



## **Strategic Statement 2013-2017**

The US Human Rights Network (USHRN or Network) was founded to strengthen the human rights movement in the United States and make it an effective part of the growing global human rights movement. The following strategy is designed to ensure that the Network marshals all its resources to strengthen a bold and effective movement and culture that play a key role in determining a just future embracing human rights for all in our country and throughout the world.

### **VISION STATEMENT**

The US Human Rights Network is a national network of organizations and individuals working to strengthen a human rights movement and culture within the United States led by the people most directly impacted by human rights violations. We work to secure dignity and justice for all.

USHRN works to realize human rights by:

- Engaging, connecting and mobilizing communities, Peoples, workers, and diverse sectors across issue areas, constituencies, and regions to uphold and defend human rights and hold government accountable;
- Building the capacity and leadership of grassroots groups and individuals to effectively apply the human rights framework in developing strategy and making long-term structural shifts to achieve justice;
- Raising the visibility of local human rights concerns and activism to shape the public discourse locally, nationally, and internationally; and
- Facilitating effective collective action to secure the structural change needed to fully realize human rights.

By successfully employing these strategies, the Network will help to build the collective power and voice of the grassroots to reshape national and international discourse on social, cultural, political and economic issues with a human rights perspective; influence policymaking to embrace human rights at the national, state, local and international levels; situate the domestic human rights movement as an essential part of social movements in the United States and around the world; begin to shift political power in the democratic process away from corporations to people; ensure United States accountability to human

rights standards at home and abroad; and build a lasting human rights culture in the United States. These strategies are designed to strengthen a human rights movement that popularizes a universal recognition of and respect for the inherent dignity of every human being – a people-centered human rights movement. Poised to play a central role, USHRN will be trusted and regarded widely by the grassroots as the place to go for community and support in their struggles for justice and transformative change to realize human rights.

## **CORE PRINCIPLES**

The US Human Rights Network is guided by these core principles:

- Human rights are universal, interdependent, indivisible, and inalienable.
- Human rights movements must be led by those most directly affected by human rights violations.
- Human rights advocacy and organizing should prioritize the struggles of the poor and most marginalized groups in society.
- Human rights movements must be inclusive and respect and reflect the diversity within communities.
- Human rights encompass civil, political, economic, social, cultural, environmental, sexual, and development rights for individuals, Peoples, and groups..

## **GOALS**

The US Human Rights Network exists to build the collective power and voice necessary to ensure United States accountability to universally accepted human rights standards and establish a lasting human rights culture in the United States. Long term, we are working to transform thinking and power relationships to enshrine the notion and actualization of human rights as paramount at home and abroad. Consequently, the Network has identified the following goals over the next five years:

- Grow the number of grassroots groups and individuals who share and effectively apply human rights principles, standards and norms to their work and activism;
- Build the collective power and voice of groups at the grassroots to act boldly and strategically in securing the structural change needed to realize the full range of human rights in the United States;
- Shape the public discourse to embrace human rights as a domestic issue and transform thinking about the fundamental structural change necessary to achieve justice for all; and

- Increase the ability of the domestic human rights movement to leverage its collective power in molding campaigns and policy at all levels of government to comply with human rights standards.

## STRATEGIES

The Network is currently the only entity with the exclusive mission of supporting and providing a community for the domestic human rights movement. Founded after a series of meetings of prominent U.S. based human rights and social justice activists, and feminists of color, it has since enjoyed the support of the domestic human rights community and established itself as a space for groups to come together, share, learn and act towards realizing human rights in the United States.

USHRN has demonstrated its ability to bring groups together across issues and constituencies through its national conference and membership meetings and in linking groups to the human rights framework particularly through its human rights mechanisms work and educational and framing resources. We are viewed by our members as a Network that insists on the leadership of people most directly impacted by human rights violations, and our grassroots membership often look to us for support and capacity building.

This broad experience, areas of expertise and support situates the Network to sharpen its focus and pursue four intertwined strategies:

- **Engage and convene** a growing number of grassroots and national organizations in the Network, as well as in the larger human rights movement, to create opportunities for building and strengthening linkages and deepening a sense of human rights community.
- **Build capacity and expand leadership** at the grassroots to effectively use human rights principles, standards, norms, and tools to advance long-term structural shifts needed to achieve justice for all.
- Drive effective and courageous communications to **raise the visibility of local and marginalized human rights struggles** across the country, share progressive and innovative human rights ideas, and reframe the national discourse with a human rights lens.
- Inspire and support **collective action** to catalyze structural change in the service of human rights and justice.

**Strategy #1: Engage and convene a growing number of grassroots and national organizations in the Network, as well as in the larger human rights movement, to create opportunities for building and strengthening linkages and deepening a sense of community.**

The US Human Rights Network provides a community for organizations and individuals interested in working to realize the full range of human rights domestically and globally.

This sense of community is necessary for a movement with a relatively new resurgence. It is particularly important to organizations and individuals working at the local level, who often feel alone and isolated, and are under resourced. Network members come *together* because they understand that together they broaden their access to diverse perspectives, share resources, learn from each other, and ultimately increase their collective power and voice. This community also offers members a space to challenge U.S. exceptionalism – e.g. the notion that the United States does not need to be held accountable to human rights because existing accountability mechanisms are sufficient to address domestic human rights concerns if and where they exist.

The Network will provide spaces – including through our national conference, regional meetings, member structures, work with international human rights mechanisms, website, listservs, and newsletter - for groups and leaders fighting for human rights particularly at the grassroots to meet and learn from each other, share resources, and act collectively. Moving forward, shared USHRN spaces will be planned to intentionally create opportunities for cross-issue and cross-constituency learning and work, and to learn from and build stronger alliances with global struggles.

In order to support a growing movement, the Network will strive to engage with a broader span of groups as well as new constituencies. The Network will prioritize the participation of grassroots and local organizations of Peoples and constituencies most directly impacted by human rights violations, but its outreach will not be exclusive of other groups. We will create an engagement ladder that offers a range of entry points for organizations and individuals to support the human rights movement depending on their time, interest, and capacity. Entry points for engagement will include some existing Network structures that were created to support the coordinating center in planning, developing, and implementing core aspects of the programmatic work, and others that provide opportunities for members to initiate their own structures around human rights struggles that interest them. However, the engagement ladder will also allow flexibility for the creation of new structures to empower members to take leadership in implementing the strategic plan and even developing new strategies, leverage member resources in supporting each other and the broader movement, encourage political leadership, empower groups to effectively apply the human rights framework at the community level, and bring new groups and leaders into the movement. The Network will maintain the success of these structures considering that the more active structures will need support from the coordinating center.

### **Impacts**

- A strengthened Network membership by deepening understanding, trust and relationships among members, expanding understanding of each other's work and constituencies, and stronger connections with broader social, economic and political movements;
- A larger and more diverse Network membership and increased number of organizations and individuals that actively identify with and support the domestic and global human rights movement;
- Increased number of Network members identifying and following through on opportunities for cross-issue and cross-constituency learning and work with each other

and other movements fueled by an appreciation that by coming together they build collective power in ways that surpass what they are able to do individually;

- Members share resources including contacts, knowledge, and tactics with each other;
- Increased ability of Network members to respond to emerging issues; and
- More collective action to shape national discourse and build a human rights culture.

**Strategy #2: Build capacity and expand leadership at the grassroots to effectively use human rights principles, standards, norms, and tools to advance long-term structural shifts needed to achieve justice for all.**

One of the key factors for an effective network is a shared framework for assessing the problems that communities face and the solutions needed to address them. In the case of the US Human Rights Network, that shared movement framework is the human rights framework – human rights principles, standards, norms, laws, and mechanisms. Most of the Network’s members identify their work as human rights, and indeed, most use human rights rhetoric. However, members have also expressed a desire for more support in applying the higher standards of accountability that the human rights framework offers. One of our roles is to ensure that the Network membership, as well as the broader movement, has the knowledge and capacity it needs to apply the human rights framework effectively to realize human rights in their respective communities, including building capacity for effective engagement in international mechanisms to strengthen and support local organizing.

The Network’s coordinating center will help articulate and disseminate information in accessible language about the human rights framework, share knowledge and success stories that demonstrate the value of human rights in achieving concrete change in everyday life, provide resources to highlight the interdependence of human rights as well as a gender, sexuality, race, and class analysis, support members in framing a proactive human rights vision, connect membership to human rights resources, and build the capacity of groups to realize human rights including through educational and framing resources, workshops, teleconferences, webinars, cultural activities, the website and newsletter.

The Network will also actively cultivate new and diverse leadership at the grassroots in order to sustain the movement and position it to respond to emerging needs. We will ensure that youth and women of color are sought out for leadership development. The Network will use regional membership meetings, the national conference, and member structures to identify and cultivate new leadership for the movement especially at the grassroots.

**Impacts**

- Network members have a deepened understanding of human rights and strengthened ability to popularize human rights as an essential framework for shifting dialogue and advancing justice in their communities, other movements and the larger public;

- Human rights framework and its application is demystified by using language and stories that are accessible to the general public and demonstrated to lead to real change in people's lives;
- Those most directly impacted by human rights violations will have a platform to share their lived experiences with the rest of the Network and movement, expand awareness of how different constituencies are impacted by the same problem, contribute to a shared vision, and lead to more effective strategies for achieving meaningful structural change;
- The interdependence of human rights is consistently promoted, and a gender, sexuality, race, and class analysis is always part of the analysis leading to solutions that work for all;
- Human rights resources are timely, relevant, and available to respond to emerging issues and opportunities;
- A stronger, energized and broadened leadership for a more sustainable and effective human rights movement; and
- A human rights movement that is credible, lives its values, is more flexible and better equipped to navigate changing times and emerging issues.

**Strategy #3: Drive effective and courageous communications to raise the visibility of local and marginalized human rights struggles across the country, share progressive and innovative human rights ideas, and reframe the national discourse with a human rights lens.**

One of the functions of the Network is to help develop a human rights consciousness in the United States. This consciousness must go beyond the most widely understood human rights violations including torture, trafficking, and war crimes, to stress the full range of human rights, their intersection with race, class, sexuality and gender, and the consequences of their denial. The Network will collect stories of local human rights struggles, provide a human rights framing, and disseminate them with increasing credibility and authority to shed light on local struggles. Our goal is to shape and drive a reframed public discourse informed by the lived experience of people most directly impacted by human rights violations. We will rely on communications tools such as webinars, teleconferences, reports, the arts, website, and newsletter, as well as educational and framing resources. We will invest in, develop and experiment with the use of social media as an effective tool recognizing that some of the membership does not yet see its effectiveness as currently used by the coordinating center. We do so given the success of other social movements in using these tools and understanding the minimal investment that we have made in the media thus far.

In addition to raising awareness of local human rights issues, the Network will also provide thought leadership based on human rights principles, standards and norms that pushes the boundaries of mainstream discourse with solid reasoning and compelling stories and ensures that unpopular issues of typically marginalized groups are raised up. The Network will identify, anticipate and pilot methodology to reframe emerging issues as human rights concerns including their inter-relatedness to other issues and multiple constituencies. We will encourage avant-garde scholarship and other communications strategies informed by

the grassroots and focused on specific themes. This will help create space for the emergence of new ideas to shape and expand rights and to re-imagine social movements.

### **Impacts**

- The Network membership and broader movement will have more effective tools and avenues to give voice to their issues and work;
- Expand the public's understanding of human rights as a domestic issue, that must contribute and be accountable to a global and people-centered human rights perspective;
- Individual and collective voice of organizations and Peoples particularly at the grassroots amplified to promote broader recognition of cultural, social, political and economic rights;
- Advocacy and other work of grassroots organizations and individuals supported by raising visibility of their work;
- Emergence of new ideas that elevate the struggles of marginalized groups supported and space created to expand and create new rights; and
- Perceived importance and relevance of grassroots issues expanded towards adopting higher standards of accountability for all with particular attention to marginalized groups.

### **Strategy #4: Inspire and support collective action to catalyze structural change in the service of human rights and justice.**

Ultimately, the Network exists to help social movements and Peoples to win real improvements in the lives of people through the realization of the full range of human rights. The human rights movement needs coordinated and more collaborative action to build momentum and push for change. To achieve this, the Network must harness its collective power to support specific joint actions from advocacy to direct action, and more. Effective campaigns in these arenas require a combination of seizing political opportunities when they present themselves, employing and leveraging a range of different tactics, and engaging in the long-term work of building political power to be leveraged when political opportunities arise. Effective campaigns will mean taking full advantage of the diversity in experience, political access, resources, and strategies in the movement. In the words of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., it may also mean the courage to support actions that refuse to cooperate “with customs and laws which institutionalize aspects of a regime of discrimination and enslavement.” While the Network has engaged in some coordinated action in the past by proactively designing and leading joint national efforts with members (for example the National Plan of Action for Racial Justice), it will expand these efforts largely by coordinating, supporting, and amplifying the existing work of members to deepen their impact. Together we can support specific campaigns by encouraging courageous positions around struggles of marginalized Peoples and constituencies, marshalling more members around the issue, and developing a shared human rights policy framework to support these joint efforts. The Network will ensure that any issue-specific

campaigns it supports are framed to allow for cross-issue work, and that in working on issue-specific campaigns, we do so with an eye to creating space for other issues that do not directly intersect.

### **Impacts**

- Increased power and effectiveness in advancing policy and structural change;
- Network's reach and influence as a watchdog and change maker at all levels of government expanded;
- Stronger human rights movement with strengthened bonds forged by joint work;
- Increased ability to fight back more effectively against human rights violations perpetrated by the public and private sectors; and
- Public's discourse about human rights shifted and the groundwork laid for building a human rights culture in the United States.

### **PLANNING, EVALUATION AND REFLECTION**

The Network will develop a 12-18 month plan in consultation with coordinating center staff a month after the Board's adoption of the strategy statement to implement the four strategies mentioned in this statement. The plan will include specific activities, anticipated outcomes, a timeline, and allocation of responsibilities and resources. The plan will focus on the use of the international mechanisms work and the national conference as two primary vehicles to employ our strategies.

The coordinating center is currently staffed by the Executive Director, an Associate Director, a National Education Coordinator, a Membership Coordinator and an Office Manager. There are plans to hire a Communications staff person as well. The coordinating center's staffing will be assessed and restructured if necessary to ensure that we have the right expertise and mix of administrative and programmatic staff.

The Network will schedule quarterly monitoring meetings to assess our progress on the plan and revise the plan and/or activities when necessary. A quarterly update on staff progress in implementing the plan will be shared with the Board. The Network will also engage members in the annual evaluation of its plan and success in living up to its core principles. The evaluation will be used as a tool for accountability and reflection about the effectiveness of our strategies, activities, and engagement ladder. Learning from the evaluation will be used to inform ongoing planning and member structures, as well as long term strategies. The evaluation and reflection process will support a flexible overall strategy to help the Network learn from what we are doing and adjust our course accordingly, as well as adapt to changing circumstances in the world.

With this renewed and tighter focus, the Network is positioning itself as a key leader in the movement for the next decade.

***Approved by USHRN Board of Directors, March 19, 2013  
(with additional edits via email on May 9, 2013)  
(with additional edits made during June 18 Board Meeting)***