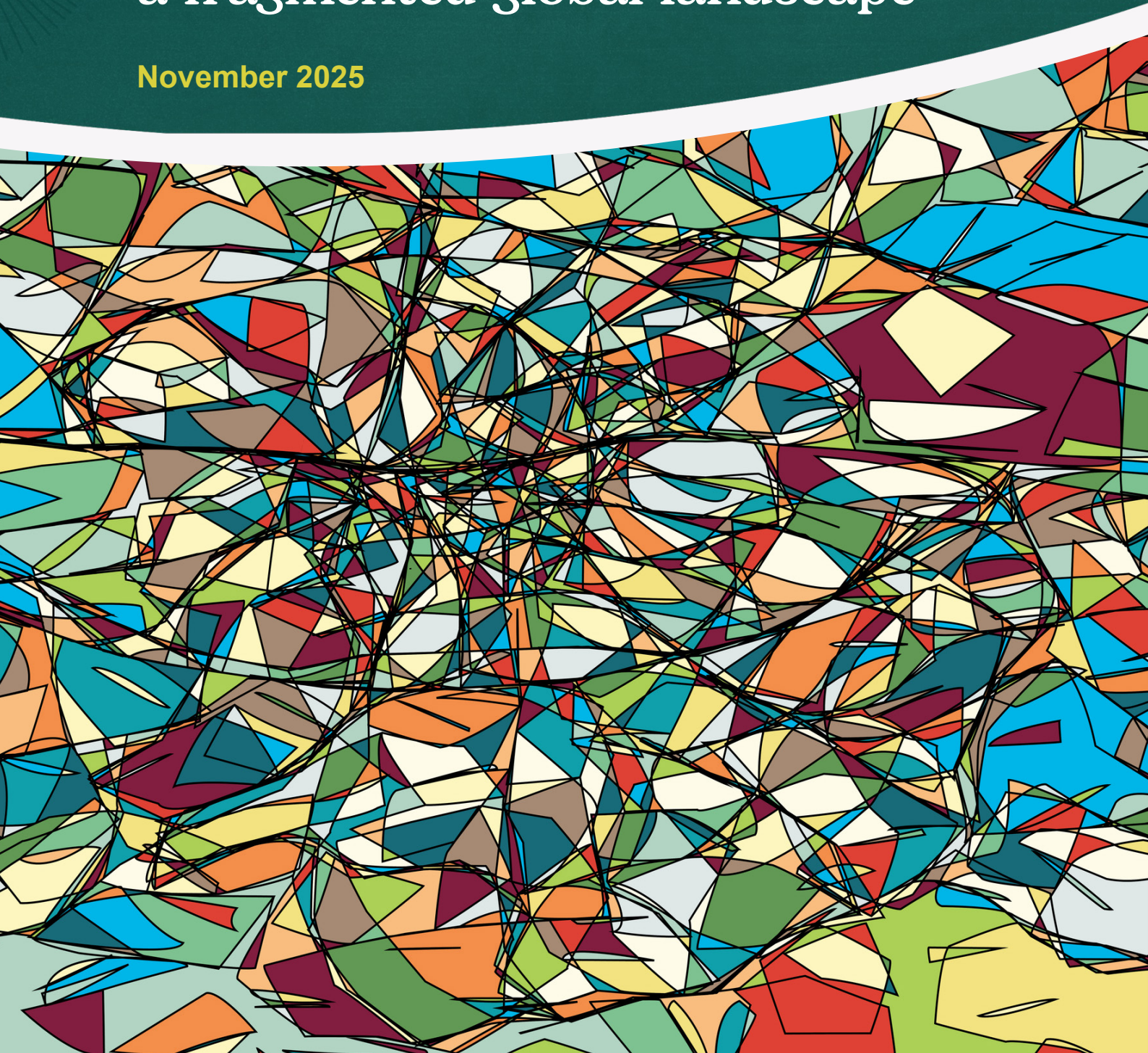


Interdependent justice: Collaborative leadership in a fragmented global landscape

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About Impunity Watch

Impunity Watch is an international non-profit organisation working with victims of violence to uproot deeply ingrained structures of impunity, deliver redress for grave human rights violations and promote justice and peace. We gather and share knowledge on priority themes, build partnerships and coalitions, and conduct international advocacy work to overcome impunity and transform justice. Impunity Watch currently works in Central America, North Africa and the Great Lakes region of Africa, the Middle East and the Western Balkans. The organisation also has a presence in Guatemala and Burundi. Impunity Watch’s headquarters are based in The Hague in The Netherlands. Our work takes place at local as well as national, regional and international levels.

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Executive summary

International justice has entered a period of deep fracture: civic space is shrinking, donor priorities are narrowing, and multilateral norms are eroding. Against this backdrop, survivors and frontline actors face heightened risk, dwindling resources, and persistent double standards.

This paper argues that sustaining justice now depends on building a resilient, interdependent ecosystem—one that redistributes power, centres survivor leadership, and treats solidarity as infrastructure rather than sentiment.

Key messages:

- 1. Justice is multipronged.** International courts remain essential but in this environment, community-rooted work, documentation, psycho-social support, narrative change, and cross-border organising, must be recognised as core to justice, not just adjuncts to prosecutions.
- 2. Participation must become collaboration.** Survivor engagement should move beyond symbolic consultation to shared design, governance, and resourcing of justice processes, with accessibility and safety embedded throughout.
- 3. Innovation is already here.** Local and diaspora initiatives (e.g., independent evidence repositories and transnational campaigns) and intersectional approaches at the nexus of human rights, corporate accountability, and climate justice are expanding the repertoire of accountability tools and norms (including emerging concepts such as ecocide).
- 4. Solidarity must be practical and protective.** In hostile environments, solidarity looks like rapid-response support, digital and physical security, legal accompaniment, distributed advocacy, and reputational shielding, leveraging all actors who continue to hold influence and visibility and delivered through trusted networks.
- 5. Funding models shape power.** Short-term, top-down grants entrench inequality. Trust-based, participatory, pooled and co-governed funds can shift resources and decision-making closer to survivors and grassroots movements while maintaining accountability.
- 6. Shared stewardship is the path forward.** Co-owned governance (community-majority boards, participatory “windows” within donor portfolios, and pooled funds) can redistribute influence, build continuity in volatile contexts, and make collaboration itself a site of accountability and learning.

Priority directions:

1. Where needed, redistribute power and resources to survivor-led and locally anchored actors through participatory grant-making, pooled funds, and flexible, core support.
2. Design for volatility, not stability, by investing in networks, digital coordination, safety, and care infrastructures that outlast project cycles.
3. Integrate levers of change, aligning funding with legal, political, and narrative strategies to amplify impact under scarcity.
4. Institutionalise joint learning and oversight, treating tension and missteps as part of accountable collaboration rather than deviations from it.
5. Elevate local priorities and transregional alliances, ensuring those closest to harm shape agendas, measures of success, and routes to influence.
6. The central claim is simple: no actor can secure justice alone. Building an interdependent, survivor-centred ecosystem, capable of withstanding political retreat and resource contraction, is now the essential work.

1. Introduction: Changing political contexts and a sector under attack

This reflection paper responds to a [2024 workshop in Nairobi](#) co-organised by Impunity Watch and the Tahrir Institute for Middle East Policy. The workshop brought together survivor-activists from the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Kenya, Lebanon, Sudan, the Sahel, Syria, Tunisia, and other regions to discuss strategies for addressing double standards in international justice efforts. All activists at the meeting highlighted systemic challenges: repressive operating environments, lack of access to decision-makers, scarce resources, and unmet disability and psychosocial support needs. Double standards in international justice efforts were defined as selective agendas for justice among national and international decision-makers, including what was described as “the problem of indifference, where institutions move resources across contexts, leaving survivors by the wayside”.

One year later, this analysis is set against a broader backdrop: the global erosion of universal human rights norms. Defenders are increasingly targeted, threatened, or killed, while major donors shift priorities and slash human rights and development budgets under political pressure, and traditional NGOs and multilateral bodies confront questions of legitimacy and relevance. The landscape is increasingly shaped by power and expediency, grossly amplifying a longstanding pattern in which legal and moral commitments to protection, accountability, and justice have been applied unevenly. While international justice has never been consistently applied—double standards have long existed—current trends represent an acceleration of these disparities, with systemic neglect, shrinking civic space, and constrained resources intensifying the challenges faced by survivors and frontline actors. As funding flows narrow and civic space contracts (CIVICUS 2024), community-led movements are forced to decentralise, adapt, or dissolve, exposing the vulnerabilities of a highly interconnected but fragile ecosystem.

Survivor-led and community-rooted organisations have long navigated volatility, but the first half of 2025 has brought an unprecedented rupture in international human rights systems. The dismantling of USAID by the US government, its sanctions against the International Criminal Court (ICC), the flagrant nature of the Israeli government’s genocide against Palestinians in Gaza, all signal a stark rejection of long-standing multilateral human rights norms (HRW 2025; United Nations General Assembly 2025). At the same time, far-right resurgence in the US, coupled with the expanding geopolitical influence of Russia and China through bilateral agreements that sideline rights obligations and promote alternative norms of “stability” and “non-interference,” have destabilised global justice frameworks (Al-Haq 2025; HRW 2025). Russia’s increasing aggression, alongside China testing its military boundaries, further underscores the shrinking space for international accountability. These shifts reveal a post-Cold War rupture in alliances that once—even unevenly—upheld universal human rights.

These moves have accelerated a backlash against the importance of inclusion and diversity, and a broader global rollback of human rights norms. In Europe, far-right and nationalist parties have gained legislative power by vilifying migrants and undermining transnational legal institutions—seen in the surge of support for parties like France’s National Rally and Hungary’s Fidesz, both of which campaign on anti-immigration and Eurosceptic platforms (Freedom House 2024; Human Rights Watch 2025). In Latin America and South Asia, governments have increasingly invoked the principle of “sovereignty” to resist international scrutiny, restrict civic space, and justify repression—evident in El Salvador’s mass detentions and India’s rejection of UN Special Rapporteur critiques (CIVICUS 2024; ICJ 2025).

In the Middle East and North Africa, the rollback is marked by intensified repression of civil society and human rights defenders. Algeria, Bahrain, Egypt, Iraq, Libya, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Yemen have seen increased reprisals against activists and restrictions on freedoms of expression and assembly (UN Secretary-General's 2024 report). Tunisia, once a beacon of progress post-Arab Uprisings, has experienced a significant decline in human rights protections, with increased harassment of journalists and political opponents (Amnesty International 2024).

In Africa, the situation is similarly concerning. Amnesty International has reported a “catastrophic rollback” of LGBTQIA+ rights across the continent, with several countries enacting discriminatory legislation that criminalises same-sex relations and advocacy (Amnesty International 2024). Additionally, the East and Horn of Africa region has faced escalating conflicts and political repression, leading to widespread human rights violations and a continued assault on civic space (DefendDefenders 2025). Countries like Sudan, South Sudan, Ethiopia, and Somalia have been particularly affected, with civilians bearing the brunt of these abuses (Human Rights Watch 2024).

Civic space has narrowed dramatically: CIVICUS reports that 70 per cent of the world's population now lives under restricted conditions of repression, obstruction, or closure (CIVICUS 2024). While historical coverage varies, comparable data from Freedom House shows that in 2000 only 39 per cent of people lived in “Not Free” countries—and a smaller fraction under systemic civic restrictions—indicating a steep, systemic decline over two decades (Freedom House 2000; CIVICUS 2024). Freedom House (2024) also reports that global freedom declined for the 18th consecutive year in 2023, with political rights and civil liberties deteriorating in 52 countries—a trend driven by election manipulation, armed conflict, and erosion of pluralism.

The legitimacy and enforceability of international human rights norms are thus under sustained, coordinated attack. Countries that once promoted these standards now hollow them out selectively. Institutions that once symbolised justice now face accusations of irrelevance or bias. These shifts are not only political—they are deeply material.

“ With foreign aid declining and development priorities reoriented toward migration control, border militarisation, and domestic security, the global justice ecosystem faces a crisis. This is not just a contraction of funding or participation. It is a reordering of values, legitimacy, and global influence. ”

In response, there is an opportunity to re-examine or reaffirm our own thinking about what we value, where our legitimacy is drawn from and upon what it is built, and what our spaces of influence are. This perhaps more intimate thinking is foundational to bigger-picture visions of functional justice spaces in which rights-holders are central.

Reflecting on the historical unevenness of international justice, and the structural pressures now intensifying global erosion, we must move from the immediate concern of double standards highlighted in Nairobi to the broader imperative of sustaining a resilient, interdependent justice ecosystem amid global erosion. Framing justice in this way highlights the need to strengthen solidarity, participation, and funding strategies in ways that are adaptive, inclusive, and survivor-led.

This paper draws out thinking around two core areas: the multipronged nature of justice, including opportunities to draw lessons from survivor participation, local and diaspora innovation, and intersectional justice initiatives; and strategic opportunities to create a healthier human rights ecosystem, including examples of collaboration and partnership, solidarity, funding and cooperation models. The following sections provide brief examples intended to prompt further thinking, and are followed by some reflective questions aimed at practitioners and advocates seeking to clarify their own engagement going forward.

With this perspective in mind, the following questions invite reflection on how we, as individuals and organisations, can strengthen these connections and align our efforts to sustain justice.

- **How do historical double standards** in international justice continue to **shape the relationships, expectations, and trust** between survivors, local actors, and international institutions?
- Where do current structural pressures—shrinking civic space, funding contractions, and geopolitical shifts—create friction within the justice ecosystem, and **how might these tensions be navigated to sustain local and transnational initiatives?**
- In contexts of contested authority and uneven enforcement, how are survivors and grassroots actors experiencing gaps in support, and **what strategies might strengthen interdependent networks of advocacy, protection, and accountability?**
- **How do the competing imperatives** of political expediency, resource scarcity, and legal norms **generate points of tension or innovation**, and **what can be learned** from these frictions to improve the resilience of justice efforts?

2. Existing justice mechanisms and the multipronged nature of justice

Mechanisms that uphold human rights—particularly high visibility international justice institutions—continue to face pressure from the current political climate. Looking ahead, the international justice landscape may feature fewer large victories, with critical work increasingly occurring at the subnational and national levels. Protecting existing spaces where human rights are actively upheld and valued is therefore essential.

International criminal prosecution mechanisms and investigatory bodies—such as the ICC, hybrid tribunals, and UN investigatory bodies—have been important levers for accountability and symbols of justice. Yet they have faced longstanding challenges with their ability to deliver justice in a way that is felt to be consistently meaningful to victims, survivors, and affected communities. This has included high operating costs, physical and emotional distance from affected communities, and a tendency to siphon resources away from local civil society initiatives that document, advocate, and support their communities (Arthur and Yakinthou 2018).

We should, of course, not retreat from international criminal justice as a critical pathway for upholding human rights and humanitarian law and norms. But as we think about how we reorient from here, we must also reflect on justice as something that is multipronged, and make more space for the fuller spectrum of definitions that victims and survivors of human rights violations have identified as important.

The value of justice beyond verdicts

The value of criminal justice rests not only in the delivery of a guilty verdict, the reparations efforts that follow, or even in the important historical documentation produced through the process. It also relies on the activation of citizens towards the goal of accountability, the ferocious claiming and owning of space by civil society organisations usually made up of people who have survived atrocious human rights violations or who have lost loved ones to these violations, and the connections made with other associations from proximate contexts who have similar experiences and expertise to lend. When done well, justice is in the communication channels opened up between those who seek the acknowledgment and restoration of their rights, those who staff the institutions of justice, and those who shape and execute policy decisions that give form to the repair of rights violations. It is often in the feeling of being heard, sometimes in making a perpetrator listen. It is in the delivery and sharing of progress, in the historical record being developed, in the psycho-social support offered to communities, and in the many invisible parts of this complex web.

Drawing lessons from survivor participation

Much about what makes victim and survivor engagement meaningful has already been documented. Both [Impunity Watch](#) (2024) and the [International Network of Victims and Survivors of Serious Human Rights Violations](#) (INOVAS 2025) have highlighted a set of recurring lessons:

- Participation must redistribute power rather than instrumentalise survivors—avoiding tokenism and extractive consultation.
- Structures should adapt to the capacities of survivors, recognising that time, safety, and psychosocial wellbeing limit their ability to engage in formal processes.

- Justice work is most effective when participation is continuous, not *ad hoc*, but anchored in long-term relationships, feedback loops, and survivor-defined priorities.
- International actors have a role in creating enabling environments, but legitimacy and strategy are strongest when shaped locally and transregionally.

Together, these insights make clear that there is already a rich evidence base on what participatory, survivor-centred justice can look like. This report, therefore, does not attempt to restate those lessons in depth. Instead, it focuses on two emerging areas where innovation is most visible: **local and diaspora-led accountability infrastructures**, and **intersectional justice norms** at the nexus of human rights, corporate accountability, and climate justice. These examples illustrate where practice is already evolving in response to the present moment of contraction, and where solidarity and resourcing could be catalytic in the decade ahead.

Local and diaspora innovation

As a pressure point and accountability tool, community organising and documenting will increase in importance. Diaspora groups are building independent evidence repositories, initiating global campaigns for sanctions or universal jurisdiction cases, and influencing diplomatic discourse—often with greater agility and visibility than international courts. For example, the Syrian Archive, founded by exiled Syrian activists, has verified thousands of open-source videos of war crimes, producing admissible evidence for universal jurisdiction efforts in Europe (Syrian Archive 2024; Ristovska 2019). Likewise, Uyghur and Belarusian diaspora organisations have coordinated digital-first advocacy campaigns that have successfully shaped international responses (Uyghur Human Rights Project 2022; Institute for European Politics 2023).

Intersectional and emerging justice norms

The current assault on rights and defenders highlights the importance of justice intersectionality. Accountability for corporate and state actors increasingly sits at the nexus of transitional and climate justice. Decades of human rights experience in state crimes, corporate complicity, and structural violence can inform legal and communications strategies for climate-related harms. At the same time, human rights work has much to learn from environmental justice movements, which have pioneered decentralised yet powerful models of global organising.

Climate justice campaigns have foregrounded indigenous and frontline voices, mobilised intergenerational narratives, and developed innovative accountability strategies—from divestment campaigns to transnational litigation against corporations—that broaden the repertoire of pressure points available to justice advocates. Indigenous-led divestment campaigns, for example, leverage sovereignty and rights-based claims to challenge fossil fuel extraction and promote regenerative economies (Indigenous Climate Action 2024; *Healing the Land: Indigenous Perspectives on Divestment* 2024). In parallel, indigenous communities are increasingly engaging in climate litigation to demand accountability and highlight the disproportionate impacts of environmental degradation on their lands and livelihoods (Columbia Climate Law 2023). Frontline communities have also mobilised transnationally to resist climate-damaging projects, often under conditions of harassment and land dispossession, demonstrating resilience and innovative advocacy approaches (EarthRights International 2024).

Together, these exchanges are generating emerging norms such as ‘ecocide’ and shared due diligence obligations, while also reshaping how legitimacy, solidarity, and long-term resilience are built across movements (Independent Expert Panel for the Legal Definition of Ecocide 2021).

Questions to explore opportunities and tensions in survivor-centred and emerging justice practices include:

- **Where are the platforms** or institutions that will remain—or could emerge—as champions of human rights principles, and **how can they be strengthened despite political or resource pressure**?
- **What role** will **universal jurisdiction** and its advocates play in foregrounding criminal accountability, and can they become more important symbols for prosecuting crimes?
- How can human rights actors collectively identify the **emerging spaces**—geographic, digital, and political—where their **advocacy can have the greatest impact** over the next decade?
- Can **new regional coalitions** of political allies and traditional state donors be formed, focusing on shared areas to support? This could be political support as much as resourcing. How might **differing priorities or approaches create productive tension** in these collaborations?
- How can **digital organising and civil society-led campaigning** be supported?

3. Strategic opportunities to build a healthier human rights ecosystem

As justice infrastructures fragment, we face a core practical challenge: how to sustain legitimacy, capacity, and solidarity within an interconnected ecosystem amid declining state support, reduced funding, and contested normative frameworks. The task is no longer to restore the old architecture—but to co-create a new one rooted in honest survivor-supporting actor partnerships, shared accountability, and distributed power. New opportunities for more honest, equitable collaborations are emerging, and they must be seized if we are to shape a way out of this crisis.

The sections that follow explore three critical areas for redesign: participation, solidarity, and funding.

From participation to collaboration

The “participation” model in international justice efforts has been questioned and challenged for at least the last decade. Victims and survivors have been routinely invited to testify, validate process design, or symbolically endorse mechanisms created elsewhere. Yet rarely have they been granted meaningful influence over decisions, governance, or resource flows. Participation has remained largely procedural—valuable for legitimacy, but limited in impact.

This disconnect has generated widespread frustration among survivor groups. In many cases, survivors have been asked to contribute trauma narratives while being excluded from strategy-setting, reparations frameworks, or monitoring systems (INOVAS 2025). The cost is more than symbolic: it has reproduced harm, eroded trust, and undermined the very legitimacy such processes claim to seek.

The current global landscape makes the question of collaboration even more urgent. With the decline in multilateralism at the international level, the space for survivors, activists and non-governmental organisations in international forums such as the United Nations is much more limited. Meanwhile, private companies and other non-state actors are gaining greater influence in shaping justice agendas.

“ Against this background, rights-holders have issued a clear and long-standing demand—not merely to participate, but to reshape how justice and solidarity are enacted, resourced, and evaluated. ”

Examples of this shift exist. In the Democratic Republic of Congo and Uganda, conflict-related sexual violence survivor-advocates and disability rights organisations **co-designed more inclusive reparation frameworks**, in partnership with the Global Survivors Fund (Global Survivors Fund 2023). While this marked progress towards survivor-informed justice, it also highlighted ecosystem imbalances: the important but disproportionate donor attention to sexual violence unintentionally overshadowed other priorities identified by survivors, revealing gaps in the broader network of accountability and support (Patten 2022).

Other collaborations show the potential of more **purpose-driven and adaptive partnerships**. Indigenous land defenders, in collaboration with digital rights groups, have developed transnational tools for protection, environmental monitoring, and resistance to surveillance.

The **Indigenous Environmental Network** in North America promotes digital sovereignty and participatory data justice. **Digital Democracy** works in solidarity with indigenous communities across the world affected by social and environmental injustice to document rights violations and defend their rights. They have co-created platforms like Mapeo, an open-source tool to collect and map information, and Terrastories, an application for communities to map and share multimedia stories that preserve histories (Digital Democracy 2023), while owning their data. These illustrate how **solidarity and innovation can be mobilised across contexts**, and how they emerge through friction—where diverse actors negotiate priorities, resources, and knowledge—across multiple contexts.

Two lessons stand out: First, there are no examples of perfect engagement, only partial victories and efforts to do things better. Second, advancing justice will necessarily involve tense, contested, and imperfect processes that must be navigated thoughtfully.

New frameworks are also emerging to support this shift. The International Network of Victims and Survivors of Serious Human Rights Abuses (INOVAS), was founded to provide victims and survivors with a platform to coordinate and amplify victim and survivor voices and expertise, particularly in justice processes. The **INOVAS Guidelines for Victim Participation**, for instance, calls for community-led design, linguistic accessibility, and genuine collaboration across all stages of justice processes. Crucially, they advocate for justice processes that adapt to survivors' realities (INOVAS 2025).

In thinking about creating meaningful collaboration, points for reflection and strategic consideration include:

- Can **regional justice hubs** be created on specific topics and guided by communities? Could they be multi-actor spaces? Could there be a pooling of capacities, where International Non-Governmental Organisations (INGOs) experienced in capacity building support members of these hubs to manage their own resources, priorities, and partnerships – if this is what they need and want, and if not, in what ways can existing INGOs provide this support?
- Which **existing collaborations and transregional policy interventions** can act as a counterbalance to geopolitical pressures? How can they be reinforced or expanded?
- How can funders and stakeholders work together to **design support mechanisms that anticipate and accommodate tension and contestation**, rather than seeking to “smooth over” or suppress them? What practical models might operationalise this approach?
- What kinds of long-term partnerships (rather than project cycles) could help survivor-led groups, grassroots organisations, and NGOs **co-create justice processes that remain resilient** even when donor priorities shift?
- Acknowledging that no engagement is perfect, how can donors and practitioners **cultivate learning spaces** where missteps and partial successes are openly examined—making collaboration itself a source of accountability and innovation?

Solidarity in a fragmented landscape

Solidarity is often framed as a moral or emotional commitment—an act of empathy across difference. But in a fractured justice ecosystem, however, solidarity must be infrastructural: embedded in the networks through which relationships, resources, and risks are shared across borders and movements.

Historically, human rights solidarity has been expressed through campaigns, convenings, and public statements of support. These mechanisms still matter—but they are insufficient in the face of increasingly hostile political environments, digital surveillance, and funding scarcity. What movements need is not only visibility, but durable systems of mutual care, joint strategy, and shared protection (Radical Flexibility Fund 2024; Human Rights Funders Network 2023).

Solidarity requires redistribution of visibility and influence. This includes (safely) amplifying groups historically marginalised within global human rights discourse—particularly stateless peoples, indigenous nations, and those criminalised for resistance (Yakinthou 2024).

Several emergent models offer insight into how solidarity can be operationalised in ways that navigate tension, build interdependence, and respond adaptively to local and transnational pressures:

- **Diaspora networks:** In contexts like Sudan, Syria, and Myanmar, diasporic organisers play a critical role in sustaining advocacy, transferring resources, and lobbying governments. Their ability to bridge contexts allows for more agile response and sustained international pressure (Access Now 2024).
- **Trans-movement learning platforms:** Initiatives such as the Feminist Accountability Framework and the Power in Praxis project convene indigenous, queer, racial justice, and disability rights groups to share strategies for resisting repression and building inclusive governance. These platforms also serve as spaces for healing, political education, and re-grounding.
- **Digital mutual aid:** Encrypted peer-to-peer systems are increasingly used to move funds, share safety alerts, and document violations in real time. In Palestine and Afghanistan, for example, WhatsApp and Signal groups have replaced formal channels as primary nodes of survival coordination (Access Now 2024).

Solidarity also takes the form of **protection and presence**. Beyond resource-sharing, international NGOs, donors, and allied actors play a vital role in sustaining frontline defenders, ensuring their survival and capacity to act within an ecosystem under pressure. This includes investing in digital security, relocation support, and safety planning; amplifying activists' access to international networks or platforms when protection is urgently needed; and at the national level offering physical accompaniment—whether by sending observers to domestic trials, showing up at moments of repression, or lending reputational backing when activists are targeted. Such practices root solidarity in tangible acts of protection, making it both visible and durable in periods of heightened risk.

Solidarity must be multi-directional, flowing across contexts and geographies: from Global North allies to Global South movements, South–South networks, diasporic knowledge transfer, and transregional alliances. Such formations are more responsive to context and less vulnerable to geopolitical shifts.

Solidarity in this moment must be more than empathy, towards strategy.

It means amplifying political work, building infrastructures of care and protection, fostering coordination across movements and borders, and redistributing technical, financial, and advocacy capacities to those closest to the issues. Above all, it requires practical mechanisms that allow defenders to survive, organise, and lead—even in an environment of shrinking resources, rising repression, and political retreat.

- **How can solidarity be resourced as survival infrastructure, rather than symbolic support?** What role can donors and practitioners play in ensuring that collective care, trauma response, and sabbatical policies are treated as core elements of justice-building rather than optional extras?
- **What mechanisms can ensure rapid, sustained solidarity in moments of repression or crisis?** Could this include standing funds, legal accompaniment pools, or compact agreements that guarantee support even in the absence of fixed budgets?
- **How can solidarity be practiced as shared risk and protection rather than charity or moral empathy?** What does this require in terms of long-term commitments between movements, donors, and allies?
- **Given shrinking funding, political retreat, and widespread uncertainty, what immediate, low-resource practices can sustain movements while building longer-term resilience?** Could sharing digital security tools, rotating advocacy roles, or pooling diaspora networks be useful?

Rethinking traditional intermediaries: Horizontal funding and cooperation structures

Historically, international human rights funding has been filtered through intermediaries that manage risk, translate language, and align grantee priorities with donor expectations. While enabling reach and coordination, it has also concentrated power in a few well-networked organisations, largely based in or accountable to the Global North (Cambridge Scholars Publishing 2022; Human Rights Funders Network 2023).

Today, this landscape is in flux, shaped by donor fatigue, geopolitical shifts, and domestic political pressures. Across multiple sectors, human rights budgets are falling, reshaping both the reach and modalities of support. At the same time, funders and recipients alike are questioning whether legacy structures—characterised by short-term grants, top-heavy reporting, and limited flexibility—can sustain long-term justice organising. In many regions, communities have had to rely on solidarity networks, diaspora remittances, or volunteer labour (Radical Flexibility Fund 2024).

These rapid shifts mean previous assessments of inequality—such as the “trust gap” in philanthropic allocations, where Global North organisations receive 99% of their funds directly, while their Southern counterparts face additional vetting, reporting burdens, or exclusion from core funding (Human Rights Funders Network 2023)—persist but are now being challenged by emerging practices. Historically, this created a structurally unequal ecosystem, in which the actors closest to harm have often been furthest from resources and decision-making. While the gap remains visible, evolving donor practices and emergent pooled funds may reshape flows to Southern and grassroots actors.

Intermediary funding and support, while often criticised for concentrating power, continues to play a role in certain contexts. For example, the Survivor Leadership Fund—coordinated by the Freedom Fund—channels core, unrestricted grants directly to grassroots, survivor-led organisations, while providing optional administrative support tools without imposing performance frameworks that undermine trust or autonomy (Freedom Fund 2024). The Freedom Fund itself operates as an intermediary, drawing resources from a network of philanthropic donors willing to adopt trust-based approaches. In contexts such as Syria,

Funding is never neutral; it shapes governance, priorities, and power structuring relationships.

intermediary work has supported coordination and advocacy initiatives that would not have been possible otherwise, including the Truth and Justice Charter and subsequent initiatives that underpinned the creation of the UN's [Independent Institution on Missing Persons in the Syrian Arab Republic](#).

In both these examples, intermediaries acted as a stabilising and facilitative mechanism in fragile contexts, and some partners have since developed independent funding streams, illustrating a cyclical evolution from dependency to autonomy. These models show that intermediaries can still enable flexibility, scale, and capacity-building—but their role must be carefully calibrated to avoid reproducing extractive dynamics.

Alongside intermediaries, **horizontal and collaborative models** are emerging, designed to redistribute power and build shared governance across movements. These include pooled funds governed by community boards, federated grant structures jointly managed across regions, and direct-to-movement grant-making. The Roma Education Fund (REF), for example, uses a co-governance structure in which Roma educators, community leaders, and donors share decision-making authority on grants, programming, and evaluation (REF 2022). Community organisers are also pioneering digital coordination hubs, diaspora-based mutual aid networks, and cross-border legal collectives; demonstrating that infrastructure can be redesigned around credibility, proximity, and shared governance rather than scale alone.

Trust-based philanthropy, participatory grant-making platforms, and feminist-inspired funding approaches, such as the Global Fund for Women and Mama Cash, use feminist principles of **transparency, co-decision-making, and mutual learning** to structure grants and strengthen solidarity across networks (Global Fund for Women 2023). Taken together, these approaches highlight a spectrum of options: intermediaries remain useful in contexts requiring coordination or perhaps risk management, but horizontal, survivor-led and collaborative models represent critical opportunities to redistribute influence and embed shared stewardship in justice ecosystems.

Every intervention must be strategic, locally anchored, and mindful of interdependence:

- How might current support structures unintentionally centralise power, and what **concrete changes could redistribute influence** sustainably to local actors?
- Given the limits on time, energy, and attention for grassroots actors, **what trade-offs between oversight, accountability, and flexibility are acceptable, and how can these be negotiated collaboratively?**
- Which mechanisms **strengthen resilience and continuity** without adding burdens on survivors or community leaders, and how to **measure whether** these **mechanisms respect their agency?**
- In contexts of scarce resources and few INGOs, where are the **most strategic points for mutual reinforcement** across local, diaspora, and small INGO networks, and how can these **relationships be deliberately nurtured?**

Shared stewardship: Governance that redistributes power

Horizontal structures do not reject coordination; they demand relational accountability. In an era of contraction, the models above point the way toward a justice ecosystem that is not only more efficient, but more just. Without this shift, even the most promising justice efforts will remain precarious, and the next generation of rights-based organising will be undermined at its foundation.

Building on frameworks developed by feminist and trust-based funders, the Radical Flexibility Fund (2024) has advanced the idea of shared stewardship as a participatory and justice-oriented model of resourcing. It is important to note that investing in these changes does not mean formalising all grassroots organising. Rather, it means resourcing the infrastructure necessary for care, resilience, and scale.

Shared stewardship involves:

- **Participatory governance bodies:** where community leaders shape funding criteria and impact indicators.
- **Ending extractive grant-making** that treats survivors as “implementers” of external agendas.
- **Regional funder collaboratives** that include movement representatives in grant decisions.
- Memoranda of understanding that **formalise shared oversight** between donors and organisers.
- Replacing pass-through models with **co-governance and pooled resourcing**;
- **Investing in infrastructure**—not just emergencies—so that movements can build stability and scale (Radical Flexibility Fund 2024).

The shift toward shared stewardship demands a **deeper reallocation of authority**. To transform funding futures, donors must shift from managing risk to redistributing power. This means **treating movements not only as recipients or informants but as co-owners of systems**.

The practical application of shared stewardship does not require abandoning existing accountability requirements to parliaments, boards, or shareholders—it requires reframing them. Co-ownership in practice might mean establishing **joint advisory or decision-making councils** where movement representatives hold a formal vote on resource allocation within legally permissible structures. It could involve **embedding flexible “participatory windows”** within larger donor portfolios, ring-fenced for survivor or movement-led decision making. For public funders, shared stewardship can be implemented through **framework agreements that report not only on financial compliance but also on power-sharing benchmarks**, such as the proportion of funds governed by participatory bodies.

Foundations and INGOs can **move incrementally** by piloting pooled funds with community-majority governance, then codifying these mechanisms. For example, FRIDA | The Young Feminist Fund and the Global Resilience Fund have pioneered participatory grant-making practices in which “applicants work together to determine how FRIDA’s grant-making funds are allocated ... FRIDA uses a participatory grant-making process that puts decision-making in the hands of young feminists themselves” (FRIDA | The Young Feminist Fund 2025).

These models show that **reform need not require wholesale restructuring of state or institutional systems**. **By creatively using existing governance spaces**, actors can redistribute influence, strengthen interdependencies, and maintain mutual accountability while still satisfying legal and fiduciary obligations.

4. Recommendations: Rebuilding justice through interdependence

This is not just a moment of reform—it is a turning point for how the human rights ecosystem functions under scarcity and structural neglect. The contraction of traditional donor models, the erosion of multilateralism, and the broader reshaping of the human rights ecosystem demand more than better funding mechanisms. They demand a reimagining of how justice is built, shared, and sustained—particularly under conditions of scarcity, volatility, and structural neglect.

Human rights movements today are navigating not only shrinking budgets, but what many describe as a strategic abandonment. The dismantling of USAID, the chilling effects of ICC sanctions, and the reprioritisation of EU aid exemplify a broader retreat from rights-based commitments. There is space and need for international actors including INGOs, international funders, and multilateral bodies to play a supportive and enabling role.

“ This means a refocusing on amplifying political work, creating supportive infrastructures, fostering multi-stakeholder coordination, and redistributing technical, financial and advocacy capacities to those closest to the issues. ”

No actor—whether grassroots movement, diaspora network, intermediary, INGO, funder, or multilateral institution—operates in isolation. Grassroots movements rely on political, technical, and financial support from intermediaries, international and national NGOs, and funders; funders rely on credible, locally-grounded partners to direct resources effectively; and networks of activists, diaspora communities, and transnational alliances rely on mutual solidarity to sustain momentum. Strengthening justice now requires recognising that the survival, legitimacy, and impact of each actor are **mutually dependent—and that these relationships are often tension-filled, contested, and negotiated in practice**. By intentionally redistributing influence, resources, and decision-making power, the ecosystem becomes more resilient, adaptive, and sustainable.

The most honest and forward-looking strategies therefore:

- **Acknowledge that capital is not guaranteed, and may remain inaccessible for many frontline actors.** Funders and intermediaries should consider approaches that account for scarcity, while supporting flexible, adaptive forms of resource distribution. This includes pooled funds, participatory grant-making, and co-governance models that place survivors and grassroots movements at the centre of decision-making, while also preserving accountability to boards, parliaments, and legal frameworks.
- **Develop models of justice-building that function in conditions of volatility, not just reform or expansion.** Movements and supporting actors should co-design processes that rely on trust, solidarity networks, digital coordination, and locally-anchored governance structures rather than assuming continuous inflows of external resources. This ensures resilience even when funding is unstable, and distributes responsibility in ways that strengthen the ecosystem as a whole.

- **Reframe funding not as the goal, but as one tool among many.** While resources remain essential, they should be integrated with other levers of change—political advocacy, legal innovation, narrative shaping, and infrastructural support. This reorientation prioritises sustainability and interdependence, and funding becomes part of a holistic approach rather than a transactional exchange.
- **Embed iterative collaboration.** Rather than temporary projects, initiatives should enable shared oversight, multi-directional support, and spaces for joint learning among movements, funders, and intermediaries (in whatever form they may take going forward).
- **Amplify local priorities.** International actors should focus on creating enabling environments for those closest to the issues, supporting local leadership, and sharing technical or advocacy capacities when requested.

Multiple converging trends—rapid contraction of traditional funding, declining multilateralism, geopolitical realignment, and accelerated civic space restrictions—have created both urgency and opportunity. Survival and meaningful justice now depend on an ecosystem that functions as a mutually accountable, interdependent network—one that embraces tension, negotiates contested priorities, and distributes legitimacy and resources across actors rather than concentrating power hierarchically—strengthening resilience, sustainability, and the ability of frontline actors to lead processes that affect them most directly.

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