



# ASSESSING THE STRENGTH OF SOCIAL MOVEMENTS: A Strategy Tool for Funders

In 2016, American Jewish World Service (AJWS) developed and launched a new tool for funders to better understand the strength and health of social movements to inform our human rights funding strategies.

## OUR APPROACH: SUPPORTING GRASSROOTS GROUPS & SOCIAL MOVEMENTS

People who have struggled with grave challenges to their human rights possess a unique understanding of the problems they face—and their expertise has the potential to fuel effective, lasting solutions. That's why AJWS funds and supports people who have experienced discrimination, inequality, oppression and violence—so they can develop ways to address these challenges, build strategic organizations and mobilize strong movements to realize their human rights.

### SOCIAL MOVEMENT:

A critical mass of people working together with a variety of strategies to advance a shared purpose for lasting change and social transformation

Some of our grantees are nascent, grassroots groups, and others are national and international organizations. While these grantees often work on similar issues, they rarely have the resources and opportunities to connect. To help these groups learn from each other and strategize to advance their common goals, AJWS periodically provides funding for meetings, trainings or other capacity-building support. We also elevate the voices of our grantees, connecting them to opportunities to share their perspectives and concerns with key decision makers in government or at human rights and development agencies.

## THE IMPORTANCE OF UNDERSTANDING SOCIAL MOVEMENTS

In many countries across the globe, power has increasingly shifted toward nationalist, highly conservative groups whose agendas often erode democracy and human rights. In response, many advocates for human rights have turned to social movements as a means of advancing equality and justice during challenging political times. Historically, autonomous, progressive social movements have played

a crucial role in advancing rights-affirming policies, increasing the political power of marginalized groups and challenging harmful social norms.<sup>1</sup>

### AUTONOMOUS:

Acting independently or having the freedom to do so

Few organizations have attempted to systematically assess the strengths and weaknesses of social movements—likely because these movements are expansive, constantly changing and comprised of large, diverse groups of people, who may take on many different respective roles over time. In 2016, AJWS decided to develop our own tool for mapping the social movements that our grantees engage with in the developing world. By comprehensively identifying the movements that we indirectly support and assessing their strength, we hoped to increase our understanding of our grantees' work and develop and strengthen our funding strategies.

## DEVELOPING A SOCIAL MOVEMENT TOOL

To develop a tool to map and assess the health of social movements, AJWS formed an internal working group comprised of staff with substantial experience in social movements and/or with expertise in research and evaluation. The working group reviewed the existing literature on social movements and reviewed Global Fund for Women's draft pilot Movement Capacity Assessment Tool, which was developed to use with movement actors. We then designed our own tool for AJWS grantmaking staff and in-country consultants to reflect on the relative strengths and struggles of social movements relevant to AJWS's work across the globe.

The AJWS tool features 20 questions ("yes/no" or 1-5 scale) focused on assessing each movement according to the characteristics of successful social movements. We have organized these characteristics into three critical domains:

**BASE.** To gain power and momentum, social movements need a critical mass of diverse participants, including those most affected by the issue at hand, who believe the overall movement—its mission, leaders, tactics, etc.—is credible and worthy of their involvement.

**STRUCTURE.** To authentically engage and represent participants and ensure sustainability, social movement

<sup>1</sup>Htun M and Weldon SL. The Civic Origins of Progressive Policy Change: Combating Violence against Women in Global Perspective, 1975-2005. American Political Science Review, Vol.106, No.3, August 2012.

leaders need to foster democratic communication and coordination practices and support other people directly affected by the issue to take on meaningful decision-making and leadership roles.

**STRATEGY.** To create lasting change, social movements need to have clear, collective agendas, engage influential people and allied groups, and strategically use a variety of tactics —research, coalition building, demonstrations, communications, advocacy, litigation, etc.—in a responsive, timely manner.

We tested the tool with a sample of AJWS staff and then refined it and translated it into French and Spanish, for ease of use by our in-country consultants. From April to July 2016, AJWS staff reflected and responded to the questions posed by the tool for each of the movements in which AJWS grantees were most involved.

The results reflect the subjective perspectives of AJWS staff responding to the questions at a specific point in time for each movement. Responses to the questions were scored to help staff assess the strength of each movement overall and within each of the three domains. In addition, the average scores for each domain across all movements provided insight into potential capacity-building needs for AJWS staff so that they can better support grantees engaged in these movements.

## HOW WE'RE USING THE FINDINGS

The movement mapping process provided AJWS staff an opportunity for deep discussion and learning. The results have informed our funding strategies and our discourse internally, and with grantees and global organizations involved in social movements.

Our results from the movement mapping tool indicate that AJWS grantees in 16 countries are involved in a total of 38 social movements, with 1 to 4 movements per country. While the majority of movements have a modestly healthy *base* (24% have a score greater than 80%, and 61% have a score between 60-80%) and a fairly strong *strategy* (39% have a score greater than 80%, and 34% have a score between 60-80%) there is ample room for improvement to the *structure* of most movements (47% have a score of less than 60%). AJWS's social movement working group has taken up the domain of structure as an internal learning priority.

This data has been especially useful to AJWS in terms of developing our country strategies. For example, the women's movement in Nicaragua received high scores

## THE ROLE OF FUNDERS IN SOCIAL MOVEMENTS

AJWS believes its social movement tool can meaningfully inform strategies to bolster successful social movements. However, we would like to underscore that true social movements arise from the pressing needs and hard work of large groups of diverse people. While international organizations and experts may be able to assist these efforts, our role is to support our partners in social movements, not direct them. We believe funders should remain responsive to their grantees' priorities and respect their autonomy—and that the voices and concerns of the most oppressed people deserve to be consistently elevated to the forefront of social movements.

on base (87%) and strategy (94%) but had clear room for improvement on structure (64%). This assessment, along with deeper analysis of the information used to create the scores, has helped AJWS's Nicaragua team identify new ways to support the women's movement.

To achieve long-term sustainability and increase democratic decision-making, the Nicaragua team is now funding efforts to elevate the voices of adolescent girls, who can contribute unique perspectives and ideas to the broader movement, which is currently led by adult women. For example, adolescent girls have identified teenage pregnancy—Nicaragua has the highest rate in Latin America—as a priority issue they want to address. The AJWS team is now dedicating resources and capacity-building support to connect leaders from adolescent girls' groups to other AJWS partner organizations and the wider women's movement.

In the future, AJWS will adapt the tool further and in collaboration with Global Fund for Women, so that AJWS grantee partners can use it to share their perspectives on and experiences in the social movements in which they operate. This project will not only inform AJWS's grantmaking, but will enable our grantees to learn from the results and potentially incorporate those findings into their work within social movements.

## QUESTIONS?

Please contact **Irit Houvras**, Director of Strategic Learning, Research and Evaluation at AJWS, if you have questions or would like an electronic copy of the movement mapping tool: [ihouvras@ajws.org](mailto:ihouvras@ajws.org).

**OUR MISSION** *Inspired by the Jewish commitment to justice, American Jewish World Service (AJWS) works to realize human rights and end poverty in the developing world.*

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