

STRATEGIES TO ADVANCE CREDIBILITY OF HUMAN RIGHTS ACTORS AND ISSUES



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Cover Image:

Civil society, organized labor, faith-based organizations, artists and musicians rally in a peaceful march through Durban, South Africa, during a recent United Nations Climate Change Conference (COP) summit.

Executive Summary

The erosion of democracy around the world is threatening the ability of human rights defenders (HRDs) to do their work to protect and promote human rights. In this global environment, autocrats are emboldened to intensify their targeting of the credibility of human rights organizations (HROs), alienating them from their constituents and undermining their ability to effectively advocate for human rights. An HRO's ability to nurture trusting relationships with stakeholders is therefore paramount for them to perform their mandate.

At the core of human rights activities' theory of change is an assumption that people believe HROs and the information they provide. In this era of misinformation and disinformation, however, people are increasingly wary, especially when the information contradicts their already-held beliefs—that is, *belief congruence*—or when HROs are portrayed as untrustworthy because they are, for example, seen as foreign, Western, or against traditional values, which challenges their *credibility*. A wealth of research shows that individuals consider two main factors when judging credibility: qualifications—for example, being a primary source, disseminating information generated by experts, and maintaining a positive reputation—and potential for bias due to perceived or actual political affiliation or one-sided messaging.

Addressing audiences' belief in HROs' information is a critical piece of engagement. HROs need to strengthen and maintain their credibility with others to promote and protect human rights. Within the human rights work sector, however, how to forge trusting connections with stakeholders is marked by a lack of recorded institutional knowledge or an evidence base to which human rights practitioners can refer to ground their work.

This report aims to fill that gap by providing an analytical framework for understanding HROs' engagement with stakeholders based on the factors of credibility and belief congruence. Using this framework, HROs can predict how stakeholders may receive their messages. It presents criteria for HROs to assess their own credibility and to understand potential responses to engagement efforts, categorized into four types of engagement:

1. **Awareness raising** is an advantageous strategy when the audience finds an HRO credible and is already predisposed to support a human rights cause. In this case, an audience can be motivated to act and is more likely to take the action recommended by the HRO.
2. **Persuasion** is a desirable type of engagement when the audience finds an HRO highly credible but holds a viewpoint in opposition to that of the HRO. Changing minds is challenging, but it is often a key goal for HROs, making this form of engagement important.
3. **Bridge building** is an appropriate approach when an HRO is not seen as a credible source of information, but the content of their message resonates with key audiences because it does not depart significantly from these audiences' already held beliefs. Importantly, bridge building can result in increased credibility for the HRO in the long run while yielding short-term benefits.
4. **Polarization** is the least desirable engagement type and should be avoided if possible. When individuals do not see an HRO as credible and the information the HRO conveys conflicts with their pre-existing beliefs, the messaging can alienate stakeholders from the human rights cause.

| Table 1: Summary of tactics | |
|---|--|
| Tactics to address credibility | Tactics to address belief congruence |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Credibility borrowing, in which an HRO partners with a stakeholder who already has a trusting relationship with the target audience • Coalition building, which involves an HRO partnering with a broad spectrum of stakeholders on a unified set of issues • Expertise building, when an HRO invests in high-quality, accurate, and transparent policy analysis and advocacy efforts to increase their perceived and actual expertise • Community funding, when an HRO obtains community investment to change the perception that they are funded by the government or a foreign source | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Message reframing, in which HROs tailor their messaging to be consistent with regime-supported values while redirecting them to support human rights • Cultivating advocates, in which an HRO strategically engages individuals who naturally align with the cause and who then serve as powerful conduits of information within their own networks • Constructive dialogue, when an HRO targets issues that a government has expressed support for and provides information and recommendations to solve problems in a constructive manner |

To further improve engagement, the report also offers tactics for HROs to strengthen their credibility and address belief congruence.

This new framework can be used by and with HROs to inform strategic advocacy campaigns, and HROs can also test the efficacy of certain tactics in their particular context. Applying these tactics should provide HROs with a strategic approach to simultaneously advance the credibility of their organization and target issue(s) while also improving engagement with communities. Together, the framework and tactics provide a vehicle to prevent the isolation of HROs and to support their positive work to advance human rights causes.

Introduction

Human rights defenders (HRDs) are increasingly under attack as democracy erodes globally. Isolation of HRDs not only hurts the advancement of human rights but also threatens the safety of HRDs to do their work. When autocrats can persuade stakeholders that human rights organizations (HROs) are not credible, trustworthy actors, HRDs working to challenge widespread beliefs about human rights abuses can further polarize and alienate stakeholders. This cycle further isolates HRDs from communities—making the HRDs easier targets for repression—and solidifies opposing viewpoints. By definition, one’s credibility is based on the perception or belief of others, so it is essential for HROs to prioritize building connections and fostering resilient relationships between HRDs and key stakeholders. What strategies can organizations use to overcome obstacles and facilitate robust engagement with communities, policymakers, and other civil society actors?

Much of the knowledge around how to forge connections between HROs and the broader community of stakeholders surrounding human rights work—policymakers, community members, and international organizations, among others—lies in unwritten institutional memory and lacks an evidence base that can be referenced by human rights practitioners to confirm it. The Human Rights Support Mechanism (HRSM) learning agenda seeks to fill this gap by outlining a framework for how HRDs engage with stakeholders and documenting tactics to forge greater connections with key audiences using experiential knowledge from program implementation, evidence from published academic work, and data from novel survey experiments.

Analytical Framework: Engagement Types

HRDs in civil society and the media enhance government accountability by promoting transparency and informing key stakeholders such as policymakers, the general public, and the international community. HRD connections could be to citizens or community members (i.e., grassroots), to other civil society organizations (i.e., horizontal), or to policymakers (i.e., vertical). Successful interactions between civil society and stakeholders are the cornerstone of many human rights projects, particularly when stakeholders can seek out information from civil society. A key assumption in the theory of change of most human rights activities is that stakeholders believe this information and take it into account when making decisions and taking action. However, consumers of information are often distrustful, particularly when the information contradicts prior held beliefs, and the era of misinformation and disinformation only exacerbates their distrust. This information environment makes accomplishing human rights goals difficult. Whether attempting to persuade a policymaker of the need for legislative changes or to convince community members to sign a petition, belief in the information is a key first step to all engagement.

Autocratic regimes often make concerted efforts to diminish the credibility of HROs. By eroding public trust in HROs, autocratic regimes isolate them from key stakeholders and deter them from exposing human rights abuses. These efforts not only endanger the work of HRDs but also undermine the pursuit of justice, accountability, and respect for human rights within autocratic societies. In light of these increasing attacks, HROs must regain and maintain credibility in order to connect with and persuade key actors.

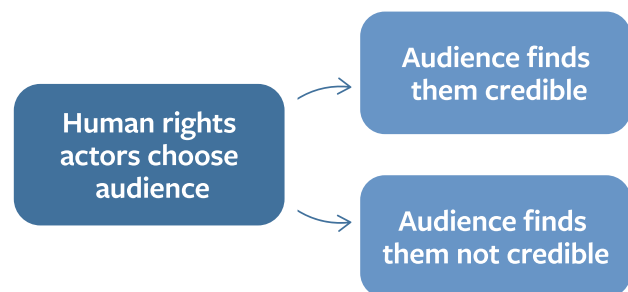
In addition to attacking the credibility of HROs, autocratic regimes also discredit human rights issues by portraying them as foreign, Western, or anti-family in nature. Propaganda in autocratic regimes often promotes alternative narratives that contradict civil society messages and spreads them through prominent platforms such as state-supported television and news outlets. Deliberate misrepresentation of human rights issues and facts not only

serves to reinforce widespread beliefs about an issue before civil society can engage on the matter but also perpetuates a divisive narrative, ultimately hindering progress.

When exploring the dynamics of engagement between HRDs and the stakeholders they seek to connect with, two concepts—the credibility of the messaging source and the congruence of the message with existing beliefs—form a useful framework for understanding interactions. Considering whether people believe that the source of information is trustworthy and their predisposition to agree with the message can ensure that messaging choices effectively connect with potential audiences, whether convincing a policymaker to revise a draft law or a major tech company to enact changes in content moderation strategies.

In terms of source credibility, HRDs can attempt to influence audiences that find them credible or those that are more suspect of their work. Stakeholders who perceive them as credible encompass individuals from the local community, policymakers, local businesses, and community groups who are aware of the HRO and trust that it delivers dependable information while prioritizing the well-being of rights-holders. Conversely, HRDs may also attempt to engage with stakeholders who do not view them as credible. This could involve reaching out to a community or group of policymakers who hold a prevalent belief that HROs are affiliated with foreign entities, solely driven by profit in the foreign aid sector, or funded by special interests.

Figure 1a: Credibility with audiences



Similarly, HRDs can articulate statements that serve to challenge or align with the core beliefs held by their audiences—that is, belief congruence. When seeking out information, people tend to prefer information that matches their existing beliefs. When engaging with individuals who hold contrasting beliefs, HRDs may choose to make statements that directly confront their audience’s fundamental convictions for the purposes of persuasion. For instance, they may inform a supporter of a particular regime about the documented human rights abuses committed by that regime, highlighting instances in which the rights of individuals have been violated, with the hopes that this information will persuade an individual to withdraw support. When audiences consume information that contradicts their beliefs, however, there is a risk that audiences will grow even stronger in their convictions (Arceneaux and Johnson 2013; Hart and Nisbet 2012; Wojcieszak 2010). Conversely, HRDs also have the option to make statements that do not challenge the core beliefs of their audience. In these cases, they may choose to focus on raising awareness among groups that are already sympathetic to human rights causes. By doing so, HRDs aim to foster dialogue and understanding by working within the existing belief framework of their audience or to call sympathetic individuals to act.

The two concepts are not independent of one another; people tend to believe that congruent information comes from more credible sources (Metzger et al. 2015). Conversely, when people hear incongruent information, their perception of credibility of the information source may decrease. This phenomenon highlights the importance of understanding the interplay between belief congruency and source credibility in communication strategies for HROs, as tailoring messages to align with pre-existing beliefs and credibility can lead to greater message effectiveness, both in the immediate context and in fostering a long-term relationship of trust with the audience.

Considering both concepts, source credibility and belief congruence, an HRO can engage with a particular audience that finds it credible or not credible on a particular message that is challenging or not challenging to the audience’s beliefs. By incorporating the concepts of source credibility and belief congruence into their engagement strategies, HRDs can better predict how their message will be received and tailor their outreach and messaging strategies accordingly, thereby increasing effectiveness in mobilizing stakeholders. Taking source credibility and belief congruence into account yields four different types of engagement: awareness raising, persuasion, bridge building, and polarization. Each type reflects the different impacts it has on an individual HRD’s relationship with an individual stakeholder.

HROs may choose to *raise awareness* with audiences that are already predisposed to support human rights causes and motivate them to act. This could involve alerting a sympathetic policymaker to unanticipated negative human rights consequences in draft bills or informing opposition supporters of regime-perpetrated human rights violations. When these audiences trust the source of the information, they are more likely to take the appropriate action recommended by HROs, such as changing language in draft legislation or making a public statement of support. These interactions are typically easier than persuasion but can have just as much impact, either directly, in the case of revising bills, or indirectly, by urging sympathetic actors to take actions that could persuade others.

Figure 1b: Credibility and belief congruence pathways

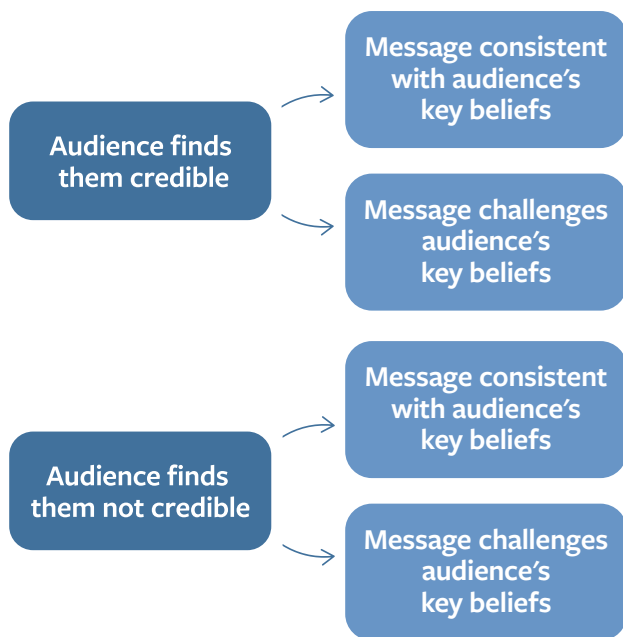
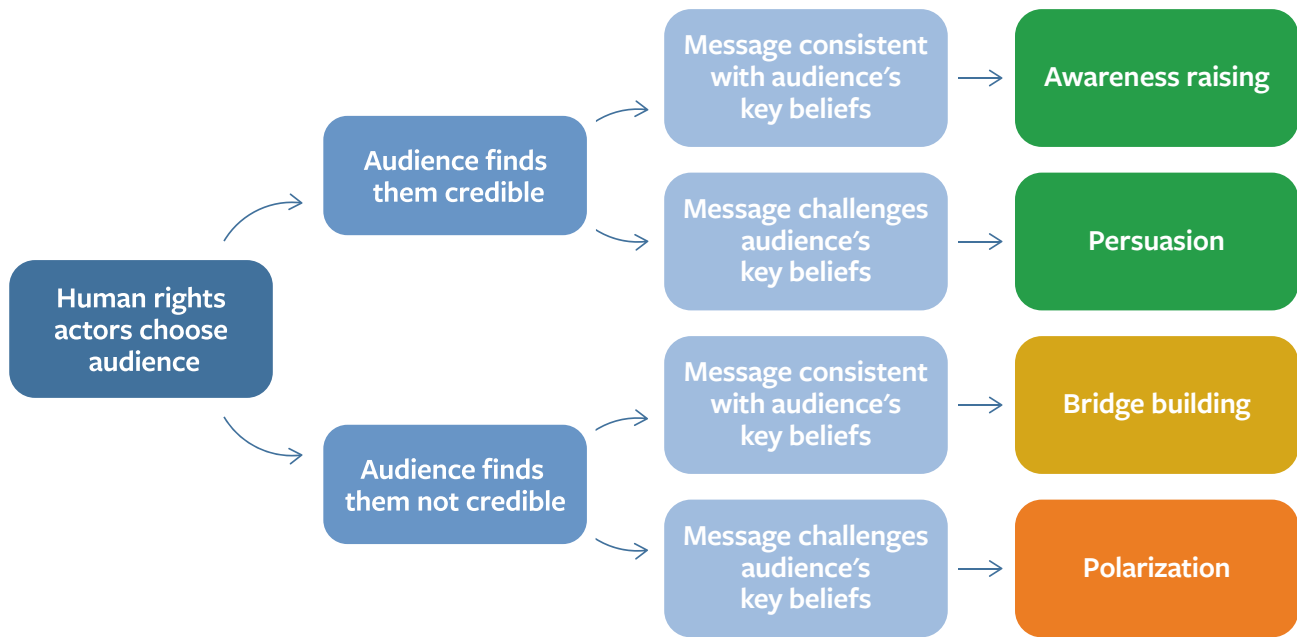


Figure 1: Typology of HRD and stakeholder engagement



Depending on the goals of a particular messaging campaign, though, organizations often want to engage in **persuasion**. For instance, a particular campaign may wish to move a policymaker from opposing a draft bill to supporting it based on new information that could change the way they think about a topic. To persuade a policymaker, HROs would need to have credibility with that policymaker and would have to present information that is new or challenging to their existing belief that the legislation should not be supported in order to convince them otherwise. Changing minds is challenging and therefore requires a high degree of credibility, but it is often a key goal for HROs, typically making this form of engagement desirable.

Bridge building, on the other hand, can build HROs' credibility and capacity in the long run while adding important details and context for human rights issues in the short run. In bridge building-style engagement, organizations themselves are not seen as credible sources of information, but the content of their messages resonates with key audiences because it does not depart significantly from what these audiences already believe. Rather, the information provides additional detail and context on human rights issues. Consequently, bridge building engagement builds credibility and capacity for HROs in the long run because stakeholders may reassess an organization's credibility

when they agree with the organization's message and when the organization practices positive engagement with stakeholders. While not as motivating as awareness raising by credible organizations, this type of engagement can still be helpful to a human rights cause in the short run and does not risk alienating key audiences.

Polarizing engagement, however, further solidifies existing opinions and can in some cases make HROs vulnerable to attack. Some stakeholders are alienated from the human rights issue or cause when messaging organizations themselves are not seen as credible and the information conveyed conflicts with the beliefs of the stakeholder. This is due to motivated reasoning, a cognitive process wherein individuals selectively interpret, evaluate, and recall information in a way that aligns with their preexisting beliefs, values, and motivations. When confronted with information that challenges their existing views, individuals may scrutinize and discount evidence that contradicts their beliefs, particularly when the source itself is not viewed as credible. This can prompt stakeholders to respond by digging into their original positions because stakeholders not only discount the information provided but also see the information as an attack on their core beliefs or even identities, which can cause a backlash response. Of the four engagement types, this is the least desirable.

Assessment Criteria to Predict Engagement Type

HROs can assess their credibility in advance to understand how engagement may be received by key audiences. When judging source credibility, individuals tend to consider qualifications and potential for bias, meaning messages from organizations that lack appropriate qualifications or are seen as biased are potentially damaging and, at worst, ineffective.

Individuals tend to believe that sources are trustworthy or credible based on qualifications, including being a primary or official source (Hilligoss and Rieh 2008; Koh and Sundar 2010), well-known to them with a positive reputation (O’Keefe 1990, Metzger et al. 2010), and expert-generated rather than user-generated (Flanagin and Metzger 2011; Lucassen and Schraagen 2011; Metzger et al. 2010; Blikstad-Balas 2016; Kubiszewski, Nordewier, and Costanza 2011). HROs, particularly emerging groups, tend to lack a positive reputation around their qualifications domestically and/or internationally, which may decrease their credibility.

When judging credibility, individuals also consider the potential for bias in information. For example, messages coming from sources who are believed to be biased against

the information they are providing are seen as more credible (Berinsky 2015), as are experts who invoke “balanced” arguments in discussions (Mayweg-Paus and Jucks 2017; Jensen et al. 2013). In repeated studies, individuals report that two-sided messages are more credible than one-sided messages (Block and Keller 1995; Eisend 2006; Faison 1961; Kamins et al. 1989; Keller and Lehmann, 2008; Pechmann 1992; Zhao and Capella 2008). One-sided messaging with implied persuasive intent tends to cue people to believe they are being manipulated and acts as a strong heuristic for negative credibility judgements (Metzger et al. 2010). If individuals associate HROs with political affiliations, these organizations may be perceived as biased and therefore less credible.

HROs can also assess whether and the degree to which a particular human rights message aligns with the intended audience’s existing core beliefs. Depending on existing beliefs about the state of human rights and the benevolence of potential human rights violators, this information may contradict certain audiences’ core beliefs and therefore risk reinforcing existing views if not presented effectively.

Table 2: Factors to assess credibility

| Qualifications | Bias |
|--|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is the organization a primary source on the topic? • Does the organization have a reputation for expertise on the topic? Among whom? • Is the organization well-known with a positive reputation? • Does the organization rely on user-generated information or expert-generated information? | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is the organization seen as affiliated with a political party or movement? • Is the organization seen as foreign or Western? • Does the organization typically use one-sided messaging or two-sided messaging? • Does the organization have a track record of calling out human rights abuses on all sides or does the organization only call out abuses perpetrated by certain offenders, such as a particular political party or movement? |

Table 3: Factors to assess belief congruence

| Stance | Centrality of belief |
|---|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Are individuals well-informed on this topic already? • Is the key audience already sympathetic, neutral, or antagonistic to this particular message or idea? | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Does this message challenge an in-group identity—ethnic, national, religious, or political, for example—for the audience? • Does the message have financial, political, or social ramifications for the core audience? |

First, because individuals tend to respond negatively to messages that contradict existing beliefs, considering an audience’s stance as for, against, or neutral to the intended human rights message is critical to determining how the message will be received. Motivated reasoning causes individuals to rationalize away disagreeable information, particularly when they lack the motivation to engage in accurate reasoning. Therefore, HROs are more persuasive on issues when people have a neutral stance on the topic.

Second, assessing whether the message touches on core beliefs, such as in-group identification, or issues with financial, political, or social ramifications can affect the degree to which individuals are likely to dig into their positions. For example, partisans tend to assess the state of the economy differently depending on co-partisanship

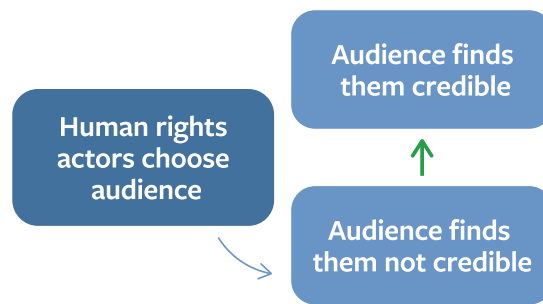
with a nation’s leaders, and even when individuals become well-informed on the state of the economy, partisans will still diverge on who to blame for poor economic performance (Bisgaard 2015). Individuals are more likely to discredit information contrary to their existing beliefs when they think of the interaction as a competition or a debate, and survey data finds that individuals commonly associate political information with competition rather than deliberation (Groenendyk and Krupnikov 2021). Expressing positions that are at odds with facts—that is, doubling down in face of contradictory information—can also reinforce one’s membership in a cultural or ideological group (Kahan 2012). For HROs, therefore, engaging on human rights issues that touch on an individual’s core group identification enhances the risks of alienating stakeholders.

Tactics to Improve Engagement in HRSM Programming

HROs attempting to connect with key audiences have employed several tactics to improve the nature of the engagement by either increasing their credibility or retooling their messaging to align with an audience’s core beliefs. By changing credibility or belief congruence, organizations can avoid the potential negative implications of alienation and effectively accomplish their engagement goals. Improving credibility, for example, can shift engagement from bridge building or polarization to persuasive or awareness raising, depending on the existing beliefs of the audience. If credibility is low and improving credibility is not possible in the short term, as is the case in many closed operating environments, then organizations can likely shift their messaging or target audiences to address issues in line with existing beliefs, shifting from polarizing engagement to bridge building engagement.

| Tactics that address credibility | Tactics that address belief incongruence |
|--|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Credibility borrowing • Coalition building • Expertise building • Community funding | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Message reframing • Cultivate advocates • Constructive dialogue |

Figure 2: Addressing credibility



Tactics that address credibility: Credibility borrowing

Organizations lacking credibility with their target audiences can **borrow credibility** by identifying potential partners that already have a trusting relationship with and positive reputation among the target audience. For example, an LGBT+ rights organization may partner with a popular local women’s savings club to disseminate community messaging on the inclusion of transgender individuals, work with a social media influencer to spread messages of inclusion, or partner with a major international human rights nongovernmental organization (NGO) when presenting human rights documentation at international accountability mechanisms. Because building credibility with an audience takes place on a longer timeline than is reasonable for many donor-funded international human rights programs, borrowing credibility from actors who already have a trusting relationship is one way to successfully engage audiences with whom human rights actors may not have a positive existing relationship. In Mexico, for example, being featured in credible independent newspapers can promote the credibility of HROs because these newspapers are known for source verification (McPherson 2016). In one HRSM program, an HRO credited the effectiveness of their grassroots engagement on the sensitive issue of gender-based violence to partnerships with religious, community, and cultural leaders who already had a high degree of trust among local communities.

This approach, however, risks harming the credibility of the partnering organizations with the trusting relationship. For example, survey research in Vietnam has found that when national pro-democracy groups endorse local-level grassroots protest activities that are common in authoritarian regimes, the Vietnamese public considers these protests to be more extreme and less legal (Truong 2023).

Programming exploring whether to use this tactic should consider the following points:

1. What incentives do potential high-credibility partner organizations have for engaging on this issue? What risks would this present for them?
2. Will the partnership hurt either organization's credibility with other groups?
3. What types of partnerships promote credibility in this context? Would an affiliation with an established international NGO be helpful in building credibility with the target audience? Or would an affiliation with an informal social movement be more helpful?

**Tactics that address credibility:
Coalition building**

Organizations hoping to increase the credibility of their messages can *build coalitions* by partnering with a broad spectrum of organizations on a unified set of issues. Involving diverse stakeholders in the coalition can build credibility by demonstrating widespread agreement on the issue and underscore the gravity of the issues being addressed. For example, a coalition involving organizations that represent youth, women, regional groups, ethnic minorities, and labor asking for revisions on a draft bill might be considered more credible than one that only represents a narrow beneficiary group. Close to half of the working group participants in an HRSM program in Tanzania indicated that advocating alongside other civil society organizations made them more effective advocates. As one working group member explained, “We’re able to work on more sensitive issues and explore ideas together. When we approach the government with a team of 20 organizations, the government pays attention because we represent the demands of the people, not just the demands of an organization.”

However, coalition building is often difficult for projects to implement and requires a significant investment of time

by multiple groups to come to a consensus. In one HRSM program, staff mentioned they worked individually with organizations for 18 to 24 months to fully understand their issues and interests before attempting to create a coalition. While other programs within HRSM formed working groups more immediately, newly built coalitions needed significant leadership support to form common advocacy strategies and agree on issues.

Programming exploring whether to use this tactic should consider the following points:

1. Coalitions typically need a convener with strong leadership abilities. Potential conveners could be major international NGOs, umbrella organizations, established local organizations, or nascent groups. Which organizations or groups are best suited to convene coalitions? How can the benefits of leading a coalition be shared equitably among participants? For more details, see the [blog post](#) inspired by HRSM programming.
2. Effectively building credibility requires creating coalitions with the right mix of organizations. For detailed guidance about how to analyze coalitions to reach human rights goals, see the [Civic Network Analysis](#) guidance.

**Tactics that address credibility:
Expertise building**

One indicator of credibility is technical expertise; accordingly, organizations can directly enhance credibility by *building expertise* in particular issue areas. High-quality, accurate, and transparent policy analysis and advocacy efforts can help the organization be seen as an expert and therefore increase its credibility. Using data and evidence to back up claims, for example, can enhance the credibility of an organization by highlighting expertise in the matter, as can a long track record of working on an issue, presenting both sides of an issue area, and ensuring that information is ground-truthed when working offshore.

In HRSM programming in Tanzania, program staff equipped local organizations with the skills, knowledge, and resources to collect high-quality and accurate data about human rights issues. Expertise building alone, however, is likely insufficient to increase credibility on an issue. In Tanzania, some participants and stakeholders worried that the high-quality data they collected was being “politicized,” which jeopardized its usefulness.

Programming exploring whether to use this tactic should consider the following points:

1. Enhancing the quality of policy analysis is always a good thing and may be necessary even in organizations that are already seen as credible.
2. This tactic should likely be paired with other tactics to maximize the effectiveness, as high-quality analysis and data can still be thought of as politicized.

Tactics that address credibility: Community funding

HROs can seek local, *community-based sources of funding* for their work to increase credibility. In an eight-country survey experiment funded by HRSM, community sources of funding tended to increase perceptions of credibility for HROs, while foreign or domestic government funding tended to decrease credibility. Among four factors tested, the source of funding for HROs was often the most important in driving perceptions of credibility among the survey sample.

However, many HROs rely on foreign government funding to continue their work because of restrictions on their work domestically. In one HRSM program, for example, previously successful news outlets that were fully funded domestically were no longer able to generate local advertising revenue because of state-sponsored repression. Instead, the news outlets now rely on foreign government funding to continue paying staff rather than change their coverage to comply with state restrictions. In cases where local funding is no longer possible, transparency in funding presents a difficult challenge for HROs.

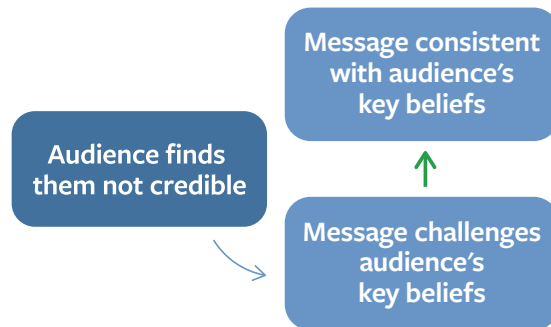
Programming exploring whether to use this tactic should consider the following points:

1. Consider the risks of transparency. While transparency in funding can increase credibility, an apparent overreliance on a single donor can challenge credibility.
2. Diversifying funding sources may require trade-offs in issue areas to generate revenue from new audiences.

Tactics that address audience belief congruence: Message reframing

Enhancing the effectiveness of messages on human rights issues often involves strategic *message reframing* that aligns these concerns with the core beliefs of the audience. This approach is particularly successful when it not only acknowledges but actively engages with the values that resonate with the prevailing messages of the regime. In [Freedom House’s exploration](#) of civic mobilization within authoritarian contexts, the success of civic initiatives was notably tied to messaging that remained consistent with the regime-supported values while redirecting them to support human rights. Similarly, reframing issues to have implicit rather than explicit rights-based terminology can be effective. In another HRSM program, for example, organizations framed their work with women as empowerment rather than explicitly focusing on human rights because that wording was more appropriate in the local vernacular.

Figure 3: Addressing belief congruence



Avoiding rights terminology entirely, however, contradicts the principles of a rights-based approach, which has proven highly effective in tackling various development issues. Such approaches underscore the responsibility of duty-bearers to fulfill the rights demanded by rights-holders. Reframing messages to exclude the role of duty-bearers can have lasting detrimental effects on rights-related matters. The “[Rights-Based Approach Guide](#),” developed under HRSM, offers comprehensive instructions on striking a balance between sensitivity to human rights and employing an effective rights-based framing.

Programming exploring whether to use this tactic should consider the following points:

1. Can the issue at hand be reframed to be consistent with existing values?
2. Is the reframing still consistent with an overall rights-based approach?

Tactics that address audience belief congruence: Cultivate advocates

Organizations can effectively *cultivate advocates* by strategically engaging individuals who naturally align with their cause and perceive the organizations as credible. This approach operates under the premise that sympathetic individuals can serve as powerful conduits of information within their own networks when equipped with the necessary tools and skills. This strategy taps into the potency of personal connections and shared values, as advocates draw upon their existing relationships to foster meaningful discussions. In one HRSM program, for example, an HRO focused on equipping college students with relevant facts, well-framed arguments, and relatable anecdotes so that they could become more effective bridges between their own perspectives and those of their friends and family who may not agree on certain human rights issues. This two-step persuasion process leverages the existing rapport between advocates and their contacts, significantly enhancing the chances of resonating with and swaying new individuals toward the cause while circumventing restrictions on in-country operations.

Monitoring the effectiveness of this tactic, however, poses challenges. Data on content viewership can only capture the initial step in this two-step process, though the second step arguably holds more significance. In the previous example, the organization acknowledged its reliance on anecdotes from core supporters to assess whether they were successful in persuading their friends and family to support the cause. Therefore, programming exploring whether to use this tactic should consider how to monitor outcomes if they decide to employ it.

Tactics that address audience belief congruence: Constructive dialogue

HROs can engage in *constructive dialogue* by targeting things that the government has already said it supports and providing contextual information and recommendations to solve the problems in a constructive rather than confrontational manner. For example, in one HRSM program in a difficult operating environment, constructive dialogue provided an opening to engage on less sensitive—but still critical—social and economic human rights issues in ways that did not challenge authorities directly on more sensitive civil-political rights. In the process, civic actors gained important soft skills such as the confidence to engage with officials. This approach also provides an opportunity to build relationships and credibility with officials, decision-makers, and community leaders that can be leveraged to discuss more sensitive civil-political rights issues over time.

Nevertheless, the efficacy of this approach is constrained by its emphasis on less sensitive issues. Achieving progress on more delicate matters in the long term necessitates pairing the constructive dialogue approach with another complementary strategy in the future.

Programming exploring whether to use this tactic should consider the following points:

1. What comfort level do HROs have in engaging on sensitive political issues? This may be a useful entry point for actors who are new to civic engagement and who are fearful of being seen as engaging in advocacy or working on human rights issues, while for other actors, this strategy may not align with the issue areas they want to work on.
2. Will constructive dialogue risk overlooking opportunities to engage on necessary sensitive political issues?

Practical Application

In order to establish stronger connections, HROs should invest in a comprehensive understanding of their credibility among their target audience. This entails assessing their own credibility, evaluating the credibility of potential partners, and gauging the extent to which the content they disseminate challenges the existing beliefs of their audience. Acquiring this level of understanding often necessitates utilizing various tools and methods, such as survey data, social media listening, and conducting focus groups.

The potential consequences of misjudgment are high. Failing to accurately gauge credibility runs the risk of alienating stakeholders, reinforcing opposing viewpoints, and even jeopardizing the safety and well-being of the staff working within HROs. Hence, exploring strategies for enhancing credibility is fundamental to human rights work, as is building resiliency to continue operations in light of the potential for an increasingly hostile operating environment.

Once armed with a deepened understanding of these concepts, HROs can consider employing the range of tactics detailed above to bolster their ability to connect with key audiences. By carefully implementing a selection of these measures, organizations can establish and strengthen their credibility and target their campaign goals, ultimately fostering greater trust and support from stakeholders.

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