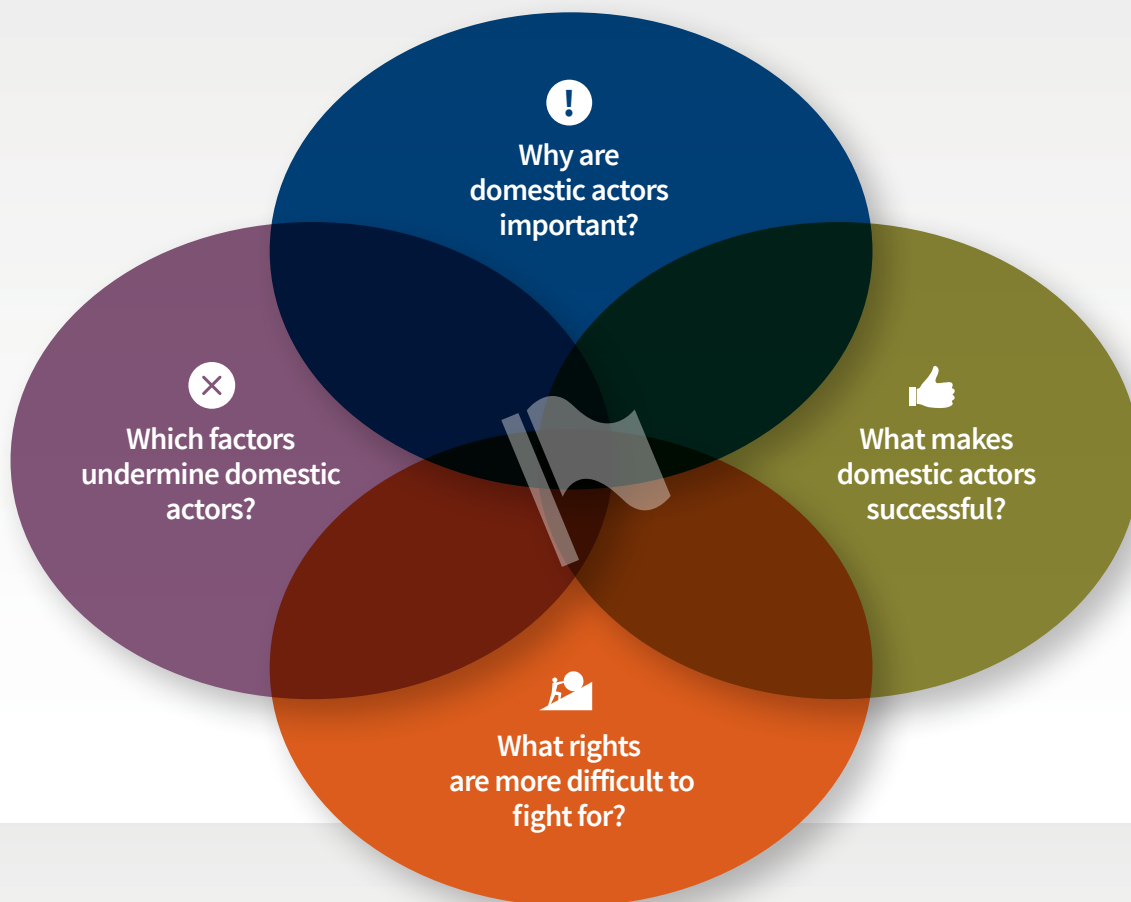


Supporting Civic Action in Successful Human Rights Programming



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A USAID-funded literature review addresses questions about human rights struggles and pressure “from below.” What do we know about the role of citizens, social movements, and other domestic civic actors in advocating for human rights outcomes? What can we learn from their successes and failures? Can the plethora of research findings on this topic in North America and Europe translate to other countries? Are certain rights easier to fight for than others? This literature review will help inform USAID’s strategic planning, project design, and in-service training in the democracy, human rights, and governance sector.



Program Recommendations



- Human rights frames are effective in advocating for change but the frame must be carefully chosen to resonate with local understandings.
- Encourage partners to work closely with social movements and grassroots organizations so that programs are guided by realities on the ground.
- USAID’s convening power helps human rights defenders build diverse networks across issues, organization types, and with local/national/international actors.

About the Report:

Chenoweth, Erica, et al. (2017). *Struggles from Below: Literature Review on Human Rights Struggles by Domestic Actors* (Research and Innovation Grants Working Papers Series). Institute of International Education.

Available at: <https://www.iie.org/Research-and-Insights/Publications/DFG-DU-Lit-Review-Publication>.

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Recommendation

Findings in the literature

Example



Use the language of "human rights"

"Human rights" language can gain legitimacy, sympathy, and access to international resources. It allows domestic actors to hold leaders accountable for promises they've made on the world stage.

In Mexico, a small group of peasants stopped construction of an airport on their land near Mexico City by adopting an indigenous rights frame. This enabled them to establish networks with human rights groups and civil society organizations, gain support from the international community, and create a movement around their fundamental rights as indigenous peasants.



Encourage strong grassroots connections and adaptation to local context

Effective rights movements bridge the global and the local. Domestic actors need strong local roots to translate rights issues into local language, norms, and practices, and to amplify locally important issues to the national or international level.

Strong grassroots connections and adaptation to local context were critical to advancing workers' rights in Iran and Malaysia. Workers used local Islamist ideology to engage in trade union activities, equating their rights to dispute resolution between employers and trade unions with Islam's recognition of the right of arbitration and conciliation.



Tap informal movements and coalitions

Flat, informal organizational structures foster movement resilience, facilitate broad participation, draw on diverse local resources, and are more agile.

The National Coalition for Gay and Lesbian Equality in South Africa leveraged its connections with elite supporters to broaden advocacy and lobbying efforts. By engaging these key players early, they built support and protected members from repression while engaging in activism such as mass protests.



Use different tactics with different regimes

Strong pressure from civic actors can "harden" the regime against rights claims. Movements should consider whether a direct challenge or more indirect, coalition-based approach will be more effective.

During early years of the Pinochet regime, domestic actors placed strong pressure on the government, making it more difficult to expand rights. Some stopped pressuring the government directly, opting for pragmatic approaches to stop human rights abuses. Once pressure decreased, government "soft-liners" had greater space to engage in democratic participation.



Build dense and diverse networks

Strong horizontal ties can create mass mobilization and lead to successful human rights advocacy. Broad coalitions are often more successful than individual movements. Vertical ties are also critical for advocacy, and transnational ties enable advocacy on a much broader scale.

Cross-border ties were an essential element to transnational activism against construction of the Nu River hydropower dam in China. Domestic NGOs in China formed alliances with global partners to establish a robust horizontal global-local dynamic, which enhanced local capacities and strengthened transnational cooperation.