

openGlobalRights Evaluation Report

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INTRODUCTION AND EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

openGlobalRights (oGR) is a web-based, multilingual platform established in June 2013. It strives to foster “vibrant, multi-lingual discussions on pressing issues” of concern or relevance to the human rights movement, prioritizing voices from the global South. In the first two and a half years of its existence, oGR published over 1000 articles and translations and engaged nearly 320,000 readers from over 140 countries and territories, including about 112 in the global South. These readers have viewed oGR’s pages over 2 million times during some 468,000 visits.¹

The Ford Foundation's Global Human Rights Program, together with The Open Society Foundation’s Human Rights Initiative, commissioned this brief evaluation of openGlobalRights “to gage whether it has become a key reference and resource for the global human rights community.” The evaluation focused on, among other things, whether relevant stakeholders access and engage with oGR’s content and to what extent they use oGR’s content in their own organizational discussions and activities. Perhaps most importantly, the evaluation explores how interviewees perceive the value of oGR for their work and for the broader human rights movement.

This evaluation is based on 33 interviews with relevant actors, including the staff of oGR, individuals who have contributed to the site, representatives of human rights organizations, human rights funders, thought leaders, academics, and others. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with all external interviewees during January and February 2016. (See Appendix A for list of interviewees) In addition, relevant documents were reviewed as part of the evaluation process.

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Key Findings

- One of the greatest strengths identified by interviewees was the diversity of oGR’s readership and contributors. This diversity was not solely geographic in nature, but also a diversity of perspectives, ideologies and place in the human rights movement.
- The content and tone of oGR debates are also considered a particular strength. Activists, funders, and academics all see enormous value in having a place created especially for the human rights movement, where they can gain knowledge and hear different perspectives. Many stakeholders regularly check

¹ Figures provided by oGR staff and include data through March 24, 2016.

the site for up-to-date information on human rights and often circulate oGR articles to their staff and networks.

- Many of oGR's themes were seen as useful, but the most important one for many of interviewees was the "sustained conversation with skeptics."
- Contributors to the site value oGR's "global reach," as well as see the importance of having their work translated. Those who work with grassroots networks, as well as staff of well-known international non-governmental organizations (INGOs), greatly appreciate the visibility that oGR offers for their work.
- oGR provides an important service to the human rights movement. It creates opportunities for interaction across multiple divides and helps stimulate critical thinking. Human rights activists noted that they are often self-referential and defensive, and they therefore find it particularly valuable to have "a safe space" where they can grapple with the tough challenges that confront the movement.
- oGR plays an important role in helping build the effectiveness and resilience of the human rights movement at a time when it is under intense attack.
- Many interlocutors already see oGR as a reference point for the human rights movement. Others see it as well on its way to becoming that reference.

Key Recommendations

A number of recommendations emerged from the interviews, many of which are aimed at continuing to strengthen oGR's reach and brand recognition. In this regard, interviewees identified four broad steps that they considered priorities: a) to further enhance diversity of readership and contributors, including in particular more contributions from grassroots activists, b) to develop targeted outreach/marketing strategy to expand oGR's reach and brand recognition, c) to consider delinking oGR from openDemocracy to improve the appearance and functionality of the site, and d) to use oGR's convening power to facilitate occasional in-person debates.

Evaluation Findings

The primary focus of this evaluation was to assess the extent to which oGR has become a reference point for the human rights movement in the 3 years since it was launched in June 2013. The evaluation focused on, among other things, whether relevant stakeholders access and engage with oGR's content and to what extent they use its content in their own organizational discussions and activities. Interviewees were asked to identify oGR's strengths and weaknesses, and to make recommendations as to how the site might become even more effective and influential. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the evaluation interviews attempted to elicit information on what stakeholders in the human rights movement perceive as oGR's value for their work and for the broader human rights movement.

External interviewees for this evaluation were almost unanimous in their view that oGR has become or is becoming a unique and valuable reference point for the human rights movement. As one interviewee observed, “oGR is a unique forum for debate within the HR community. There is nothing quite like it.” Similarly, an activist stressed, “It is really valuable... In my circles, a wide cross-section are reading it, finding it useful, and learning from it.” Interlocutors appreciate that oGR “was created especially for the human rights movement,” and stress that it has filled a significant gap.” Interlocutors identified a number of strengths in oGR’s approach.

Strengths

Diversity of Readership/Contributors

One of the single greatest strength identified by most interviewees was the diversity of those who use the site. There was widespread agreement that oGR has a uniquely diverse readership and that oGR’s leadership has also worked to ensure significant diversity among its contributors. As one academic noted, “oGR has a much wider range of participants than I find anywhere else.” Similarly, an activist observed, “It is the most pluralistic site I know.” A funder noted, “oGR is more global than almost any other platform.... In fact, I can’t think of a site that is comparable.” In addition to the geographic diversity of the readership, several specifically noted that they value the fact that diverse groups are represented on the site (such as human rights funders, policymakers, as well as activists and academics). Others valued the “inter-disciplinary nature of the contributors.”

Those who are writing for/contributing to oGR’s debates stressed how much they appreciate the “uniquely diverse audiences” because it gives them “a more global reach” than they could possibly have otherwise. Several representatives from human rights NGOs noted that it is not only important for their work to gain exposure to a wider audience, but that it was a matter of prestige to be seen as a relevant contributor to the debates on oGR. As a funder of grassroots activists commented, “Women from the global South rarely get to participate in debates on important issues that affect their work.... [oGR] gives a voice to women leaders we work with and places them in a position to expand their opportunities to influence the debates. oGR has helped these activists gain greater visibility.” It is perhaps less surprising that a grassroots network would value the opportunity to expand its reach, but even one representative of an INGO shared this perspective. As he said, “oGR attracts the audience we are interested in reaching.... It is important for us to be perceived as a credible contributor for these debates.”

Interviewees praised oGR's efforts to expand translations, which several underscored were "essential to encourage greater participation from activists based in the Global South. Numerous interviewees specifically pointed to the site's extensive translations and policy of accepting articles in any language as "a particular strength" and a "component of oGR's success."

Strong Content

The content and tone of oGR debates are considered a particular strength. As one interviewee commented, "The content is terrific. Contributors are serious, well-informed, and have a high level of expertise. There is useful analysis on important issues, and even if contributors are disagreeing, there is a high level of debate."

Many interviewees reported that they regularly turn to oGR to learn the state of debate on a particular issue. As the executive director of one INGO observed, "They have done a good job choosing topics that are relevant and useful to those in the field. When I need to figure out a new issue, I count on being able to go to oGR to find the most important views." Similarly, a funder noted, "I get different and more useful content from oGR than I get anywhere else." And an academic commented, "oGR introduces us to a lot of scholarship we weren't aware of because we only read English."

When asked to identify the debates they had found most useful or innovative, interviewees mentioned many different themes (depending on their interests and points of reference). Several themes, including human rights funding, economic, social and cultural rights, and inequality and poverty, were each mentioned by several interviewees. The debate identified as most important, however, was not a stand-alone theme, but "the sustained conversation with skeptics," which has been interwoven among different debates.

For the most part, interviewees like the format of oGR articles, which are short enough to be read quickly and easily digested, but long enough to allow for an argument to be developed. A few interviewees wished for "an occasional deeper dive" or longer format, to allow topics to be explored in more depth. According to most interviewees, oGR also strikes a good balance among different types of writing (social science, legal analysis etc.).

In general, those who have written articles for oGR considered the editorial process excellent. A couple of writers resented the level of editorial intervention and the delay

that was associated with it, but the majority praised oGR's editors and felt they had benefited from the "supportive editorial process." As one recent contributor commented, "The editors are nice and patient. They don't interfere, but they know what they are doing, and ultimately guide you to a good draft. I know I benefited from their input."

When asked to assess the current balance that oGR strikes between high-profile writers and those who are less well-known, interviewees did not have a consistent response. Many felt that oGR strikes a good balance. As one NGO leader stated, "I want to hear from the thought leaders, but I also want to hear from others who challenge the accepted thinking." Similarly, an activist commented, "I want to hear what the experts have to say, but some of the most interesting and creative perspectives come from less well-known individuals." Two interviewees stressed that oGR needs to work with "lesser known activists," but with the proviso that these contributions "must be grounded in deep knowledge and experience." As will be discussed in more detail below, most interviewees wanted to see more contributions "from the front lines," and "from grassroots activists."

[How stakeholders access and engage with oGR's content](#)

As already noted, evaluation interviews confirmed that many stakeholders regularly check the site for up-to-date information on human rights. One activist from Asia commented, "I use [oGR] a lot to see what others in the human rights movement are saying. It is especially useful for our network because we also hear from human rights funders and learn trends in the philanthropic sector. Without oGR, we would lack timely information about developments that impact the field very negatively." A representative of an INGO stated, "I don't go to oGR very often, but when I need to figure something out, or I need to inform myself about a particular view, I know I will be able to find the most important viewpoints represented there." Similarly, one well-known academic observed, "I didn't know half the contributors in the ESCR debate. By reading oGR, I am expanding my network of knowledge.... The moment I think about a new issue, I check the site to see what others have said."

Interviewees also provided anecdotal evidence that they regularly circulate oGR articles to their staff, as well as with others in their networks. For example, one NGO leader based in Latin America stated, "I found the debate on local funding really helpful. The deep analysis helped us connect the dots.... I shared the articles with our membership." Several NGO representatives mentioned using articles or debates in staff meetings, or at staff retreats to foster learning and critical reflection. Another activist commented, "We reviewed all of the articles [from an oGR debate] and shared them within our team to help us get up to speed on current issues." An NGO leader in Asia stated, "I shared their materials with my staff because I feel it helps sharpen our minds.... oGR has

stimulated thinking in [our organization] and has left a mark on our ongoing internal conversations.” Similarly, another NGO leader reported sharing articles with diplomats: “We felt that the articles were a comprehensive and helpful way to inform their thinking on the issue.”

Several academics reported that they use oGR debates as part of their classroom reading. As one academic stated, “I send all my students to the site. I tell all my students that it is a must-read. If they are interested in human rights, they need to follow oGR.” Similarly, another academic commented, “I often send stuff from oGR around, and Tweet and put on Facebook. I consider it required reading and an essential stop when I am trying to become better informed, and I urge my students to take a closer look.”

There were, however, a few interviewees who stated that they do not go to the site regularly. These tended to be activists or human rights funders. Interestingly, these included individuals who stated that they find oGR to be uniquely helpful and informative. They attributed this to being overwhelmed by the amount of information they receive and the obligations of their job. Some of these individuals suggested that oGR might need a better system of drawing their attention to new articles or themes, including email updates and other mechanisms. It is already possible to receive email updates, and oGR staff regularly tweet and provide updates on Facebook. Nevertheless, some activists and funders appear unaware of these services. The issue of information overload and how best to ensure that oGR “rises above the noise” was of concern to numerous interviewees, some of whom suggested the need for a more targeted outreach strategy.

[oGR's Benefit for the Human Rights Movement](#)

A significant number of interviewees stressed that oGR is an important resource for and provides an important service to the human rights movement. It creates opportunities for people to interact who would not otherwise be able to exchange perspectives. As one activist stated, “It is one of the few places where we can come together to talk about the wider issues we are struggling with.” Another interviewee observed, “oGR allows us to have conversations with people we would not normally meet otherwise.” One INGO representative described how oGR had been particularly helpful, “I already knew those in the debate. It was not our first time talking, but the oGR format set out and helped us clarify issues. And it has influenced the way we think about those issues.”

According to external interlocutors, oGR not only facilitates learning and information-sharing, but also stimulates critical thinking among human rights stakeholders. As one activist noted, “The human rights movement tends to be very self-referential. oGR is providing an enormous service by consciously trying to surface new perspectives and voices....oGR helps us question our assumptions, and challenges our frame of reference.” Another activist pointed out that “oGR asks troubling questions. It doesn’t shy away from the sensitive fault lines in the movement. There is a lasting benefit – it provides us with a real opportunity to grapple with the tough challenges facing us with a degree of intellectual rigor. Our own opinions are informed, shaped and challenged by this process.” Similarly, an activist from Asia observed, “oGR stimulates new thinking and provides us with new inputs. It provides an important service by helping us to gain new perspectives.”

Interlocutors stressed that oGR has an important role to play at this time in the human rights movement’s history. Some interviewees noted that the human rights movement is in a moment of crisis. Activists are confronted with questions regarding their effectiveness and legitimacy, as well as the movement’s underlying normative framework. What is more, there is a sense that we are witnessing an unprecedented and growing crackdown on civil society actors in many countries, both authoritarian and democratic, and human rights organizations and funders are often the target of these new restrictions. In this context, interviewees pointed to the critical need for a forum that brings together human rights activists from across various divides and provides a “safe space” for reflection, learning, and debate. As noted above, many see oGR as providing this important service for the human rights movement, creating a unique platform for innovation and for developing responses to the many challenges that confront the movement. As one interviewee observed, “oGR takes up topics we all need to be thinking about. They provide a real benefit for the movement and help us be prepared for the next phase in our work.” As noted earlier, several activists suggested that the “sustained conversation with skeptics” was particularly helpful in forcing human rights stakeholders to “think more critically, alter our thinking, or become better at articulating our arguments.” This, in turn, strengthens the movement and makes it more resilient in the face of new challenges.

Concerns/Suggested Next Steps

As described above, the vast majority of interviewees view oGR very positively and consider it to have made significant strides toward its objective of creating a valuable and influential platform for the human rights movement. Few, if any, of the interviewees for this evaluation had strong criticisms of oGR or the approach of its management. They did, however, identify areas for improvement going forward and/or possible next steps as the oGR staff continues to develop and expand the site’s reach and impact.

Need for Even Greater Diversity

Although external interlocutors identified the diversity of oGR's readership and contributors as one of its greatest strengths, numerous interviewees pointed to the need for even greater diversity. While there was widespread agreement that oGR is more global and diverse than almost any other site, it is still perceived as largely dominated by North American and Western European perspectives, as well as perhaps the capital-based elite from a few countries. As one interviewee stressed, "More needs to be done to fully integrate African and Asian voices into the debates. We would all benefit from hearing more from these regions.... For example, in the discussion on human rights evaluation, it would have been really useful to hear the perspective of Asian or African NGOs on measuring impact."

Many acknowledged the efforts oGR has undertaken to build a diverse readership and encourage greater diversity of contributions. As one activist from Latin America stated, "They have done almost everything they possibly could to reach out to other parts of the geographic divide." Similarly another activist stressed, "[oGR] has gone to great pains to include a diversity of perspectives. I am not sure they could do much more."

While interviewees acknowledged the efforts oGR has made to engage voices from the global South, several pointed out that different aspects of diversity also need attention. As one activist noted, "Debates continue to be largely a conversation among elites. I am sure that the majority of oGR authors still come from established NGOs." Similarly, another activist commented, "oGR has done an honest effort to reach out. Even so, things are still skewed toward insiders – toward academics and full-time activists, who have the time and capacity to write for such a platform." Numerous interviewees stressed the need for greater efforts to incorporate grassroots activists into oGR debates.

Although there was widespread agreement that grassroots activists need to be better integrated into oGR debates, some questioned whether oGR provides the best format for such activists, who may not have the time or capacity to write articles and/or may not prioritize influencing a global agenda. Some suggested that oGR explore other formats, including publishing interviews, ghost writing for activists, or using alternative media such as video or podcasts to facilitate contributions from grassroots activists. oGR staff has already tried a number of these approaches.

Some interviewees considered the question of diversity “an insurmountable problem” for oGR because the lack of diversity “reflects an imbalance in the human rights movement.” As one activist pointed out, “oGR accepts submissions in other languages and translates a lot. It is the only space that includes lesser-known activists. But it is nevertheless affected by the inequalities of the human rights field.”

Finally, one funder pointed out that there is the perception that oGR is a global North institution, with its agenda set in the global North. This makes it difficult for some human rights funders to support oGR, even if they may value its contributions to the field.

Some interviewees expressed an interest in hearing more from friendly diplomats and/or the private sector. As one NGO leader commented, “The articles are rather academic because people who have time to write tend to be academics. But the political perspective is missing. Articles need to be embedded in realism, not detached from the political reality....It would be useful to hear more from friendly diplomats and relevant government officials occasionally.”

There was some disagreement about whether the active participation of funders was a positive thing or whether it might stifle or distort debate on oGR. While most interviewees welcomed hearing the perspective of human rights funders, one activist expressed some reservations: “oGR should not be seen as tied to and implicated by donor dynamics. I have a very conscious concern about pandering to funders. [In my view,] some contributions have been naked self-promotion.... But intellectual integrity should always prevail.”

[Long-term Debates vs. Current Controversies](#)

Several activists raised questions about what they perceive as oGR’s focus on long-term, more theoretical debates, instead of more newsworthy topics. As one activist from Latin American commented, “oGR has a less than ideal mix between medium-term debates and contemporary topics that will resonate right now with a wider readership....They need to be more opportunistic or anticipate upcoming debates so that they can be seen as engaging with current affairs.” In part, these questions were raised in the context of trying to generate more attention for oGR and expanding its readership even more. Some felt that one way of creating drive to the site would be to have oGR more engaged with current issues that would be more likely to resonate. However, others felt that oGR’s added value is precisely in providing the human rights movement with the opportunity to step back from day-to-day pressures and crises and to reflect on the longer-term challenges to the movement.

Conclusions

Many interviewees already consider oGR to be a reference point for the human rights movement. oGR fills a gap that previously existed in the human rights movement, facilitating greater communication and critical reflection across numerous fault lines. It is a useful platform for networking and linking activists from across the movement. oGR has made it a priority to seek diverse perspectives, which enrich debates and challenge accepted thinking. As such, it provides an enormous service to the human rights movement, helping activists to expand their horizon, test their assumptions, and develop new and more effective arguments. At a time when the human rights movement feels under attack, oGR helps strengthening the movement and make it more resilient in the face of new challenges.

Recommendations

Interviewees identified a number of recommendations that they felt would help oGR in four broad areas: a) to further enhance diversity, b) to expand oGR's reach and brand recognition, c) to improve the appearance and functionality of the site itself, and d) to facilitate occasional face-to-face debates.

Steps to Further Enhance Diversity of Readership and Contributors

oGR should continue to prioritize diversity. Interviewees would welcome more contributions from the global South, and in particular from grassroots activists. Interviewees acknowledge the many efforts already undertaken by oGR to engage authors from the global South, and recognize the ongoing challenges to cultivate new contributors. They therefore suggested, among other things that,

- oGR base staff in key areas of the global South to further enhance identification of new voices, and to facilitate building relationships with potential contributors.
- Forge more partnerships with key institutions in the global South to facilitate the process of identifying both new contributors and new themes of particular interest to activists from these regions.
- oGR should expand its use of alternative formats, such as podcasts, video, interviews, and ghostwriting, which may be more effective ways to gain the perspectives of grassroots activists.

Develop Targeted Outreach/Marketing Strategy

Many interviewees stressed that oGR needs to develop more targeted outreach/marketing, in order to expand its brand and its impact.

- oGR should find more effective ways to share evidence of expanding global reach and increasing diversity with its readership.
- oGR staff should regularly attend important human rights meetings or events in order to increase awareness about their work and the site.
- oGR should consider occasionally publishing a pamphlet or book that pulls together a thematic debate, which can serve as a calling card for the site.
- oGR should build additional partnerships with important institutions in the global South, not only for purposes of identifying contributors (as noted above), but also for outreach purposes.
- oGR should consider developing partnerships with regional and international media.

Consider delinking oGR from openDemocracy

Numerous interviewees recommended changes to the appearance and function of the website. However, many of these steps are apparently difficult, if not impossible, as long as oGR is a section of openDemocracy (oD). Therefore, oGR may want to consider whether it should have a medium-term plan to delink from oD. Given that approximately 25% of oGR's traffic comes directly from oD, any step to delink should take place after further outreach and marketing has occurred and the impact has been assessed.

Interviewees would like to see the following changes:

- Insert graphics to help organize the site and guide the reader.
- Introduce use of video, photos, podcasts etc.
- Improve ability to conduct research on site.
- Improve the interactive feature of the site, which interviewees felt was weak.
- Systematize topics that have been covered. Introduce summaries of themes that have been closed.

Use oGR's Convening Function

Some interviewees also suggested that oGR occasionally identify a debate that would benefit from a face-to-face meeting in order to further expand and develop the theme and build working relationships among relevant actors in the movement. oGR has already begun to explore convening in-person workshops to enhance or supplement its online debates. For example, oGR helped execute the Survey and Human Rights workshop in November 2015, which has led to more oGR debate contributions, fueled the forthcoming special issue in the Journal of Human Rights, and resulted in the idea of creating an online "Human Rights Opinion Hub". Interviewees would welcome the opportunity for more of these kinds of in-person exchanges, and see them as important both for the movement, as well as for building the profile and reputation of oGR.

Appendix A

Organizational Affiliation of External Interviewees²

Ariadne Fund

Amnesty International

Asian Forum for Human Rights and Development (Forum Asia) (Bangkok)

B'Tselem (Israel)

Center for Economic and Social Rights (CESR)

Center for Women's Global Leadership at Rutgers University

Columbia University

Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative (India)

Conectas (Brazil)

Dejusticia (Colombia)

ESCR-Net

Ford Foundation

Fund for Global Human Rights

Harvard University

HER Fund (Hong Kong)

Human Rights Initiative, OSF

Human Rights Watch

International Centre for Transitional Justice (ICTJ)

International Human Rights Funders Group

International Network of Women's Funds

Open Society Justice Initiative

Sigrid Rausing Trust

SOAS, University of London

State of the Union Coalition (SOTU-Kenya)

Universal Rights Group (Switzerland)

² Multiple interviews were conducted in several organizations.