

Addressing the Global Human Rights and Governance Implications of the COVID-19 Pandemic

Update to “Opportunities for Philanthropic Response to the Coronavirus (COVID-19) Crisis”

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1. Context for this update

Critical new needs and opportunities for the philanthropic response to COVID-19 continue to emerge. Bridgespan’s [Opportunities for Philanthropic Responses to the Coronavirus \(COVID-19\) Crisis](#) memo addresses principles of giving in a crisis and high-impact opportunities for philanthropic investment in public health preparedness and response in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs), and public health response and mitigating socioeconomic consequences in the United States.

The implications of the pandemic for human rights, governance, and democracy around the world are still emerging. This update outlines needs and high-impact opportunities for philanthropic investment in this area. It also highlights credible actors who might serve as partners and effective channels to deploy capital swiftly and responsibly—but it is not a compendium of the universe of actors working in these areas (particularly at local levels). We have begun to compile a list of other actors actively engaged in the areas outlined in this update, which we can share upon request and augment with your suggestions.

This is a snapshot of needs and opportunities that we have come across to date. In a rapidly changing environment, new opportunities, actors, and channels will likely emerge.

2. Global human rights and governance implications of the COVID-19 pandemic

Around the world, governments are taking unprecedented measures, such as mandatory quarantines and regional lockdowns, in an effort to stem the spread of COVID-19 and [flatten the curve](#). While these

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measures are essential to contain the pandemic in the short term, human rights organizations have warned that governmental responses to the crisis will have significant, long-lasting implications for human rights, rule of law, and democracy. As Human Rights Watch notes in a [recent report](#), “The scale and severity of the COVID-19 pandemic clearly rises to the level of a public health threat that could justify restrictions on certain rights. ... At the same time, careful attention to human rights, such as non-discrimination, and human rights principles, such as transparency and respect for human dignity, can foster an effective response amid the turmoil and disruption.” In the current crisis, philanthropy can play a vital role in supporting organizations and leaders working to monitor, elevate, and protect human rights, civil society, and democratic processes.

Since the pandemic broke out, a range of concerning human rights violations and threats to democracy—beyond the bounds of what can be justified in the interest of public health—have been reported. Countries such as Hungary, for example, have [pushed through laws](#) that give leaders sweeping emergency powers.

These moves are not without precedent: [Some governments have used past crises](#) to justify restricting rights, stifling dissent, and assuming powers that last after the crisis is over. As Don Gips, CEO of the Skoll Foundation, noted during a [recent webinar](#) on philanthropic leadership in the COVID-19 crisis: “If we’re not careful, autocrats will use this crisis as an opportunity to shut down free and open democracy. I would call on philanthropists to support citizens who are calling for change.” Philanthropy can respond by supporting advocates, activists, and journalists who play critical roles in identifying abuses of power and mobilizing on behalf of human rights.

Even in liberal democracies such as the United States, democratic processes, including elections and the [2020 Census](#), have been impacted. Multiple actors are working to mitigate disruptions to these processes and will need additional support, particularly in reaching marginalized populations and ensuring their voices are represented.

Approach and major funding channels

As outlined in Bridgespan’s memo on [“Opportunities for Philanthropic Responses to COVID-19,”](#) philanthropists should consider a set of principles when giving during a crisis, including remaining flexible, coordinating with others, and working locally and through experts. [CIVICUS](#), a global alliance of civil society organizations and activists dedicated to strengthening citizen action and civil society throughout the world, reinforces these principles in an [open letter](#) urging civil society donors and supporters to offer as much flexibility, certainty, and stability toward grantees and partners as possible.

Philanthropists interested in this area should look to experts in the field for guidance. In particular, the [Human Rights Funders Network](#), a global network of almost 450 institutions across 70 countries committed to advancing human rights through effective philanthropy, connects and offers resources for human rights funders. Other funders and philanthropies focused on advancing human rights and democracy, including the [Ford Foundation](#), [Open Society Foundations](#), [Proteus Fund](#), and [Democracy Fund](#), may also serve as valuable resources for identifying opportunities for giving.

There are three major channels for funding in this area:

- 1. International, regional, and national civil society and human rights NGOs** are closely monitoring responses to COVID-19, to ensure that governments are respecting and upholding human rights. International groups (which often also have country-level offices and operations) such as [Human Rights Watch](#), [Amnesty International](#), [Freedom House](#), and the [International Federation for Human Rights](#) are documenting and disseminating global human rights abuses and highlighting broader human rights implications, as evidenced by Human Rights Watch’s [Human Rights Dimensions of COVID-19 Response report](#). The [International Center for Not-for-](#)

[Profit Law](#) and the [European Center for Not-for-Profit Law](#), along with a global network of partners, recently launched the [COVID-19 Civic Freedom Tracker](#), which monitors government responses to the pandemic that affect civic freedoms and human rights, with a focus on emergency laws.

At a national level, organizations, such as the [American Civil Liberties Union](#) and [Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights Under Law](#) in the United States, are deeply attuned to specific country-level challenges and risks to civil and political liberties. Network and membership organizations, such as the [International Network for Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights](#), the [International Network of Civil Liberties Organizations](#), and [CIVICUS](#), can serve as resources for identifying a broader set of organizations working in this field.

- 2. Grassroots human rights NGOs and community-based organizations and activists** are uniquely positioned to mobilize their communities, protect vulnerable populations, and collaborate with local health officials and organizations during this pandemic. In reflecting on [lessons learned in the aftermath of the Ebola outbreak in West Africa](#), John M. Kabia, the Fund for Global Human Rights' program officer for West Africa writes: "Often, due to the scale of an emergency and the influx of outside groups, donors tend to overlook or overshadow local voices. ... Amid deep mistrust of state actors, local human rights and community groups were critical in the response due to their credibility, local knowledge, and extensive volunteer networks."

Grassroots advocates are integral to COVID-19 responses in many communities. For example, Muslims for Human Rights (MUHURI), a frontline organization supporting communities throughout Kenya's coastal region is [drawing on its extensive network of community leaders](#) to help monitor government actions, advise the government on how best to respond, and educate people on COVID-19 preventive measures. [The Fund for Global Human Rights](#), a public foundation that offers flexible funding to local human rights activists and organizations, is continuing to ensure that local leaders have the resources necessary to respond to the crisis and could serve as a channel for identifying or directing funding to grassroots actors responding to the crisis.

- 3. Organizations focused on specific issues** related to human rights, governance, and democracy will also need additional funding at this critical moment. Relevant actors will vary across countries and regions depending on the most pressing issues. In the United States, for example, this may include organizations working on the 2020 census, such as the [Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights](#), [Common Cause](#), and [Fair Count](#), and voter registration and participation efforts, such as the [Campaign Legal Center](#), the [Southern Coalition for Justice](#), and the [Voting Rights Lab](#). Other examples include the [Anti-Defamation League](#), which aims to fight anti-Semitism and all forms of hate, and [WITNESS](#), which helps people use video and technology to protect and defend human rights and provides training and localized guidance on how to document abuses that occur during the pandemic. To advance independent journalism, National Geographic Society recently established an [emergency fund to support journalists](#) providing local coverage of COVID-19, particularly in areas where there is a dearth of factual information getting to those who need it.

Critical issues

As emphasized in Bridgespan's memo on "[Opportunities for Philanthropic Responses to the Coronavirus \(COVID-19\) Crisis](#)," marginalized communities are likely to suffer disproportionately as a result of this crisis, intensifying existing inequities. It is thus critical to channel support to organizations combatting discrimination and xenophobia and advocating for and protecting the rights of marginalized populations, including low-income families, people of color, immigrants and refugees, tribal communities, women, people with disabilities, and religious minorities. To ensure human rights and civil liberties are upheld

throughout the pandemic, and democratic processes are protected, support is needed in several additional areas:

- 1. Upholding freedom of expression and ensuring access to information:** Access to accurate information is especially important in a public health pandemic, yet in several countries there has already been a [rise in misinformation](#) and a [backlash against independent journalists and a free press](#). [Human Rights Watch](#) outlines a number of instances in which governments such as China and Thailand have infringed on freedom of expression, taking actions against journalists and healthcare workers.
- 2. Protecting elections and democratic processes:** With [more than 70 national elections](#) scheduled for the remainder of the year, the pandemic threatens the timing, turnout, and even the very occurrence of critical elections. We have already seen this [impact Iran](#), where the country's February 21 parliamentary elections saw the lowest participation rate since the 1979 Islamic revolution. In addition to voters' genuine concerns about the spread of COVID-19, [experts warn that bad actors may seize this opportunity](#) to spread misinformation about the virus in an effort to discourage voter turnout or manipulate which populations vote. In the United States, with the 2020 Census underway, there is [the risk of undercounting](#) hard-to-reach populations, including low-income families, and racial and ethnic minorities.
- 3. Protecting citizen privacy:** While responding to COVID-19 will require governments to take extraordinary measures such as large-scale data collection, safeguards must be implemented to ensure individual data is protected. A statement [signed by over 100 civil society organizations](#) warned that "an increase in state digital surveillance powers, such as obtaining access to mobile phone location data, threatens privacy, freedom of expression, and freedom of association in ways that could violate rights and degrade trust in public authorities—undermining the effectiveness of any public health response."
- 4. Ensuring restrictions on rights are proportionate and comply with rights norms:** As mandatory quarantines and travel bans are increasingly instituted around the world, [Human Rights Watch](#) argues that such restrictions "must be strictly necessary to achieve a legitimate objective, based on scientific evidence, proportionate to achieve that objective, neither arbitrary nor discriminatory in application, of limited duration, respectful of human dignity, and subject to review." Some governments have already used the pandemic to justify passing far-reaching state of emergency laws, severely restricting civil and political liberties.
- 5. Protecting the right to health:** Amnesty International [notes](#) that "most governments have ratified at least one human rights treaty which requires them to guarantee the right to health. Among other things, this means they have an obligation to take all steps necessary for the prevention, treatment, and control of diseases. In the context of a spreading epidemic, this means ensuring that preventive care, goods, and services are available to everybody." Beyond ensuring the continuation of access to routine healthcare and emergency services, vulnerable populations, including low-income individuals and those in jails, prisons, immigrant detention centers, and refugee camps, must be able to protect themselves against the virus (through access to safe water, adequate sanitation, and proper hygiene) and access the care they need. In the United States, advocacy groups have also raised concerns that [protocols to ration lifesaving medical care might discriminate](#) on the basis of disabilities, age, or other factors.
- 6. Protecting other fundamental rights:** In addition to protecting the rights outlined above, it is critical to uphold other basic rights guaranteed by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and other international conventions, such as the right to education, the right to an adequate standard of living (including sufficient food, clothing, housing, and necessary social services), and

freedom of religion. In times of crisis, these rights—particularly as they affect the most vulnerable and marginalized—can be ignored or actively eroded.

- 7. Protecting civil society:** As civil society organizations work to stem the spread of the virus and ensure that those with COVID-19—or those living in isolation or under quarantine—have the support and protection they need, it is important to ensure that governments don't use the pandemic to justify obstructing the work of civil society organizations.

As the pandemic continues, human rights, the rule of law, and democratic processes should be protected. Special attention must be paid to ensuring that responses are equitable and protect the rights of the most marginalized. Philanthropy can play an important role by supporting the vital work of civil society and human rights organizations at the front lines of these efforts.