

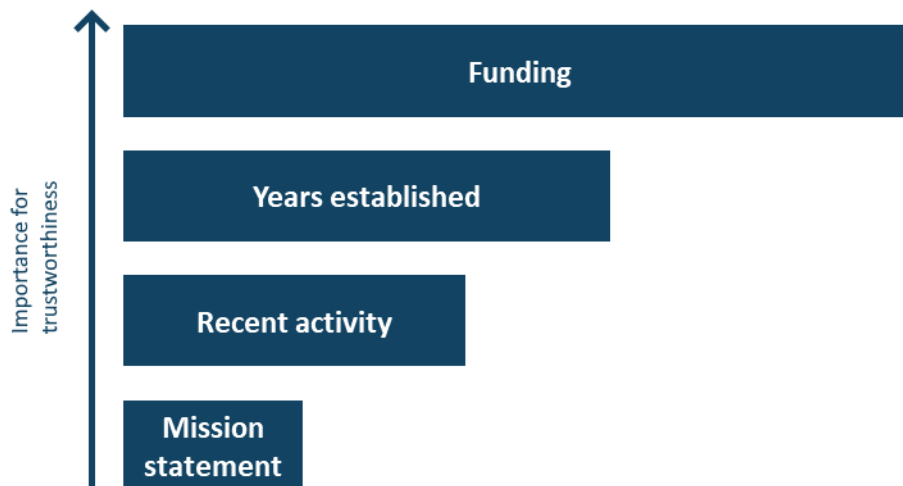
Credibility of Human Rights Organizations: South Africa

Overview

As attacks on human rights organizations (HROs) increase, it is imperative for them to establish and nurture local support networks to sustain their vital work and continue advancing global rights, even amid a dwindling space for civic engagement. Despite the important role of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), many people perceive them as having hidden agendas, not genuinely representing local interests, or potentially being corrupt. This perception significantly hampers HROs’ efforts to broaden their constituencies. Consequently, Freedom House conducted a multi-country survey to identify specific attributes that shape public perceptions of HROs in Africa, Asia, Eurasia, and Latin America.

Freedom House structured the survey to detect the attributes of HROs that drive public perception in ways that mimic real-world choices. Individual respondents were shown two profiles of hypothetical HROs that varied across four attributes: funding source, recent activities, mission statement, and year established. In this head-to-head matchup, Freedom House asked respondents to choose which of the two HROs they thought was more trustworthy based only on the attributes listed for those HROs. Analyzing the results allowed Freedom House to determine which attributes were more important for respondents in determining trustworthiness and, for each attribute, the values that enhanced or decreased trustworthiness of HROs. While the focus of the study was human rights organizations, the survey used the term “nongovernmental organization” or its acronym “NGO” based on the assumption that it is more commonly understood and used.

Key takeaways from the South Africa survey



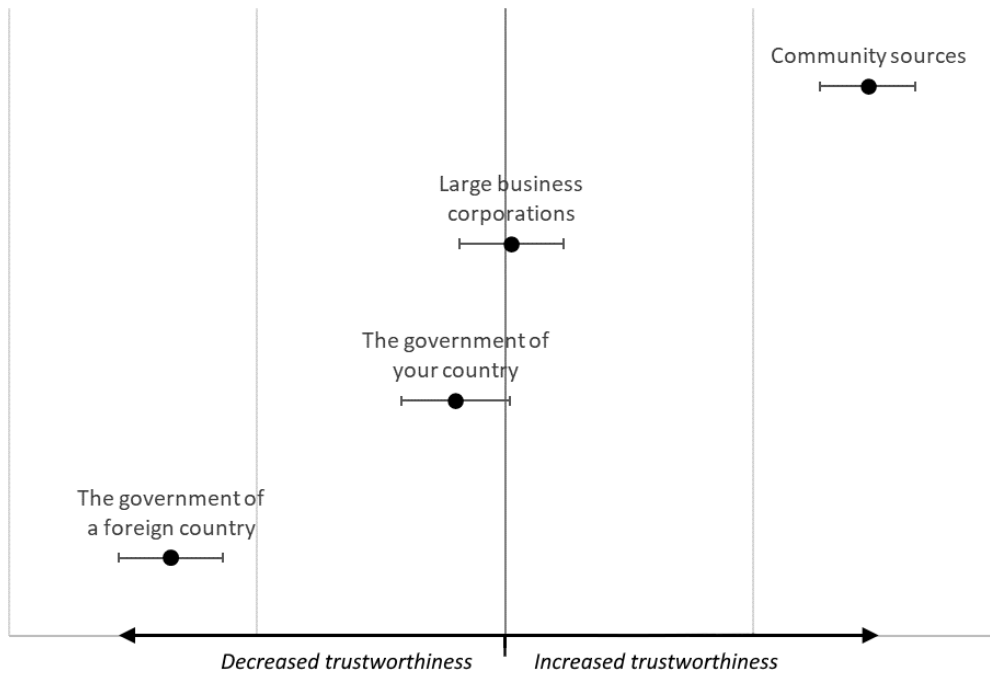
1. Funding was the most important attribute driving respondents’ choices around trustworthiness in head-to-head matchups of HROs, followed by years established. Recent activity and mission statement were the least important attributes.

2. Funding by community sources increased trustworthiness of HROs, while foreign government funding decreased trustworthiness.
3. South African respondents thought that HROs established for 10 and 20 years are significantly more trustworthy than those established for one and five years.
4. Among the recent activities of HROs, providing direct aid and services increased trustworthiness, while meeting with government officials to inform policy decreased trustworthiness.
5. While mission statements that included increasing women's economic empowerment decreased trustworthiness, the mission statement of an HRO was the least important factor in respondents' decision-making, and the differences in trustworthiness between mission statements were small.

Ranked attributes that affect the perception of trustworthiness of HROs

1. Funding

Among the attributes examined in the survey, funding was the biggest driver of trustworthiness. The survey varied funding across four levels: community sources, large business corporations, the South African government, and foreign governments.



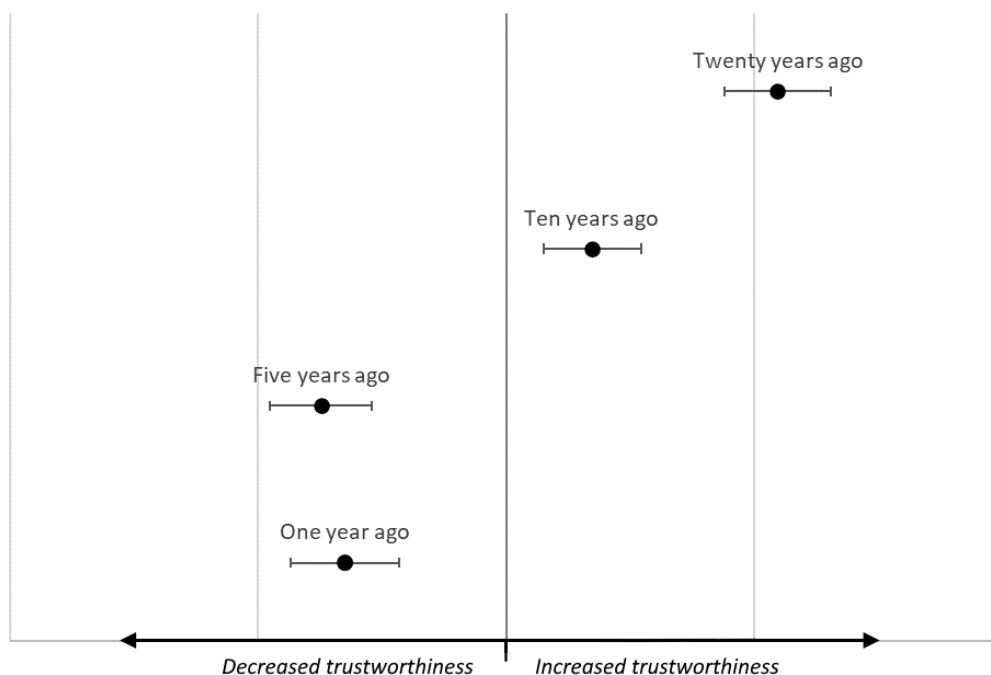
When choosing the more trustworthy of two comparable HROs, South African respondents were more likely to choose HROs funded by community sources and less likely to choose those funded by foreign governments. Compared with HROs funded by community sources, South African respondents were 15 percent, 17 percent, and 28 percent less likely to choose HROs funded by large business corporations, their own government, and foreign governments, respectively.

The survey asked South Africans how they think HROs they interacted with are usually funded and found that most thought HROs are funded through community sources, while only one-in-four thought they are funded through international

sources. It also asked South Africans about their perceptions of government and civil society institutions, and more than 95 percent of respondents thought that at least “some of them” are corrupt.

2. Years established

Age of an HRO was the second-most important factor for South African respondents in deciding the trustworthiness of HROs. The survey varied how many years the HRO has been established: one year, five years, ten years, and twenty years.

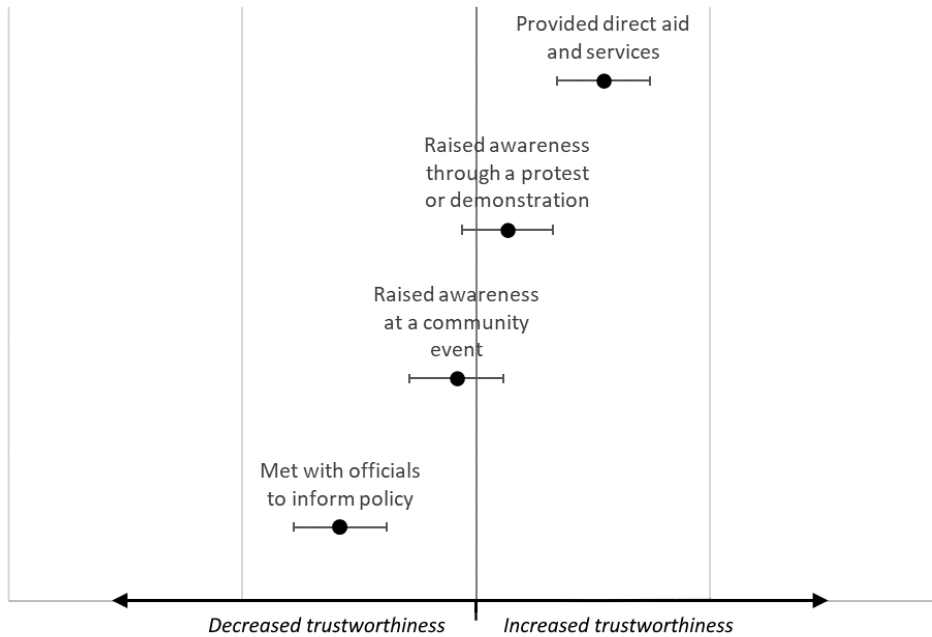


Regarding HROs’ age, South Africans are significantly more likely to choose older HROs as the more trustworthy HRO. Compared to twenty-year-old HROs, respondents were 8 percent less likely to choose ten-year-old HROs as the more trustworthy HRO and 18 percent less likely to choose one- and five-year-old HROs.

3. Recent activity

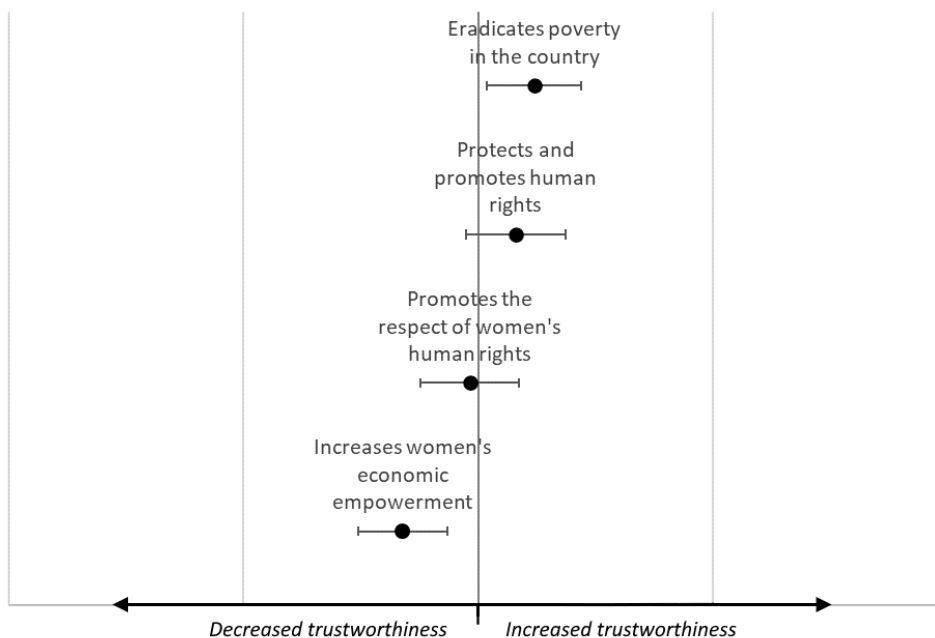
Among the attributes examined, recent activity of HROs was the third-most important attribute driving trustworthiness. Along this dimension, the HROs shown to respondents provided direct aid and services, raised awareness at community events, raised awareness through hosting peaceful protests or public demonstrations, or met with government officials to inform policy.

Among different activities, HROs that provide direct aid and services were the most likely to be chosen as the more trustworthy HRO, while those who meet with government officials to inform policy were the least likely to be chosen. The survey found that most South Africans engaged with HROs through reading HROs’ awareness materials or attending an HRO’s event, while few engaged with them through direct aid and services.



4. Mission statement

Mission statement was the least important attribute influencing trustworthiness. The survey varied mission statement across four levels: promotes the respect of women’s human rights, protects and promotes human rights, increases women’s economic empowerment, and eradicates poverty in the country.



Among the tested mission statements, HROs that aim to increase women’s economic empowerment were the least likely to be chosen. The differences in perceived trustworthiness between the other mission statements were small.

Men and women in South Africa diverge in their perceptions of trustworthiness of HROs based on the mission statement attribute. Women are about 7 percent more likely than men to choose HROs that aim to increase women’s economic

empowerment as the more trustworthy HRO, while men are about 6 percent more likely than women to choose HROs that aim to eradicate poverty as the more trustworthy HRO. Men are also 7 percent more likely than women to choose HROs that protect and promote human rights as the more trustworthy HRO.

Methodology

This survey was executed under the Human Rights Support Mechanism (HRSM), a USAID-funded and Freedom House-led Leader with Associates cooperative agreement. HRSM is implemented by the PROGRESS Consortium, a group of five organizations that support and implement human rights programming. To study perceptions of HROs, Freedom House worked with survey vendor Pollfish to conduct an online survey in nine countries, including South Africa. Freedom House developed this brief as a resource for the consortium; other democracy, human rights, and governance implementers; and USAID Missions.

The survey employed a conjoint experimental design to best understand the attribute-level determinants of public opinion on HROs. A conjoint experiment is a research method used to understand how individuals make choices by presenting them with hypothetical scenarios featuring multiple attributes or features. Participants are asked to select their preferred option from two alternatives, each varying in specific attributes. By analyzing the choices made, researchers can deduce the relative importance of these attributes and how they influence decision-making. In this case, individual survey respondents were asked to judge the profiles of two hypothetical HROs and select the organization that they think is most trustworthy and best reflects the opinions of people like them. Based on conversations with human rights practitioners, the HRSM learning specialist identified several attributes to study in the conjoint experiment: nascency of the organization, funding sources, mission statement, and style of recent activities. By asking people to choose the more trustworthy alternative in head-to-head matchups, HRSM can infer the importance of certain attributes, both alone and in context with one another.

The sample included one thousand South African respondents, but the sample used in the study is not representative of the South African population. Pollfish collects survey responses through partnership with mobile applications that offer in-app incentives, such as a token in a game or a free yoga class in a fitness application, to respondents in exchange for their participation. While this sample avoids using so-called career survey takers, the sample typically skews younger and urban, as only mobile phone users can participate and surveys should be fewer than 10 questions. Because of these factors, the results may have limited applicability for rural and older populations. Pollfish is compliant with the General Data Protection Regulation and is based in California.