# HUMAN RIGHTS NGOS: A CRISIS OF TRUST

## THE ROOT CAUSES AND RECOMMENDED REMEDIES

By Dr HELENA IVANOV


HJS Henry Jackson Society

CENTRE FOR RESILIENT SOCIETY

DEMOCRACY | FREEDOM | HUMAN RIGHTS

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## About the Author

**Dr Helena Ivanov** is an Associate Research Fellow at the Henry Jackson Society. She recently completed a PhD in International Relations at the London School of Economics and Political Science. Her research focuses on the relationship between propaganda and violence against civilians. In her thesis, Helena examined the role propaganda played during the Yugoslav Wars and produced a model for studying propaganda which details the key phases, functions, discourses, and techniques of propaganda (the model itself is applicable to other contexts). Additionally, Helena also served as a Manager at the Centre for International Studies at the LSE.

Prior to her PhD, Helena completed an MPhil in Political Theory at the University of Oxford, and holds a BA in Politics from the University of Belgrade.

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## About Us

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## Executive Summary

Non-governmental organisations (NGOs) are facing a deepening crisis of trust, with confidence in them steadily declining on a number of fronts across both developed and developing countries according to survey data. This erosion of trust threatens their ability to operate effectively. This report seeks to analyse the origins of this crisis of trust and offer targeted policy recommendations for NGOs. If implemented, these measures should help restore confidence in the sector, allowing it to carry out its vital work more effectively.

The crisis of trust has worsened over the last few years. For instance, significant doubt surrounds the conduct and research of human rights NGOs towards Israel, particularly since the 7 October attacks. As Michael Powell tells us in his recent *The Atlantic* article: "organizations that explicitly valued impartiality and independence have become stridently critical of Israel." [1] In the same article, Powell argues that human rights organisations frequently apply double standards. He highlights how once-impartial groups, such as Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch, which originally pursued clear and principled objectives, have become increasingly biased – particularly in their approach to the Israel–Hamas war. [2]

This report does not aim to assess the validity of the accusations of bias against these NGOs. Instead, it argues that the mere presence and frequency of such comments contribute to a substantial erosion of trust in the NGO sector. In a conflict where the stakes are so high, and given the critical role that NGOs play in protecting human rights both in times of peace and war, it is essential to find a way to address these concerns and restore genuine confidence in the work of these organisations.

Another factor contributing to this erosion of trust is the increasing perception of double standards. When NGOs focus on and push for the highest ethical standards for Western companies, they create a perception that they are inadvertently distorting developing markets and contributing to worsening human rights conditions on the ground – as their activities result in critical strategic assets and operations being taken over by Chinese, Russian or other similarly less scrupulous entities.

Further compounding the issue, the new US administration, led by President Donald Trump, has signalled plans to reduce and in some cases stop foreign aid spending and to subject NGO funding to increased scrutiny. Elon Musk, who leads the newly created Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE) and has been widely critical of American philanthropist George Soros and his role in the NGO sector, [3] has stated his intention to scrutinise NGO funding closely, casting further doubt on the sector's financial viability and future efficacy. Already in February 2025, "the Trump administration indicated it will shut it [USAID] down as an independent agency and possibly move it under the State Department in a larger effort to crack down on federal bureaucracy." [4] A few days later, all USAID overseas missions were ordered to shut down, with the USAID webpage announcing that "Nearly all staff for the U.S. Agency for International Development, or USAID, will be placed on leave." [5]

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1 Michael Powell, "The Double Standard in the Human-Rights World", *The Atlantic*, 27 March 2025, https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2025/03/ngos-anti-israel-bias/682148/.

2 For a more detailed analysis and examples, see footnote 1.

3 "Elon Musk compares George Soros to Darth Sidious of Star Wars: A meme that fuels a broader debate", *The Times of India*, 5 January 2025, https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/world/us/elon-musk-compares-george-soros-to-darth-sidious-a-meme-that-fuels-a-broader-debate/articleshow/116962508.cms.

4 Elizabeth Chuck, "What is USAID? How it works and what could happen if Trump and Musk shut it down", *NBC News*, 3 February 2025, https://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/what-is-usaid-trump-musk-shut-down-budget-funding-doge-rcna190441.

5 Sara Cook and Caitlin Yilek, "USAID to put nearly all staff on leave Friday; overseas missions shuttering", *CBS News*, 6 February 2025, https://www.cbsnews.com/news/usaid-missions-overseas-ordered-shutdown-by-friday/.

This report explores the nature and root causes of the trust deficit and provides actionable policy recommendations. Central to these is the adoption of transparent Codes of Conduct (CoCs) to restore public confidence and protect the sector's operational capacity. While NGOs may tailor their own CoC, we propose five essential policies:

- Increased transparency and accountability across their funding and operations.
- Better collaboration and engagement with local organisations and other key stakeholders to build community trust.
- Greater flexibility in operations, adapting to the cultural and political landscape of the countries in which they operate
- A risk-based approach that allows Western influence, with its higher human rights standards, to grow in countries with poor human rights records, thereby preventing the spread of Chinese or Russian influence which has little regard for human rights.
- Improved messaging strategies to communicate their plans and values effectively – so as to avoid accusations of political bias and partiality in their operations and communications.

The recommendations in this report aim to help rebuild trust at this critical time and ensure NGOs remain a vital and effective part of our civil society community, fulfilling their core missions.

## Introduction

World War II inflicted unimaginable horrors on humanity and, in its aftermath, it became painfully clear that the world needed to change to prevent such atrocities from happening again. In response, the UN General Assembly adopted the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948, establishing it as the cornerstone of modern international human rights law. [6] Since then, the protection of human rights has emerged as one of the most fundamental principles of democratic and liberal societies. Governments and citizens alike have worked tirelessly to craft legislation and implement policies designed not only to uphold human rights within their own borders but also to promote and safeguard these rights globally.

Over the years, and as awareness and coverage of events around the globe increased, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) emerged as key players in the global effort to advance human rights. These organisations became central actors in promoting and protecting human rights across the globe, playing a vital role in advocacy, raising awareness and influencing both national and international policies aimed at fostering human rights protections. [7] Since their establishment:

> NGOs [have] significantly contribute[d] to the formulation and development of international human rights law through the submissions of complaints and through international litigation, instituting or intervening in cases as parties, serving as experts, testifying as witnesses etc. Moreover, 'in many instances NGOs have been involved not only in articulating and building consensus for relevant norms, but also in helping to establish the institutions designed to enforce those norms'. [8]

NGOs are also "a key source of information to governments, intergovernmental organizations, politicians, human rights tribunals. Furthermore, NGOs provide reliable and credible information that sometimes contradicts the information provided by states and thus proves that some countries may lie about the real human rights situation(s) in their country." [9]

In practice, NGOs have demonstrated their value time and again, contributing to numerous success stories. For example, during the Cold War, Helsinki Watch played a pivotal role in monitoring and promoting human rights across Eastern Europe. Similarly, NGOs have been instrumental in advancing women's rights, pushing for gender equality worldwide and advocating for the abolition of slavery, helping to eradicate some of the gravest human rights abuses. These successes highlight the significant influence NGOs can have on shaping social progress and defending human rights globally.

This track record of success has granted human rights organisations a unique and elevated status on the global stage. Their ability to drive change, hold governments accountable and advocate for marginalised groups has positioned them as trusted guardians of human rights, often seen as indispensable actors in the fight for justice and equality worldwide. This recognition has cemented their role as influential voices in shaping both public discourse and international policy.

But over the course of the last few years, many began questioning whether the role of NGOs is as positive as once thought and whether some monitoring and accountability may be

6 "What are human rights?", United Nations, https://www.ohchr.org/en/what-are-human-rights#:~:text=The%20Universal%20Declaration%20of%20Human%20Rights%20(UDHR)%2C%20adopted%20by,all%20international%20human%20rights%20law.

7 Lina Marcinkutė, "The role of human rights NGO's: Human rights defenders or state sovereignty destroyers?", *Baltic Journal Of Law & Politics* 4, 2 (2011), https://intapi.sciendo.com/pdf/10.2478/v10076-011-0012-5.

8 Ibid.

9 Ibid.

necessary. Most importantly, the NGO sector (among others) is facing serious issues with trust and confidence,[10] with data showing that people no longer trust NGOs like they did in the past – and this is applicable both to those who donate to these organisations and also those who are supposed to be aided by them. According to Gallup and Wellcome research from 2019, "A slim majority of the world's adults (52%) express confidence in charitable organizations and NGOs in their respective countries. However, 32% tell Gallup they do not have confidence in such organizations, many of whom deliver vital services in the countries where they operate."[11] Alarmingly, in many countries where NGOs should play a crucial role in improving human rights, trust in these organisations is worryingly low. And according to this research, trust in NGOs was declining in many Western countries.

Over the years, the situation has worsened in some countries. According to the 2024 Edelman Trust Barometer, trust in NGOs, businesses, government and media declined between 2023 and 2024, with the UK now among the least trusting nations. Specifically, regarding NGOs, countries globally are largely neutral – neither actively distrusting nor showing strong trust in them. However, in many developed countries, such as the UK, Sweden, Germany and Japan, the majority of people do not trust NGOs.[12]

Many separate factors have contributed to this erosion of trust since 2019. For example, back in 2021, when celebrating the 60th anniversary of Amnesty International (AI), some asked whether this NGO was as impartial as it claimed to be, with "allegations of one-sided reporting, or a failure to treat threats to security as a mitigating factor"[13] emerging to taint the celebrations. Moreover, in 2022, in light of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, AI issued a report titled "Ukrainian fighting tactics endanger civilians"[14] which is, according to many experts, overly and unjustifiably critical of the Ukrainian side with "Ukrainian and international experts condemn[ing] the report as misleading".[15] In a nutshell, "the report implies that Ukraine may be committing war crimes and that its soldiers' actions might be interpreted as using civilians as human shields."[16] Critics argue that the condemnation of Ukraine lacks a clear violation of international law, pointing to considerable ambiguity in the legal basis for AI's claims. Moreover, the credibility of the report was further called into question because "the local office immediately distanced themselves [from the report]. They claimed it was compiled by foreign observers who just parachuted into the country."[17]

Finally, since the 7 October massacre of Israeli civilians by Hamas terrorists, AI has been accused of being "among the most active NGOs that systemically promote demonization of Israel, BDS [Boycotts, Divestment and Sanctions], and antisemitism – under the façade of

[10] For further details on what Gallup terms 'crisis of confidence' see: Frank Newport, "Crisis in Confidence 2023", Gallup, 31 December 2023, https://news.gallup.com/opinion/polling-matters/547766/crisis-confidence-2023.aspx.

[11] Mohamed Younis and Andrew Rzepa, "One in Three Worldwide Lack Confidence in NGOs", Gallup, 20 June 2019, https://news.gallup.com/opinion/gallup/258230/one-three-worldwide-lack-confidence-ngos.aspx.

[12] "2024 Edelman Trust Barometer", https://www.edelman.com/sites/g/files/aatuss191/files/2024-02/2024%20Edelman%20Trust%20Barometer%20Global%20Report_FINAL.pdf.

[13] Rob Mudge, "Amnesty International: The good, the bad and the ugly?", *DW*, 28 May 2021, https://www.dw.com/en/amnesty-international-the-good-the-bad-and-the-ugly/a-57680902.

[14] "Ukraine: Ukrainian fighting tactics endanger civilians", Amnesty International, 4 August 2022, https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2022/08/ukraine-ukrainian-fighting-tactics-endanger-civilians/.

[15] Julian Hayda, "Experts widely condemn Amnesty International report alleging Ukrainian war crimes", *NPR*, 6 August 2022, https://www.npr.org/2022/08/06/1116179764/experts-widely-condemn-amnesty-international-report-alleging-ukrainian-war-crime; see also Uriel Epshtein, "Amnesty got it terribly wrong", *Politico*, 15 August 2022, https://www.politico.eu/article/amnesty-ukraine-report-wrong/ and Michael N. Schmitt, "The expert panel's review of Amnesty International's allegations of Ukrainian IHL violations", *Articles of War*, 1 May 2023, https://lieber.westpoint.edu/expert-panels-review-amnesty-internationals-ai-allegations-ukrainian-ihl-violations/.

[16] Amb. Alan Baker, "Amnesty International: Hypocrisy and Double Standards", Jerusalem Center for Security and Foreign Affairs, 1 September 2022, https://jcpa.org/amnesty-international-hypocrisy-and-double-standards/.

[17] Hayda, "Experts widely condemn Amnesty International report".

universal human rights." [18] The state of Israel also suggested that AI is antisemitic with Lior Haiat, spokesperson for the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs, telling *Politico* that: "Amnesty International is an antisemitic organization that is biased against Israel." [19]

In response to many of these accusations, Amnesty International stated that "criticism of Israel that is based on agreed international human rights standards that hold all countries to account cannot be dismissed with the broad use of the term [antisemitism] – nor by the invocation of a non-legally binding definition [the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance definition of antisemitism]." [20]

More problematically, AI is not the only organisation to be accused of disseminating objectionable material in the aftermath of 7 October. [21] It should be noted that our report does not aim to assess the validity or merit of such criticism or to endorse it. Instead, the report merely acknowledges its presence, arguing that the existence and relative frequency of these criticisms contribute to an erosion of trust within the NGO sector.

Moreover, multiple NGOs, and especially those based in Africa, have also been criticised for being "more accountable to their funders than those they serve. Because they are largely dependent on funding, their projects are crafted in line with donor preferences instead of those they supposedly represent." [22] Generally speaking, in the context of Africa, some argue that NGOs often apply intense pressure on Western companies and governments to adhere to the highest human rights and environmental standards. Moreover, "even though the West often encourage their companies or multinational corporations to compete in Africa, the conditions and the cost they set are sometimes too expensive compared to the bid of the Chinese companies." [23] As a result, many operations may end up being controlled by Russian or Chinese companies, which do not have to adhere to the same rigorous standards.

Despite criticisms of Western companies, they generally uphold higher human rights and environmental standards compared to their Russian or Chinese counterparts, and the shift of operations to these other countries results in a net loss for everyone involved. Therefore, when NGOs push for unattainable standards for Western companies operating in Africa, they inadvertently contribute to worsening human rights conditions on the ground. This often results in these operations being taken over by Chinese, Russian or other similarly less scrupulous entities. There is also a notable lack of criticism in cases where non-Western companies take the lead while demonstrating little to no regard for human rights. This absence of scrutiny often reinforces perceptions of double standards, where Western countries face stricter accountability than non-democratic entities. Such conduct in turn also further erodes trust in the NGO sector.

The new Trump Administration is likely to pose even further challenges to the NGO sector. In his first term, President Trump often expressed frustration with the NGO sector – for example

18 "Any Excuse to Attack Israel: Amnesty International's Propaganda on Gaza", NGO Monitor, 1 November 2023, https://www.ngo-monitor.org/reports/amnesty-internationals-propaganda-on-gaza/.

19 Paul Dallison and Peter Wilke, "Israel blasts 'antisemitic' Amnesty over finding of 'war crimes, by all parties'", *Politico*, 26 October 2023, https://www.politico.eu/article/israel-calls-amnesty-international-antisemitic-and-biased-after-it-criticized-war-crimes-by-all-parties/.

20 Eve Geddie, "EU needs to acknowledge the reality of Israeli apartheid", Amnesty International, 20 March 2023, https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2023/03/eu-needs-to-acknowledge-the-reality-of-israeli-apartheid/.

21 For further details see: "Antisemitism and NGOs", NGO Monitor, https://www.ngo-monitor.org/key-issues/ngos-and-antisemitism/ngo-involvement-in-antisemitism/.

22 Sally Matthews, "The role of NGOs in Africa: are they a force for good?", *The Conversation*, 25 April 2017, https://theconversation.com/the-role-of-ngos-in-africa-are-they-a-force-for-good-76227.

23 David L. Dambre, "Why the U.S. is Losing Africa to China and Russia", *Modern Diplomacy*, 23 July 2023, https://moderndiplomacy.eu/2023/07/23/why-the-u-s-is-losing-africa-to-china-and-russia/.

in 2020, "the Trump administration [was] reportedly making plans to declare that several high-profile non-governmental organisations (NGOs) are antisemitic … Under the supposed plans, Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch and Oxfam – NGO's operating in several countries across the globe – would be labelled antisemitic because of their stance on Israel's settlement policies." [24] While this had not taken place by the end of Trump's previous term, given the developments post the 7 October massacre, we can anticipate that NGOs are unlikely to fare well under the new Trump Administration. Indicative of that is President Trump's decision to sanction the International Criminal Court (ICC), a decision which "coincided with a visit to Washington by Israel's Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, who is wanted by the ICC over the war in Gaza." [25] Specifically, President Trump has authorized economic and travel sanctions targeting people who work on International Criminal Court investigations of U.S. citizens or U.S. allies such as Israel. [26]

What is more, Elon Musk, tasked with leading an advisory body called the Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE), has indicated his intention to scrutinise NGO funding closely and demand greater transparency from aid and nonprofit organisations. [27] Already in February 2025, "the Trump administration indicated it will shut it [USAID] down as an independent agency and possibly move it under the State Department in a larger effort to crack down on federal bureaucracy." [28] A few days later, all USAID overseas missions were ordered to shut down with the USAID webpage announcing that "Nearly all staff for the U.S. Agency for International Development, or USAID, will be placed on leave". [29] Thus, if things don't change, NGOs are likely to find themselves in a very complex situation which would seriously undermine their ability to do their work effectively.

Given the critical role and prominent positions that NGOs hold, coupled with ongoing debates about their effectiveness, a thorough investigation is long overdue. This report examines the history and evolution of human rights NGOs, exploring how they have operated in the past compared to the present, and assesses the need for enhanced oversight and accountability – especially in high-stakes contexts like the Middle East and Africa.

To achieve this, we have carefully selected case studies for in-depth analysis. We examined instances where NGOs have successfully driven positive change, such as in the work of Helsinki Watch and the Anti-Slavery Society. Additionally, we analysed the criticism of NGO engagement in Africa and the Middle East, two regions currently facing significant human rights challenges and thus regions where engagement of human rights NGOs is crucial.

Ultimately, we contend that NGOs, much like other organisations, are tasked with upholding and safeguarding human rights worldwide. However, they also bear a second, equally crucial responsibility: persuading the public and earning their trust in the integrity of these efforts. The data presented in this paper reveals that NGOs are falling short in this second role, highlighting an urgent need to restore trust in the sector. To restore trust and confidence, NGOs must create effective and transparent frameworks to guide their operations and enhance their impact worldwide. Specifically, we argue that NGOs need to create Codes of Conduct (CoCs)

[24] Matt Mathers, "Trump administration 'plans to brand leading NGOs including Oxfam and Amnesty as antisemitic'", *Independent*, 22 October 2020, https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/us-politics/trump-ngos-antisemitic-amnesty-international-oxfam-human-rights-watch-b1220140.html.

[25] Michelle Nichols and Bart H. Meijer, "Countries vow 'unwavering' support for ICC, as Trump hits it with sanctions", *Reuters*, 7 February 2025, https://www.reuters.com/world/trump-impose-sanctions-international-criminal-court-2025-02-06/.

[26] Ibid.

[27] Alex Nitzberg, "Elon Musk and Vivek Ramaswamy agree on 'need to scrutinize' US funding for NGOs", *Fox News*, 3 December 2024, https://www.foxnews.com/politics/elon-musk-vivek-ramaswamy-agree-need-scrutinize-us-funding-ngos.

[28] Chuck, "What is USAID?".

[29] Yilek, "USAID to put nearly all staff on leave".

that will guide their work. While individual NGOs can expand their CoCs, we propose five key policies be included:

- increased transparency regarding their operations and funding;
- partnering with local organisations to amplify their voices;
- adopting flexible, context-specific working models instead of one-size-fits-all solutions;
- refining and clarifying their messaging;
- implementing a risk-based approach to human rights protection in complex regions.

## NGOs over the years

While there are many different definitions, typically an NGO is defined as a "voluntary group of individuals or organizations, usually not affiliated with any government, that is formed to provide services or to advocate a public policy. Although some NGOs are for-profit corporations, the vast majority are nonprofit organizations… NGOs may be financed by private donations, international organizations, governments, or a combination of these." [30] NGOs vary in their thematic focus, addressing issues such as human rights, environmental protection, disaster relief or development aid. Their scope of activities can range from local and regional efforts to national and international initiatives. [31]

Although the term "NGO" is a more recent development, organisations of this kind have existed for a long time. By the mid-19th century, "international NGOs focusing on women's rights, peace, or ending slavery were common" [32] and some such organisations still exist today – for instance, the Anti-Slavery Society which began campaigning for the abolition of slavery back in 1839 is now known as Anti-Slavery International. [33] Similarly, "the Red Cross… formed in Geneva in 1863, married science and morality as it lobbied European governments to let medical personnel care for wounded soldiers on the battlefield… The late nineteenth century also saw the establishment of the International Council of Women, the International Federation of Trade Unions, the International Olympic Committee… among many other organizations." [34] Many of these organisations strongly opposed European nationalism and instead focused on promoting humanitarian causes across the world. In another example, "in 1910 some 130 international groups organized a coordinating body called the Union of International Associations." [35]

The 20th century saw the NGO sector professionalise its activities, especially in the aftermath of World War I, when the League of Nations "recognised citizen-based organisations as essential sources of information and technical expertise for League members." [36] Those organisations worked together with the League of Nations, often providing essential expertise.

But the proper rise of NGOs in their modern form occurred predominantly after World War II, a period when the global community recognised the urgent need for strong international frameworks to prevent such horrors from happening again. During this period, NGOs played a crucial role. Specifically:

> If not for the coordination, engagement, and persuasive advocacy by private NGOs at the 1945 San Francisco Conference, the UN Charter would not have enshrined human rights as the preeminent multilateral organization's Third Pillar or laid the institutional groundwork for the subsequent development of international human rights law… In this sense, the story of the inclusion of human rights in the UN Charter is also the story of the power of effective NGO advocacy to ensure more effective protection of international human rights. [37]

30 Margaret P. Karns, "nongovernmental organization", Encyclopaedia Britannica, 19 March 2025, https://www.britannica.com/topic/nongovernmental-organization.

31 Ibid.

32 Emmaline Soken-Huberty, "What Role Do NGOs Play in Protecting Human Rights?", Human Rights Careers, https://www.humanrightscareers.com/issues/what-role-do-ngos-play-in-protecting-human-rights/.

33 Ibid.

34 Ryan Irwin, "Non-Governmental Organizations", History Faculty Scholarship, University at Albany, State University of New York, 2015, https://scholarsarchive.library.albany.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1025&context=history_fac_scholar.

35 Karns, "nongovernmental organization".

36 Irwin, "Non-Governmental Organizations".

37 Felice Gaer, "Human rights and the UN Charter: NGOs made the difference", Universal Rights Group, 26 June 2020, https://www.universal-rights.org/human-rights-and-the-un-charter-ngos-made-the-difference/.

From this point, the NGO sector continued to grow, evolve and significantly advance human rights across the globe. [38] NGOs expanded their reach, addressing not only post-war reconstruction and humanitarian relief but also broader issues such as poverty, inequality, environmental protection and social justice. Through advocacy, grassroots mobilisation and international partnerships, they became a driving force in shaping policy, holding governments accountable and giving a voice to vulnerable communities. Their influence has been crucial in promoting global human rights standards and responding to crises that threaten peace and security.

Today, NGOs exist at various levels, from national and international organisations to smaller, local grassroots groups. Multiple factors have contributed to their rise, including the spread of democracy, globalisation, the expansion of the internet and the growing awareness of international issues. [39] These changes created an ideal environment for NGOs to thrive, as they stepped in to address gaps in governance and advocacy. By the turn of the 21st century, research suggested there were approximately 6000 international NGOs operating globally. [40] And to this day, the number of NGOs continues to rise, as does the influence they have in both national and international arenas. [41]

Over the course of their existence, NGOs have played multiple different roles, including but not limited to providing technical expertise and knowledge to various governments and other organisations like the UN; [42] lobbying for specific laws or policies (e.g. women's rights, banning landmines); [43] and providing humanitarian and other assistance. [44]

As time passed, NGOs began to specialise in specific areas of advocacy. Today, there are NGOs that focus exclusively on issues such as the environment, workers' rights, healthcare, education and more. [45] This process of specialisation allowed organisations to focus their efforts and resources into areas where they saw the greatest potential for impact. Among these, a significant number of NGOs emerged that focus exclusively on advancing human rights, some of the largest being Amnesty International, Children's Defense Fund, Human Rights Action Center, Human Rights Watch, International Committee of the Red Cross and UN Watch. [46] These human rights NGOs have become crucial in advocating for the protection and promotion of human rights and have exerted substantial influence on governments and countries across the globe.

Specifically, according to the Council of Europe, human rights NGOs have played a "crucial role in:

- fighting individual violations of human rights either directly or by supporting particular 'test cases' through relevant courts
- offering direct assistance to those whose rights have been violated
- lobbying for changes to national, regional or international law

38 Kevin Bales, *Understanding Global Slavery: A Reader* (University of California Press, 2005), pp.78-86.

39 Irwin, "Non-Governmental Organizations".

40 Karns, "nongovernmental organization".

41 Irwin, "Non-Governmental Organizations".

42 Karns, "nongovernmental organization".

43 Ibid.

44 Ibid.

45 "Human Rights Activism and the Role of NGOs", Council of Europe, https://www.coe.int/en/web/compass/human-rights-activism-and-the-role-of-ngos.

46 Ambreen Muzaffar, "The World's Top Ten Human Rights Organisations", Funds for NGOs, https://www.fundsforngos.org/featured-articles/worlds-top-ten-human-rights-organisations/ and "Human Rights Organizations", United for Human Rights, https://www.humanrights.com/voices-for-human-rights/human-rights-organizations/non-governmental.html.

- helping to develop the substance of those laws
- promoting knowledge of, and respect for, human rights among the population." [47]

Depending on the situation and the needs of those they are helping, human rights NGOs employ various strategies to advance human rights. They may provide direct assistance, such as legal aid or humanitarian assistance. [48] In other cases, they focus on gathering and documenting accurate information about human rights violations, which is then used "to promote transparency in the human rights record of governments [and] is essential in holding them to account". [49] They often campaign and lobby for various policies, and rely on the strategy of naming and shaming when there are severe human rights abuses. [50] Finally, they also play a crucial role in raising public awareness through educational programmes which foster a broader understanding of human rights issues among general audiences. [51]

[47] "Human Rights Activism and the Role of NGOs", CoE.
[48] Ibid.
[49] Ibid.
[50] Ibid.
[51] Ibid.

## Human Rights NGOs – The Success Stories

The benefits that NGOs have brought to the world have been evident since their inception. As mentioned earlier, NGO consultants played a crucial role in ensuring the inclusion of human rights in the United Nations Charter, setting a foundation for global human rights advocacy. From that moment onward, NGOs have made remarkable contributions to advancing human rights worldwide, with numerous success stories to their credit. In the following paragraphs, we will examine two examples that demonstrate how effectively NGOs can drive positive change when they are well-structured, focused on a single issue and supported by local populations who are either victims of or direct witnesses to human rights abuses.

### *Anti-Slavery Society (nowadays Anti-Slavery International)*

It seems that the origins of NGOs as such can be traced all the way back to the Abolition movement. According to Bales: "If there is a pathfinder for the development of nonstate actors present as a potent force for political change, it is the various incarnations of the antislavery movement." [52] When it comes to the abolition of slavery, most experts agree that human rights organisations and civil society organisations (as they were mainly known at the time) played a crucial role. [53] As Martinez argues: "Like modern human rights movements, the movement for the abolition of slavery and the slave trade involved transborder activism by privately organised individuals and included, as one goal, the strengthening of international treaty regimes concerning the slave trade." [54]

In general, while experts may disagree about the motives of the individuals who took part in the abolition movements (with some suggesting they had idealistic motives, while others argue that they were primarily driven by self-interested reasons), [55] they do agree that the tactics used by these movements were effective and essential for ending slavery. Such tactics included petitions to Parliament (in the UK), the mobilisation of women in the process (which would later prove instrumental in empowering women to self-organise and demand civil and political rights) [56] and boycotts – all of which contributed to the increased attention that these organisations received in the UK. [57] Through these strategies, the abolitionist movements successfully pressured governments to implement legislation that progressively moved towards the abolition of slavery. And as the years passed, these organisations developed more sophisticated strategies that remain useful to contemporary NGOs. [58]

One notably successful organisation fighting for the abolition of slavery was the Anti-Slavery Society, nowadays known as Anti-Slavery International, which is "at over 180 years old… the oldest human rights organisation in the world." [59] The origins of the Anti-Slavery Society date all the way back to 1768, when Thomas Clarkson (the founder of the organisation) published a long essay arguing in favour of the abolition of the slave trade. The essay received praise, and Clarkson went on to use the momentum to build a movement that would fight against slavery and would ultimately become the Anti-Slavery Society. Clarkson relied on various methods

52 Bales, *Understanding Global Slavery*, p.70.

53 Jenny S. Martinez, "The Anti-Slavery Movement and the Rise of International Non-Governmental Organizations", in Dinah Shelton (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of International Human Rights Law* (2013; online edn, Oxford Academic, 16 December 2013), pp.222-249, https://academic.oup.com/edited-volume/42626/chapter-abstract/358047942?redirectedFrom=fulltext.

54 Ibid., p.226.

55 Ibid., p.228.

56 Ibid., p.239.

57 Ibid., p.234.

58 Ibid., p.247.

59 "Who we are", Anti-Slavery International, https://www.antislavery.org/about-us/who-we-are/.

including "fund-raising, research, public speaking and publishing" [60] but also graphic imagery that he showed during his campaign. According to Bales: "this was truly a mass human-rights campaign: note that the Anti-Slavery Society's thirteen hundred local branches generated 5,484 petitions to Parliament in just six months in 1830-31, and that two years later a women-only 'monster petition' carried 187,000 signatures." [61] By 1850, the Anti-Slavery Society had also "Developed 'slave-free produce' consumer action groups, promoting alternatives to slave plantation sugar." [62]

More importantly, this organisation played a key role in the establishment of the Brussels Act, "the first comprehensive anti-slavery treaty, which allowed the inspection of ships and the arrest of anyone transporting slaves." [63] On top of the Brussels Act, the Anti-Slavery Society also impacted multiple international laws and conventions, "providing legal protections for millions of people affected by slavery across the world." [64] According to the organisation, it was the efforts of the Anti-Slavery Society that played a crucial role in ending the tyranny of King Leopold II in Congo [65] – by drawing attention to the brutality of his regime towards the locals in Congo, the Society shifted international opinion in favour of ending the King's rule in the country.

Over the years, as the needs of the market changed, the Anti-Slavery Society had to evolve and diversify so as to include "issues [such] as child labour, female genital mutilation, and unfree forms of marriage while concentrating on slavery". [66] In the end, it transitioned to Anti-Slavery International. To this day, it is regarded as the most successful organisation in its mission and is highly valued and celebrated by experts and policymakers, who frequently express gratitude for "their consolidation and review of the conventions on slavery". [67]

The success of the Anti-Slavery Society, and later Anti-Slavery International, can largely be attributed to its well-structured operational framework:

> ASI's aims and objectives are well defined and there is a considerable degree of internal reflection on the scope of its work… Priorities are well thought out and rationalised, and there is a good balance between maintaining continuity with past work and responding to current developments… ASI set up an internal monitoring system… Its regional work is done in partnership with local NGOs… [and finally] there appears to be a good system of scrutiny and checks in place with the Council and the Executive Committee. [68]

### *Helsinki Watch*

Another very prominent example of a successful human rights NGO is Helsinki Watch and the role it played in the Eastern Bloc in the final years of Communist rule. The US Helsinki Watch Committee (HW) was founded in 1978 and "it was connected to a specific international

60 Bales, *Understanding Global Slavery*, p.71.

61 Ibid., pp.70-71.

62 "Our history", Anti-Slavery International, https://www.antislavery.org/about-us/history/.

63 Ibid.

64 "Who we are", Anti-Slavery International.

65 "Our history", Anti-Slavery International.

66 Bales, *Understanding Global Slavery*, p.77.

67 David Weissbrodt and Anti-Slavery International, "Abolishing Slavery and its Contemporary Forms", Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2002, https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/Documents/Publications/slaveryen.pdf.

68 Todd Landman and Meghna Abraham, "Evaluation of nine non-governmental human rights organisations", IOB Working Document, February 2004, https://minorityrights.org/app/uploads/2024/01/evaluation-report-evaluation-of-nine-non-governmental-human-rights-organisations.pdf. This article also provides more insights into how ASI operates, as well as contemporary success stories.

agreement (the Helsinki Final Act), concerned with a particular group of victims (Eastern Bloc dissidents), and founded explicitly as a U.S. citizens' organization operating on American funds (a $400,000 grant from the Ford Foundation)." [69] To date, Helsinki Watch is considered one of the most stellar examples of how NGOs can change societies and the world for the better. In the words of its successor, Human Rights Watch:

> Helsinki Watch adopted a methodology of publicly 'naming and shaming' abusive governments through media coverage and through direct exchanges with policymakers. By shining the international spotlight on human rights violations in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, Helsinki Watch contributed to the dramatic democratic transformations of the late 1980s. [70]

From its inception (which is an inspiring story showcasing how impactful NGOs can be when citizens seize a moment and channel it towards a meaningful change), [71] Helsinki Watch had a clearly defined objective to "apply pressure to the Soviet Union through the human rights provisions of the Final Act." [72] HW went on to play a major role both domestically (in the US) and abroad, often detailing human rights abuses on American soil and in the Eastern Bloc.

Due to the success of Helsinki Watch and America Watch (founded to monitor abuses of human rights during the civil wars in Central America), "In rapid succession in the 1980s, Asia Watch (1985), Africa Watch (1988), and Middle East Watch (1989) were added to what was then known as 'The Watch Committees.' In 1988, the organization formally adopted the all-inclusive name Human Rights Watch." [73] Nevertheless, the original Helsinki Watch division remained true to its mandate, stating that it felt "a special responsibility towards its counterparts in the Eastern bloc signatory states". [74]

Perhaps the clearest evidence of HW's deep commitment to human rights in the Eastern Bloc is that even after the collapse of the USSR, HW believed that the fight for human rights in the region had only just begun. Recognising the need for sustained effort, HW proposed the following:

> ...by training human rights monitors and defenders throughout the region, Helsinki Watch will be contributing to the development of civil society as well as seeking to establish a system of citizen enforcement that is intended to ensure that rights spelled out in newly adopted constitutions are meaningful... We would not attempt to organize these groups into any formal federation. Nor do we see our role as permanent. This will be a limited project: as the local activists develop expertise, they will take over the training sessions and we will withdraw. [75]

In general, the legacy of HW in the Eastern Bloc remains positive, and the work of this organisation has had a profound impact on the region, ultimately improving human rights records. Specifically, the HW overview states:

> In the countries where we have been most deeply involved – Poland, Hungary, Czechoslovakia and the Soviet Union – our contacts, the 'dissidents' whose rights we

69 Peter Slezkine, "From Helsinki to Human Rights Watch: How an American Cold War Monitoring Group Became An International Human Rights Institution", *Humanity Journal*, 16 December 2014, https://humanityjournal.org/issue-5-3/from-helsinki-to-human-rights-watch-how-an-american-cold-war-monitoring-group-became-an-international-human-rights-institution/.

70 "Our History", Human Rights Watch, https://www.hrw.org/our-history.

71 For further details on how Moscow dissidents used the Helsinki Final Act to pressure the USSR into respecting human rights, ultimately inspiring the creation of Helsinki Watch, see Slezkine, "From Helsinki to Human Rights Watch".

72 Slezkine, "From Helsinki to Human Rights Watch".

73 "Our History", Human Rights Watch.

74 Slezkine, "From Helsinki to Human Rights Watch".

75 Ibid.

> have long defended, are now helping to shape their countries' futures from positions of power. The Presidents of Hungary, Czechoslovakia and Poland, for example, are each our former colleagues in the human rights struggle, and in these countries, as in the Soviet Union, many former members of Helsinki Committees are now serving as members of the government or Parliament. [76]

To this day, the work that HW did is remembered as a story of success and a story in which human rights were championed in a difficult and complex region.

Similarly to Anti-Slavery International, HW's success is rooted in a well-structured operational framework characterised by a clear focus on specific issues and a long-term plan that involves educating local populations to eventually take charge of human rights protections in their own respective countries. Their extensive collaboration with local individuals also granted HW invaluable regional context and insight, enhancing their understanding and effectiveness in the areas in which they operated.

As demonstrated by these two examples, NGOs have frequently played a crucial role in advancing human rights worldwide and in curbing or ending practices that involved serious human rights violations. Over the years, particularly in the aftermath of World War II, their significance and influence have grown tremendously. Today, many recognise that NGOs can often exert considerable influence in key decision-making processes, including influencing politicians and governments through various strategies. These strategies range from representing victims of human rights abuses and documenting violations to engaging in 'naming and shaming' campaigns. A common factor among successful human rights NGOs is their clear operational framework, which involves strong collaboration with local organisations and relevant stakeholders. They maintain a well-defined focus on specific issues, complemented by internal checks and balances that support accountability. Throughout history, the impact of such NGOs has often been celebrated, highlighting their effectiveness in driving change and supporting human rights causes. Therefore, the continued existence and support of NGOs remains essential, given the vital role they play in promoting and protecting human rights.

[76] "Helsinki Watch Overview", HRW, https://www.hrw.org/reports/pdfs/worldreports/world.90/helsinki.pdf.

## Human Rights NGOs – The Challenges

Despite the widespread acclaim that human rights NGOs receive, recent years have seen growing questions regarding their ethics and effectiveness in combatting human rights abuses globally. Various forms of criticism towards these organisations have emerged over time. For example, two of the key methods that NGOs use – reporting and advocacy – have come under criticism "for at least three reasons: the way they portray the victims [which basically perpetuates victimisation], the way the facts in the reports are obtained [the validity of which is sometimes dubious], and the imposition of certain interpretations of situations while suppressing victims' voices." [77]

In addition, there are growing concerns about the influence funders may have on NGOs, and whether political biases might stem from their funding sources. Problematically, some NGOs offer very limited transparency regarding their funding sources, prompting many experts to call for increased transparency in NGO funding. [78]

This is especially critical in cases where there are suspicions that funds may be originating from non-democratic sources. Along those lines, and following the Qatargate scandal, [79] "the European Commission is now trying to inject more accountability and transparency into the NGO sector, with new requirements being planned for the disclosure of such organizations' non-EU funding." [80] However, this proposal has faced opposition from some NGOs and other experts, and challenges to increasing NGO funding transparency persist globally. [81]

Additionally, some have raised concerns about the effective monopolisation of human rights NGOs due to the sheer scale and influence of organisations like Amnesty International (which, according to its website, has over 500 employees and volunteers [82] and represents "a global movement of more than 10 million people in over 150 countries" [83]) and Human Rights Watch (which employs more than 550 staff members from over 70 nationalities [84]).

Elliott Abrams, deputy assistant to President Bush and deputy national security advisor with responsibility for supervising US policy towards the Middle East in the Bush Administration, has asked the question "Quis custodiet ipsos custodes?" ("Who will guard the guards themselves?"), [85] further suggesting that organisations as large as AI or HRW "report to no one, nor of course are they democratically run internally... [and that] the very independence of NGOs, one of their greatest strengths, can become an issue when two organizations so dominate the field." [86]

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77 Barbora Bukovská, "Perpetrating good: Unintended consequences of International Human Rights Advocacy", *PILI Papers*, 3 (April 2008), http://socialsciences.scielo.org/scielo.php?script=sci_arttext&pid=S1806-64452008000100001.

78 "Mapping the anti-Israel NGO Network in the US", NGO Monitor, https://ngo-monitor.org/mapping-the-anti-israel-ngo-network-in-the-us/.

79 More on the Qatargate story is available at: Markus Becker, et al., "Inside the European Parliament Corruption Scandal", *Der Spiegel*, 20 January 2023, https://www.spiegel.de/international/europe/a-secret-meeting-in-suite-412-inside-the-european-parliament-corruption-scandal-a-af0228b9-3557-47ca-8184-7e355ad151c3.

80 William Nattrass, "We need to talk about NGOs", *Politico*, 17 April 2023, https://www.politico.eu/article/we-need-to-talk-about-ngos/.

81 Ibid., and "Mapping the anti-Israel NGO Network in the US", NGO Monitor.

82 "Work for us", Amnesty International, https://www.amnesty.org.uk/work-for-us.

83 Amnesty International, https://www.amnesty.org/en/#:~:text=Amnesty%20International%20is%20a%20global,end%20abuses%20of%20human%20rights.

84 "About Us", Human Rights Watch, https://www.hrw.org/about/about-us.

85 Elliott Abrams, "Human Rights NGOs: 'Quis Custodiet Ipsos Custodes?'", Council on Foreign Relations, 16 June 2022, https://www.cfr.org/article/human-rights-ngos-quis-custodiet-ipsos-custodes.

86 Ibid.

Furthermore, NGOs have faced criticism for alleged political bias. Notably, in the aforementioned article, Abrams suggests that both HRW and AI have been accused of being biased against Israel which, if true, begs several other questions like "What other biases might [AI and HRW] have, with respect to particular countries or particular issues? Are they playing some matters down and playing others up in ways that would be controversial if fully understood outside the organization?" [87]

All of these problems have led to the decline in confidence that some people have in the NGO sector. According to Gallup and Wellcome research from 2019, "A slim majority of the world's adults (52%) express confidence in the charitable organizations and NGOs in their respective countries. However, 32% tell Gallup they do not have confidence in such organizations, many of whom deliver vital services in the countries where they operate." [88] Alarmingly, in many countries where NGOs should play a crucial role in improving human rights, trust in these organisations is worryingly low. And according to this research, trust in NGOs has started to decline in many Western countries. To illustrate, in the UK around a third of respondents (30%) said they do not trust NGOs; a similar figure of 27% emerged in the US; in Israel, less than half (48%) said they have confidence in NGOs and 41% said they do not; and in Germany, only 31% expressed confidence in NGOs whereas 42% said they do not have confidence in these organisations. [89]

Over the years, the situation has worsened in some countries. According to the 2024 Edelman Trust Barometer, trust in NGOs, businesses, government and media declined between 2023 and 2024, with the UK now among the least trusting nations. Specifically, regarding NGOs, countries globally are largely neutral – neither actively distrusting nor showing strong trust in them. However, in many developed countries, such as the UK, Sweden, Germany and Japan, the majority of people do not trust NGOs. [90] All of this is especially problematic since trust in governments is also in decline and, as David Bersoff, Edelman's head of research suggests, NGOs are "the logical institution you would think people would turn to when governments are failing them. But what happened is instead, people have been turning more to business." [91]

87 Abrams, "Human Rights NGOs: 'Quis Custodiet Ipsos Custodes?'".

88 Younis and Rzepa, "One in Three Worldwide Lack Confidence in NGOs".

89 Ibid.

90 "2024 Edelman Trust Barometer".

91 Elissa Miolene, "How can NGOs strengthen trust in a changing world?", *devex*, 30 September 2024, https://www.devex.com/news/how-can-ngos-strengthen-trust-in-a-changing-world-108420.

## NGOs and Israel-Hamas War

Nowhere are the issues of trust and impartiality more apparent than in the case of Israel. For many years, commentators, analysts and organisations have raised concerns about possible bias within the NGO sector towards Israel – and since the 7 October massacre, these concerns have grown significantly. Perhaps the most notable example of such criticism came from an op-ed in *The New York Times* penned by Robert L. Bernstein, the founder of Human Rights Watch. In 2009, he wrote:

> As the founder of Human Rights Watch, its active chairman for 20 years and now founding chairman emeritus, I must do something that I never anticipated: I must publicly join the group's critics. Human Rights Watch had as its original mission to pry open closed societies, advocate basic freedoms and support dissenters. But recently it has been issuing reports on the Israeli-Arab conflict that are helping those who wish to turn Israel into a pariah state. [92]

Mr Bernstein argued that the purpose of HRW was to "draw a sharp line between the democratic and nondemocratic worlds" [93] but that in recent years "the organization, with increasing frequency, casts aside its important distinction between open and closed societies." [94] According to him, this issue was most evident in the Middle East, where, despite the prevalence of authoritarian and dictatorial regimes that were obviously antithetical to even the idea of human rights, HRW "has written far more condemnations of Israel for violations of international law than of any other country in the region." [95]

In the rest of the op-ed, Mr Bernstein contrasts the democratic state of Israel with terrorist organisations like Hamas and Hezbollah, both of which are supported by undemocratic Iran. He suggests that HRW appears overly focused "with how wars are fought, not with motivations", [96] asserting that while all parties must adhere to the rules of war, "there is a difference between wrongs committed in self-defence and those perpetrated intentionally." [97] Moreover, Mr Bernsteincasts doubt on HRW findings, suggesting that the limited access to battlefields in Gaza and elsewhere also meant that "it is extremely difficult to make definitive judgements about war crimes." [98] Finally, Mr Bernstein concluded that HRW could only maintain its credibility by "returning to its founding mission" [99] which clearly distinguished between democratic and undemocratic states and aimed to improve human rights record in closed societies.

However, criticism of human rights NGOs and their work in the Middle East does not end there. For example, the Jerusalem Centre for Security and Foreign Affairs argued that international human rights NGOs, specifically highlighting Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch, continued with biased and anti-Israeli reporting during an Israeli operation in Gaza in 2012 which aimed to end the rocket attacks on Israel. According to the article:

> Palestinian officials and NGOs immediately laid the blame on Israel, claiming a "new Israeli military escalation" and accusing Israel of human rights violations, including

92 Robert L. Bernstein, "Rights Watchdog, Lost in the Mideast", *The New York Times*, 19 October 2009, https://www.nytimes.com/2009/10/20/opinion/20bernstein.html.

93 Ibid.

94 Ibid.

95 Ibid.

96 Ibid.

97 Ibid.

98 Ibid.

99 Ibid.

> "massacres" and "war crimes." Amnesty International and HRW immediately followed up on these accusations, condemning Israel alone for "reigniting the conflict," and "raising concerns" that Israeli strikes were "unlawfully disproportionate." Amnesty also called for an arms embargo against Israel. However, these same groups also failed to condemn massive rocket attacks by Palestinian terrorist organizations in the weeks leading up to the operation. [100]

Over the years, human rights NGOs have continuously been accused of anti-Israeli reporting – for example, in 2017, NGO Monitor (a research institute that analyses NGOs across the world, primarily in the context of the Israeli–Arab conflict) accused UN Women for publishing a "politicized" report with "faulty methodology" claiming that the report was "yet another example" of biased reporting on the Israeli–Arab conflict by the UN and NGOs. [101] Similarly, in 2021, the American Jewish Committee criticised HRW's report on Israel, calling it "outrageous". [102] They list multiple things problematic about the report concluding that "HRW frequently levels baseless accusations against Israel, the only democracy in the Middle East, while victims of authoritarian regimes in Iran, Syria, and Yemen consistently get a pass." [103]

But things substantially escalated following the massacre on 7 October 2023 during which Hamas killed over a thousand people and took hundreds hostage, after which a full-scale war erupted in the region.

As the conflict continues to unfold, various human rights NGOs have provided commentary and published data, the accuracy of which has often been questioned. Some prominent organisations have faced accusations of antisemitism. This report will not attempt to assess the validity of these claims and accusations. Rather, we present this information to support the argument that the very existence and frequency of such accusations erodes public trust and confidence in the NGO sector, ultimately weakening the ability of these organisations to carry out their work effectively.

For example, in its annual report for 2023, NGO Monitor stated that "Human Rights Watch (HRW) dedicated a considerable portion of 2023, even before October 7, to demonizing Israel and advancing antisemitism." [104] Elsewhere, NGO Monitor argues that "For more than 20 years, non-governmental organizations (NGOs)... have engaged in a long-term BDS (Boycotts, Divestment, and Sanctions) campaign against security assistance to Israel." [105]

In a more recent report, published after 7 October, NGO Monitor presents an in-depth mapping of NGO networks which it claims are responsible for spreading anti-Israeli bias. While the Henry Jackson Society does not seek to verify the validity of these claims, one significant insight from the mapping is "the varied levels of funding transparency among the NGO network" [106] with many organisations providing "minimal information about their funding sources". [107] This finding, alongside its use to support allegations of anti-Israeli bias, suggests that increased

100 Gerald M. Steinberg, "The Role of NGOs in the Palestinian Political War Against Israel", *JCPA*, https://jcpa.org/overview_palestinian_manipulation/role_of_ngos_in_the_palestinian-political_war/.

101 "UN Women Report on Israel – Faulty Methodology and Promotion of NGO Political Warfare", NGO Monitor, 8 June 2017, https://ngo-monitor.org/reports/un-women-report-israel-faulty-methodology-promotion-ngo-political-warfare/.

102 "5 Things You Should Know About Human Rights Watch's Report on Israel", *AJC*, 28 April 2021, https://www.ajc.org/news/5-things-you-should-know-about-human-rights-watchs-report-on-israel.

103 Ibid.

104 "Annual report 2023", NGO Monitor, 2024, https://ngo-monitor.org/pdf/2023AnnualReport.pdf.

105 "NGO Warfare: The Arms Embargo Campaign vs. Israel", NGO Monitor, 22 September 2024, https://ngo-monitor.org/reports/ngos-lobby-for-arms-embargo/.

106 "Mapping the anti-Israel NGO Network in the US", NGO Monitor.

107 Ibid.

transparency regarding funding – especially when funders may be perceived as undemocratic or politically biased – could be an effective way for NGOs to address such criticism and bolster public trust in their impartiality.

Other, more substantial, criticisms of human rights NGOs have emerged elsewhere. For instance, many women's organisations have been accused of remaining "silent and indifferent regarding the organized sexual assaults against women in Israel on October 7." [108] There have been many documented accusations of cooperation between the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) and Hamas. In August, reports emerged that "Nine staff members of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestinian Refugees (UNRWA) may have been involved in the Oct. 7, 2023, Hamas attack on Israel, and have been fired, the United Nations said". [109]

UNRWA is not the only agency accused of such cooperation with Hamas. For example, Seth Frantzman from *The Jewish Chronicle* has openly accused different NGOs of working with Hamas and failing to condemn their operations in Gaza and the usage of civilians as shields for their operations. He writes that "instead of condemning [Hamas] for entering schools or reporting and monitoring on this phenomenon, most NGOs and the UN prefer to either not mention Hamas or to condemn, in general, 'armed groups' for operating in civilian institutions in Gaza." [110] He continues to argue that a lot of this behaviour is driven by the organisations' motivations and aims in Gaza. Specifically, he says that:

> The NGOs and other groups that work there want to get their aid to local people. They see working with Hamas as a lesser evil than the aid not being delivered… As long as they can say aid came across the border, they can say it was delivered, even if it never reaches the people in Gaza and even if Hamas and armed gangs take the aid and sell it, fuelling the Hamas war machine. [111]

But ending Hamas's usage of civilians is key to defeating Hamas altogether argues Frantzman, suggesting that "this starts at the level of donor countries who back the UN and NGO efforts in Gaza. They can mandate reporting on Hamas presence." [112]

Moreover, there are also ongoing disputes about the aid distribution in Gaza. Some have accused Israel of intentionally blocking humanitarian aid and engaging in a deliberate policy of starvation on the basis of the reports regularly published by the UN Office of Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) and the Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC). [113]

According to one such IPC report, more than half a million people are at risk of starvation in Gaza due to Israel's siege. [114] The importance of the IPC and the data they publish is reflected

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108 Anita Friedman, "Global women's organizations have failed Israeli women – opinion", *The Jerusalem Post*, 5 December 2023, https://www.jpost.com/opinion/article-776282#google_vignette.

109 David Brunnstrom, "Nine UNRWA staff members were possibly involved in attack on Israel, UN says", *Reuters*, 5 August 2024, https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/nine-unrwa-staff-may-have-been-involved-oct-7-attack-israel-says-un-2024-08-05/.

110 Seth Frantzman, "International donors are complicit in Hamas' presence in Gaza – and key to its demise", *The Jewish Chronicle*, 18 September 2024, https://www.thejc.com/lets-talk/analysis/international-donors-are-complicit-in-hamas-presence-in-gaza-and-key-to-its-demise-myxuqv51.

111 Ibid.

112 Ibid.

113 "The IPC is a joint initiative of countries, UN agencies, and international non-governmental organisations (NGOs) established in 2004 to assess and address worldwide nutritional insecurity and malnutrition crises." (Tammy Caner, "The Misleading Reports of the UN Over Famine in Gaza", INSS, 24 July 2024, https://www.inss.org.il/publication/un-hunger-reports/).

114 "Israel's siege now blocks 83% of food aid reaching Gaza, new data reveals", Norwegian Refugee Council, 16 September 2024, https://www.nrc.no/news/2024/september/israels-siege-now-blocks-83-of-food-aid-reaching-gaza-new-data-reveals/; and "Gaza Strip: Acute Food Insecurity Situation for 1 May-15 June and Projection for 16 June-30 September 2024", IPC, https://www.ipcinfo.org/ipc-country-analysis/details-map/en/c/1157065/.

in the fact that the International Court of Justice, the UN, the prosecutor of the International Criminal Court and the UN-Secretary-General all referred to IPC reports when issuing provisional measures against Israel, or when deciding to submit requests for arrest warrants. [115] However, data presented by the Institute for National Security Studies (INSS) thinktank casts doubt on the IPC findings. An INSS report titled "The Misleading Reports of the UN Over Famine in Gaza", published in July 2024, suggests that Israel reports all aid data via Coordinator of Government Activities in the Territories (COGAT) and that there are significant discrepancies between the IPC reports and the data published by OCHA on one hand and the data published by COGAT on the other – discrepancies that are increasing with each passing month. [116]

The INSS argued that "the [UN's] reports are based on incomplete data from sources in Gaza" [117] which explains why there are differences in the findings between Israeli sources and those that rely on OCHA and the IPC. The INSS report also stated that it had discovered a number of issues with the way in which the UN reports the relevant data and listed the following problems:

- "reliance on incomplete UNRWA data
- failure to verify the figures
- disregard of the figures presented by Israel
- absence of transparency
- the manner of presenting the data
- incomplete presentation of the distribution of aid in the Strip
- selective presentation of statements from Israel" [118]

The report ultimately concluded that the widely cited IPC report is giving "a misleading and false picture of the situation." [119] And indeed, the latest IPC report [120] seems to indicate that their earlier projections [121] for this period were inaccurate which prompts further considerations regarding the accuracy of the IPC's assessments.

Finally, in December 2024, Amnesty International released a report titled "'You Feel Like You Are Subhuman': Israel's Genocide Against Palestinians in Gaza" [122] in which the organisation concluded that, in their view, Israel was committing genocide in Gaza. [123] Many have criticised the report, suggesting that it is "poorly researched and highly politicized". [124] Others have suggested that Israeli actions do not amount to the legal definition of genocide with experts noting that Israeli warnings are indicative of the fact that Israel is trying to "minimize civilian casualties". [125]

115 "The Misleading Reports of the UN", INSS.

116 Ibid.

117 Ibid.

118 Ibid.

119 Ibid.

120 "Gaza Strip: IPC Acute Food Insecurity and Acute Malnutrition Special Snapshot | September 2024 - April 2025", IPC, 17 October 2024, available via: https://reliefweb.int/attachments/885821a3-eee3-48a9-8461-aa7d9464b5b4/IPC_Gaza_Strip_Acute_Food_Insecurity_Malnutrition_Sep2024_Apr2025_Special_Snapshot.pdf.

121 "Gaza Strip: IPC Acute Food Insecurity Special Snapshot | 1 May - 30 September 2024", IPC, 25 June 2024, https://www.ipcinfo.org/fileadmin/user_upload/ipcinfo/docs/IPC_Gaza_Strip_Acute_Food_Insecurity_MaySept2024_Special_Snapshot.pdf.

122 "Israel/Occupied Palestinian Territory: 'You Feel Like You Are Subhuman': Israel's Genocide Against Palestinians in Gaza", Amnesty International, 5 December 2024, https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/mde15/8668/2024/en/.

123 "Amnesty International investigation concludes Israel is committing genocide against Palestinians in Gaza", Amnesty International, 5 December 2024, https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2024/12/amnesty-international-concludes-israel-is-committing-genocide-against-palestinians-in-gaza/.

124 Beth Bailey, "Amnesty International slammed over report charging Israel with genocide: 'Double standards'", *Fox News*, 5 December 2024, https://www.foxnews.com/world/amnesty-international-slammed-over-report-charging-israel-genocide-double-standards.

125 Ibid.

Moreover, others have argued that the evidence provided does not prove beyond reasonable doubt the element of intent [126] – *mens rea* – which is a necessary component when proving that genocide is occurring, rather than a different war crime or crime against humanity.

Along the same lines, Amnesty Israel rejected the report published by its parent group. Some members of Amnesty Israel accused "the report's authors of reaching a 'predetermined conclusion.' Amnesty Israel said that although the death and destruction in Gaza reached 'catastrophic proportions,' its own analysis did not find that Israel's actions met the definition of genocide." [127] In addition, following the publication of the report, "Israeli government officials and interest groups [claimed] that the human rights NGO fabricated its own bespoke definition of genocide in order to reach its damning conclusion." [128] This last point garnered a lot of discussions – with some genocide scholars arguing that "Amnesty's arguments fall along the lines of those you might expect to hear in an international courtroom" [129] while the Anti-Defamation League in the US stated that the report was "littered with inaccuracies, flaws, and contortion of facts to fit its own twisted definition of 'genocide'". [130] Finally, the US, the UK and Germany have all rejected Amnesty's claim that Israel is engaging in genocide.

As the above paragraphs illustrate, significant doubt surrounds the conduct and research of human rights NGOs towards Israel, particularly since 7 October. This report does not aim to assess the validity of the accusations and concerns listed above, instead, we are arguing that the mere presence and frequency of such comments contributes to a substantial erosion of trust in the NGO sector. In a conflict where the stakes are so high, and given the critical role that NGOs play in protecting human rights, both in times of peace and war, it is essential to find a way to address these concerns and restore genuine confidence in the work of these organisations.

126 Jeremy Sharon and Jacob Magid, "'Predetermined conclusions': Amnesty Israel workers slam parent group's 'genocide' charge", *The Times of Israel*, 5 December 2024, https://www.timesofisrael.com/predetermined-conclusions-amnesty-israel-workers-slam-parent-groups-genocide-charge/.

127 Ibid.

128 "Why is Israel accusing Amnesty International of inventing its own definition of genocide?", *The Journal*, 11 December 2024, https://www.thejournal.ie/amnesty-international-invented-definitiion-of-genocide-israel-gaza-6568231-Dec2024/.

129 Ibid.

130 Ibid.

## NGOs and Africa

The Middle East is not the only region where the conduct of NGOs has come under scrutiny. Increasing concerns are being raised about the ethics and effectiveness of NGO operations in Africa. Experts suggest that Western influence – beyond NGOs and extending to political and military decision-makers – has waned across the continent. [131] According to a Gallup report:

> ...median approval ratings of Washington – indicative of the country's soft power – slipped from 59% in 2022 to 56% in 2023. Of the four global powers asked about, the U.S. was the only one not to see its image improve across Africa in 2023. Meanwhile, China's approval in the region rose six percentage points, from 52% in 2022 to 58% in 2023, two points ahead of the U.S. [132]

Moreover, Russia has managed to improve its positioning. According to the same report, in 2023 "median approval of Russian leadership now stands at 42%, up from 34% the previous year". [133]

The decline in approval ratings can be attributed to the West being largely "absent from the continent". [134] When it does engage, experts argue, its approach is often flawed and perceived as "paternalistic". [135] Moreover, experts have pointed to the US's "poor messaging strategy" which is also pushing Africa away from the West and towards Russia or China. [136] Additionally, the US is frequently perceived by African populations as being more self-interested than genuinely concerned with African interests. Experts also suggest that a lack of cultural sensitivity in US engagement further alienates African nations from the West. [137]

It seems that the results on the ground are also not speaking in the US's favour. Experts are suggesting that the 2023 coup in Niger (the seventh coup in Africa since 2020) showed that "U.S. measures in Africa are underperforming" and that the US lacked "situational awareness" about the situation in Niger, despite "having a significant presence in the country". [138] Elsewhere, *Foreign Affairs* also reports that "Sub-Saharan Africa is facing headwinds it hasn't experienced in more than 30 years... In 2023, the region had the highest number of state-based conflicts (28) in the world and accounted for nearly half of all internally displaced people (34.8 million) worldwide." [139]

Western-led organisations have also deepened the disillusionment with the West by placing "an emphasis in much Western assistance upon conflicting rather than common values." [140] Analysts contend that the West has insisted on imposing its values system on African societies, with "LGBT advocacy... function[ing] as a wedge issue around which elites could mobilise public anger for their own pet causes." [141] The GIS report reached a similar conclusion, stating

131 Nina Wilén and Jack Watling, "The Collapse of Western Influence in West Africa Points to Wider Problems", RUSI, 8 November 2023, https://www.rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/collapse-western-influence-west-africa-points-wider-problems.

132 Benedict Vigers, "U.S. Loses Soft Power Edge in Africa", Gallup, 26 April 2024, https://news.gallup.com/poll/644222/loses-soft-power-edge-africa.aspx.

133 Ibid.

134 Prince Michael of Liechtenstein, "Don't lose Africa", *GIS*, 23 August 2022, https://www.gisreportsonline.com/r/africa-china-russia/.

135 Ibid.

136 David L. Dambre, "Why the U.S. is Losing Africa to China and Russia", *Modern Diplomacy*, 23 July 2023, https://moderndiplomacy.eu/2023/07/23/why-the-u-s-is-losing-africa-to-china-and-russia/.

137 Ibid.

138 James Jay Carafano, "U.S.-Africa policy adrift", *GIS*, 8 September 2023, https://www.gisreportsonline.com/r/us-africa/.

139 Judd Devermont, "Africa Needs More American Involvement—Not Less", *Foreign Affairs*, 27 June 2024, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/africa/africa-needs-more-american-involvement-not-less.

140 Wilén and Watling, "The Collapse of Western Influence in West Africa".

141 Ibid.

that "In practice, U.S. foreign policy mimics other strategies prioritizing the 'green agenda' and social policies such as abortion and gender, which have little positive impact in Africa." [142] Finally, "The U.S. has further lost its footing with key allies for forcing issues – including democracy or human rights – that many African states see as hypocrisy, given Washington's close ties to some autocratic leaders elsewhere." [143] In contrast, "China, Russia and Turkey limit themselves to working within existing structures… [while Western] paternalism is seen as a new form of colonialism." [144]

Perhaps the best way to illustrate this point is through a quote from Lawrence H. Summers, Secretary of Treasury for President Clinton and Director of the National Economic Council for President Obama, who recounted a conversation with someone from a developing country: "Look, I like your values better than I like China's. But the truth is, when we're engaged with the Chinese, we get an airport. And when we're engaged with you guys [Americans], we get a lecture." [145] And indeed, in every instance where disillusionment set in, misinformation about the West followed [146] and Russia and China were quick to step in and fill the void left by the West – often at a significant cost to African nations and their people. [147] This disillusionment with the West already has visible consequences, with NGO Monitor reporting that both Russia and China increasingly dominate the markets in Africa, with "trade between China and Africa [approaching] USD 300 billion [in 2022], nearly three times the trade volume between the United States and African nations." [148]

Obviously, this is not to suggest that the US should abandon its commitment to upholding human rights, but rather that it must adopt a more effective strategy to achieve this goal. Failing to do so risks ceding influence over the continent to hostile actors.

International NGOs have not escaped this specific criticism, with *New African Magazine* reporting that their contributions to alleviating poverty on the continent have been marginal. Using the same term, the GIS report highlights that "U.S. aid continues to marginally affect economic development and advancement of civil society. According to a recent report from the United Nations 'Economic growth of Africa is estimated to weaken to 3.8 percent in 2023 from 4.1 percent in 2022 due to subdued investment and falling exports.'" [149] Additionally, *New African Magazine* argues that these organisations have also undermined "the struggle of the African people to emancipate themselves from economic, social and political oppression." [150] The magazine concludes that "NGOs could, and some do, play a role in supporting an emancipatory agenda in Africa, but that would involve them disengaging from their paternalistic role in development." [151]

Importantly, according to the latest report by NGO Monitor, human rights NGOs are often criticised for their "dependency on donor funding, which can skew priorities towards external agendas rather than local needs." [152] Moreover, NGO Monitor also argued that NGOs are

142 Carafano, "U.S.-Africa policy adrift".

143 Mark Banchereau and Jessica Donati, "What to know about Russia's growing influence in Africa", *PBS News*, 6 June 2024, https://www.pbs.org/newshour/world/what-to-know-about-russias-growing-influence-in-africa.

144 Prince Michael of Liechtenstein, "Don't lose Africa".

145 Lawrence H. Summers (@LHSummers), *X* post, 16 April 2023, 1:25pm, https://x.com/LHSummers/status/1647576849021644800?lang=en.

146 Dambre, "Why the U.S. is Losing Africa to China and Russia".

147 Ibid.

148 "Resource Extraction in Africa and the Controversial Role of NGOs", NGO Monitor, forthcoming.

149 Carafano, "U.S.-Africa policy adrift".

150 "NGOS in Africa: A tainted history", *New African Magazine*, 15 March 2018, https://newafricanmagazine.com/16536/.

151 Ibid.

152 "Resource Extraction in Africa", NGO Monitor.

increasingly facing "accusations of selective advocacy, with some focusing disproportionately on Western actors while neglecting the actions of non-Western powers like China and Russia." [153]

Other problems with NGOs' conduct in the region also persist, further undermining their impact and influence. For example, writing about how even well-meaning NGOs can inadvertently cause harm, *Kellogg Insight* pointed to a study that found "evidence that NGOs can indeed crowd out government-provided services and, in doing so, may inadvertently harm the people they're seeking to help." [154] Moreover, *African Arguments* highlights four additional problems with NGOs' conduct in Africa. First, it argues that "many staff at INGOs [international non-governmental organisations] have damaging negative attitudes towards their local partners and believe they are superior because they hold the funding." [155] In turn, this alienates local partners, especially because INGOs often take credit for all successes and place blame on local organisations for any issues. Second, it argues that "INGOs frequently focus on donor compliance – i.e. conforming to all the relevant standards and policies – over actual impact." [156] In practice, this often leads to INGOs prioritising donor expectations over creating meaningful, positive change in the regions they operate.

Third, "INGOs often presume that all their partners should look like them – i.e. follow a Western model or structure." [157] This again alienates local organisations which perhaps do not wish to look like or behave like their Western counterparts – and this further feeds into the narratives that the approach of INGOs is paternalistic. Finally, *African Arguments* concludes that "INGOs end up competing with their local counterparts. Instead of building up civil society, they intrude on their space." [158] Recalling the example of Helsinki Watch, which involved local communities and empowered them to drive positive change within their own societies, it becomes clear that the current model employed by many organisations falls short compared to the approach used by HW in the Eastern Bloc.

The West Africa Civil Society Institute (WACSI) points to similar problems in how international NGOs operate in Africa, and how their conduct inevitably pushes the local people away from NGOs and the West as well. It argues that the current "one-size-fits-all" approach of NGOs needs to be abandoned and proposes implementing "hybrid models that provide context-specific solutions."[159] Along the same line, GIS also argues that the US "strategies are formulated vaguely and have little regard for the significant regional differences on the continent." [160] And elsewhere, experts have highlighted that "Cultural sensitivity is crucial in messaging to engage with diverse African populations effectively. Failure to understand and respect local cultures, languages, and traditions can lead to misinterpretation or alienation, hampering the effectiveness of communication efforts." [161] Similarly, NGO Monitor also highlights the fact that "the lack of diverse perspectives among NGOs operating in Africa's extractive sectors can be traced primarily to their shared funding sources." [162] Along the same lines, WACSI concludes

153 "Resource Extraction in Africa", NGO Monitor.

154 "Why Well-Meaning NGOs Sometimes Do More Harm than Good", *Kellogg Insight*, 7 August 2020, https://insight.kellogg.northwestern.edu/article/international-aid-development-ngos-crowding-out-government.

155 Michelle D'Arcy, "When international NGOs try to 'help' local ones and fail", *African Arguments*, 22 May 2019, https://africanarguments.org/2019/05/when-international-ngos-try-to-help-local-ones-and-fail/.

156 Ibid.

157 Ibid.

158 Ibid.

159 Olusola Owonikoko, "Why International Development Projects Fail in Africa and What We Can Do Differently", WACSI, 22 July 2021, https://wacsi.org/why-international-development-projects-fail-in-africa/.

160 Carafano, "U.S.-Africa policy adrift".

161 Dambre, "Why the U.S. is Losing Africa to China and Russia".

162 "Resource Extraction in Africa", NGO Monitor.

that "Project success in Africa is highly dependent on flexibility and strategic stakeholder engagement" [163] and invites donors to provide more flexibility.

Moreover, WACSI also points to the fact that many NGO projects fail due to political interference and political biases. It argues that international donors and organisations "cannot succeed without cooperation of indigenous governments… [and that] there is a need to foster communication between international donor and governments, beyond party politics." [164] NGO Monitor also suggests that the exclusion of local organisations has created a paradox in which "NGOs originally valued for their grassroots connections and local responsiveness now frequently implement projects designed thousands of miles away." [165] Finally, like many other aforementioned articles, WACSI also argues that local people do not "buy-in" to these international projects and feel largely disconnected from them which "means that the project team is less likely to capture the nuanced needs and expectations of the locals into their decision-making progress." [166] Analysing specifically the extractive industry in Africa and the conduct of human rights NGOs, NGO Monitor reaches very similar and equally concerning conclusions. [167]

Moreover, in the African context, serious concerns have been raised about potential selection bias among human rights NGOs. Some argue that these organisations disproportionately target Western companies and individuals while failing to apply the same level of scrutiny to their Russian or Chinese counterparts. Specifically, NGO Monitor argues that NGOs have primarily targeted their criticism on Western companies, however "the activities of Chinese and Russian SOEs often receive less scrutiny, despite their significant involvement in resource extraction across the continent." [168] The report highlights that this gap in criticism, coupled with other problems discussed above, further contributes to the deterioration of credibility that NGOs have on the continent.

Finally, some have also argued that NGOs have created "significant challenges for Western interests and global security." [169] NGO Monitor discusses the example of DR Congo and Dan Gertler – an Israeli billionaire who "was hit with sanctions [under the Global Magnitsky Act] by the US Treasury in 2017 for alleged corrupt dealing in Congo." [170] In its report, NGO Monitor asserts that NGOs have "inadvertently created an opportunity for Chinese state-backed companies to consolidate their position in the DRC's mining sector." [171] In turn, the Gertler case has become a strategic security headache for the United States. In 2024, President Biden tasked his energy and Middle East advisor, Amos Hochstein, to find a solution to the Gertler case because, as Hochstein stated, "sanctions are blocking Western Investments". [172]

The DRC Government also wants to find a solution, as evidenced in the comments made by their Finance Minister, Nicolas Kazadi, in his interview with the *Financial Times* (*FT*) in 2023. [173]

163 Owonikoko, "Why International Development Projects Fail in Africa".

164 Ibid.

165 "Resource Extraction in Africa", NGO Monitor.

166 Owonikoko, "Why International Development Projects Fail in Africa".

167 "Resource Extraction in Africa", NGO Monitor.

168 Ibid.

169 Ibid.

170 For further details see: Harry Dempsey and Tom Wilson, "Billionaire under sanctions could get $300mn in controversial US-Congo deal", *Financial Times*, 16 June 2024, https://www.ft.com/content/d55f9e63-a49d-47f5-967c-6a5730c67ded.

171 "Resource Extraction in Africa", NGO Monitor.

172 https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2024-07-22/us-says-billionaire-gertler-s-royalties-must-go-to-congo-for-sanctions-deal.

173 For further details see: "DRC finance minister talks mining, smuggling and building batteries", *Financial Times*, 28 March 2023, https://www.ft.com/video/2a7c09ef-4a71-4b9d-ac63-98eb97158dcc.

Similar comments were made in 2022 by the DRC President Félix Antoine Tshisekdi Tshilombo in his letter to President Biden in which he pleaded "for the removal of Mr Dan Gertler and his group from the Global Magnitsky Act" arguing that sanctions "no longer need to be imposed, lest they have a negative impact on the economic interests of our country." [174] These talks are ongoing at the time of publication, and it is unclear if or how they will continue under the Trump Administration (which initially sanctioned Gertler back in 2017, only to then ease the sanctions in the final weeks of Trump's first term). [175]

Despite the complex situation, the Gertler case is arguably a success story for the Sanctions programme as well as NGO engagement in Congo, as they have successfully enabled the DRC Government to recover over $2 billion-worth of assets from Gertler in 2022, and as stated by the DRC's finance minister back in 2023 with the *FT*. [176] And indeed, in the aforementioned letter, the DRC President also praised the sanctions, highlighting their "transformative" role. [177]

As demonstrated in this section, human rights NGOs face considerable criticism regarding their operations in the Middle East and Africa – regions where the stakes are high, and where their performance will significantly impact perceptions both locally and globally. We have shown that the NGO sector is already grappling with a crisis of confidence, with many developed and developing nations expressing distrust. Additionally, Israel is increasingly distancing itself from most human rights NGOs, and once the Israel–Hamas conflict concludes, it remains uncertain whether Israel will be willing to cooperate with these organisations in the future. This is clearly problematic, not only for NGOs' ability to protect human rights in the Middle East but also for the perceptions other countries may hold about NGOs if Israel discontinues its cooperation with them due to a widespread perception of political bias among Israeli citizens and officials.

In Africa, if current trends continue, the influence of China and Russia is likely to expand further, while Western influence wanes – which, given the rise in coups and increased instability on the continent, is highly problematic and dangerous. If anything, recent events in Africa show that "Africa needs more American Involvement – not less" [178] and rebuilding trust in American-led organisations and institutions remains key. These outcomes are far from ideal for NGOs, and to reverse this trend, they urgently need to reassess their approach. Otherwise, regardless of their intentions and the validity of the criticism targeting them, NGOs risk losing influence and impact in the very regions they aim to serve. Ultimately, it is not only a question of whether NGOs are effective in protecting human rights, but also whether people trust their impartiality and effectiveness in doing so – without this trust, their capacity to protect human rights is inherently weakened.

174 Letter from DRC President Félix Antoine Tshisekdi Tshilombo to President Biden, 5 May 2022, https://int.nyt.com/data/documenttools/2022-05-drc-president-to-biden-re-gertler/df0e6ab2940f16fc/full.pdf.

175 Aaron Ross, "Trump administration quietly eased sanctions against Israeli mining magnate Gertler", *Reuters*, 25 January 2021, https://www.reuters.com/article/world/us-politics/trump-administration-quietly-eased-sanctions-against-israeli-mining-magnate-gert-idUSKBN29U1M6/.

176 "DRC finance minister talks mining, smuggling and building batteries", *Financial Times*.

177 For further details see: Letter from DRC President.

178 Devermont, "Africa Needs More American Involvement – Not Less".

## Policy recommendations

The crucial role of NGOs in advancing human rights makes it essential to rebuild public trust and confidence to enable them to continue fostering positive change as they have in the past. Whether or not some of the criticisms are unfounded or stem from well-intentioned actions, public perception is turning increasingly sceptical. As the data above indicates, trust in human rights NGOs is waning, which inevitably weakens their capacity to defend and promote human rights on a global scale. In addition, the NGO sector is likely to come under more fire and scrutiny now Trump has assumed the role of US President once more – he has been pretty upfront about his scepticism towards the sector, and the comments made by Musk only further confirm that the NGO sector is under a threat. Thus, if the NGO sector does not reform, it is likely that many reforms and cuts will come externally. To address this issue, we propose that NGOs urgently start working on improving the trust and confidence people have by adopting Codes of Conduct that will dictate how they operate. While all NGOs should be allowed to adapt their CoCs as they see fit, in this report we argue that all CoCs should contain five key policy recommendations.

### *Increased transparency and accountability*

This report highlights a prevailing view that NGO funding heavily influences their agendas and positions, with some critics, notably NGO Monitor, suggesting that, in the case of Israel, NGOs may play a role in promoting problematic views about Israel due to the sway of their financial backers. Similarly in parts of Africa, some argue that NGOs "are more accountable to their funders than those they serve. Because they are largely dependent on funding, their projects are crafted in line with donor preferences instead of those they supposedly represent." [179] What is most concerning, however, is the widely held view among experts that NGO funding lacks sufficient transparency across their operations, which raises further questions about the extent to which it may influence organisational priorities and actions.

Whether or not these criticisms are justified and have merit is not essential to our argument; rather, the very fact that so many concerns have been raised about NGO transparency and accountability demonstrates that these questions have a detrimental effect on the public's trust in these organisations.

To address these criticisms and concerns, we recommend that human rights NGOs commit to increasing transparency and accountability regarding their funding sources and other operations in order to increase trust and confidence in the sector. For instance, along those lines and following the Qatargate scandal, [180] "the European Commission is now trying to inject more accountability and transparency into the NGO sector, with new requirements being planned for the disclosure of such organizations' non-EU funding." [181] Therefore, measures akin to those proposed by the European Commission, along with a broader push for transparency, are certain to address some of the criticisms and concerns currently surrounding the conduct of human rights NGOs.

### *Partnering with local organisations*

NGOs have often been criticised for either overlooking or overcrowding local communities, inadvertently alienating the very populations they aim to support. This approach can also

179 Matthews, "The role of NGOs in Africa".

180 More on the story available at: Markus Becker, et al., "Inside the European Parliament Corruption Scandal".

181 Nattrass, "We need to talk about NGOs".

marginalise local organisations which, while initially benefiting from the expertise of international human rights NGOs, are ultimately expected to take charge of upholding human rights within their own countries. The model set by Helsinki Watch – collaborating closely with local organisations and dissidents while empowering them to continue their work independently – offers a constructive example of the approach we should strive for.

Moreover, this collaborative model provides an additional advantage: by partnering with local institutions, human rights NGOs can gain essential cultural insights, enabling them to implement approaches that are contextually appropriate and more likely to succeed. When multiple local communities share the same geographical space and could benefit from an NGO's work, it is essential to ensure all are included.

### *Flexibility instead of one-size-fits-all*

Human rights NGOs have faced considerable criticism for their rigid, one-size-fits-all approach, which fails to account for the diverse contexts of the countries in which they operate. We argue that NGOs should shift away from this inflexible model and instead adopt a more adaptable approach, tailored to the unique cultural and political landscapes of different countries. This would involve not only prioritising their efforts but also making a clear distinction between closed and open societies – a framework originally set forth by Helsinki Watch.

Understanding the fundamental differences between these types of societies would allow human rights NGOs to distinguish between what is ideal and what is achievable, focusing first on practical goals in closed societies. This approach would enable NGOs to work progressively towards more ambitious objectives as conditions evolve, ultimately ensuring that their work remains effective and context sensitive.

Moreover, adopting a more flexible approach will enable international NGOs to collaborate more effectively with local organisations, equipping them to continue this work independently once key human rights standards have been achieved. This adaptability will support a smoother transition, allowing international NGOs to eventually hand over responsibilities to local groups who are well-prepared to uphold and advance human rights in their communities long after an NGO's departure.

### *Improved messaging strategies*

NGOs have also faced criticism regarding inconsistent and, at times, harmful messaging. In Africa, the West has been accused of delivering conflicting messages, while in the case of Israel, certain human rights NGOs have been accused of spreading politically biased narratives.

Moreover, many have called out NGOs for a notable lack of criticism of non-Western actors who demonstrate little to no regard for human rights – especially in instances where Russian or Chinese companies take over Western companies in Africa. This absence of scrutiny has often been used to reinforce the notions of double standards. Furthermore, the growing perception of political bias among human rights NGOs has undermined their image as impartial defenders of human rights. Increasingly, they are seen not as neutral advocates for universal rights, but as activists aligned with particular agendas. All of these issues combined have severely undermined public confidence in NGOs and hindered their ability to operate effectively in these regions. Learning from the positive examples set by Helsinki Watch and the Anti-Slavery Society, human rights NGOs must prioritise clear, context-sensitive messaging across all regions in which they work. They must also differentiate between open and closed societies, directing the majority of their criticism towards the latter rather than the former. Failure to reassess and improve their messaging risks overshadowing their valuable contributions, as poor communication can divert attention from their achievements.

### *A risk-based approach*

In line with adopting greater flexibility, human rights NGOs should consider a more risk-based approach, focusing on also achieving net positive outcomes rather than rigidly adhering to ideal standards. In practical terms, this means sometimes prioritising attainable goals that allow for incremental progress, rather than pursuing unrealistic standards that may inadvertently enable the expansion of Russian or Chinese influence – ultimately exacerbating human rights conditions on the ground.

Of course, certain red lines must remain in place to uphold core principles. However, we propose a reassessment of these boundaries to create a more pragmatic strategy, one that enables Western influence to grow even in countries with poor human rights records. This adjusted approach could counter the current trend where rigid standards may unintentionally cede ground to Russian and Chinese influence in such regions. In the end, this will result in a net positive outcome for everyone – and such outcomes are crucial for regaining the public trust and confidence in the NGO sector.

Title: “HUMAN RIGHTS NGOS: A CRISIS OF TRUST – THE ROOT CAUSES AND RECOMMENDED REMEDIES”
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