

The World Around Us: Human rights challenges on the horizon and the future of Amnesty International

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Introduction

After six months as Secretary General, and as I look back on many conversations with teams at the International Secretariat (IS) and across our global movement, this is an important moment for reflection about the state of the world, and our readiness to confront the challenges around us.

I begin with a recognition of the honest truth that although we are winning some important battles, we are not winning the war for human rights. There is abundant evidence around us, not least that leaders turning their backs on human rights are finding mass support. It seems highly improbable that anything like the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which has just turned 70 years old, would be agreed upon today – a reminder of its preciousness, but also a sobering warning about its success. What does it say about our effectiveness as its champions?

To date, Amnesty's macro-level theory of change has centred on norm setting, measuring adherence to those norms, and deploying mass campaigns (usually targeting governments) to address the deficiencies and abuses we identify. This is based on numerous assumptions, including broad buy-in to human rights, the state as the main centre of power, and the centrality of international law, among others. These assumptions are all in question today.

The pressures on human rights are coming not only from the extent to which they are violated with impunity, but from legitimate questions about the usefulness of the human rights frame. The rise of China belies old ideas that economic growth necessarily yields greater political freedom, or that human rights are necessary for a materially better life. Economic growth in many rising countries has not come to mean more political freedom or equality – human rights have not found the route to challenge these realities adequately. Technological advances pose fundamental questions about the nature of being human and may yet challenge the underlying idea of human equality. Our shifting ecological understanding raises questions about the anthropocentrism of human rights. Overall, human rights have become rather peripheral, in the view of many people, to solving the biggest challenges of our time.

There is no point being right, if we are not being effective. The urgent task facing us today is a simple but existential one: to reinvent our relevance to the major struggles and challenges in the world, and our ability to make change happen.

The World Around Us

The most striking feature of the world we live in is its complexity. Nobody can truly understand the global economy, and trends such as **rapid urbanisation**, **global hyper-connectivity**, **migration patterns**, the **exponential development of technologies**, and **deep shifts in the nature of work**, are creating complex social and political dynamics which can scarcely be mapped, much less analysed.

However, some major trends in the world are clear to see, and they are closely interrelated.

- **Climate change.** The extreme urgency of confronting climate change was spelt out clearly in the landmark report of the [UN Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change \(IPCC\)](#) which warned there are only 12 years remaining for action to limit warming to 1.5C, beyond which it will become irreversible and cause catastrophic damage. Climate change is largely a result of a consumption-centred economic model, and political short-termism. Its effects are already being felt most severely by the most marginalised. Yet however much climate change is already a driver of significant human rights challenges, what we see today is a mere shadow of the probable calamity ahead of us unless we act with great urgency.
- **Inequality.** Income inequality has increased in nearly all regions of the world in recent decades, a consequence of the prevailing global economic model. Since 1980, although numbers of people in absolute poverty have reduced, the richest 1% have captured twice as much growth as the bottom 50%,¹ and according to Oxfam, the number of billionaires has doubled since the 2008 financial crisis.² Rising inequality has significant implications, including the

¹ World Inequality Lab, *World Inequality Report 2018*, World Inequality Database, pp. 4-7, available at: <https://wir2018.wid.world/>.

² Oxfam, *Public Good or Private Wealth*, p. 12, available at: <https://oxfamlibrary.openrepository.com/bitstream/handle/10546/620599/bp-public->

stark disparities it creates in access to health, education, water, sanitation and other important services, growing power differentials, and more – and the divide is expected to continue growing, including due to austerity measures, corruption, and structural discrimination. But inequality is not one-sided bad news: high levels of consumerism impact on mental health, and the more unequal a society, the higher the rates of unhappiness for everyone.

- **Technology.** Rapid technological change is having a profound impact on the ways humans interact with each other and the world, including the way we process information and make decisions, and the nature of work. It will likely reshape our view of what it means to be human, as technologies such as artificial intelligence and genetic editing become more sophisticated and accessible to the wealthy, with the potential greatly to accentuate inequality. As automation and the gig economy impact upon ever greater numbers of the world's workforce, we must challenge whether our current labour laws and concepts of social security – unevenly implemented as they are – are really fit for purpose. 1.4 billion workers were estimated to be in vulnerable employment in 2017, and this number is growing.³ And technology is providing powerful new tools for repression and social engineering, which are likely to go much further than we have seen so far.
- **Demonisation.** Many world leaders and politicians have successfully exploited the latent anxiety in many populations including around inequality, fragility, and identity, by spinning narratives of fear and blame, stoking identity-based hatred and violence, promoting nativism, and rejecting internationalism. From the USA to Hungary to the Philippines, many people are embracing demonising rhetoric from political leaders who flagrantly reject or undermine human rights. Their simple narratives of “us versus them”, carried widely in the echo chambers of social media, hold understandable appeal in a world whose complexity is so great that most politicians seem totally unable to reckon with it, and where ordinary citizens have lost belief in their ability to influence and engender change. The core constituencies of leaders who use tactics of demonisation are often people who are themselves feeling left behind in a world of growing inequality.

It hardly needs saying that the axes of power in the world are shifting decisively. In particular, the human rights movement as a whole has failed to reckon seriously with the economic and political rise of China and all its implications, and we must invest more in understanding and adapting. The huge influence of businesses over the root causes of human rights abuses is not matched by the level of attention they attract from the human rights movement. We cannot expect that yesterday's methods will prove to be effective tomorrow.

However, there are also some extraordinary positives we should not forget. We should not lose sight of rapid attitudinal changes in many countries towards **LGBTI people**, and although there is much more to be done, this is a source of hope. Most strikingly, the global upsurge in **women's rights** movements, both transnational ones such as #MeToo, and specific struggles in countries like Argentina, India, Poland, Saudi Arabia and the USA, are – hopefully – bringing us closer to a new turning point. This is the time to transform the very understanding of power that has oppressed women and LGBTI people in all parts of the world.

But if network-based, grassroots protest movements, particularly women's, anti-discrimination and youth movements, are the source of much campaigning energy in the world today, we must also acknowledge the low levels of trust that currently exist towards international civil society organisations (ICSOs). Accountability scandals have dented public confidence in countries where NGOs have traditionally been strong, and leaders in many countries have become bolder in their attacks on ICSOs as well as local NGOs, as Amnesty's own experience has shown.

Directions for the Future

Based on this brief analysis of the external challenge and my experience as a driver of social change over three decades, I am setting out the following imperatives for Amnesty. These will be my priorities, the measuring sticks I will use for my work with the senior leadership team, the global management team, the international board, and section leadership.

I continue to use the framework of **an Amnesty which is “bigger, bolder and more inclusive”**. However, I would like to set out a longer list here, one which loosely relates to the three headings but explains in more detail what I mean.

This list of imperatives reflects my initial thinking. This should be the start of a discussion, and I look forward to receiving feedback and comments and we build commitment to these imperatives, and work towards our next strategic plan as a movement.

[good-or-private-wealth-210119-en.pdf](#).

³ ILO, *World Employment and Social Outlook: Trends 2018*, available at: https://www.ilo.org/global/research/global-reports/weso/2018/WCMS_615594/lang-en/index.htm.

1. Defining our proposition

We are facing an existential challenge in demonstrating our relevance in the context and challenges of the world today. We need to be totally clear on our purpose, define our proposition to our constituencies around the world, and understand our unique role in a diverse and large social change sector, where many see us past our prime.

2. Root causes and system transformation

We must become more effective in challenging the systems which enable injustice and abuses. We need to look beyond making the system work and start making bold propositions about how to transform the system. It is time to address the historic failure across our whole sector, that we maintain artificial distinctions between human rights, the climate, development, and peacebuilding. The issues we are talking about have the same roots. If we start to build stronger lateral cooperation, based on a shared understanding of how to address the real root causes of the problems we are all grappling with, our collective strength will be considerable.

We must reckon with the major crises of our time, including climate change, spiralling inequality, and exponential technological change, all of which are enablers of human rights abuses. This will require different ways of thinking and operating, and new qualities of partnerships.

3. Responsiveness

While one mode of our work must be focused on root causes, we also need to improve our responsiveness and urgency. I think of this as “human rights interventions in the present” – dealing with crises in real time and seeking to shift the course of events, not simply analysing them retrospectively.

4. Widening our framework

Amnesty has a long and distinguished relationship with international human rights law. But as political commitment to international law dwindles, we must ask whether pursuing greater compliance is the best use of our energies, or whether we must be more flexible in our use of frameworks, including making stronger appeal to the Sustainable Development Goals or national constitutions and values.

We need to respond to the reality that legal protections (international and national) are only part of the solution, are being eroded and ignored, and are arguably outmoded in the face of challenges such as climate change and automation. While focusing on the inalienable entitlement to rights, we must search for breakthrough approaches to inequality that can enable and empower claimants in bottom-up initiatives.

5. Vision and moral courage

We will not meet the challenge of the world around us with a mindset of business as usual. If we are to be effective in challenging the structural causes of injustice in the world, we must be prepared to challenge the rules of engagement which serve the status quo. A vast gulf between government and governed is nothing new in many countries around the world, but the erosion of faith in our collective ability as citizens to influence significant change in policy directions is a serious crisis.

If we are only describing problems, that is not a basis for bold and courageous activism which will bring results. We need to design solutions that we believe in, and we will be ready to fight for them. We cannot continue to show good faith in broken systems. We must challenge the breakdown in the relationship of accountability between governments and citizens and find ways to recalibrate the power imbalance in favour of ordinary people. We must be propositional, and we must be solutions-oriented. We often speak of the rule of law but must take seriously Howard Zinn’s radical critique that the rule of law is a tool of oppressors and the tyranny of the oppressed. In confronting structural oppression, we must be prepared to engage in civil disobedience.

6. Partnerships and mobilisation

If we are going to bring about real change through mass mobilisation, we need numbers on our side. Yet, we know we are losing the battle of ideas in the public sphere. Making human rights resonant and relevant must be core to our mission. This is an increasingly urgent task, and we can begin by engaging tomorrow’s leaders and empowering them as agents of change. Through them, we need to build a broad support base which reflects the composition of the societies we want to change.

But we must also radically change our understanding of coalition-building, and expand our partnerships and collaboration with human rights defenders, communities and grassroots groups. Our true power consists in the ecosystem of movements

where we belong. We must engage with where the energy is – particularly women’s rights movements – and build connections with like-minded allies both in traditional spaces such as the labour movement and the arts, and non-traditional areas such as the private sector and faith groups. Expanding our footprint massively in the global south is essential, and initiatives to drive south-south partnerships should be a high priority.

7. Communication

We must create and drive compelling and positive narratives on the concepts underpinning rights – equality, non-discrimination, justice, dignity, universality – linked to the inseparable agenda for the environment, for peace, and for sustainable development. The communication battleground is where we will win or lose the hearts and minds of people. For ordinary people to believe in human rights as a potent tool to save the planet, tackle inequality, and fight hatred, they need to see and hear solutions we can offer. Amnesty needs to be a communications-first organisation that is generating resonant and powerful messages, and I need to lead that from the front.

8. Innovation

We have to incubate and encourage ideas, both in terms of the issues we work on, and the ways we work. We have no choice but to encourage and incentivise learning, adaptation and innovation. We must explore edgy approaches, and ways that Amnesty and our partners can become more disruptive. Long-established tools and approaches need to be refreshed, and new approaches will be explored. We will continue to be at the front end of thinking on how technology can enable human rights breakthroughs.

Finally

I am convinced that many of the transformative strategies that will ensure Amnesty is a potent force for change have yet to be invented, and that the people who invent them are probably among us now. I want to ensure the organisation finds them, enables them, believes in them, resources them, and makes great ideas fly.

Amnesty was once seen as an edgy, courageous and dynamic force. We still are in some areas, but we can do more to celebrate ideas, search for newness, and invest in alternative routes to impact. The development of a new global strategy for Amnesty is a huge opportunity that we cannot miss to help set us in the right direction.

That’s why we are calling for your boldest ideas to help transform Amnesty’s future – and the world’s future.