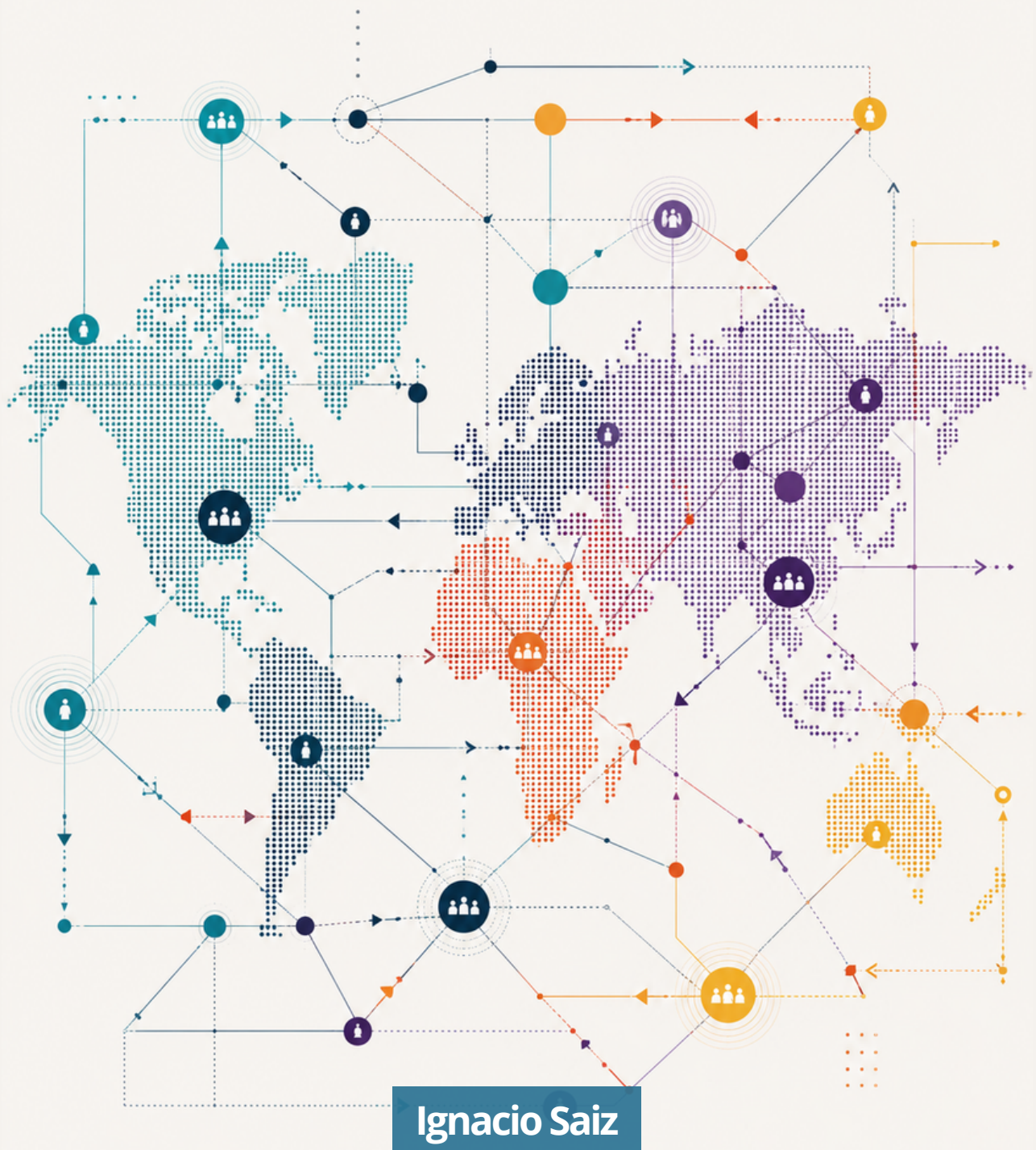


CHARTING HUMAN RIGHTS CHANGE THROUGH A DISORIENTING DECADE

Insights from a global survey
of human rights organizations



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Executive Summary

The past decade has been exceptionally challenging for human rights work. Democratic backsliding, authoritarian resurgence, widening inequality and accelerating climate impacts have unfolded as the international architecture in which the human rights system took form has fractured. Human rights organizations have faced rollback, repression and attacks on the legitimacy of rights themselves. Understanding what has nonetheless been achieved during this period—and how—is essential to assessing the contribution of human rights work to date and its continued relevance going forward.

This report draws on reflections from close to ninety organizations across regions and thematic areas, distilling their insights on the **challenges** they have faced, the **achievements** they have secured, and the **lessons** they have drawn over the past ten years. It examines progress across **five dimensions of change** that reflect common objectives in human rights work. Across contexts, organizations have secured significant **law and policy** victories – from defending the right to protest to recognizing the right to a healthy environment. They have advanced **accountability and remedy** for grave human rights violations, helping to bring high-profile perpetrators to justice and secure meaningful redress for communities affected. They have shifted **norms and narratives** around disability, the economy and climate, and around justice itself. Their progress in **strengthening the human rights ecosystem** has reinforced its capacities, connections and resilience. Critical, though perhaps least visible, is the role they have played in **preventing harm** by halting rollbacks, averting crises and building longer-term protective safeguards.

Reflections by human rights organizations underscore that progress is rarely linear. It has meant simultaneously **holding the line** against regression, **breaking new ground** in critical areas, and **laying the groundwork** for longer-term transformation. Many advances were contested or slow to materialize, often secured against a backdrop of backlash and uncertainty. Yet their insights also point to deeper, more enduring changes over the decade – changes that have expanded who is recognized as a rightsholder, where responsibility is understood to lie, and how power can be challenged.

The report also distills learning on what is required to achieve durable human rights change. Across contexts, organizations point to the need for closer **strategic alignment** around long-term visions of systemic change; greater **collaborative power** across movements, actors and geographies; and deeper grounding of human rights work in **community leadership**, agency and lived experience – both as a principle and as a driver of more durable outcomes. They highlight the importance of expanding tactics beyond traditional methods, including creative and compelling **narrative strategies** to contest power and build broader public support. Finally, organizations reflect candidly on the need for more **sustained resourcing**, underscoring the importance of collective learning and experimentation to ensure that hard-won gains are not lost and that the human rights ecosystem remains viable.

The evidence surfaced in this report suggests that, even in a hostile and volatile environment, human rights work has contributed to real and durable forms of change. While many gains remain fragile, they have broadened the frame on whose voices are heard, which rights are recognized, and how they can be realized. The analysis points to **three priorities** for consolidating progress: through deeper attention to structural drivers of abuse, renewed investment in narrative power, and funding approaches more attuned to the long arc of change.



● Introduction

Over the last decade, hundreds of human rights organizations have worked across the globe to advance the full range of rights in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, deterring abusers and holding perpetrators accountable, and promoting the equality, autonomy and access to power of marginalized people. A vibrant ecosystem of national and international organizations – NGOs, movement-led networks, media groups, academic institutions, philanthropic organizations and UN expert bodies – works across diverse regions and issues. In September 2025, amid significant shifts in the global humanitarian and human rights landscape, over 140 organizations were invited to share reflections on key achievements, challenges and learnings from their work over the last decade via an online survey. The ten-year timeframe was chosen to capture long-term gains and enduring obstacles over a period characterized by profound threats to human rights and democratic governance. Close to two thirds (87 organizations) contributed responses. This paper distils key insights from the reflections shared. Quotations and observations are drawn directly from survey responses and presented without attribution to specific organizations.

The paper charts the meaningful human rights advances achieved despite what has been, for many, a profoundly disorienting period for human rights work.

- **Section 1** outlines three sets of **challenges** – political, strategic and organizational – faced by human rights organizations amid democratic backsliding and intensifying pushback.
- **Section 2** highlights their major **achievements** across five dimensions of change: Law and Policy; Accountability and Remedy; Norms and Narratives; Ecosystem Strengthening; and Prevention – tracing a pattern of non-linear progress where they have held the line on some fronts while shifting the dial on others.
- **Section 3** draws on respondents' **learnings** about what enables durable change, outlining five shifts needed to build a more resilient and effective human rights ecosystem: aligning strategies, building power, centering inclusion, renewing narratives and rethinking resourcing.
- **Section 4** reflects on taking these insights forward, proposing three **priorities** for consolidating progress over the last decade and meeting the challenges ahead.

While human rights work spans numerous fields and subfields, this analysis is based primarily on perspectives from organizations working to sustain the human rights architecture; to prevent large-scale human rights violations and secure justice and accountability for these; to hold corporate and other economic actors accountable; and to advance the rights of persons with disabilities.

By sharing this analysis of insights contributed by participating organizations, it is hoped that the achievements and lessons will inform and inspire others in and beyond the human rights and philanthropic communities as they explore promising strategies and potential shifts at this challenging moment for global human rights work.



1. A Decade of Deepening Crises: Key Challenges

The past decade has been marked by a profound deterioration of the global human rights environment. Surveyed human rights organizations highlight three broad sets of challenges: the political trends and structural forces confronting their work; strategic challenges in adapting to these shifts; and organizational and resource constraints compounding these pressures.

A. Political Challenges

Human rights organizations have operated in a landscape defined by interlocking global crises and coordinated political backlash. They describe an increasingly hostile climate characterized by **democratic recession and the rise of authoritarian governments** across continents, including what one termed an *'existential threat'* to democracy in the US and a wave of far-right electoral victories globally that have rolled back gains on issues from gender-based violence to land rights. This trend is fueled by declining public trust in democracy, as large segments of the population feel that *'democracy does not deliver'*, while elites push exclusionary, market-based solutions to economic grievances: *'The idea that capitalism can exist without democracy or human rights... resonates among those elites and young people and leads to disbelief in the value of collective solutions'*.

A geopolitical retreat into nationalism has further frayed multilateralism and fostered **overt disregard for international norms** including human rights and respect for territorial integrity, which are *'increasingly brushed aside by global and regional leaders, providing room for predatory behaviour free from accountability'*. This has bolstered a culture of impunity, feeding the perception that there will be few, if any, consequences for violating human rights. Countries once seen as allies of human rights (on some issues) are setting aside these principles as trade or security considerations prevail: *'Those autocratically inclined learned there were no real consequences for illegality, whether it was the open rigging of elections by Russia or the assassination of Jamal Khashoggi'*. International justice and human rights mechanisms are under attack, underfunded, and suffering from eroded trust.

The **backlash against human rights** has been concerted and organized, with a surge in anti-rights rhetoric against gender-related, LGBTQ+, disability and migrants' rights. Dominant narratives portray corporate regulation and socioeconomic rights as hindering economic competitiveness. Tactics used against human rights defenders, journalists and others have intensified, with unprecedented levels of violence and criminalization using counterterrorism, security and 'foreign agent' laws and the proliferation of strategic lawsuits against public participation (SLAPPs) as well as tighter administrative restrictions. In the development and humanitarian arenas, the backlash is visible in *'a new impulse to militarization and neo-colonial imperialism'*, unprecedented civilian casualties in conflict, and *'preferences for securitized approaches over human rights'* in aid, development and migration policy.

Respondents also highlight the **underlying factors driving democratic erosion**, notably *'seismic shifts'* in the information environment and unregulated digital technologies that have polarized discourse and served authoritarianism: *'Combating misinformation and pursuing defamation remedies has thus become a necessary (if unwanted) part of our work'*. Many cite the concentration of corporate power across political, economic, security and technological spheres as a defining systemic challenge. *'Governments and corporations working in more blatant collusion to amass power and wealth'* have coopted governance at all levels and entrenched an economic model that *'prioritizes profit for the few over the rights, wellbeing, and dignity of the majority, as well as the health of the planet'*. In the words of one Latin American organization, *'the unchecked power of corporations in contexts of inequality, environmental collapse, and institutional fragility'* is *'one of the most urgent challenges of our time'*.

B. Strategic Challenges

In this deteriorating environment, human rights organizations have faced significant **strategic and tactical challenges in meeting the moment**. An international food rights network observes that, while the need for robust human rights advocacy has grown, *'the enabling conditions to pursue this work have eroded - addressing this contradiction remains one of the most urgent tasks for our movement moving forward'*. Some call for *'a fundamental reevaluation of how we approach human rights'*, and a break with the complacency that, according to a network of funders, led to reduced investments in human rights work by governments and civil society actors a decade ago, *'leaving us playing catch-up to defend against coordinated attacks and reclaim lost ground'*.

As a result, **tactics and narratives have struggled to keep pace** with the speed and effectiveness of far right and anti-rights forces. Many emphasize the need for *'constant adaptation of methods and tools'* in response to evolving risks and forms of repression. Limited narrative and communications power is cited as a major challenge. Over-reliance on social media as a primary advocacy tool risks trapping human rights messaging in echo chambers, limiting its effectiveness in *'cutting through the noise'* and disinformation. Some note the insufficiency of arguments based solely on international law, while others point to how human rights language is co-opted, for example when Global North countries resist efforts to democratize global economic governance. Organizations also highlight the tendency to default to defensive postures, as resisting reversals and *"prioritizing the urgent over the important"* limits proactive or counter-offensive strategies. The long timeframes of legal work, relationship building and convincing authorities often clash with political windows of opportunity or funder expectations for rapid results. An overreliance on written and evidence-based outputs, limited influence on elite institutions and reduced opportunities for dialogue and traction with powerholders also constrain impact.

A recurring theme is the **persistence of silos and imbalances** which hamper collaboration and overlook crucial intersections. Despite efforts to bridge fields, many organizations see continued disconnects between advocacy areas such as human rights and economic justice, or disability and children's rights. Others note movement fractures, for example around decriminalization. Intersectional exclusion within and across movements remains a barrier, as seen in the challenge of mainstreaming disability in broader human rights processes. Some observe that the global ecosystem continues to be dominated by large international NGOs which *'extract evidence from affected communities and then conduct advocacy... that they think will be beneficial'*. These dynamics compound the many political obstacles to cross-border solidarity and collaboration, including government clampdowns on perceived foreign interference.

C. Organizational Challenges

Strategic effectiveness has also been shaped by organizational challenges—from security and administrative burdens to governance and resourcing constraints. Human rights organizations and the communities they serve have faced heightened physical and digital security risks. According to an international organization dedicated to business and human rights, over the past ten years there have been thousands of documented attacks in nearly 150

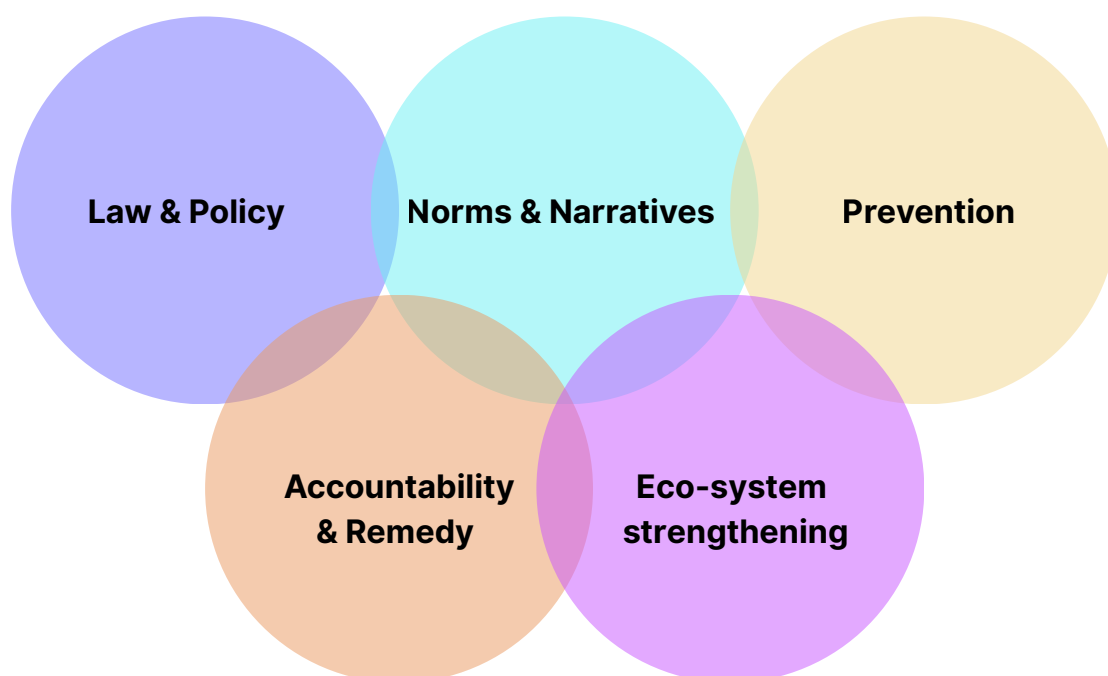
countries, ranging from intimidation and abusive lawsuits to assaults and killings. Many targeted land, climate, and environmental defenders, with Indigenous leaders especially at risk. Administrative and bureaucratic burdens, threats to public interest lawyers and field staff, and obstacles to travel and financial operations have further constrained human rights work. Some organizations branded '*enemies of the state*' have faced raids and arrests pushing them to the brink of closure.

Another severe constraint is the **precarious resourcing environment** - exacerbated by recent cuts in bilateral and foundation funding - which threatens institutional resilience in this hostile climate. Limited, unstable and project-based funding remains a pervasive challenge, as does competition for funding across sectors. Areas identified as chronically underfunded and 'misunderstood' include disability rights, civic space, sexual and reproductive health and rights, as well as women and Indigenous-led climate solutions (said to represent less than 1% of climate funding). Respondents note that donor trends exacerbate the problem: short-term, results-oriented cycles are misaligned with the realities of human rights struggles, which require long-haul commitment. Donor shifts towards '*service-based approaches*' or '*big bets on discrete problems rather than root causes*' have further narrowed the space, prompting the need for 'a new paradigm for resourcing human rights advocacy and organizing'.

Resourcing constraints limit organizations' ability to address **security, capacity and governance challenges**. Navigating heightened security and legal risks, including bracing for SLAPPs and other '*lawfare*' by governments and corporations, requires 'a significant investment of time and resources'. A disability rights funder describes how operating in survival mode means organizations cannot build the skills, partnerships and intersectional approaches essential for transformative advocacy: '*The result is a movement with proven capacity for change but insufficient resources to scale impact*'. Resource scarcity may also undermine efforts to embed equity, inclusion and well-being in organizational governance and culture. While some spoke of progress in these areas, challenges such as '*over-centralized structures*', '*a lack of succession plans*' and '*limited leadership renewal*' were cited as persistent but often neglected dimensions of organizational health.

2. Dimensions of Change: Key Achievements of Survey Respondents

As the preceding section illustrates, human rights work is inseparable from politics. While the goal is long-term change, organizations continually confront backlash, often triggered by their own advances that threaten entrenched power. Progress is rarely linear; the field moves forward and back against powerful erosive tides. Nevertheless, organizations highlight significant achievements over this period. In some cases, they held the line against deterioration or pushback. In others, they broke new ground or sowed the seeds for longer-term transformation.



The following sections distill the main advances identified across five widely recognized **dimensions of human rights change**: law and policy; accountability and remedy; norms and narratives; ecosystem strengthening; and prevention¹. Drawing on organizations' reflections, each section identifies where they succeeded in stemming erosion or resisting backlash; where they built on existing gains and advanced into new territory; and where they laid groundwork for long-haul change. Each section also notes the evolving strategies that enabled these advances, reflecting a field that is continually learning and adapting.

¹ These dimensions reflect recurring domains of change identified in human rights strategies and learning frameworks. They do not claim to capture the full range of impacts pursued by the variety of actors that comprise the human rights movement.

A. Law and Policy Change

Changes in laws, regulations, policies and standards remain one of the most formalized and visible areas of human rights progress. Nearly 60% of respondents cited major legal and policy shifts they helped secure over the last decade, spanning dozens of countries and affecting millions of people, including many previously excluded from the protective reach of international human rights norms. **Achievements have ranged from defending basic civil liberties against restriction to expanding the reach of human rights in economic and environmental policy, and catalyzing a wave of transformative disability rights reforms.**

Safeguarding core civic freedoms and protections

Amid rising authoritarianism, organizations from Argentina to Kenya have buttressed normative and policy protections around the rights to **protest, freedom of information and judicial independence** as critical defenses against civic space restrictions. Latin American human rights organizations have defended the right to protest across the region by consolidating standards defining the contours of that right, curbing the use of less-lethal weapons and promoting public awareness of protest as the *'megaphone of democracy'*. Vital safeguards have also been put in place protecting the **physical and mental integrity** of countless people at risk, from stronger torture prevention laws and new restrictions on the use of physical, chemical and mechanical restraints against persons with disabilities, to more effective policies against sexual abuse in humanitarian settings.

Shaping economic policy and tackling inequality

Organizations described major advances in **leveraging human rights in economic policy reforms**. An organization in Southeast Asia described its evolution: *'What began with capacity building to groups to demystify economics... ended with them producing what could potentially be one of the first ever economic policy packages developed by the people'*. Organizations in East Africa and elsewhere have helped generate recognition from a critical mass of actors - from civil society groups to National Human Rights Institutions (NHRIs) and government officials - that economic and social rights are core public policy concerns. Latin American and international organizations have brought human rights frameworks into fiscal policy debates in contexts from Colombia to Spain, as well as in negotiations around a UN Tax Convention, reframing tax as a tool to counter growing economic inequality and wealth concentration.

Moving the needle on corporate regulation

Another major shift – ‘*almost impossible to overstate*’ – has been the move from voluntary codes to binding mechanisms of **corporate regulation and accountability**. A legal advocacy organization working closely on France’s Duty of Vigilance law notes that it not only led to domestic victories but served as a model for other countries and for the recently adopted EU Corporate Sustainability Due Diligence Directive (CSDDD). The ultimate weakening of the EU Directive following concerted corporate lobbying has only reinforced organizations’ resolve to press for more effective binding norms at regional and global levels – including through ongoing negotiations for a UN binding treaty – as well as to counter corporate influence over such international processes. At national level, organizations in several contexts report success in pressing governments to translate international standards on business and human rights into national action plans. 8

Bringing a human rights lens to climate and environmental policy

These breakthroughs on corporate regulation are linked to ongoing efforts to advance human rights in environmental, land and climate policy. Key milestones include UN recognition of the right to a healthy environment, landmark jurisprudence such as the KlimaSeniorinnen ruling at the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR), and recent Advisory Opinions of the Inter-American Court of Human Rights (IACtHR) and the International Court of Justice (ICJ), all of which have strengthened the framing of climate and environmental harm as a human rights issue. As an international environmental justice organization notes, a major step forward has been ‘*cementing the climate crisis as a human rights crisis... and converting this into legal wins that have stopped polluting plants and advanced climate justice for affected communities*’. From Latin America to Indonesia, human rights organizations and social movements have placed land rights and redistribution firmly on the political agenda, shaping land reparations in Kenya and Paraguay, and propelling recognition of the rights of peasants and rural workers through adoption of the 2018 UN Declaration on these rights.

Transforming disability policy

A major transformation in the policy landscape has been around the **rights of persons with disabilities**. Organizations of persons with disabilities (OPDs) in Latin America have secured notable gains: helping to deliver Peru’s 2018 landmark legal capacity reforms; removing decades-long guardianship laws in Colombia and Guatemala; and bringing disability perspectives to public policy

reforms in Argentina and Uruguay. A disability rights funding organization tallied 140 national law and policy changes over the decade secured by its partners worldwide, including Indonesia's comprehensive Gender Based Violence Prevention law and Nigeria's National Disability Act. *'These weren't isolated wins but part of a broader transformation'* achieved through years of strategic coalition-building. African OPDs made 'remarkable strides' on the rights of people with albinism, shaping the African Union (AU) Action Plan and strengthening access to justice capacities. Intentionally intersectional approaches have been central to many of these advances. Women-led OPDs have integrated disability into debates on SRHR and gender-based violence, and secured explicit inclusion of women with disabilities in the 2025 AU Convention on Ending Violence Against Women and Girls. Other organizations have successfully brought a disability lens to the care agenda, shifting social protection policies from a charity model to one focused on autonomy, inclusion and participation.

Forging new frontiers of human rights law

Human rights actors have also opened up new terrain in the development and application of human rights law - from extraterritorial obligations in climate, debt and tax policy, to recognition of the Amazon and Cauca rivers as rights-holders, or deepening approaches to reparations in transitional and racial justice contexts. This normative reimagination reflects a broader trend toward propositional, affirmative visions of rights-centered societies, economies and environmental stewardship. This work plants the seeds of structural transformation that may not bear fruit for years, even decades. As one European legal advocacy organization explains, "We see the law as a tool to address the root causes of human rights violations and bring about long-term social change... opening up new legal and political terrain in the fight for human rights."

Inclusion and participation as guarantees of enduring progress

Reversals - such as the recent weakening of the EU Corporate Sustainability Due Diligence Directive under pressure from companies and governments including the US and Qatar - are stark reminders that policy gains cannot be taken for granted. Yet the increased **participation of previously excluded voices** in policymaking may be one of the decade's most durable advances and the strongest bulwark against future regressions. As OPDs affirm, *'We have seen a shift from having to knock on doors and make the case for inclusion to fielding inquiries for translating the 'why' into the 'how'.*' Indigenous leadership

has likewise been instrumental to climate and environmental victories, from recognition of the right to a healthy environment to the inclusion of Indigenous rights in global conservation targets. In this context, robust and broad-based civil society participation is all the more critical to counter the growing corporate capture of international and domestic policy spaces. Civil society organizing and coalition building has been behind every significant law and policy victory of the last decade, and will remain essential to sustaining momentum in the face of the headwinds to come.

B. Accountability and Remedy

Advancing accountability - ending impunity, deterring future crimes and securing remedy - has long been a core focus of human rights strategies. Numerous organizations highlight progress on this front over the last decade. They have held high-level perpetrators accountable before national and international courts. **They have broadened pathways to justice and expanded the range of actors and crimes brought under scrutiny. And they have expanded the scope of remedies available to affected communities. Their work has reinforced both the demand for accountability and the architecture required to deliver it - at the domestic and international levels.**

Reining in impunity

Painstaking, often costly work over many years - sometimes decades - has resulted in the **prosecution and conviction of high-level political and military figures** responsible for serious violations of international criminal, human rights and humanitarian law. The box below outlines some of the most emblematic cases facilitated or supported by human rights organizations over the past decade.

Holding perpetrators to account: a decade of emblematic milestones

- **Hissène Habré:** ex-president of Chad sentenced to life imprisonment in 2016 for crimes against humanity, war crimes, and torture, by the Extraordinary African Chambers in the Senegalese court system
- **Sepur Zarco:** 2016 conviction in Guatemala of an army officer and commissioner on charges of sexual violence and slavery as crimes against humanity, brought by 15 Q'eqchi' indigenous women

● **Inocente Orlando Montano:** 2020 conviction of former Salvadoran Vice Minister of Security by Spain's Audiencia Nacional for his role in the 1989 massacre of six Jesuit priests, under universal jurisdiction

● **Frederic Batumike:** DRC legislator, convicted of crimes against humanity by a Congolese military court in 2017 along with ten militia members for the rape of dozens of young girls from Kavumu, South Kivu

● **Anwar Aslan:** former Syrian colonel sentenced to life by a German court in 2022 for crimes against humanity

● **Bashar al-Assad:** 2023 French arrest warrants against ex-president of Syria and 3 officials for chemical weapons use; vice-president Rifaat al-Assad sentenced 2022 for money laundering

● **Myanmar Army commanders** sanctioned by European governments following report implicating over 60% of senior commanders in disappearances, killings, rape or torture by units under their command

● **Alieu Kosiah and Kunti Kamara:** former Liberian rebel leaders convicted of crimes against humanity in Switzerland (2023) and France (2024) respectively

● **Moussa Dadis Camara:** former president of Guinea and other senior officials convicted in 2024 for crimes against humanity in relation to a 2009 stadium massacre

● **Manuel Terrén:** Spanish businessman under investigation since 2024 by Spain's Audiencia Nacional for crimes against humanity in relation to the illegal trade in 'blood diamonds' from Sierra Leone

● **Benjamin Netanyahu, Yoav Gallant, Mohammed Deif:** 2024 ICC arrest warrants against Israel's prime minister, ex-defence minister and a Hamas commander for war crimes & crimes against humanity in Gaza

● **Rodrigo Duterte:** ICC arrest warrant against former president of the Philippines issued in March 2025 after years of advocacy by diverse coalition of human rights defenders

● **Nicolas Sarkozy:** former French president sentenced to five years in prison in 2025 for criminal conspiracy with intent to engage in corrupt conduct

As one organization that helped drive some of these court victories noted, the significance of such milestones is in 'broadening the venues, legal theories, and evidentiary pathways available to pursue justice, while strengthening the global norm that the gravest crimes are never beyond reach '. *For another, victories such as this are a powerful testament to the fact that accountability is possible even many years after the crimes are committed: 'For survivors and the families of victims, this recognition is often just as important as the prosecutions themselves.'*

Upholding international justice under attack

The work of human rights organizations has resulted in the **expansion of transnational accountability pathways**, despite aggressive efforts to undermine international justice mechanisms. Universal jurisdiction (UJ) - which allows courts to prosecute atrocity crimes regardless of where they were committed or the nationality of those involved - has matured from an experimental doctrine to a widely used accountability backstop for these crimes. A UJ-tracking partnership recorded 36 new cases opened in 2024 and 27 convictions at first instance or on appeal, twice the number in 2023 - with over 10% involving companies or businesspeople. Some 120 states have now adopted UJ-enabling reforms. 11

A rise in cases in Africa and Latin America is making UJ a more genuinely universal strategy, with leadership and initiative coming increasingly from actors in the Global South, including efforts by African justice and accountability organizations to pursue UJ cases relating to international crimes in Sudan. UJ has also shown a '*boomerang catalytic effect*', prompting domestic efforts - such as Liberia's move toward a war crimes tribunal (with similar prospects in Syria and The Gambia) - and spurring other national-level prosecutions such as the Sepur Zarco case in Guatemala. Organizations have likewise leveraged the vital role of the ICC and ICJ in pursuing accountability for genocide and crimes against humanity in Gaza, Sudan and elsewhere, a role which has prompted sanctions from the US administration. For example, an exposé on attacks on aid workers and obstruction of humanitarian relief in northern Gaza was submitted as evidence to the ICC, cited in UK and US parliamentary debates, and shared with actors involved in South Africa's genocide case before the ICJ. Organizations also have flagged systemic failures within the ICC and worked to strengthen its effectiveness and legitimacy, including shaping reforms to outreach and court reporting and ensuring greater public scrutiny through trial monitoring.

Making corporate accountability enforceable

A major breakthrough has been progress in **holding corporations and economic actors accountable**. Advocates pressed U.S. courts to hold corporations accountable for human rights abuses, winning a landmark victory in *Doe v. Chiquita* on behalf of victims of paramilitary violence in Colombia and challenging the International Finance Corporation over environmental harm in India—a case that led the Supreme Court to affirm that international financial institutions can face liability in U.S. courts. War crimes cases have been brought against European businessmen trading in blood diamonds from Sierra Leone, showing that *‘financiers and facilitators can be pursued, not only gun-wielding commanders’*. European legal advocacy organizations have secured charges against Lafarge for complicity in crimes against humanity in Syria and the indictment of Vinci for forced labor in Qatar. Litigation by an African environmental organization against Total in Uganda led to withdrawal of financing by banks and insurers and compelled Total to adopt human rights impact assessments and grievance mechanisms. The examples highlighted by organizations are a small but indicative sample of the consequential advances in corporate accountability over this period.

Expanding the scope and scale of remedies

The number of people who have obtained some form of justice or reparation as a result of these accountability efforts is likely to be in the hundreds of thousands. Though difficult to quantify more precisely without significant investment in economic models to capture this data, survey responses indicate that **the scale and range of remedies have been substantial**. Examples of remedies cited include 200,000 garment workers in Karnataka, India who obtained almost \$23 million in backpay after wage theft; 7,000 Pemba community members finally being recognized as Kenyan citizens; and more than 5,000 persons with disability who obtained reparations following the Inter-American Court decision striking down Guatemala’s guardianship law. Transitional justice processes to which organizations have contributed have yielded some of the widest-reaching remedies, benefiting whole populations. A consortium of civil society actors helped secure the African Union’s 2019 Transitional Justice Policy Framework, tailoring the four components of truth, reconciliation, justice and reparation to the regional context, fleshing them out with eleven pillars reflecting African conceptions of restorative justice. The framework has guided transitions in Mali, South Sudan, The Gambia and elsewhere in the region, with the potential to benefit populations of tens of millions. It has also influenced processes in Eastern Europe, Latin America and South/Southeast Asia with far-reaching preventive as well as remedial consequences.

Growing transnational alliances for justice

A key factor behind this progress has been the increase in cross-border collaboration in civil society accountability efforts. A Mexican human rights organization brought a precedent-setting case under France's Duty of Vigilance Law on behalf of an indigenous community opposing construction of an unlawful wind park megaproject by a French company; its multilevel strategy in collaboration with a European partner ultimately led to the cancellation of the project. A West African organization has helped advance strategies for legal accountability across regional jurisdictions by applying precedents and access to information tools from one country in the courts of another. Furthermore, investigations into abuses in Del Monte's supply chain by a Kenyan organization, in partnership with a UK-based law firm and others, led UK retailer Tesco to suspend its products in 2023. During negotiations on the EU CSDDD, international human rights organizations joined forces with labor and human rights defenders from the Global South to ensure the lived experience of affected workers and communities shaped the final text. Similar efforts to connect grassroots movements to global networks calling for a UN treaty on corporate accountability is reported to have helped redress '*systemic asymmetries in access to justice*'. Such alliances have enabled partners to combine their complementary strengths, reach and constituencies, increasing their leverage in holding transnational actors accountable.

Empowering communities to demand accountability through new tools & resources

Also central to these advances has been the work of many organizations to strengthen capacities, evidence and tools for demanding accountability. International justice groups have supported victimized communities directly, equipping survivors and grassroots leaders with tools and skills to '*demand justice on their own terms*'. Rights groups have introduced open-source investigative methodologies that have bolstered documentation for future accountability processes, for example safeguarding millions of digital records—more than 100 years of video—from countries facing conflict or emerging crises, and forensically preserving material relied on by international accountability mechanisms and national war crimes units. Others have contributed medical and scientific expertise to build forensic evidence capacity, contributing to successful convictions of military officials for crimes against humanity. As a result of human rights organizations' work, affected communities in numerous countries have greater capacity to pursue corporate accountability for human rights and environmental harms, aided by new research tools on supply and

investment chains and follow-the-money methodologies that ‘have been used to gain remedy, achieve wins, and push the needle on the balance of power between corporations and communities’. Strengthening civil society capacity in this way has helped build resilience in the face of reversals. As one practitioner noted on the backlash in Guatemala, *‘Victory is not how much case law is passed; it’s keeping our eye on the long-haul demand for accountability - that’s the powerful thing, though it may be hard to quantify’*.

At a time when international crimes continue to be committed with brazen impunity, the survey reveals important and enduring gains. While under strain, the accountability infrastructure that the human rights movement has worked for decades to build continues to be used with growing creativity and effectiveness across sectors and geographies to prevent and curb abuses, hold perpetrators to account, and secure meaningful measures of redress for countless people deprived of their rights. 13

C. Norms and Narratives

Shifts in social norms and public narratives are a critical but less frequently measured dimension of human rights change. They shape the social and cultural conditions that make legal and policy advances possible and determine whether those advances take root in people’s lives. More than half of organizations surveyed saw these shifts as among the most important areas of progress to which their work has contributed. Over the past decade, human rights organizations have helped counter the spread of anti-rights narratives, deepen understanding of justice, and shift the discourse on issues from disability to climate. Their reflections indicate that they are not only changing the debate but expanding the moral imagination about what human rights mean in an age of polycrisis.

Disrupting anti-rights rhetorics

A common feature of anti-rights backlash has been the use of dehumanizing rhetorics against marginalized or stigmatized groups. Human rights organizations have made important strides in pushing back by reshaping narratives around the rights of those most frequently targeted, including migrants, trans people and persons with disabilities. According to an international network of human rights organizations, *‘The recognition of trans rights, trans justice, trans lives is bigger across regions - this was not like this 10 years ago’*. Despite the perpetuation of ableist narratives, OPDs note *‘a growing recognition of disability justice’*, including broader social understanding of

principles such as reasonable accommodation and community integration, and greater discussion and visibility of diverse disabilities – from albinism to psychosocial disabilities. Countering anti-rights narratives has also involved shifting public perceptions around human rights defenders, reframing media coverage of attacks on defenders by focusing attention on the motivations and power networks behind them: *'This reframing shifts the conversation from "how many have died" to why they were targeted - and who enabled that targeting.'*

Rooting concepts of justice in society and culture

Organizations have also helped embed societal understanding of transitional justice and accountability despite political contestation around these concepts. Transitional justice frameworks have proven to have *'enduring value'*. Public perceptions about it have shifted in countries such as Liberia and Uganda as a result of sustained media and narrative work by human rights groups. Such groups have also made concepts of remedy more meaningful to victims and survivors. They have worked with affected communities to design *'a restorative justice route that integrates cultural memory, environmental repair, and collective dignity'* and to achieve wider reparations outcomes domestically. Their media work has *'helped reshape how justice is pursued, narrated, and experienced'*, embedding diverse voices in the call for accountability and fostering public sentiment that *'justice can be done without reigniting conflict'*.

Shifting discourse on the economy and environment

Many organizations report significant headway in bringing human rights into debates on economic and environmental justice. An international economic and social rights organization sees *'a shift in discourse and action around the connections between human rights and economic policies'*, while a Latin American human rights organization's work on fiscal policy through a gender and racial justice lens has influenced national and regional debates on equity and inclusion. Organizations note an evolution from human rights serving merely as *'choreographical framing'* to offering fundamental guidance on market regulation, macroeconomic planning and other aspects of public finance. They also highlight how human rights advocacy has shaped discussions around the energy transition: *'Now, it is more common to find narratives that call for a "just" or "fair" energy transition (in our experience, this means with respect to 14 human rights). No plan for energy transition... can be done by violating the human rights of the communities who have done the least harm to the environment.'*

Crafting new visions and frames

Much of the narrative-shifting work has had transformative ambitions, articulating longer-term systemic alternatives, such as *'advancing collective demands for community-led development', the 'global social pact on care' and the wide uptake of the concept of the 'human rights economy'*. Some narrative efforts are beginning to address more intentionally the structural drivers of democratic backsliding, raising public awareness of 'multistakeholderism', corporate capture, securitization and disinformation, *'concepts that, a decade ago, were neither well understood nor widely debated'* but are now an integral part of national and intergovernmental debates. A particularly transformative impact has been empowering young people to craft their own narratives. For example, a coalition of agrarian, food and land rights movements highlights the mobilizing power of visual storytelling by young people in Indigenous, rural, women's and food producer organizations: *"We see how this contributes to building an anti-hegemonic narrative, creating new forms of solidarity among young people across continents"*.

Firming the foundations of narrative power

Survey responses also shed light on the strategies and factors that have enabled progress on the narrative front. Disability rights groups, for example, note that data is key to these strategies: *"greater acceptance of the need for data (evidence) and rigour"*, including disaggregated data on inequalities, has been central to progress in shifting narratives on disability and moving the conversation forward with key stakeholders. Interdisciplinary expertise has also strengthened narrative power, as illustrated by the role financial transparency expertise has played in supporting human rights advocacy around tax justice. Additionally, human rights funder collaboratives have invested in narrative research and infrastructure in partnership with human rights and social justice organizations, including growing engagement with climate funders on information integrity as key to both civic space and climate action.

Taken together, these shifts reflect a growing capacity within the human rights movement to contest dominant frames, root claims in lived experience and disrupt the narratives of privilege through a refreshed language of rights.

D. Ecosystem Strengthening

More than 60% of responses highlight advances over the last decade in strengthening the human rights ecosystem – the constellation of organizations, networks and actors working at different levels and playing distinct, interrelated roles in defending and advancing human rights. That this is the most frequently referenced dimension of human rights progress is striking given the alarming global deterioration in civic space worldwide.² Yet it reflects the priority organizations place on defending civic space against intensifying repression, while building the longer-term resilience of the human rights movement.

Effective strategies range from ‘downstream’ work to protect those on the frontlines, to longer-term efforts to build a more capable, diverse and interconnected field, and to address the ‘upstream’ drivers of civic space restrictions.

Protecting the right and space to defend human rights

In the face of evolving tactics of repression, organizations have **secured key protections for human rights defenders, journalists and humanitarian workers** – physically, legally and digitally. They have challenged the abuse of terrorism charges against Indigenous and environmental activists; provided free legal assistance to thousands of journalists in over 100 countries; and equipped human rights defenders with safe evidence-gathering techniques, for example filming intimidation and coercion during national elections and providing security guidance to activists. As well as using international human rights mechanisms to seek protection and justice for human rights defenders at risk, organizations have secured anti-reprisals policies and safeguards within other key international bodies, including the major multilateral development banks.

Strengthening core movement capacities

Human rights organizations have reinforced core civil society skills and tools in myriad ways. Survey respondents described having trained over 700 grassroots environmental activists across the Amazon, Mekong and Democratic Republic of Congo; piloted monitoring tools with organizations of persons with psychosocial disabilities; and advanced the use of spatial and digital technologies for atrocity prevention and civilian protection. Innovative

² See Civicus, [Rights Reversed: A downward shift in civic space \(2019 – 2023\)](#). Civicus defines civic space as the respect in law, policy and practice for freedoms of association, peaceful assembly and expression and the extent to which states protect these basic rights.

follow-the-money methodologies have helped communities track harmful investments. The increase in skillsets has not only been ‘incredibly positive to the movement’ but has helped entire fields to flourish. For those working on business and human rights, new corporate accountability tools have *‘really transformed the field’*. The disability rights sector has grown into a diverse, influential and globally networked movement that has helped mainstream disability in other parts of the human rights ecosystem. Capacity strengthening has also helped shift entire professional fields, whether making the legal profession more responsive to the public interest or *‘maximising the collaborative potential of media and civil society’* through systematic engagement with journalists.

Connecting movements to build collective power

Funders, international non-governmental organizations (INGOs) and networks have strengthened advocacy by **weaving deeper connections across movements and advocacy spheres**. For example, an environmental funder has invested in the capacity *‘to resource and connect grassroots movements more deeply and responsively’*. Networks focused on human rights and development have supported community groups in Latin America to engage multilateral institutions, governments and corporations in challenging harmful mining permits. OPDs have fostered dialogue between disability and feminist organizations on abortion rights, while economic and social rights organizations see a ‘drastic increase’ in discussions bridging human rights and economic justice movements. International women’s rights organizations have fostered cross-movement solidarity by connecting feminist, disability, drug policy, sex worker, LGBTQI+ and protest rights activists under the shared banner of challenging criminalization. These efforts have created a more interconnected and effective human rights ecosystem than there was a decade ago. Respondents point to an increase in alliances and partnerships across organizations and regions, connecting struggles and making organizations ‘better at their work’. As one observes, *‘The setbacks we are seeing also respond to great (and uneven) advancements... So while it now feels like a terrible time in history... protest movements have become stronger.’*

Addressing the drivers of civic space restrictions

An important area of progress with longer-term implications for the future of the human rights ecosystem is the growing attention to **the structural drivers of civic space restrictions**. One funder collaborative is working to anticipate future threats and mobilize resources for transformative action, seeding new

communities of practice around securitization, information integrity and corporate power as key constraints on democratic and civic space. Maintaining the momentum around such forward-looking work was felt to be all the more critical in times of backsliding, despite the demands of continual firefighting. As another funder emphasizes, sustained investment in grassroots movements is even more necessary when democracy is in decline, so they remain resilient ‘through both peaks and valleys’ and ready to seize future opportunities when they arise. By shifting attention upstream - from responding to incidents of repression to addressing their underlying causes - these approaches strengthen the long-term resilience of civic space and reduce the likelihood that hard-won gains are repeatedly eroded.

Equity and inclusion as essential conditions of a stronger ecosystem
A key ingredient in the evolution of the human rights ecosystem over this period has been the growing commitment to **tackle imbalances of power within the movement** by expanding who is resourced, represented and heard. A human rights funding network has catalyzed resource shifts towards underserved issues and regions through research on funding gaps and intersectional grantmaking, while an environmental funder has expanded access to actors often excluded from traditional funding streams, including grassroots women, rural and Indigenous groups, LGBTQI+ activists and youth. An Africa-focused funder has supported over 500 largely women-led grassroots entities across the region advancing climate justice, gender equality, and corporate accountability, often in repressive political conditions. These shifts help correct long-standing distortions in whose priorities shape agendas and whose knowledge is valued, strengthening the legitimacy, relevance and reach of human rights strategies.

These resource shifts have worked in tandem with **efforts to diversify leadership across movements**. More inclusive and representative leadership has strengthened movement competencies, broadened its constituencies and made advocacy more responsive to the realities of those most affected by rights abuses. A human rights organization in Asia and the Pacific highlights the multiplying effect of intentional efforts to diversify a male dominated human rights community, as women have ‘*created spaces for others as leaders of their organizations and communities.*’ An international human rights network described how it is embedding intersectional approaches, centering grassroots women leaders in its strategy and model of work. Disability movements have fostered the inclusion of women, refugees, LGBTQI+ and young people so that ‘*marginalized voices within the disability community...are no longer excluded but are leading policy change.*’ Groups working on albinism report ‘*remarkable*

strides' in self-representation, while others note the field has come 'a very long way in giving visibility to African voices and perspectives' in global disability and SRHR debates. INGOs and international networks also affirm the importance of 'recentering expertise and advocacy among local and national groups of the Global Majority'.

These developments are helping to create an ecosystem that is more inclusive, capable and connected - and therefore better equipped to adapt to mounting constraints and sustain progress towards transformative change.

E. Preventing human rights abuses

Prevention is widely recognized as one of the most challenging dimensions of human rights change to assess, because progress is counterfactual - defined by the abuses that never materialize. While prevention is often an explicit goal in humanitarian and protection contexts, a preventive logic runs through all human rights work, from due diligence efforts deterring corporate abuses to disability policy reforms designed to avert violence and institutionalization. **Over the ten-year period, organizations across fields highlight evidence of prevention in two key areas: first, numerous instances where threatened rollbacks were halted or rights-restricting measures withdrawn in a specific case; and second, broader progress in strengthening preventive systems, such as early warning capacities and other protective infrastructures to shield individuals and communities at imminent risk.**

Stopping harm in its tracks

Human rights organizations cite many examples of **imminent threats averted** through their work:

- Ahead of **Kenya's** 2022 elections, an international conflict prevention organization pursued months of quiet advocacy with Kenyan and international actors to reduce tensions in a polarized environment, avoiding a repeat of previous electoral violence and contributing to a largely peaceful transfer of power. Its work in **Yemen** in 2018 helped avert a Saudi-led coalition offensive on Hodeida that would have triggered a humanitarian disaster.
- An anti-torture organization played a crucial role in preventing a threatened revival of the CIA's post-9/11 torture program in the **United States** during President Trump's first term, securing release of a Senate Intelligence

- Committee report on the program, amended legal prohibitions and strong statements from officials opposing torture. It notes that, under the second administration, ‘revival of anything similar has been completely absent from discussions’.
- Several international and national NGOs highlight working with communities to stop harmful extractive industry projects across **Africa, Asia and Latin America**, deterring investment, and avoiding land evictions.

Strengthening prevention systems and infrastructure

As well as deterring violations, organizations have helped strengthen prevention systems, developing and deploying early warning and other risk-monitoring tools using evolving technologies. Several initiatives were highlighted across continents: one has advanced spatial analytics and digital technologies for early warning and action, embedding these tools in contexts from election monitoring to conflict and climate risk-mapping, from West Africa to Indonesia. Another is an early warning project described as *‘the only public system to assess the risk of future mass killing within a country’* and used routinely by policymakers, civil society groups and scholars drawing on historical insights on how to prevent future genocides. Initiatives in the Asia-Pacific have helped grassroots organizations in Indonesia and elsewhere track rises in hate speech, disinformation and related violence, contributing to policy and legal changes to prevent these. An international civil society tracking system on development bank investments has fuelled global campaigns on climate and development justice, forecasting risks to defenders and triggering preventative actions.

Significant progress has also been made in **reinforcing the role and infrastructure of local, regional and international protection actors** to prevent harm to key populations at risk. Organizations in the humanitarian sector have led efforts to strengthen the capacity of peace operations to protect civilians and secure access to hard-to-reach populations. Some note that equipping civil society networks with evidence and platforms for coordinated early warning advocacy has not only prevented harm in many contexts but elevated issues such as arms trafficking to regional human rights priorities. OPDs highlight how civic education and coordination between government and civil society has contributed to a reduction in ritual killings of persons with albinism across Africa. Women’s rights organizations have been a vital part of the protective and preventive infrastructure; one emphasized that supporting women human rights defenders, prisoners and genocide/war crimes survivors in contexts such as Darfur, Sudan, Somalia and Ethiopia had *‘contributed significantly to saving lives’*.

While early warning systems and rapid response have been central to preventing harm, durable prevention depends on **addressing the conditions that enable abuses** and allow them to persist. As organizations point out, the *'shrinking of humanitarian space'* and *'politicization of humanitarian assistance'* have narrowed the scope for engaging those conditions directly, pulling practice toward mitigation rather than transformation. This tension highlights prevention not only as a technical challenge, but as a test of whether human rights work can move beyond managing crises toward reshaping the environments which generate harm.

3. Learning and Reflecting on Change

Reflections by human rights organizations on how to achieve durable change converge around five broad themes: the need for closer **alignment of strategies for systemic change; the importance of collaboration in building collective power**; the imperative of **centering community leadership**; the quest for more **effective narratives and tactics**; and the perennial challenge of **sustainable resourcing**. These have long been identified as critical pathways for strengthening the impact and effectiveness of the human rights movement. Their emergence as consistent threads in the survey underscores their continuing relevance and points to them as priority areas for further investment and exploration.

Key Areas for Investment and Exploration



A. Aligning strategies and visions for long-term systemic change

A salient theme is the need for more **collectively aligned approaches** that ‘distill a long-term strategy that holds promise, concentrate resources and focus around that goal’ without atomizing or dissipating efforts. Durable change requires ‘*a united front and an organized, future-oriented strategy that works across the funding field and movements.*’ For example, respondents identify drawing linkages more effectively between disparate efforts on democracy, development and economic justice as critical for the durable impact of human rights strategies.

Organizations emphasize that to be most effective, **strategies must aim at systemic change**. Groups addressing ‘*root causes rather than symptoms*’, and whose vision is for structural change rather than short-term victories, are seen as ‘*the foundation of the new human rights ecosystem*’. As one respondent affirms in relation to civic space, strategies must range ‘*from defensive efforts that protect against immediate threats, to long-term disruptive and transformative strategies that address the root causes*’.

For several groups, this means confronting corporate capture as a pervasive driver of political, economic and environmental crisis, since ‘*systemic change cannot occur within rules written by those we seek to regulate.*’ A systemic approach to intersecting crises such as climate change and authoritarianism requires a focus on the ‘*foundational conditions essential for lasting change*’.

Many reflect on the need to move beyond **defensive strategies to more intentionally transformative ones**. An international network emphasized the shift ‘*from resistance to transformative agenda-setting*’ – for example, advancing community-led renewable energy alternatives challenging extractivist models. Others stress the importance of securing and implementing hard-won victories to prevent them from remaining symbolic or being reversed. Some describe pivoting towards ‘*upstream harm prevention*’, for example by deploying tools used to secure remedy at earlier stages of project design to benefit communities.

Organizations call for **adaptive strategies that balance long-term vision with responsiveness to opportunities**. Many stress the need to adapt nimbly to political openings and changing contexts: ‘*Our movement must be capable of agility alongside tenacity.*’ Durable change is rarely the result of a single strategy, but of ‘*knowing when to focus, when to join forces, and when to adapt*’. Yet adaptiveness should support, not distract from, ‘*visionary, long term*

strategies’ focused on the ultimate systemic change sought. Human rights work is a ‘long game’, where progress is incremental and cumulative, requiring patience, perseverance and trust. An international organization advancing freedom of expression reflected that, in countries such as Tunisia and The Gambia which had seen democratic openings, *‘our work there didn’t start when the dictators were driven out; it started years, sometimes decades, before’*, building the legitimacy and solidarity that eventually enabled progress on constitutional change. Though the impact of current efforts may not be understood until much later, even modest steps sustained over time can lay foundations for lasting change.

This has implications for **how the field - and funders supporting it - understand and measure impact**. Many organizations caution against quick fixes and pressure for immediate results: *‘The arc of change toward a just future covers generations’* - a win today is *‘a milestone on a nonlinear journey’*. The incremental nature of change and the challenges of attribution demand creativity, learning-focused approaches and effective feedback loops to track impact. Some note that essential elements of movement sustainability - resilience, collective care - are rarely captured in Monitoring, Evaluation, Accountability and Learning (MEAL) frameworks. Others recall that *‘survivors themselves have taught us what impact truly means... Durable change is not just a legal result; it is the lifelong commitment to inform, support, and protect the people whose courage made that result possible.’*

B. Building power through collaboration across movements and geographies

A core learning is that **cross-movement and cross-border collaboration is key to build power** on a scale commensurate with the challenges. Policy wins can be fleeting without the collective power to defend and translate them into real change in people’s lives. Achieving durable impact requires ‘a holistic approach that fosters interactions among diverse actors, facilitating a dynamic ecosystem of exchange’. As one international network notes, *‘If the past decade has taught us anything, it is that real change requires persistence, coalition-building, and multi-level engagement.’* It cites the example of the mobilization following the killing of Honduran defender Berta Cáceres, where local communities joined forces with international allies to secure convictions and press international financial institutions to adopt anti-reprisal policies. The lesson that ‘we cannot achieve systemic change alone’ is echoed by others; such change demands *‘movement power, south and north, not isolated projects’* and emerges when

broad, diverse coalitions *'make inaction electorally dangerous for politicians and socially untenable'*. Coalitions across movements and contexts enable mutual learning on ways to address common obstacles.

Organizations from specific fields highlight **the value of deeper collaboration with other movements**. Disability rights organizations speak to the power of synergistic collaboration with women's rights and socioeconomic rights movements, which has strengthened visibility and helped sustain wins: *'Lasting change comes not from isolated advocacy but from aligning our struggles with wider demands for justice'*. For those working on socioeconomic rights, deepening links with economic, climate and gender justice movements has enabled more integrated approaches to inequality and embodied *'practical solidarity'*. Humanitarian groups cite partnership as fundamental to their impact. Feminist collaboratives describe cross-pollination between issues and regions as *'incredibly useful and rare'*, seeing huge desire among partners to exchange strategies and *'get past the isolation of the contexts they work in'*.

Collaboration between **a greater diversity of actors within the same field** also matters. A Latin American civil society network observes that change is most resilient when academics, NGOs, grassroots organizations and policy institutions work together to generate shared frameworks and narratives that can withstand political cycles and polarization. For an international food rights network, forging alliances and convergences between CSOs, social movements, and affected communities has proven essential, as *'collective power amplifies demands and ensures that no single actor is isolated in their struggle.'*

While there is unanimity on its value, organizations also flag the **challenges involved in cross-movement collaboration**. Some observe that not all NGOs have a collaborative culture, which can impede cooperation. Others note territoriality and a narrow focus on their issue or sector as barriers. One describes the challenge of engaging with *'single-entry campaigners'* in broad coalitions on global economic governance reform: *'Many prefer to chase the locus where "their issues" are named ... rather than being politically clear on the nature of the turf where the struggle needs to be conducted'* - a challenge also seen in engagement with some human rights actors.

Where many see the greatest potential - as well as the greatest pitfalls - is in **collaboration between international and national organizations**. Many affirm the mutual benefit of Global South-North collaboration in the current context. Building alliances across borders *'ensures collective resistance to transnational*

corporate abuses and authoritarian crackdowns, strengthening movements against both local and global threats'. As a movement-led coalition in the Global South affirms, 'We must always link broad internationalist alliances with specific communities and peoples, connecting 'los de abajo' with the global.' Working as part of regional or international networks helps groups learn from other contexts. In restrictive environments where authoritarian or anti-gender forces are strong, the role of international actors in enabling young Global South activists to participate in global forums is described as 'transformative' in strengthening solidarity and shifting power dynamics in those spaces. INGOs have enabled advocacy to 'helicopter' between local, national, regional and global levels, 'so insights travel upward and back, informing policy, practice, and accountability in emerging economies and beyond.'

At the same time, organizations in the Global South speak to some of the **enduring challenges around international collaboration**. INGOs may overlook concerns which are critical to global South partners - such as the security of human rights defenders - when designing transnational strategies. Some international NGOs and networks reflect that they have learned *'that advocacy must be rooted in the Global South ...while Northern-based NGOs like ours take on the role of ally, using our expertise and position to amplify, not replace, Southern voices.'* One international human rights network sees its core principles of social movement centrality, intersectionality and regional/gender balanced leadership as a *'foundation for building cross-regional solidarity'*. An international environmental rights organization stressed the need for *'local-to-global strategies'* premised on the principle that *'transformative solutions must be grounded in the leadership and experiences of frontline communities.'* These evolving models of collaboration signal a broader recalibration of power within the international human rights system, enabling transnational partnerships that are both more equitable and more effective in achieving impacts.

C. Deepening inclusion and centering community leadership and agency

A central insight is that **change strategies must be rooted in the agency and power of communities most affected** by injustice. Working with communities as peers—not merely as beneficiaries—creates the most resilient forms of advocacy. *'When communities lead, change is not only more legitimate but also more sustainable.'* Conversely, actions or interventions *'drafted behind a desk without the input and the reality check of those affected will seldom generate lasting change'*. An international coalition working for accountability in

development flags the immense payoff of long-term community trust and power-building through initiatives and platforms that ground advocacy in local ownership rather than external agendas. Organizations in the humanitarian and international justice fields similarly stress the importance of community-led efforts. For one, empowering the leadership of affected communities is crucial to delivering long-term improvements to the global humanitarian response infrastructure. Likewise, for another, *'court victories or formal recognitions only become transformative when communities themselves lead the justice process and foster social change.'*

D. Rethinking the toolkit, rewriting the narrative

A point of convergence among organizations is that **future effectiveness depends on expanding beyond traditional human rights methods and tools**. Policy and legal wins are essential but insufficient in themselves for durable change. Some describe shifting beyond single-track strategies to a mix of tactics, for example combining litigation with cultural interventions and community development to transform conditions that enable violations. Others describe how multifaceted strategies combining litigation and advocacy with alliance-building and public mobilization had been instrumental to progress, for example on the right to protest in Latin America.

In addition, rigorous **data and evidence** continue to play a powerful role in making injustice visible. In the field of disability rights, the generation of disaggregated data and analysis has prompted important policy reforms. Integrating innovative methods such as advanced spatial tools, open-source intelligence and data visualization has transformed human rights advocacy and helped shift debates *'from ideological confrontation to fact-based dialogue'*. At the same time, there is widespread awareness that evidence and data alone are insufficient basis for social change advocacy, particularly in polarized information environments that foster distrust of expert analysis: *'You don't win by having a good argument and good research but by tackling power and power doesn't move by a well-documented report'*.

With the diminishing power of traditional 'naming and shaming' approaches, many organizations stress the need to craft **compelling and accessible narratives** to secure broader public and political support for human rights agendas, all the more so when misinformation is rampant. This includes human-centered, emotionally resonant storytelling that connects human rights to people's everyday lives and concerns: *"If we cannot explain why rights and*

shared prosperity matter in everyday terms, others will fill the void with divisive narratives.' Narratives must recapture public imagination, building an affirmative vision of a society based on human dignity and making the case that no-one's rights are expendable: *'Stories are powerful, and we must not lose sight of the human side of human rights work.'* Investing in creative communications, media partnerships and information integrity - including preserving open-source information at scale - is seen by many as a priority, not only to counter toxic narratives and amplify progressive voices, but to build a healthy information ecosystem as a pillar of democratic resilience.

Relatedly, organizations stress the need to cultivate **broader audiences and constituencies** - addressing the *'movable middle'* and *'skeptical stakeholders'*, engaging more with young people and expanding alliances with actors beyond the usual civil society ecosystem, including artists and cultural influencers. In a context where *'strategies have to take into account power and public support much more than they did'*, practitioners see greater scope to mobilize public pressure on decision makers and entrenched interests, *'from fossil fuel producers and ultra-fast fashion to speculative cryptocurrency actors'*. This also requires building surgical alliances with other influential actors, such as responsible investors and companies, as well as with progressive national and municipal governments willing to lead on rights issues regionally or internationally in a changed geopolitical landscape.

E. Navigating a challenging resourcing landscape

Given developments in the funding landscape over the last year, organizations reflected on implications for the **future sustainability of human rights work**. For many organizations and the constituencies they serve, the outlook over the next few years is incredibly challenging. They note that *'rollbacks are already happening'* and see a real threat that, without sustainable support, *'past wins will be demolished'*. Some anticipate the potential closure of their organization or of others in their field, making archiving of material and preserving institutional memory a critical priority. Others are looking for help in securing new support and resourcing their movements in years to come.

Funders and civil society organizations alike consistently emphasize the importance of **long-term, flexible and unrestricted funding** to ensure progress is not reversed. Sustained multi-year support has enabled organizations to weather setbacks and seize opportunities when political openings arise. Flexible funding enables activists to build collective power over time and respond to emerging threats without fear of financial collapse. Grassroots movements

especially need predictable, unrestricted support to withstand repression and address urgent challenges and opportunities, as well as capacity strengthening to navigate a volatile operating environment.

Organizations also share views on **how the philanthropic ecosystem might evolve**. An international environmental funder highlights the need for a more collaborative, decentralized and democratized environmental philanthropy ecosystem in the Global South, particularly in regions where civic freedoms are most at risk. A grassroots funder in Africa emphasizes minimizing bureaucratic hurdles and trusting local leadership to enable rapid, community-led responses to crises as they emerge. Trust also requires balancing the requirements of rigorous impact measurement with respect for grassroots autonomy and a commitment to avoid extractive practices. Beyond funding, philanthropy's role in collective sense-making and strategizing could also be enhanced: *'Progress depends on funders coming together to share insights, invest in long-term, trust-based relationships... [and hold] space for failure and experimentation.'*

Reflections from funder interviews highlight that **supporting movements, alliance building and public mobilization** remains challenging but essential for human rights grant makers. While some have made exploratory grants to movement-led groups via intermediaries, such strategies require more structural, longer-term support given the longer arc of change. Supporting movements and organizations to test, innovate and learn from failure is felt to be an important pathway along that arc. Learning from the successes of anti-rights funders, foundations could consider *'bigger-bet support for promising young actors'*, bolder experimentation and more investment in shifting attitudes through popular culture. Of all the dimensions of change in which to invest, ecosystem strengthening and field capacity are seen as vital for long-term resilience. Deepening human rights advocacy and discourse on economic inequality and state capture are identified as a promising future direction, applying accountability tools to rein in corporate power and boosting the resonance of human rights with broader constituencies.

Many contributions affirm that **sustained support** from leading human rights foundations has been a *'huge factor'* behind the achievements highlighted and will continue to be *'invaluable to so many in the movement'* over the coming years. As one respondent observes: *'The biggest wins of the past ten years have been decades in the making. That plodding, incremental, ego-less work is essential for the moments of breakthrough - and consistent, core support funding for the long haul makes that work possible.'*

4. Taking These Insights Forward

The human rights work surveyed here has unfolded amid profound geopolitical changes. Many of the rules of the post-World War II order that gave rise to the contemporary human rights system have been weakened, challenged or openly disregarded. **Human rights actors may not have been able to arrest this erosion, but they have continually contested it**—strategizing adaptively to push back where needed and press forward where possible, always keeping sight of the longer-term horizon.

Beneath the specific advances highlighted by organizations lie deeper tectonic shifts that have redefined **who is recognized as a rights-holder, where responsibility is understood to lie, and how power can be challenged**.

Whether securing recognition of the agency and autonomy of persons with disabilities; bringing corporate power within the frame of accountability; or expanding pathways to justice and redress, these advances have been incremental, contested and jagged, yet no less consequential for it. Seen over a longer-term arc, these are durable shifts in the terrain which will prove difficult to reverse.

Most importantly, these changes reflect **a deeper transformation in the demand for justice**. Compared to ten years ago, more people, in more places, have asserted rights claims grounded in lived experience of harm, exclusion and inequality—and have persisted in doing so despite repression, fatigue and backlash. Even as the formal architecture of human rights has come under strain, sustained investment has widened the frame on whose voices are heard, which rights are recognized and how they can be realized. It is this defiant and distributed demand that gives the shifts described in this report their enduring significance.

Nevertheless, **three priorities** stand out for consolidating this progress, building on the gains of the past decade and meeting the challenges of the years ahead. These are not intended as exhaustive or prescriptive recommendations, but as reflections on how the collective wisdom of the field - as surfaced through the survey - might be channeled into ongoing discussions on strengthening the resilience and effectiveness of the human rights ecosystem.

1. Tackle the drivers of human rights abuse

Funder collaboratives and civil society networks are well-placed to support cross-movement strategizing on how to tackle the systemic drivers of human rights and democratic backsliding - particularly the unprecedented concentration of corporate power and its harmful yet unaccountable influence on politics, the economy, the ecology, culture and technology. As this paper highlights, many organizations are recognizing the imperative of addressing this and other structural roots of injustice. Yet they are often working in isolation. Creating or expanding spaces for shared analysis and strategic alignment across fields (e.g. corporate accountability, gender and SOGI, media and technology, democracy and civic space) and across types of actors (from think tanks to social movements) could enable more coherent efforts, strengthening their collective power. As spaces for shared systems thinking, they could also help incubate affirmative, long-term visions of the rights-fulfilling societies we want to see, helping align strategies and action around shared horizons and common goals, rather than purely defensive agendas.

2. Reclaim the narrative power of human rights

Human rights remain an enduring ethical framework, one that has come under sustained and virulent attack precisely because of its success in constraining the interests of the powerful. From Chile's nationwide protests against inequality to Sudan's 'bread and freedom' revolution, from the campaign for marriage equality in Thailand to the defence of abortion access in the US, social protests over the last decade have consistently invoked the language of rights to propel profound social or constitutional change. These movements have often adopted an intuitive and expansive concept of rights, shaped by lived experience of injustice rather than by the letter of the law.

By contrast, the narrower and more technical language of professionalized human rights practice can appear disconnected from the concerns and aspirations of wider publics. It is telling that so-called 'anti-rights' actors often deploy the language of rights themselves, advancing restrictive - but for many, resonant - conceptions of whose rights matter. In this context, many within the human rights community perceive a loss of narrative ground.

As this report has shown, many organizations have nonetheless made important gains on the narrative front, bringing a justice lens to debates on disability, the economy and climate, and enhancing the relevance of human rights to broader constituencies. Yet despite growing attention from funders,

investments in narrative work - and the deeper work of longer-term culture shift - have often fallen short of the scale, duration and experimentation required. In many contexts, human rights still remains a minority discourse, while narratives that legitimize exclusion, inequality and concentration of power continue to hold greater traction, proliferating through algorithmic amplification on social media.

Funders can play a catalytic role by supporting more contextualized and applied narrative work, grounded in local realities, attentive to different audiences and sustained over time. This includes investing in long-term experimentation, research and learning on how narratives shift attitudes and behaviour, moving beyond one-off, universal toolkits toward approaches that treat narrative change as a core, iterative dimension of human rights strategy rather than a communications add-on.

3. Reconcile metrics of impact with the long arc of change

The survey evidence highlights a long-standing tension: while lasting progress on rights and justice depends on collaborative, intersectional approaches over long time horizons, funding patterns often prioritize narrowly defined, short-term outcomes, with organizations under pressure to demonstrate discrete, attributable results. This can fragment strategies, discourage collaboration and undervalue forms of progress—such as movement-building, narrative change or prevention—that are essential to lasting impact but harder to capture through conventional metrics. Bridging this divide calls for investment in credible interim markers of progress—metrics that can signal momentum and learning without obscuring the broader arc of change. With deliberate commitment, funders and human rights organizations can navigate this tension together, by developing shared approaches to evidence, learning and accountability that recognize non-linearity, value contribution over attribution, and make space for experimentation and adaptation. Doing so would help build the tools and infrastructure needed to enable organizations to track both short-term gains and the deeper collectively-led transformations that define durable justice.

