

COLLABORATION

New alliances — especially with unexpected partners — can strengthen the efforts of human rights advocates in unexpected ways. Get a former adversary on your side and you have not only gained an ally, you've lost an opponent. Open channels of communication that had been closed and you lessen the possibility of conflict and abuse. Build relationships with groups outside your sector and you lend credibility to your cause and attract new audiences. Reach across international borders and you build an alliance that is stronger, more flexible and has more political clout.

Strategic collaboration can make advocates more prepared, more powerful and more representative of the communities they serve. It can give them legitimacy in the mainstream, in media and in government. When the human rights advocates have a powerful, diverse array of allies and are no longer working in isolation, their work is much more difficult to assail.

Building a United Front: Building a coalition of a country's human rights organizations to speak with one voice against abuses.

When human rights groups work together they can often do much more to improve a country's human rights situation than individual groups could do on their own. The National Coordinator for Human Rights in Peru proves that this is possible even on a very large scale.

The National Coordinator for Human Rights (Coordinadora Nacional de Derechos Humanos) is a coalition of 63 of Peru's leading human rights groups. The Coordinadora, founded in 1985, has survived because of its ability to unite member organizations and adapt to a constantly changing political environment. Its mix of both urban and rural members has enhanced the group's legitimacy throughout the country and internationally, while constructive engagement of government officials has contributed to its power as a political player.

Following the military regime of General Francisco Morales Bermúdez and the launch of the Sendero Luminoso (Shining Path) armed revolution, human rights groups were overwhelmed by the increasing atrocities. During 1983 and 1984, nearly 6,000 Peruvians lost their lives as a result of political violence. It was vital to create a space for groups to collaborate that was independent of religion and politics.

The success and strength of the coalition is due to a number of factors, including:

- 1 Clear principles of internal functioning:** The coalition decided from its first meeting that it would pledge to reject violence of all types, remain independent of political parties and the government, be committed to a democratic society and oppose the death penalty. Organizations that do not adhere to these principles are not allowed to be part of the coalition.
- 2 Decision-making by consensus:** The decision-making process creates a sense of common agreement and solidarity. All groups must be in agreement. While groups in the coalition are all different sizes and come from various parts of the country, each has an equal voice when it comes to decision-making and to forming the National Board, elected by members at a General Assembly.
- 3 Representing the collective:** The internal process of selection and agreement on a representative for the organization gives legitimacy, both internally and externally, to this person and to the organization. When someone is selected by the member organizations to participate in an international meeting, for example, the individual participates not as a representative of the specific organization that he/she represents, but rather as a representative of the Coordinadora.
- 4 Agreement on priorities that will be carried out together:** Every two years, the member organizations come together in a national assembly and determine priority topics they will address as a coalition. Their work on these topics is then carried out collectively and nationally by the Executive Secretary, a permanent body that carries out the decisions of the National Board and General Assembly. The Executive secretary is elected for a two-year term and serves as the official spokesperson for the coalition, organizing and facilitating the meetings, and mobilizing the members. The Coordinadora only takes on activities that are distinct from those implemented by individual coalition organizations and related to the priority areas.

By coordinating its efforts, the Coordinadora efficiently and effectively mobilizes people on a national scale, having a much greater impact than individual organizations or a temporary coalition. For example, when former Peruvian President Alberto Fujimori threatened to withdraw participation in the Inter-American Court system, the Coordinadora mobilized people across the nation within one week. All of its member organizations signed a statement and carried out efforts against the president's proposal and more than 400 additional organizations were mobilized to act. Every organization then took steps in its own community to build support and engage people to speak out against the situation. If not for the Coordinadora's clear position, credibility and structure, this would not have been possible. The Coordinadora was created in an atmosphere of violence and extreme human rights abuses, demonstrating that it is possible to implement this coalition-building tactic in adverse situations. Yet the true success of this coalition is based on much more than a need to come together at a very difficult time. Clear objectives, a solid framework and principles for collaboration and a clear stance against violence have brought the organization greater legitimacy. These principles have also won the support of the international community and have served to ensure the coalition's long-term success.

Public Dialogue with the Police Force: Creating a long-term public forum where the police and ordinary citizens can work together to resolve human rights grievances and other issues affecting police/community relations.

One friction point in many societies is the relationship between the police force and civilians. Poor communication can lead to abuses or compromise public safety. In Nigeria a group has found an innovative way to bridge that gap.

The CLEEN Foundation, formally the Centre for Law Enforcement Education in Nigeria, creates public forums where citizens and police can discuss concerns and grievances regarding crime and police conduct.

Communities and police forces can find themselves in an unproductive cycle of distrust. Community members are concerned about police misconduct, brutality and corruption. The police, in turn, can see the community as hostile and uncooperative in their investigations.

In Nigeria, the centralized structure of the police force has contributed to the problem: one set of agendas and policies is applied to the whole country, creating a gap between the law enforcement priorities of the police and the needs of the local communities.

CLEEN begins bridging this disconnect by sending letters to local governments, proposing the establishment of a public forum in their communities. The group follows up on this invitation only if local governments respond and the cooperation and commitment of the local police division can be secured. CLEEN then conducts a partnership workshop, where police and community members receive conflict-resolution training, discuss police responses to local complaints and discuss how CLEEN's program could be implemented in the area. These workshops allow each community to shape the program to its own needs. Two people from the community are then hired on a part-time basis to coordinate the forums for two years. After the two-year period is over, the community must find a way to sustain the program on its own.

CLEEN's tactic provides community members and police officers with a nonthreatening environment in which to share their concerns, overcoming the significant barriers created by bureaucracy. Both sides in a potentially contentious relationship have the opportunity to see the other as more human: someone to collaborate with, rather than to oppose. Over time, this process can interrupt the unproductive cycle of mistrust, laying a new foundation on which police embrace their role of service to citizens and citizens assist the police in their duties. This can reduce both police violence and civilian crime. The project has been implemented in fourteen local government areas drawn from the six geographical regions of Nigeria.

Because mistrust and misunderstanding cause friction among many groups, this tactic could be used to build stronger relationships between other groups in conflict, such as ethnic groups or business owners and farmers. One potential pitfall is the emotion and acrimony that can surround very difficult issues. Facilitators must be prepared to deal with this and to do so over a fairly long period of time. A one-time meeting is likely to be far less effective than CLEEN's long-term approach.

Getting to Know Your Allies: Identifying allies to hold constructive dialogue and maintain cooperative relationships.

Sometimes mistrust exists not only between human rights organizations and outside institutions, but among and within the human rights organizations themselves. In the Great Lakes Region of Africa, a group is working across international borders and entrenched lines of suspicion to overcome this problem in order to cooperatively monitor the region's human rights situation and quickly disseminate information.

The Ligue des Droits de la Personne dans la Region des Grands Lacs (Human Rights League of the Great Lakes Region, or LDGL) works as an umbrella group to maintain the alliance among 27 member organizations in Burundi, the Democratic Republic of Congo and Rwanda — a region rife with conflict. The Great Lakes region has long suffered from violence caused by ideological and ethnic mistrust or hatred. Some organizations in the region, including even some human rights groups, reflect these divisions, taking actions on behalf of narrow, ethnically-based constituencies.

The League's process of careful and systematic dialogue relies on the principles of *ubuntu* (humanness) as a basis for approaching its interactions with people from different backgrounds and cultures and for successfully building dialogue and sharing information.

When divisions within the LDGL emerge, leaders of the group try to understand the underlying problems creating the dispute. They then map out potential allies and identify the approach to dialogue that has the most potential for maintaining productive relationships. The LDGL selects individuals to participate in the dialogue based on their ability to build trust and cooperation. In everything it does, the LDGL chooses language and actions that build its credibility, thereby assuring alliance members that they are respected and that their concerns will be addressed.

Before approaching any issue to be addressed by member organizations, especially a contentious one, the League identifies the problem, the possible or real areas of contention, the desired goal and the alliances necessary to reach it. The league also identifies passive, potential and active allies to engage in dialogue.

Friction is natural among members of an alliance, especially one working in an area with a great deal of conflict. Rather than being the fault of "bad people," this friction signals the need for rigorous, sensitive systems of dialogue. A difficult part of the League's work is gaining mutual understanding for its actions within the region. If no consensus is reached at a meeting, the League sends reliable and trusted delegates from member organizations to the reluctant members in order to gain better understanding of the perspectives and build support.

Through this on-going process of building and maintaining relationships, the League has succeeded in creating a strong network of diverse organizations throughout the region and gaining their trust, in order to monitor human rights abuses and quickly disseminate information.

Creating mechanisms to carefully map out allies before convening members or groups for dialogues on contentious issues is critical for the successful implementation of tactics. This tactic could be applied in other situations where human rights groups are divided and competing with each other for scarce resources and attention. Coalitions are tenuous and always require constant dialogue and cultivation to continue to work effectively and stay together.

Intensive, Long-term Monitoring: Contracting with multinational corporations to monitor labor conditions in their supplier factories.

Coverco invites multinational corporations to improve human rights by comparing their corporate codes of conduct with on-the-ground reality in the overseas factories supplying their goods. Coverco gathers, examines and independently publishes information to remove any excuses the business may have for failing to respect human rights.

The Commission for the Verification of Corporate Codes of Conduct (Coverco) conducts long-term, intensive, independent monitoring of labor conditions in Guatemalan apparel factories and agricultural export industries, verifying compliance with internationally accepted labor standards. Based in Guatemala City, Coverco is an independent monitoring organization formed in 1997 by members of civil society groups; it does not work as a consultant to management nor as a worker advocate. The organization first establishes a relationship with a corporation (for example, Liz Claiborne Inc.) then negotiates an agreement permitting full, unannounced access to the production facility where the corporation commits to pay service fees. The organization independently publishes its findings on its web site.

Rather than conducting short-term visits and filing one-time reports, Coverco maintains a steady presence in the factories it monitors over a period of at least six months. It tries to “make movies” of the labor relationships in a production facility, instead of taking a snapshot. Trained monitors visit factories several times a month, unannounced. Monitors review factory records, have management explain official policy on issues as they arise, conduct “sensory inspections” of production facilities, meet with workers during and outside of normal business hours and maintain a telephone hotline to ensure that employees have full access to them. Interviews are conducted in Spanish and kept in strict confidence. Full access to the production facility, personnel files, management and workers is guaranteed by the multinational corporation.

Monitoring begins with a “social audit” whereby monitors characterize labor relations at the production facility — checking, for example, whether there is a grievance procedure and whether or not it works. Working conditions are thoroughly documented, including the presence and handling of industrial chemicals, the maintenance of and access to bathrooms, on-site health care and compliance with other health and safety criteria.

Monitors then undertake a thorough review of payroll records, payment of employee benefits and production bonuses and compliance with overtime regulations. They carefully investigate worker complaints and make certain to include management comments in all reports, noting situations where claims cannot be verified.

Coverco’s monitoring and verification activities have led corporations to require suppliers to demonstrate systemic compliance with labor rights. For example, one minor working at a supplier to Liz Claiborne complained that her manager refused to allow her to leave work early to attend classes as required by both local law and the LCI Code of Conduct. When Coverco documented this violation, LCI intervened with local management to ensure that managers complied with this law. This led Coverco to review the files of all minors working at the factory; the supplier then acted to ensure that they had the required parental permission for all working minors and to comply with local law requiring that minors work no more than 35 hours per week.

Coverco has reported some problems with gaining access to supplier factories and reluctance by some suppliers to implement the remediation programs they have negotiated with the multinational corporations. Managers at one Gap supplier factory, for instance, refused for a time to let Coverco monitors walk unescorted through the production facility or speak unobserved with workers.

Although the record is hardly perfect, failure to implement remediation programs has led some supplier factories to reprimand or dismiss managers. Illegally dismissed workers have been reinstated, excessive overtime has been reduced and cases of incorrect benefit payments have been remedied.



Different types of monitoring are being undertaken around the world, including confrontational approaches and those, like Coverco’s, which involve working in cooperation with companies. Coverco uses a collaborative relationship with international businesses rather than an adversarial one. It negotiates with them to fund this external, independent monitoring program and then, in interesting ways, takes monitoring a step further than usual. It provides a safe venue where workers can complain without fear of reprisals, thereby encouraging them to take a hand in improving their own working conditions. It also employs local monitors who are more likely than foreigners to understand local conditions and make connections with workers. To make this tactic work, it is crucial to have the support of both workers and management. When it is successful, all stakeholders contribute to the creation of a culture of compliance.

Self-Governance that Crosses Borders: Creating a transnational body to advocate for and promote the rights of indigenous people.

Sometimes potential allies are obvious, but ways of bringing them together are not. The indigenous Saami people, living in four different countries in the Arctic Circle, have built governing bodies that coordinate with each other across national borders to advocate for cross-national policies on rights of a minority — particularly for grazing rights that directly impact their day-to-day life.

The Saami Council, established in 1956, emerged from the need to maintain strong connections across the political borders that divide the Saami people of northern Scandinavia, to promote cooperation and to preserve their rights as indigenous people. The Council advocates for rights in the area where the Saami have lived for more than 10,000 years, an area that currently spans four countries — Norway, Sweden, Finland and Russia's Kola Peninsula.

Saami Council members are typically involved with national Saami organizations in their home countries. The fifteen seats of the Council are divided proportionally based on the Saami population — totaling over 100,000 — in each of the four countries. The Council has given strong support to the creation of Saami Parliaments in the Scandinavian nations, established in Finland in 1973, and in Norway and Sweden in 1987 and 1993, respectively. Each parliament is an independent, democratically-elected political body that consults with its respective national parliament on matters of interest to the Saami. Though Saami Parliaments cannot pass their own legislation, they are able to promote initiatives before the national parliaments.

The success of the Saami Council can be attributed to its ability to organize its people simultaneously on local, national and international levels. In this way members are able to use their cross-border unity to build constituencies and leverage for a local policy changes, while at the same time drawing on smaller, local organizations to provide support for larger, transnational coordination of Saami issues. One effort currently underway is the drafting of the Nordic Saami Convention. In 2002, the governments and Saami Parliaments of Norway, Sweden and Finland agreed to establish an expert group made up of Saami and non-Saami members to produce a draft of the Convention by 2005. The Convention will deal with fundamental issues of self-determination and land rights, as well as the environment, cooperation between states and Saami parliaments and the preservation of cultural heritage. A critical area of consideration is cross-border land grazing rights for those who herd reindeer — a primary livelihood of the Saami people.

In addition, the Saami Council was instrumental in establishing the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues at the United Nations and played a significant role in creating the Special Rapporteur on Human Rights for Indigenous People under the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights.

As a minority in each of their home countries, separate Saami political bodies would have less power to shape the policies that affect them. But together they can be much stronger advocates for their own rights — a clear example of the value of collaboration. This also promotes human rights at the local level while simultaneously influencing the decisions of national, regional and international institutions. Similar collaborations could be effective in other situations where interest groups or human rights issues cross national borders, as is more and more often the case.

“ ” | *We try to have a good working relationship with the home governments, even though we do not compromise on our rights. We are in constant dialogue with the governments. We have always tried to be more informed and know more about the issues than the government people we are going to be negotiating with.*

— Mattias Åhrén, Head of the Human Rights Unit, Saami Council

Educating the Next Generation: Collaborating with government to incorporate human rights education into public schools.

Public schools can be important settings for building a human rights culture. In Albania, a group worked with the government to prepare citizens for democracy in a post-communist nation.

The Albanian Center for Human Rights (ACHR) collaborated with the Albanian Ministry of Education to bring human rights education into all public schools in the country. The group took advantage of the post-communist transition period, negotiating with officials in the new democratic government to launch a long-term and ambitious process in which they would prepare young Albanian citizens to participate fully in a democracy.

In 1991, after 45 years of an oppressive and isolationist communist dictatorship, Albania faced a new world of democratic possibilities, with mountains of inherited political, economic and social problems and an institutional infrastructure ill-prepared to face them. To make the most of their new democracy, Albanians needed an educational system that prepared its citizens for critical thinking and encouraged political participation.

ACHR developed an ambitious plan to integrate human rights education into the official curricula of all public schools in the country. The group took advantage of the unique political moment provided by the post-communist transition to secure a written commitment from the Albanian Ministry of Education and Science to implement human rights education projects in public schools.

ACHR then began establishing pilot projects, carrying out large training sessions for a core group of teachers, adapting international human rights education materials for Albanian classrooms and developing activity books for every grade level. They also created pilot schools, where teachers and administrators helped trained all of the other teachers in human rights and its history, international mechanisms and human rights methodologies and activities in and out of the classroom.

By the end of the decade, ACHR had developed special curricular material in many subjects for all age groups, trained thousands of teachers to use the materials, set up 42 pilot schools throughout the country and initiated a curriculum in the teachers colleges to integrate the teaching of human rights into their preparation.

ACHR had an ambitious vision for Albania and used a political opportunity to turn that vision into reality. The government was in transition and eager to show the international community its dedication to human rights. (Albania had ratified the Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1993.) ACHR offered the government a way to demonstrate that commitment and help fulfill its obligations under the convention, and thereby secured its cooperation. It also sustained momentum by bringing in international support and educational experts.