

RESILIENCE WITH 4Cs

EMBRACING COMPLEXITY, CONTEXT, CULTIVATION & CARE IN HUMAN RIGHTS

Understanding, building, and assessing resilience in the human rights field

Co-researchers: Lucia Nader, Tania Correa, Catherine Shutt and Ashley F. Thomas¹

Research carried out between February 2023 and April 2024

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Over the last decade, funders and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) around the world have been engaging in a much-needed discussion on building resilience in the human rights field. External threats to activism and civil society have proliferated and diversified. The internal challenges that NGOs and funders face in supporting effective, holistic approaches to protection and resilience have also become more evident. The task of **building resilience is highly complex due to the unique cultural, political, and socioeconomic conditions of the local contexts** in which human rights defenders and organizations work.

This study aimed **to better understand what resilience is (and is not) and how to build and assess it**. The results presented below are based on a **literature review and 35 semi-structured interviews** with 48 representatives of NGOs, foundations, and experts from both the Global South and the Global North.

The main findings of the research are:

■ **UNDERSTANDING RESILIENCE:** A rights-based and power-informed understanding of resilience is needed and can be formulated by combining key elements specific to the human rights field. There is a consensus on the need to strengthen the human rights field, but not on approaching it as ‘resilience’. Several interviewees expressed discomfort with the concept of resilience, as the mindset supporting it neglects structural challenges and the deeper transformation needed in the field. In light of this, to fully understand and develop an effective approach to resilience in the human rights field, we must take into account and embrace the four Cs: complexity, context, cultivation, and care.

■ **BUILDING RESILIENCE:** Several strategies are already being deployed in the human rights field to build resilience. In addition to them, to better build resilience it is also key to take into account “enablers of resilience” – that is, conditions and capabilities that contribute to resilience. As the proposed “Holistic Resilience Wheel” below suggests, resilience is multi-dimensional, must be cultivated, and involves four interconnected levels: organizational, individual, field, and donor. The proposed enablers should be considered in light of the increased threats and shrinking civic space for civil society.

■ **LEARNING ABOUT & ASSESSING RESILIENCE:** Resilience poses challenges for monitoring, evaluation, and learning (MEL) traditional approaches and requires strategies that embrace complexity and are tailored to each context and situation. Donors are experimenting with approaches to overcome methodological challenges and strike the right balance between accountability and learning. Human rights stakeholders are keen to improve their capacity to monitor, evaluate, and learn about resilience. They would like donors to adopt learning and evaluation approaches that contribute to the resilience of individuals, organizations and the wider field.

¹ Translation and editing by Karen Lang. Marina Apgar (evaluation expert) also participated in the designing phase of the research.

UNDERSTANDING RESILIENCE IN THE HUMAN RIGHTS FIELD

The term 'resilience' comes from the Latin word 'resilire', which means to rebound or bounce back (CIVICUS, 2020). Though relatively new for civil society, the concept has long been the topic of debate in several fields. The term is not widely used in human rights reports and articles, but where it is discussed, the definitions vary according to the case or situation.

→ **A rights-based and power-informed understanding of resilience is needed and can be formulated by combining key elements specific to human rights that were identified during this study.**

Resilience in human rights is the existing and improved ability of individuals, organizations, and the human rights field to maintain hope and persist in the struggle to defend human rights, while navigating constant challenges and adapting to or resisting changes in their context.

Resilience in human rights is not a given: enablers have to be cultivated at multiple interconnected levels using a **case-by-case approach that takes into account each context, structural discrimination, and power dynamics.**

→ **There is a consensus on the need to strengthen the human rights field, but not on approaching it as 'resilience'.**

Many interviewees voiced their **resistance and criticisms of the concept and traditional approaches to build resilience.** The criticisms include:

- its **limitations for describing how resilience resonates or is built on the ground.** It is often too technical or does not adequately express what is truly required to better respond to disruptions and crises;
- its **depoliticization, cooptation, and/or misuse, and failure to address power imbalances and the structural conditions** that led to the need to be resilient in the first place. Even worse, it can end up reinforcing them or "maintaining a culture that is not ours" (NGO);
- it is a **term promoted by patriarchal, capitalist worldviews (paradigms) that implies complacency, resignation, and the maintenance of the status quo.** Hence the call for the decolonization and reimagination of resilience by grounding work on care, healing, and holistic approaches – a call led by groups who defend women's rights or feminism, an anti-racist agenda, and/or holistic protection.

→ **To fully understand and develop an effective approach to resilience in the human rights field, we must take into account and embrace the four Cs: complexity, context, cultivation, and care.**

RIGHTS-BASED & POWER-INFORMED UNDERSTANDING OF RESILIENCE



- **Complexity:** resilience has multiple definitions and requires a dynamic, nonlinear, multi-level, and non-individualistic understanding and approach.
- **Context:** Understanding resilience requires a case-by-case approach that acknowledges social, political, and economic factors, the particularities of organizations and individuals, and power dynamics.
- **Cultivation:** Resilience should be strengthened through on-going engagement with funders, organizations, networks and individuals to cultivate conditions and enablers.
- **Care:** Decolonizing and reimagining resilience requires a collective, holistic approach that puts care and transformative power at the center.

Failure to embrace the 4 Cs would result in an approach that may be seen as inadequate, ineffective, or even illegitimate.

BUILDING RESILIENCE IN THE HUMAN RIGHTS

It is important to **acknowledge and value the resilience that already exists in the human rights field**. Activists and NGOs have adaptation and change in their DNA. For them, turbulence, crises, and disruptions are regular occurrences. That said, most would agree on the need to improve it. As resilience varies on a case-by-case basis and from one context to the next, strategies must be adapted accordingly.

→ **Several strategies are already being deployed in the human rights field to build resilience.**

Current strategies to build resilience include:

- **network** building and **knowledge production and sharing**;
- developing leadership and structures that are conducive to **collective decision-making and power sharing** within organizations;
- policies promoting **'people-centered organizations'** – that is, ones that put people first, including their own members and staff – especially policies on diversity, equity, and inclusion and holistic protection and care within organizations;
- **mobilizing public opinion**, especially when defenders and organizations come under attack.

→ **It is key to take into account “enablers of resilience” – that is, conditions and capabilities operating at the individual, organization, network, and donor level that contribute to resilience.**

Individuals in the field stressed the importance of **motivation and hope** in order “to continue to fight” and “resist and persist”, as well as **feeling fully protected** and **part of a network or a community** to overcome isolation and vulnerability. **Participation in decision-making processes** is also crucial, as it contributes to motivation and more horizontal power relations. At both the individual and organizational level, the most frequently mentioned enabler was **adequate funding** to ensure the financial resilience of organizations and that individuals' basic economic needs (salary and working conditions) are met. At the field level, there is a need to diversify the types of organizations in leadership positions and **acknowledge and deconstruct power relations** between stakeholders within networks and collaborative initiatives.

Enablers of resilience that depend on funders include:

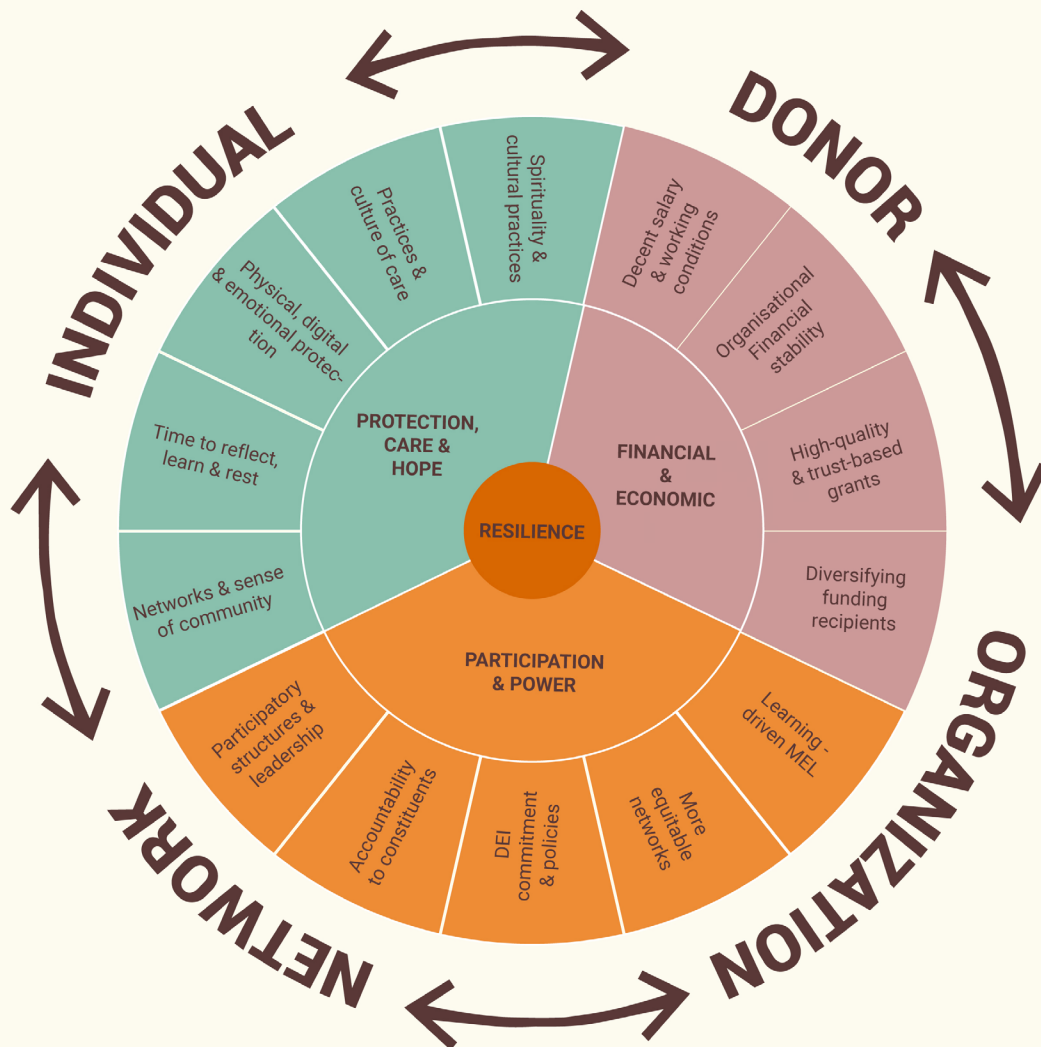
- (i) **greater funding** for resilience, including resources to invest in staff, more attention to well-being and care, and spaces for reflection and innovation;
- (ii) **improved grants** (core funding, flexible, and long-term);
- (iii) **trust-based relations** with grantees and no excessive reporting requirements;
- (iv) greater awareness and acknowledgement of **power relations**;
- (v) **facilitation of knowledge sharing and exchanges** among grantees, and
- (vi) **transparency and/or participation** in grant-making processes and **learning-driven MEL strategies**.

“Resilience is not new as a concept, but it is new for funders to think about it as their own responsibility...and how they might be undermining or supporting it with their behaviors and priorities. There is also a need to go beyond the ‘obsession’ with ‘organizational strengthening’, as there is much more to resilience than that” (Donor)

In the discussion on enabling conditions and capabilities, **concerns about the future of funding practices** were also raised, as funders “become more and more obsessed with indicators”, “spend too much time trying to find the perfect strategy, instead of trusting the field”, and “are constantly changing their priorities”.

As the proposed “**Holistic Resilience Wheel**” below suggests, resilience is **multi-dimensional** and involves not only the organizational level, but also the individual, field, and donor levels. If these **four interconnected levels** are not taken into account, the wheel of resilience will not turn. Looking at them holistically, discussing them, and engaging in trust-based exchanges is crucial for building resilience.

HOLISTIC RESILIENCE WHEEL: INTERCONNECTED ENABLERS



It is important to remember that the Wheel is being proposed in a **context of closing civic space**, with unprecedented threats and attacks to human rights defenders and organizations.

→ **Resilience poses challenges for monitoring, evaluation, and learning and requires strategies that embrace complexity and are tailored to each context and situation.**

Just as there is no single definition for resilience, **there are no one-size-fits-all** or off-the-shelf approaches to monitoring, evaluating and learning (MEL) about resilience in the human rights field. Attempts to evaluate resilience are still in the early phases of development.

Characteristics of resilience	Challenges for one-size-fits-all MEL approaches
Multiple definitions or levels	Lack of clarity on what to assess or measure
Intermediate, unobservable, or unquantifiable	Hard to measure; tendency to conflate outcomes with process
An indirect relationship between organizational health, resilience, and effectiveness/impact	Challenging to determine the focus of monitoring and evaluation
Combination of context-specific capabilities	Generic indicators are ill-suited, which makes comparisons difficult
Combines 'negative' and 'positive' aspects (disruption followed by resistance or response)	Difficult to measure in the absence of disruptive events
Multi-scale, dynamic, and multi-dimensional	Requires complex evaluation designs
Relates to formal and informal 'dimensions' of life and systems	Formal dimensions are easier to measure than informal ones (e.g., social interactions that contribute to resilience)

→ **Donors are experimenting with approaches that overcome methodological challenges and strike the right balance between accountability and learning.**

Assessing and aggregating the outcomes of capacity-strengthening initiatives across a portfolio is challenging due to the diversity of grantees and projects and difficulties in isolating the effects of capacity-building and establishing a baseline. Funders struggle to find the balance between MEL approaches that prioritize upward accountability ('what', how much/average effect of change, etc.) and those that also enable inclusive learning (causal analysis around theories on what changed for whom, how, why, and why not). While Organizational Capacity Assessments Tools (OCATs) may have a role to play in helping donors and grantees establish goals, they should not be used as standalone tools. Emerging learning around **theory-based, mixed-methods developmental evaluation models that involve intermediary organizations** to avoid bias are promising.

→ **NGOs are keen to improve their capacity to monitor, evaluate, and learn about resilience.**

They believe that the ability to analyze their work is central to their survival. **When properly approached, assessing and learning about the strengths and weaknesses of their tactics in particular contexts are seen as resilience capabilities.** Yet many organizations still associate MEL with top-down approaches for donor reporting.

→ **Human rights stakeholders would like donors to change and adopt MEL approaches that contribute to the resilience of individual organizations as well as the wider field.**

Interviewees working in the field made suggestions that align with the Human Rights Grantmaking Principles²:

- **Power Sharing:** MEL needs to be decolonized; donors should take measures that address power relations between funders and grantees.
- **Mutual Accountability:** donors and grantees should dialogue and develop contextually appropriate approaches that map out what each partner hopes to learn from a funding relationship.
- **Collective Care:** funders need to ensure that their MEL methods and reporting demands support care and healthy working conditions. In other words, they should avoid approaches that cause grantees stress.
- **Community-driven:** MEL approaches should be locally owned and reflect grantees' capacities and ways of knowing. For example, pictures can sometimes say much more about resilience than a thousand words.
- **Equity :** foundation staff and grantees expect MEL approaches to be informed by an intersectional lens that considers how race, ethnicity, class, age, gender identities, and sexual orientation influence the questions that drive MEL frameworks and tools.
- **Adaptability and Learning:** one expert pointed out that organizations should be evaluated on the quality of their learning and adaptation and that this requires long term support.

LIST OF PARTICIPANTS

We are grateful and thank all the participants interviewed for their time and insights.

NGOs:

Amnesty International
Association for Progressive Communications
CELS - Centro de Estudios Legales y Sociales
CIVICUS
Conectas Direitos Humanos
Friends of Diversity
Front Line Defenders
Human Rights Watch
IM-Defensoras
JASS
Kenya Human Rights Commission
Laboratorio de Paz
Protection International Thailand
Redes da Maré
RSF - Reporters Sans Frontières
Spirit House South Inc.
Thai Lawyers for Human Rights

Foundations, funders' networks and independent funds:

Ariadne Network
FJS - Foundation for a Just Society
Ford Foundation
Fund for Global Human Rights
Hewlett Foundation
Numun Fund
UAF - Africa
UHAI-EASHRI

Academic and Independent Experts:

Alice M. Nah- Durham University
Ellen Sprenger- Spring Strategies
Jewlya Lynn - Evaluation Expert
Maggie Banger – Independent Consultant
Meg Satterthwaite – Centre for Human Rights and Global Justice
Mona Younis - Independent Consultant
Shawna Wakefield - Independent Expert

To promote transparent, inclusive, and participatory research, participants were invited to discuss the research main findings before they were made public. This discussion took place during two webinars held in March and April 2024. All participants listed above have formally agreed to have their names included. Quotes remain anonymous, with no attribution.

CONTACT INFORMATION

Lucia Nader – Researcher and Independent Consultant (lucia.nader@gmail.com)

July, 2024