very public leadership roles, rather than being in less visible parts of civil society.⁴

The Urgent Action Fund for Women's Human Rights (UAF) tracks the source of threat experienced by the human rights defenders that seek its support, as well as the issues that defenders are working on at the time they experience the threat. This assessment found that activists working on issues of gender-based violence and LGBTIQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, intersex, queer) equality appear to be most at risk, though threats are also context specific. Half of activists supported by UAF were threatened by a non-state actor, most often a religious extremist or fundamentalist group. This shows that there are both state and non-state actors that seek to shrink the space for civil society and attack its defenders.

Some sections of civil society, particularly those organisations focused on human rights and social justice, routinely experience backlash, and women's rights movements are no exception. Indeed, backlash may be an indicator of civil society's progress. Ask a grassroots human rights organisation how they know

that their campaign is making a difference, and they may well answer that they know they are being successful when people start trying to hack their website. That said, the perseverance of movements in the face of backlash is not to be taken for granted. In the context of backlash, individual activists lose their lives, organisations are disbanded, and movements falter.

INTEGRATED SECURITY, ENABLING ENVIRONMENTS, AND RESOURCING RESILIENCE

In her 2014 annual report, the Special Rapporteur outlined the elements she felt were needed to maintain a safe and enabling environment for human rights defenders. These included:⁵

“a conducive legal, institutional and administrative framework; access to justice and an end to impunity for violations against defenders; strong and independent national human rights institutions; effective protection policies and mechanisms paying attention to groups at risk; specific attention to women defenders; non-State actors that respect and support the work of defenders; safe and open access to international human

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rights bodies; and a strong and dynamic community of defenders.”

The Women Human Rights Defenders International Coalition has elaborated on the need for what it calls ‘integrated security’ for WHRDs.⁶ Integrated security highlights the importance of violence prevention measures; recognises that WHRDs should be and feel safe in all areas of their lives (at home, at work and on the street); acknowledges that WHRDs are subject to different and specific threats, depending on their contexts and biological, economic, geographic and socio-cultural factors, including age, class, language, gender identity and sexual orientation, location of residence, race and ethnicity, and religion; and includes psychological well-being as a complement to physical well-being, with a therefore necessary additional attention paid to the situations defenders’ organisations and families are in.

It is the resilience of activists, groups and movements that helps them to sustain and take advantage of enabling environments. Integrated security approaches, when applied well, also support resilience. Increased resilience in civil society strengthens its capacity both to persevere in the face of backlash and threats, and to leverage new opportunities. When resilience is strong, movements are able to persist, even in the face of tremendous backlash. Within unstable, constantly shifting contexts, adaptive capacities help organisations not only to weather threats, but also to seize windows of political opportunity. When resilience is strong, movements adapt to rapidly changing political situations, and leverage moments of opportunity for progress toward their goals.

Norris et al (2008)⁷ provide an exhaustive list of research that supports a link between the availability, accessibility and diversity of resources and the resilience of both individuals and communities. While resource availability alone may influence effectiveness, resource accessibility is critical to resilience. The resilience of communities in New Orleans following the 2005 Katrina disaster was weakened in part because, while the United States is one of the wealthiest countries in the world, resources were not accessible to the affected communities. Resource diversity, meanwhile, means that if one source of resources fails, others are still available. In a civil society context, resource diversity may also ward off the risk of co-optation by donors of civil society, by lessening reliance on any one source of financial support.

RESILIENCE- ENHANCING GRANT-MAKING IS BOTH SUSTAINABLE AND RESPONSIVE

Mama Cash is the oldest international women’s fund in the world. With over 30 years of grant-making experience, it has found that stable, multi-year, flexible core resources are key to building resilient, creative organisations. Many of its partners operate in contexts with high levels of discrimination, political repression and conflict, and flexible, core, multi-year support enables them to adapt strategically and promotes their sustainability.

While long term, unrestricted funding is the single most important type of funding to strengthen the effectiveness of civil society, rapid funding provides a vital complement to strengthen its resilience.

- Core, or institutional, resources cover costs related to salaries, rent and utilities, i.e. overheads and operational costs, as opposed to project costs only. Such unrestricted resources fund organisations as an entity, rather than funding any particular set of activities. In this way, an organisation is supported, even as it changes its activities.
- Flexible resources are those that can be reallocated during a grant period to respond to changed circumstances and unexpected opportunities. That is, they are not required to be tied to original plans, but can be put to other uses as the organisation rolls out its work and its needs change.
- Longer term or multi-year resources are often the key for many organisations to be able to pursue dramatic social change. With such funding, organisations can consolidate their learning and efforts, and plan ahead, as their income is more predictable. Having secured funds for a number of years also frees up time that would otherwise be spent fundraising every year.

Rapid funding, meanwhile, helps activists, groups and movements to meet a particular challenge to resilience. Having access to flexible resources when they are most needed supports organisations in a moment of crisis, or when a sudden shift in the political landscape creates a window for advocacy. While long term, unrestricted funding is the single most important type of funding to strengthen the effectiveness of civil society, rapid funding provides a vital complement to strengthen its resilience. Rapid response funding supports emergency interventions when time is of the essence, effecting lasting change through fast mobilisation, activism and protection of women's human rights.

Although a number of donors make some emergency funds available to their existing grantees or affiliates, resilience for civil society overall can only be achieved if rapid funds are accessible via processes that are open to any activist or organisation, and not solely those that have pre-existing funding relationships with a donor. A growing group of rapid funders are becoming increasingly more networked and accessible. These include the network of Urgent Action Funds, Frontline Human Rights Defenders, the Euro-Mediterranean Foundation, the Observatory for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders, East and Horn of Africa Human Rights Defenders, the Meso-American Women Human Rights Defenders Initiative and the Dignity for All Fund for LGBTI Defenders. These funders have the capacity to deliver funding to activists and organisations within very rapid timeframes. For some, this can be as quickly as one day to a week. Collectively, they deliver over an estimated US\$5m in rapid funding annually, mostly through very small grants of less than US\$10,000.

Rapid funding, particularly in security situations, is a specialised kind of grant-making. It requires orienting the grant-making department differently, and may demand specialised skill sets, such as staffing an emergency hotline, or providing encryption for all communications with a human rights defender.

Sometimes civil society organisations do not want their major donors to know that they are experiencing threats, out of the belief, often founded on experience, that those donors will get cold feet and stop funding in their region if they hear about those threats. For these reasons, it is important that there be independent sources of rapid funding for civil so-

ciety, beyond emergency pots of funds within existing funders' budgets.

BRIDGING SUSTAINABILITY AND RESPONSIVENESS: THE CONTINUUM OF FUNDING

One way to resource both the long term effectiveness and the resilience of civil society is through collaboration between funders that provide core support and funders that provide rapid support. Mama Cash and Urgent Action Fund - Africa (UAF-A) have both funded the Women's Organization Network for Human Rights Advocacy (WONETHA), a Ugandan sex workers' organisation, over the past several years, to develop its lobbying and advocacy capacities, by providing different types of strategic resources and capacity support.

The current political climate in Uganda is conservative and repressive for women and sexual minorities. In recent years, Uganda's political elite has become increasingly conservative, and Christian fundamentalist organisations and other right-wing groups have become more influential, opposing the rights of LGBTIQ people and sex workers, to name two examples. This political focus on maintaining the 'social fabric' by

prescribing rigid gender norms and attempting to control sexuality is a familiar strategy for diverting attention from other fundamental political issues, such as unemployment, public corruption, inadequate public services and a lack of democratic space.

The lives of Ugandan sex workers are tough and dangerous. Many women, as well as trans people and some men, undertake sex work as a viable job to support themselves and their families. However, sex work is criminalised in Uganda and, as in most places, sex workers experience extreme stigma. Both stigma and criminalisation fuel violence and harassment by police, clients and others, as well as a culture of impunity. When instances of violence or arbitrary arrest are reported to the police, they are rarely investigated, and sex workers often experience further violence and intimidation for speaking up. WONETHA and other sex workers' organisations have documented police raids, violence by clients and public humiliation.

WONETHA has grown since its founding in 2008 to emerge as a key sex workers' and women's rights organisation in Uganda, able to act on a national stage. WONETHA's results include:

- Commissioning research on access to HIV prevention, treatment, care and support services for sex workers in Uganda;⁸
- Successful lobbying against provisions most in violation of sex workers' rights in the HIV/AIDS Prevention and Control Act of 2014 (proposed 2010, passed 2014), such as mandatory testing of people convicted of drug abuse or possession

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of hypodermic instruments associated with drug abuse, as well as those convicted of offences including prostitution; and

- Lobbying against the Anti-Homosexuality Act (2009-2014) as part of a broad civil society coalition working to promote and secure human rights.

Mama Cash has provided WONETHA with flexible core funding since December 2010, which has expanded its resource base and enabled it to develop professionally, including by growing its staffing, paying office expenses and building its skills base. Mama Cash's funding has allowed WONETHA to determine its own priorities and cover essential operating costs that other funders often do not cover. This has provided the organisation with a vital source of stability and sustainability over time, allowing it to plan, build, consolidate and resource the areas of work it has felt is most critical at any particular time.

UAF-Africa's rapid response grant-making model has, in turn, provided WONETHA with resources to enable it to make strategic and urgent interventions to address security needs, as well as to move advocacy work forward. Support from UAF-Africa has allowed WONETHA to act quickly, and respond both to windows of opportunity and threats in a number of instances, including:

- In 2010, securing legal counsel and support to prepare a court case in which a police officer assaulted a sex worker (a frequent type of violence faced by sex workers);

- In 2012, securing legal support to represent staff in court after WONETHA's Gulu office was raided, data was seized and staff were arrested on false grounds;
- In 2012, increasing security awareness among WONETHA staff and members, and developing a digital safety plan for the organisation's information, following the police raid and confiscation of digital files in Gulu;
- In 2014, participating in a legal challenge to the Anti-Pornography Act in Uganda's Constitutional Court.

Combining core funding and rapid response support has proved powerful and effective for WONETHA, not only because WONETHA has needed the combination of both longer term and rapid response funding to be an effective advocate, but also because sustained core support has allowed the organisation to build its capacities to become strong and resilient, enabling it to then respond quickly and effectively to opportunities and threats when they have arisen.

CONCLUSION

Women's rights activists, WHRDs and women's rights groups and movements are likely to face threats in the course of their work because of who they are and the issues they work on. Dedicated attention to their specific needs through an integrated security response, as well as broader attention to enabling environments for civil society to operate, will support them to resist and react to these threats. A focus on

their resilience, in addition, will help them to persist and continue to pursue their advocacy agendas.

Resourcing for the resilience of civil society needs a variety of complementary approaches, including providing a continuum of funding that both provides flexibility and sustainability to groups, and is responsive to their changing circumstances and needs and opportunities. Rapid funding is critical but complementary: it supports the resilience of civil society only if that civil society has had the core funding to continue to exist in the first place.

This means that collaboration is key. Collaboration and partnerships allow funders to maintain independence, but ensure complementarity. This contributes to greater accessibility of rapid resources and better accountability for how they are used, and increases the diversity of funding sources, which is in itself a factor in strengthening resilience.

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