

THE GLOBAL AUTHORITARIAN TURN: MAKING HUMANITY WIN

**A THINK PIECE FOR AMNESTY'S NEW GLOBAL STRATEGY
DEVELOPED BY AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL NORWAY**



Amnesty International's mission is not to save the world, but to empower the people who can change the world to do so.

AMNESTY
INTERNATIONAL 

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INTRO

The major world trends of today are all key drivers of human rights violations. The global inequality crisis, the environmental crisis as well as rapid technical development (including automatisisation and artificial intelligence) and are independent, but mutually reinforcing challenges. All three of them are amplified by a fourth major trend – the crisis of shrinking civic space and increasing authoritarianism. This global authoritarian turn is existential, it threatens every human being and our freedom, equality and justice.

The mission and vision of Amnesty International still prove relevant in today's global context: *“a world in which every person enjoys all of the human rights enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and other international human rights instruments. In pursuit of this vision, Amnesty International's mission is to undertake research and action focused on preventing and ending grave abuses of these rights.”*

Furthermore, with regards to our methods, the statutes read *“Amnesty International addresses governments, intergovernmental organizations,*

armed political groups, companies and other non-state actors. Amnesty International seeks to disclose human rights abuses accurately, quickly and persistently. It systematically and impartially researches the facts of individual cases and patterns of human rights abuses. These findings are publicized, and members, supporters and staff mobilize public pressure on governments and others to stop the abuses. In addition to its work on specific abuses of human rights, Amnesty International urges all governments to observe the rule of law, and to ratify and implement human rights standards; it carries out a wide range of human rights educational activities; and it encourages intergovernmental organizations, individuals, and all organs of society to support and respect human rights.”

We argue that Amnesty International's mission is not to save the world, but to empower the people who can change the world to do so. The path towards a bigger, bolder and more inclusive movement – with the greatest possible impact – goes through a thematic focusing using our core methodology.

THE SCOPE AND LIMITS OF AMNESTY'S AMBITION

According to our statutes, as quoted above, Amnesty's mission is to promote all human rights for all human beings, everywhere and always. We are, according to the statutes, doing this by holding duty bearers, governments, but also other decision makers, to account for their human rights obligations under international human rights law.

This mission is ambitious. Not less so now, during the global authoritarian turn, where the international human rights regime is undermined and disputed. Still, our mission is finite as well as precisely defined. All of our work is framed by international human rights law. Even if we acknowledge the critical world trends, Amnesty is not an organisation for all good causes. We are not an organisation for system change or social transformation loosely defined at headline level. We are not an organisation for the mobilisation

of people for its own sake or for people-oriented, participatory decision making. Our mission is not to save the world, but to empower the people who can change the world to do so. We promote human rights by empowering rights holders and by holding duty bearers to account. In a global situation where authoritarianism is on the rise, this method, so central to Amnesty International's work and mission, is more relevant than ever.

This methodological approach differs from many other NGOs and social movements which are thematically engaged in various causes. Our role is often more indirect, but not less essential, enabling others to play their roles as human rights defenders. Our role is to protect their rights to speak up, and by taking this role, we add great value to the entire landscape of social movements and thus maximise the impact we make.

ACCOUNTABILITY: THE KEY TO DISCIPLINE POWER

Central to the historical development of human rights and rule of law is the acknowledgement of power as a force which needs discipline. Historically, institutional checks and balances have been established to avoid arbitrary exercise of power, to avoid power concentration and corruption, to balance individual and communal needs, to protect minorities, and to ensure universal protection for all. Internationally, human rights law is the strongest framework to reach these aims.

International human rights law is far from a perfect framework. However, accountability mechanisms are integrated in the very concept. This rights-based approach puts the free and equal human being at the centre, defining an individual as a rights holder. The rights holder is empowered with rights and correspondingly

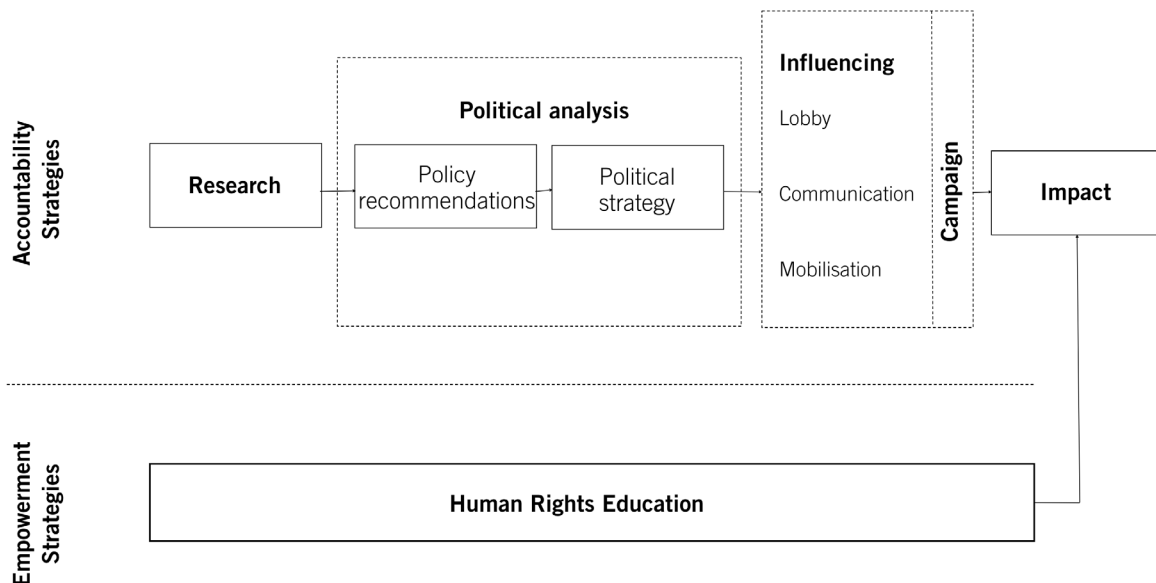
a duty bearer is made accountable to protect, respect and fulfil these rights.

Even if international human rights instruments are far from perfect and are still in need of improvement, they remain more binding than other international commitments. For example, both the Paris Agreement and the SDGs are built on the voluntary contributions and the good will of the powerful. The understanding that power needs to be accountable to people and to people's universal rights makes the human rights regime a qualitatively better approach than for example the SDGs. Also, we should keep in mind that Amnesty has contributed to building the human rights framework in times in which it was often contested as well. Therefore, it must remain a core task for Amnesty to defend the human rights concept, especially now that it finds itself again under attack, during the global authoritarian turn.

THE ESSENTIAL ROLE OF RESEARCH IN THE ERA OF “FAKE NEWS”

The Amnesty theory of change, our HOW, as laid out in the statutes, can be graphically illustrated as follows:

AMNESTY’S THEORY OF CHANGE



This model highlights some key features of Amnesty’s core methodology. The main point of the model is to illustrate how our different efforts play together to make a difference. This HOW still proves effective, though there are needs for improvements and innovation.

Firstly, **research**: Amnesty’s theory of change places high quality research of human rights violations at the core of Amnesty’s approach. Our work to promote human rights for all is rooted in independent high quality documentation, facts, and observations. Thus, our starting point differs from other organisations’ approaches. Other organisations can be rooted in their ethical values, religious faiths, economic interests, ideological convictions etc. Our research-based approach is not better or worse than other organisations’ starting points, but it is different and provides us a starting point for lobby, communication and campaigning which cannot easily be disputed.

It provides us with a unique standing among stakeholders and decision makers of all kinds. It gives an added value, which continues to open doors for promotion of human rights.

The importance of credible research and documentation of human rights violations is increasing in the time of the global authoritarian turn. Fragmentation of the public sphere is driving demonization. “Fake news” has become a tool for politicians and authoritarian leaders. Technological development has facilitated smear campaigns, undermining human rights defenders. Politicians and other opinion leaders can more easily frame the public debate. When fact and fake become increasingly difficult to distinguish, the need for a credible source of information and documentation becomes fundamental. High quality and independent research remains a prerequisite for Amnesty’s human rights promotion.

A commitment to research in the new global strategy should include initiatives of innovation. Research should be developed with a purpose and to support the organisation's thematic and country priorities. High quality, independence and credibility cannot be compromised, still we must ensure that quality checks and approvals take place as smooth and uncomplicated as possible. We should also develop new formats for research, such as rapid response reports on relevant topics. Increased capacity for research in sections and increased transparency in how resources for research are allocated should also be considered.

Secondly, based on research – Amnesty develops **policy recommendations** to relevant duty bearers and stakeholders. Research-based work may from the surface appear as “backward-looking”, but it forms the basis for forward looking recommendations to relevant duty bearers and stakeholders. In line with the AI Strategic Review of Advocacy, there is room for improvement in the development of recommendations. The policy recommendations should be more specific and developed as concrete policy options which decision makers can easily adopt. This would also be supported by the new communications strategy, promoting solutions and hope based communication. For a human rights-based organisation, this can be challenging, as the human rights framework by nature is geared towards what we want to fix, rather than how to fix it. Still, we should strive to develop relevant recommendations, possibly

distinguishing between recommendations based in human rights law directly and those which are mere Amnesty's suggestions for solutions.

Thirdly, in order to achieve impact, Amnesty develops and implements **influencing** strategies. We apply three main kinds of tools; lobby (direct dialogue with decision makers), communication (our own channels as well as press) and mobilisation of activists/supporters. Strategic litigation is a fourth and emerging tool. The strategic combination of these kinds of tools within a defined time-span is what constitute a campaign. Notably, the different kinds of tools do not stand alone and should not operate in silos. It is by developing the interaction between them and in relation to the context we want to influence, that we make the greatest impact. During the new global strategy period, we should nurture this interaction.

Lastly, and also in order to achieve impact, we work on empowerment of human rights holders and human rights defenders. **Human rights education** should remain our main method for this purpose. The organisation has extensive experience within this field as well as supporting individuals so that they are equipped to fight their own battles. Human rights education is also key to win “the battle of ideas”, which is of increasing importance in these times where powerful world opinion-leaders dispute the very idea of human rights.

ON COMMUNICATION – A STRATEGIC TOOL

This emphasis on interaction between different kinds of tools, comes with some implications, also for the understanding of communication.

Communication does not come first. Content, our political goals, the human rights we want to have realised, comes first. Communication is an important tool in our strategic tool box and plays an essential role to achieve those goals.

We do not produce communication content because something is newsworthy, nice or important as such. We produce communication content because it will support the human rights goals we strive for, because it plays a role in the influencing strategy we have.

More hope-based communication, as the new communication strategy facilitates, will be an integrated part of this perspective. This again

requires heavy work from the policy makers in Amnesty. To have a trustworthy hope-based communication, also means we need relevant policy solutions.

There is for sure a need to reframe human rights; making human rights relevant in today's context and modernising the way we speak about them. This is necessary to reach new audiences beyond the bubble and to win the battle of ideas. But there can never be a shred of doubt that human rights, as something completely different than ideology or beliefs, should be our framework and our reference in all our work. We must have a clear conceptual distinction between what is the policy goal – which should refer to human rights framework - and what is the messaging, the framing – which needs to be human rights rooted, but not necessarily make explicit use of human rights wording.

ON COORDINATED, INTERNATIONAL HUMAN RIGHTS ADVOCACY

Amnesty has been a driving force in the formulation and monitoring of international human rights standards for decades. International human rights as enshrined in the international and regional human rights conventions and agreements are powerful means to ensure the dignity for individuals and to hold states to account for violations.

Formulation of new standards and defense against states' efforts to undermine already agreed standards are increasingly important in the time of the global authoritarian turn to ensure that the protection of individuals are not weakened. Important monitoring of state

compliance of human rights is taking place in the international human rights institutions and states are held to account or called out for violations of human rights. Amnesty's organisational model with national sections and regional/international experts and advocates makes us uniquely positioned to have impact in the international human rights system because it enables the coordination of simultaneous national and international advocacy both in capitals and in the international institutions. We must maintain the capacity and priority on international advocacy in international institutions and coordination between sections to stand up against the erosion of human rights standards.

ON INDIVIDUALS AT RISK AND CALLS FOR SYSTEM CHANGE

In a climate where human rights defenders are increasingly put at risk, it is key that Amnesty continues to support, protect and inspire individuals, as well as the communities and the movements they represent, in their struggles for human rights.

The dynamic between individual cases and calls for change at system level is a unique characteristic of Amnesty's influencing work. This approach is also described in our statutes: "Amnesty seeks to disclose human rights abuses accurately, quickly and persistently. It systematically and impartially researches the fact of individual cases and patterns of human rights abuses." Further to this, we conclude that one of our core values is to take "effective action for the individual victim". Through Amnesty's work on individual cases,

there is potential to bring about systemic change. However, according to Amnesty's impact review, there are also examples of the opposite – that the release of prisoners of conscience is done to distract the public and avoid systemic changes. This illustrates not the need to scale down the work on individual cases, but the need to do regular impact assessment of our I@R work to ensure learning and improvement. Still, this dynamic, between individual cases and systemic causes, remains key to keep up pressure against decision makers. It remains a good tool in communication and mobilisation. Through the story of an individual, Amnesty can tell powerful stories about complex human rights situations to reach out to a broader public. This separates Amnesty from other organisations, giving us added value, and has potential to be further developed.

THE NEED FOR THEMATIC FOCUS

This document is not developed to answer the big WHAT question; i.e. what topics Amnesty should work on. However, in the spirit of HOW, we want to underscore the methodological fact that real impact, is also dependent of real, thematic prioritisation. Thus, the new strategy should seek to focus, rather than further fragment the movement. To develop and maintain expertise on the thematic areas we prioritise, it seems a prerequisite to keep the areas of focus more limited than they have been in recent years, especially when it comes to our common international agenda. A clear thematic focus increases our impact, as we avoid spreading our scarce resources too thin.

Relating to the four global trends – the environmental crisis, the inequality crisis, rapid technological development as well as the global authoritarian turn – we would argue that when thematic focusing is necessary, it is the latter trend that Amnesty at a global level should concentrate on. While still maintaining a holistic understanding of the indivisibility of human rights and still acknowledging the critical aspects of the other trends, the global authoritarian turn could be our prism to challenges we work on. Such a focus is legitimate when political and civil rights are increasingly undermined and

when this undermining also obstructs realisation of economic, social and cultural rights in many parts of the world. It is also legitimate because of the historical role and competency of Amnesty. Additionally, political and civil rights is an area where we can have a tremendous added value to the broader landscape of activists, social movements and NGOs working for social change.

The protection of economic, social and cultural rights is equally important and should be developed in regional or national perspectives. When we develop our work on ESC rights, we must keep a human rights-based approach. We could also take an umbrella approach to ESC rights; i.e. instead of working for one single ESC at the time, we could work for solid social protection systems, their design and funding, and against austerity measures. This would appear less fragmented (and it is in line with suggestions in the Us versus Them-document). Similarly, to the extent we develop our work on climate change and environmental protection, we need to find our very clearly defined niche among other strong NGOs. This should build on our existing strengths and added value, such as our methodology for working for individuals at risk, i.e. environmental human rights defenders.

BALANCING GLOBAL STRENGTH AND LOCAL RELEVANCE

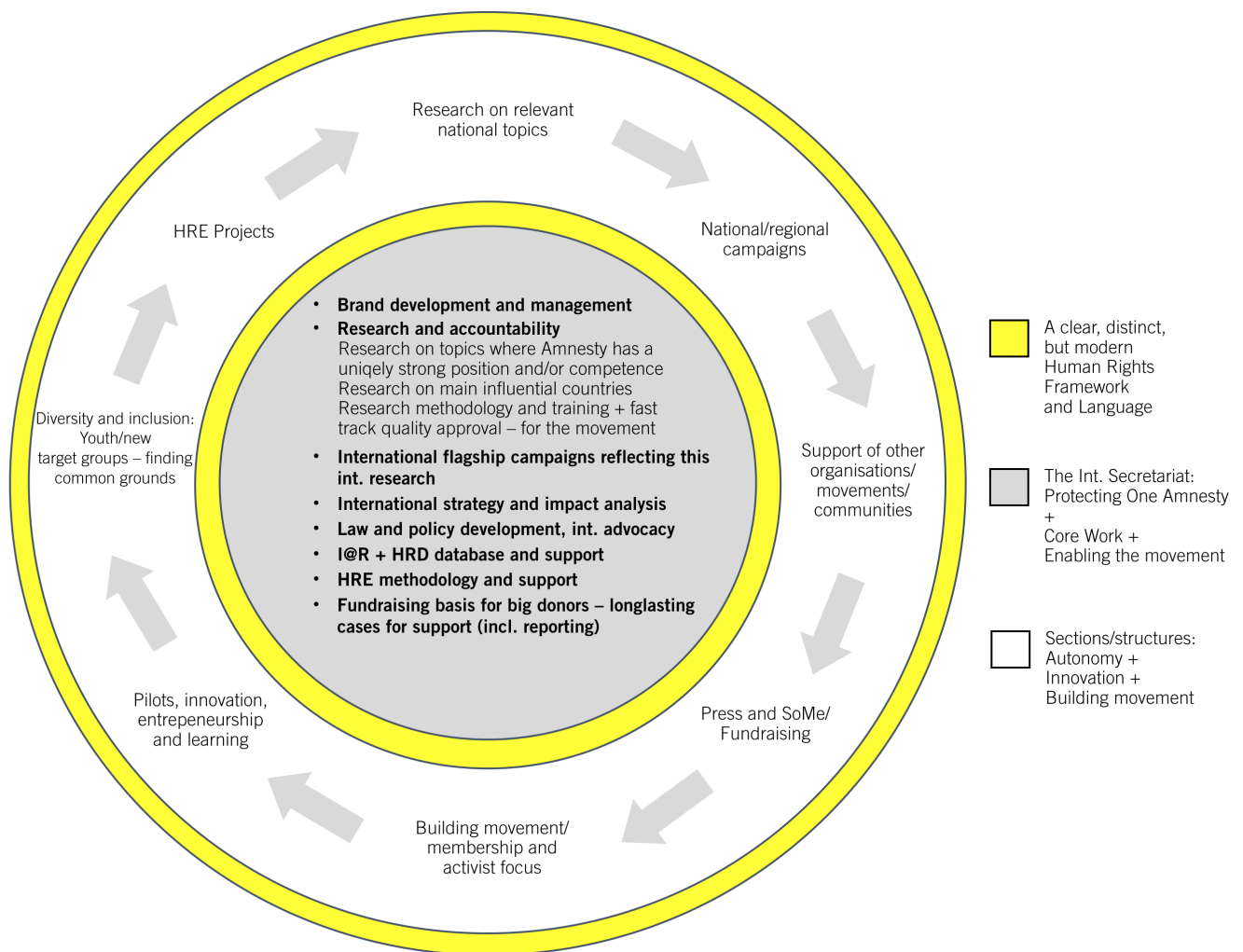
Recognising the need for thematic focusing, a key question of the new global strategy is: “How can the members and supporters of a movement be empowered to organise themselves with autonomy, while maintaining the capacity for unified global mobilisation”?

Despite the global trends that have been identified, there are significant differences between the human rights issues that are most relevant at regional and national levels. Amnesty needs a model that is more adaptable for the future and that accommodates both a stronger global prioritisation, as well as allowing for more regional specific strategies and priorities.

1. Local autonomy: A larger possibility for the specific sections or structures to pick thematic areas within the whole range of rights with local relevance and impact.

2. Regional tactical campaigns, with regional relevance

3. One recognisable Amnesty: A meaningful small and focused international agenda, with issues that are of truly global concern within the area of political and civil rights. Global campaigns need to address global problems that are relevant worldwide, with global policy recommendations. They also need to support and reinforce Amnesty’s new brand platform.



The model above is an attempt to draw up a possible division of labour between the IS and the sections. We wholeheartedly support and cheer the ambition to rise Amnesty to its true potential, and to become an inclusive and empowered movement across all regions and peoples. We also believe that transition of power in many ways can be the answer to this challenge. There is nevertheless a strong need to find the right balance between local relevance and global impact. The one cannot undermine the other.

We believe that to obtain an even stronger global position and impact, the International

Secretariat needs to protect the notion of One Amnesty through keeping core aspects of work centralized and even strengthening it. It is essential that the International Secretariat, by the new coalition leadership itself, makes sure that there is a great brand understanding and allegiance throughout the entire movement. Brand, core research and carefully chosen international flagship campaigns should mutually reinforce each other. This is perfectly possible to combine with greater local autonomy to innovate, pilot and explore relevant topics, audiences, and cooperation, if systems of quality assurance are in place.

THE TIMING

Internally, Amnesty International is currently facing big challenges. The last few months have revealed the financial government crisis of the organisation as well as the crisis of well-being among staff at the International Secretariat. The last years we have also implemented the closer to the ground reorganisation, a process which still needs time to settle before we can harvest its full potential. This is the internal context for the development of the new global strategy.

In addition to the points raised above, we would question whether it is the right timing for an expansion of methodology as well as topics we are involved in. Rather, we should consider consolidating as a bearing approach to the new strategy process. We would also underscore the need to better assess the fundraising potential of new thematic priorities as well as financial and reputational risks related to taking on board controversial methods, such as civil disobedience.

AMNESTY'S ADDED VALUE

Summarised, the key strategic question is the one concerning Amnesty's added value: How can we make the biggest possible impact with the limited resources that we have?
We share the vision of a bigger, bolder and more

inclusive Amnesty. We also share the analysis of the power structures and global mega trends driving current, global challenges. We believe that Amnesty's added value is to confront the global authoritarian turn to make humanity win.

We believe that we can make our movement bigger, bolder and more inclusive through the following:

A. Human rights framework: The new global strategy should maintain and uphold international human rights as the foundation of our organisation. The international human rights regime is not perfect, but it remains the best framework to hold duty bearers to account for human rights obligations. This implies that we should avoid striving for vaguely defined “system change”, but rather empower and protect the people who aim to do so.

B. Strengthen research as a core methodology of Amnesty: Uphold Amnesty as an organisation conducting independent, highly credible and high quality documentation of human rights abuses. This forms a unique base for advocacy, which has gained increasing importance in the era of “fake news” which is a driver of the global authoritarian turn.

C. Strengthen coordinated, international advocacy as a core methodology of Amnesty: Maintain the capacity and priority on international advocacy in international institutions and coordination between sections to stand up against the erosion of human rights standards. Amnesty’s organisational model makes us uniquely positioned to do this work.

D. Strengthen work on individual cases as a core methodology of Amnesty: Continue to develop our work on individual cases (individuals at risk as well as urgent actions) of human rights defenders. When appropriate, link the work of individuals to claims for change at system/political level. This approach is unique to Amnesty and is one where we have a clear added value in the global “ecosystem” of social movements.

E. Innovative policy development: Amnesty has traditionally been a problem documenting organisation. To maintain relevance in today’s political context there is a need to develop solutions. Thus, there is a need to improve the organisation’s capacity to develop research based and human right based policy recommendations.

F. Thematic focusing to remain a thematic expert with a clear added value: Even if Amnesty is an organization for all human rights, we will have to make substantial thematic focusing at both global, regional and national levels. This is in order to avoid fragmentation and undermining our own potential impact. This is where the “how” and the “what” of the strategy process connects: A more limited thematic focus is a prerequisite for impact. The global, thematic focusing should concentrate on confronting the global authoritarian turn.

We encourage the organisation to develop the new global strategy within the above-listed framework.

**This think piece is developed by Amnesty International
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