



**HUMAN  
RIGHTS  
HOUSE**  
FOUNDATION

# **GOOD GOVERNANCE OF A HUMAN RIGHTS HOUSE**

A practical guide for the Network of Human  
Rights Houses and beyond



# ABOUT HUMAN RIGHTS HOUSE FOUNDATION

Human Rights House Foundation (HRHF) envisions a world in which everyone can freely and safely promote and enjoy all human rights. Empowered human rights defenders and strong and independent civil society are key to this vision.

HRHF establishes, supports, and connects Human Rights Houses – coalitions of civil society organisations working together to advance human rights at home and abroad. Today, more than 80 civil society organisations are united in Human Rights Houses in an international network active across Eastern Europe, the Western Balkans, and the Caucasus.

Together, we advocate for the freedoms of assembly, association, and expression and the right to be a human rights defender. These four rights underpin a strong and independent civil society and protect and empower human rights defenders.

HRHF is an international non-profit organisation headquartered in Oslo with an office in Geneva and representation in Brussels and Tbilisi. HRHF holds consultative status at the United Nations and participatory status at the Council of Europe.

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## ILLUSTRATIONS BY PABLO STANLEY

This guide uses illustrations from the "Miroodles" pack by [Pablo Stanley](#).





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# INTRODUCTION

This practical guide is a resource for [Human Rights Houses \(HRHs\)](#) and their member organisations. It is meant to stimulate self-reflection among Board members, management as well as staff of HRHs and their member organisations. It is designed to inspire HRHs and their member organisations to contribute to and tap into the experiences of others who strive to create secure, sustainable, resilient, efficient and accountable organisations that work to advance human rights in their countries and beyond.

While this guide is primarily for and based on the experiences of organisations in the [Network of Human Rights Houses](#), it includes principles relevant for civil society organisations beyond the Network.



Photograph taken during the 2023 Human Rights Houses Network Meeting.



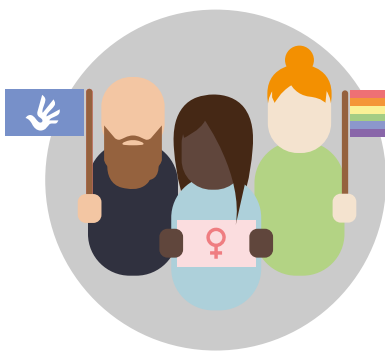
# ABOUT HUMAN RIGHTS HOUSES

## HUMAN RIGHTS HOUSE CONCEPT

Human Rights Houses are coalitions of civil society organisations working together to advance human rights at home and abroad. Their mandate, structure and focus reflect local needs and contexts and are decided by their member organisations. This empowers HRHs to help strengthen the local human rights community as a whole, enhancing the national capacity to uphold and protect human rights and independent civil society. Following the principles of good governance and upholding human rights standards is instrumental to achieving these objectives.

HRHF works with civil society organisations to establish and support Human Rights Houses as platforms for human rights activities. Civil society organisations working on human rights that wish to establish a Human Rights House in their countries are welcome to refer to the [Manual on Establishing a Human Rights House](#).

**While each Human Rights House is unique, all HRHs aim to be collaborative, independent, relevant, sustainable, effective, and united.**



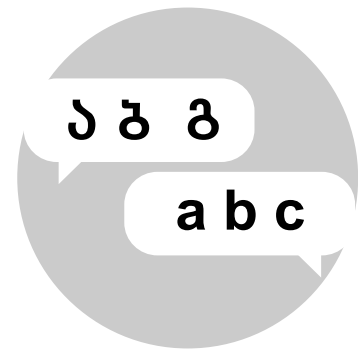
### Collaborative

Human rights organisations cooperate under one roof.



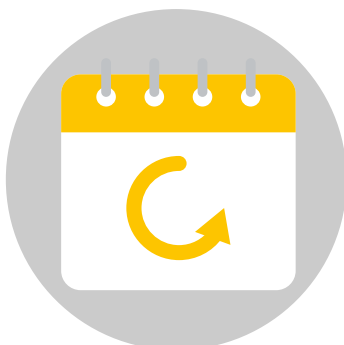
### Independent

HRHs and their members are autonomous.



### Relevant

Adapted to local needs, HRHs serve the human rights cause in a country.



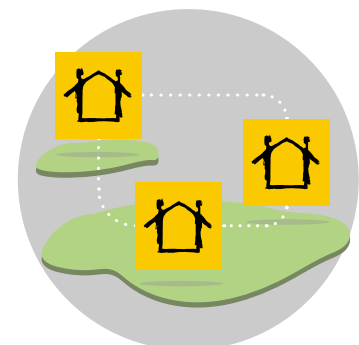
### Sustainable

Members benefit from shared space, reduced costs, and increased security.



### Effective

HRHs provide a platform to increase protection, visibility, and influence.



### United

HRHs are connected in an international network.



## NETWORK OF HUMAN RIGHTS HOUSES

All Human Rights Houses are united in an international [Network of Human Rights Houses](#) which serves as a catalyst for solidarity, cooperation, mobilisation and protection for human rights defenders at risk. Connected in this way, human rights defenders and their organisations are strengthened through cooperation, knowledge sharing and solidarity. Networking is essential to the Human Rights House concept. The Network provides opportunities for building connections and solidarity, sharing experiences and expertise, developing joint projects, conducting joint advocacy and campaigning and raising the visibility of the work of the HRHs.

The Network of Human Rights Houses focuses on the promotion and protection of the Four Rights which underpin independent civil society. These Four Rights are the rights to freedom of assembly, association, and expression, and the right to be a human rights defender. We also advocate for greater civic space, for the protection of human rights defenders and accountability for serious human rights violations.

## WALKING THE TALK: HUMAN RIGHTS AS A GOLDEN THREAD

HRHs have human rights at the core of their work and are therefore expected to adhere to them in their own internal functioning, governance, management and conduct. In practical terms, international human rights principles and standards should underpin internal policies and strategies of human

**READ MORE**

- ▶ [Establishing a Human Rights House: Manual](#)
- ▶ [Human Rights House Concept](#)
- ▶ [Human Rights Houses in the Network](#)



rights organisations. Human rights standards developed to protect specific groups can serve as models for internal policies and strategies addressing power imbalances and ensuring equal treatment (e.g. anti-harassment policy). Some human rights standards provide concrete advice on how to ensure that HRHs are physically accessible to persons with disabilities or ensure equal representation of different groups in their governing structures. By adhering to these values internally, Human Rights Houses not only ensure that human rights culture starts with them but also positively contribute to the well-being of their staff and membership.

**HUMAN RIGHTS HOUSE TBILISI**

**CASE STUDY**

Human Rights House Tbilisi has an unwritten policy of renting (when needed) physically accessible premises for all of their events. The premises must include features such as ramps, elevators and accessible restrooms to enable seamless access for all participants with disabilities. By ensuring that all events are inclusive and accessible, HRH Tbilisi demonstrates its commitment to diversity, human rights, and promotes equal participation and a sense of belonging. As a result, the audience of their events is more diverse, the discussions are enriched by more diverse views from the community and the positive image of the HRH is reinforced.

**HRHF**

**CASE STUDY**

Human Rights House Foundation aims to ensure gender equality in all of its operations and at all organisational levels (including governance, management and staff). For example, gender balance is considered during the election of new Board members, hiring of new staff, and when selecting speakers at events. HRHF reports on gender balance in public annual reports as a way to promote transparency and accountability.





# GOOD GOVERNANCE

## WHAT IS GOOD GOVERNANCE?

HRHF understands good governance as a “transparent decision-making process in which the leadership of a non-profit organisation, in an effective and accountable way, directs resources and exercises power on the basis of shared values.” To put it simply, good governance refers to the way decision-making authority is shared in the organisation and the way decisions are made.

## WHY IS GOOD GOVERNANCE IMPORTANT?

Good governance helps develop strong, healthy and sustainable organisations. Good governance contributes to:

### ▶ TRUST, RELIABILITY, SUSTAINABILITY

By establishing and following clear and fair standards of work and its oversight, organisations send a clear signal to their members, staff, constituencies, donors and other stakeholders that they are a reliable partner committed to their mission. In turn, this leads to increased trust, reliability and sustainability of organisations, be it in terms of funding, public support, solidarity, continuity, or institutional memory.

### ▶ EFFECTIVENESS AND EFFICIENCY

Adherence to the principles of good governance increases organisations' effectiveness and efficiency and allows them to spend less time and effort on standard situations and decisions, saving energy and resources. Organisations that follow good governance principles are better prepared for emergencies and crises; they are in a better position to both receive and manage funding.

### ▶ HEALTHY ORGANISATIONAL CULTURE

Good governance principles help foster healthy organisational culture and working environment. Separation of power, clear decision-making principles, defined roles and responsibilities and adherence to the organisation's mission and values contribute to a healthy organisational culture based on trust and cooperation among all employees.

## GOVERNANCE VS MANAGEMENT

As a rule, decision-making authority lies in the hands of the organisation's governing body, such as a General Assembly, Council or Annual meeting, and its management. Separation of the two is crucial to avoid decision-making power and resources being concentrated in the hands of one individual or a small group of people.

- The governing body decides on the strategic development of the organisation and has control of and support function to the management
- The management is tasked with day-to-day implementation of the Board's vision and decisions.

Professional governance and management are both equally important. Human Rights Houses must have well-functioning boards and management to achieve their mission and serve as joint platforms for organisations and human rights defenders in their respective countries.

To achieve this, member organisations of a Human Rights House should jointly ensure that there is a clear division of power and responsibilities between the governance and the management. The governing body should not engage in the day-to-day operations of the organisation. Instead, it should make policy and strategy decisions, oversee organisational performance, and ensure overall accountability.

## VALUE-BASED DECISION-MAKING

Value-based decision-making is deciding through the lens of the core values of the organisation and the outcomes that these values support. Value-based decision-making ensures that core values are integrated into the process of making decisions so that the outcomes of each decision are in line with the organisation's vision and identity. For example, if inclusivity is one of the core values of the organisation, then the decision-making processes as well as the actual decision of this organisation must facilitate meaningful engagement with and inclusion of groups.

<sup>1</sup> Footnote: In line with the definition of the Work Working Group on NGO Governance in Central and Eastern Europe. For further information, see: A Handbook of NGO Governance, Marilyn Wyatt <http://ecnl.org/a-handbook-of-ngo-governance-2>





## DECISION-MAKING PROCESSES IN THE NETWORK

In line with the Network's [Code of Conduct](#), decision-making processes should be “open, transparent and reliable” and we should observe the following standards in our decision-making: be participatory and responsive, consensus-oriented, transparent and accountable, equitable and inclusive.

### ► PARTICIPATORY AND RESPONSIVE

Important decisions should seek to engage those affected by the decision so that a decision takes into account all interests and angles and is more easily accepted by all members of a group. Any important decision should be a result of a discussion, a process during which opinions can be voiced, and dissenting views encouraged. While decision making by a single person or a narrow, closed circle of people is often quickest, value-based decision-making model encourages engagement of broader stakeholders in this process, as it leads to more effective and sustainable results.

Participatory decision-making ensures that those affected by the outcome are provided safe space to express their views and these views are listened to and acted upon, as appropriate. Participatory decision-making allows responsiveness to the needs and constraints of the target groups and communities served by HRHs, as it encourages HRHs and their members to reach out to their constituencies while planning and implementing programs.

### ► CONSENSUS-ORIENTED

Organisations committed to value-based decision making should try to reach decisions based on consensus, resorting to simple or qualified majority rule only to avoid deadlock. Decisions based on consensus create a sense of ownership and can positively contribute to successful implementation of the decision.

## SHOULD HUMAN RIGHTS HOUSES ADOPT THE NETWORK CODE OF CONDUCT OR DEVELOP THEIR OWN?

A Code of Conduct is essential to values-based decision-making. A Human Rights House can either adopt the Code of Conduct of the Network or develop, regularly review and adhere to its own Code of Conduct. Should a HRH choose to develop its own Code of Conduct, it must be in line with the Network's Code of Conduct and provide ethical guidance for the operations of the HRH and the conduct of its members, leadership, and employees. A Code of Conduct is not meant to regulate every aspect of behaviour. Instead, the organisation's mission and core values enshrined in the Code of Conduct will help its members and staff act in line with the organisation's vision and identity.





## ► TRANSPARENT AND ACCOUNTABLE

Transparent decision-making processes and direct communication with the members, stakeholders, and beneficiaries about the values that informed concrete decisions is critical to ensure buy-in and smooth implementation. It helps those affected by the decision to understand and appreciate the rationale behind the choice, even when this is not their preferred outcome. Ensuring transparency of actions (e.g. through public or donor reporting), is key to building trust within and towards the human rights community.

### TRANSPARENCY VS SAFETY

In restrictive environments, where some Human Rights Houses operate, full transparency may not be possible, as it may jeopardize the safety and security of human rights defenders and their organisations. However, even in the most restrictive environments, some degree of transparency and accountability can be achieved, and the HRHs and member organisations are encouraged to find the balance. However, attempts to be transparent while remaining cautious about safety are both necessary and possible. Transparency is sometimes misunderstood as sharing everything with everyone.

Three questions should be asked when thinking about transparency:

- What to disclose?
- To whom to disclose?
- When to disclose?



#### What to disclose?

The type and quality of information disclosed is the main consideration for achieving transparency. Not all information is disclosable or should be disclosed, including personal information or information that can potentially harm the members, partners, or beneficiaries of the organisation. This said, it is important to consider this issue in advance and to create a document that will detail what type of information will not be disclosed and why, and how a decision about non-disclosure is made for those types of information that are not covered by the said document.

#### To whom to disclose?

**Donors.** At a minimum, transparency is owed to the donors that fund the work of a HRH or its member CSOs. It is advisable to build relationships with the donors so that they are aware and understand the risks that the organisation faces. If this level of trust and transparency cannot be achieved or it is questionable

whether honest reporting and disclosure of information to a donor is safe, it may be necessary to evaluate whether it is wise to take funds from such a donor. If the issue of trust is not related to a donor but to a secondary or tertiary party that could gain access to sensitive information, a request can be made to the donor to take extra precautions to ensure confidentiality of sensitive information.

**Human rights defenders.** Transparency is also owed to the fellow human rights defenders, to keep the community informed about the work of the HRH, both to avoid duplication and to let HRDs know what type of support they can receive from the HRH or its members.

**Public.** It goes without saying that transparency is owed to the general public, as it improves the latter's understanding of the work of CSOs and HRDs and helps to defend against accusations about CSOs misusing funds or being self-serving. Unfortunately, in restrictive environments, it is difficult and often impossible to be fully transparent to the public. However, it is still possible to provide some context to donors, stakeholders, beneficiaries, or the public, so that stakeholders understand the rationale behind concrete decisions.

*Disclosure and reporting to public authorities is not addressed in this section as these are complex, context-specific legal issues that differ from country to country, as ill-democracies and authoritarian regimes are known for their practice of imposing burdensome reporting and disclosure requirements on CSOs, to thwart their operations.*

#### When to disclose?

Being proactive and sharing information in anticipation of the public interest or need is a golden standard for good governance. This term is mostly used in the context of national and local public authorities, but CSOs are increasingly proactive in publishing information about their members, governance, projects, budgets, and procurements on their websites. When and how to disclose specific information is to be decided with careful consideration of various contextual factors, including the need to enhance the public's trust toward CSOs and the commitment to ensuring the safety and security of partners and beneficiaries.

*Programmatic and financial reporting to donors on project implementation is generally regulated in the grant agreements and is not covered under this point.*

## ► EQUITABLE AND INCLUSIVE

HRHF and HRHs believe that all human beings are equal and strive to promote equitable and inclusive societies where people with diverse backgrounds, identities, and perspectives are entitled to fulfil their potential free of discrimination and oppression. The commitment to human rights including equitable and inclusive work is made by each HRH at the time of their creation. The Network's Code of Conduct signed by the HRHs underscores the obligation to respect people and groups of different backgrounds and cultures, not to engage in discriminatory practices, and to apply a human rights-based approach in their daily work. The principles of equity and inclusiveness underpin the relations between member organisations in a HRH as well as relations among the HRHs in the Network and should guide all the decision-making.

# THE BOARD

## ROLE OF THE BOARD

The Board is the governing body responsible for providing strategic direction, control and oversight of the organisation. A well-functioning Board:

- Steers the organisation, making sure that it identifies and works towards its mission, strategies and policies.
- Hires and dismisses the head of the organisation.
- Promotes sustainability of the organisation, safeguarding institutional memory, assessing risks, and ensuring legal and ethical integrity and accountability.
- Oversees the financial aspects of the organisation, approves the organisation's budget and accounts, monitors spending and puts adequate internal controls in place.
- Serves as a link to and maintains the trust of those constituencies that the organisation serves.
- Assures financial integrity and solvency of the organisation, which means that the Board has an obligation to guide or even to contribute to the management's efforts of raising funds needed to sustain the organisation and to advance its mission.

## EXPERIENCE IN THE NETWORK SHOWS THAT WELL-FUNCTIONING HUMAN RIGHTS HOUSES HAVE BOARDS THAT:

- ▶ Play an active strategic role and leave day-to-day operations to the management, thus not overloading the Board members
- ▶ Have procedures for the election of the Board, including its Chairperson
- ▶ Have procedures for decision-making in the Board
- ▶ Document Board decisions and oversee their implementation.



## EXAMPLE: BOARD OF A HUMAN RIGHTS HOUSE

HRHF encourages all member organisations to be represented in the Board of a HRH, as a way to ensure that values of equality, inclusion and transparency are respected. This recommendation is based on the experience of two HRHs, in which all members were represented at the General Assembly, which met once a year, while a smaller group of members were represented at the Board, which met and made decisions regularly. That practice led to unequal access to information and decision making, and ultimately caused the members who were not part of the Board to question equality of their partnership. In one case the issue was resolved by changing the statutes of the HRH and ensuring that all member organisations had a representative in the Board.

## BOARD OF A HUMAN RIGHTS HOUSE

In most cases, the Board of a HRH consists of representatives of several or all member organisations. Election and rotation procedures, including election of the Chairperson, are decided at the time the HRH is established and revised as needed.

As Board members of the HRHs are also representatives of member organisations, the issue of divided loyalty is something to be aware of and potentially managed. Sometimes, conflict of interest situations might arise, as the interests of the HRH might not align with the interests of an individual member organisation, represented in the Board of the HRH. Board instructions and Conflict of Interest policy are internal procedures that could provide guidance and help navigate such situations.

Furthermore, to avoid challenges related to fulfilling their fiduciary duties towards the HRH, an external evaluation commissioned by HRHF in 2018 to evaluate the relevance of the Human Rights House concept recommended that Boards of the HRHs open Board membership to external stakeholders, including those from other HRHs.



# MANAGEMENT

## MANAGEMENT OF A HUMAN RIGHTS HOUSE

The management of an organisation is tasked with executing strategic decisions of the Board and carrying out day-to-day operations.

There is no single way to ensure the professional management of a Human Rights House. The management structure and policies of a particular HRH will depend on a variety of factors, including country-specific situation, funding opportunities, size of the HRH, strategy, the scope of the HRH activities, etc. HRHs will also experience changes over time, as the management will be adjusted to be able to deliver on the HRH strategy.

## HIRING OF DIRECTOR / COORDINATOR OF A HUMAN RIGHTS HOUSE

The expertise and experience of the person in charge of the management of the HRH (director or coordinator), together with their job description, is one of the important factors contributing to the relevance and effectiveness of a HRH<sup>1</sup>. It is the responsibility of the Board to hire the head of the HRH. HRHF can provide support in the process, from the development of the position description to participation in the hiring interviews.

The experience of existing HRHs shows that in the HRHs where members do not implement larger joint projects, the coordination role can be fulfilled by one of the member organisations or a coordinator hired to ensure smooth and timely communication between the members of the HRH and the Network of Human Rights Houses. As HRHs grow, there might be a need to add a more senior position of a manager/director, as the increased scale and scope of activities require more time, experience, and skills.

One of the factors contributing to successful recruitment is the hiring process. Organisational needs should be clearly defined and captured in a position description, the hiring process should be transparent and successful candidates must have adequate skills to fulfil the responsibilities of the position.

## INTERNAL POLICIES AND PROCEDURES

As HRHs develop and grow, it becomes important to introduce internal policies and procedures regulating processes and human relations. For example, a human resources manual or an Employee Handbook might be a useful document to capture the practices of the HRH.

Internal policies and procedures that define hiring and dismissal procedures, roles and responsibilities of all staff, employee benefits, support flexible working hours and foster organisational culture of care have all shown to positively contribute to well-functioning HRHs. Key elements of any internal policies and procedures are that they need to be known, understood and used by everyone.

### EXPERIENCE IN THE NETWORK SHOWS THAT WELL-FUNCTIONING HRHS HAVE:

- ▶ Transparent hiring and dismissal procedures
- ▶ Position descriptions outlining roles and responsibilities of all staff
- ▶ A focus on developing and fostering culture of care and workplace wellbeing<sup>2</sup>



<sup>1</sup> Finding of the 2018 external Human Rights House Concept evaluation.

<sup>2</sup> Workplace wellbeing includes all aspects of working life, such as the quality and safety of the physical working environment, contracts and processes regulating employer and employee relations (employment contract, salary, vacation, working hours, other benefits, etc.), organisational culture, etc.

# FOSTERING AN ORGANISATIONAL CULTURE OF CARE

In 2022, representatives of the Network of Human Rights Houses gathered for an in-person workshop entitled “Good governance in times of crisis”. The group prepared the following tips on how to foster an organisational culture of care that contributes to the wellbeing of its employees.

## WORKING TIME

- ▶ Accept flexible work hours and focus more on what employees need to deliver rather than when the work done
- ▶ Plan evaluation, reflection and idea generation during slow periods in the organisation
- ▶ Agree on joint office hours and have a rule not to communicate outside these hours unless it is an emergency
- ▶ Allow time for professional development of staff, including managers

## ORG CULTURE

- ▶ Foster organisational culture that adheres to democratic processes, human rights based approach and organisational values
- ▶ Have roles and responsibilities clearly defined and communicated to all staff
- ▶ Encourage employees to take care of their wellbeing
- ▶ Be transparent about benefits available to staff

## WELL-BEING OFFER

- ▶ Aim to have dedicated financial resources for annual medical check-ups and health insurance of employees
- ▶ Organise annual retreats for psychosocial support as well as team building / artistic activities
- ▶ Have an open offer for well-being support that meets the needs of staff, be it physical, mental or other



Participants of the workshop in Vilnius, September 2022.



## FINANCIAL MANAGEMENT

Financial management entails planning, organisation, control and monitoring of financial resources for an organisation to achieve its goals. Sound financial management is a cornerstone of any civil society organisations work. It builds trust with donors and supporters and lays ground for financial sustainability.

The complexity of financial management will naturally vary, depending on the complexity of the work that HRHs do. However, the following four elements are essential to sound financial management:

- **Planning** - budgets are financial representation of the organisation's work plan, where activities are assigned monetary value. It is advisable for HRHs to have a joint annual budget that shows all income and expenses. When budgeting, it is important that costs are estimated as accurately as possible. For the budget to be a relevant representation of organisation's plans, it needs to be updated regularly.
- **Organising** - establishing how financial management is carried out, establishing who is responsible for what and providing instructions on what employees and the HRH can and cannot do. Sound internal policies that are understood and implemented contribute to efficient use of resources and give donors confidence that the HRH can use resources efficiently.

- **Controlling** - a system of checks and balances to ensure proper internal control and risk management of financial resources. HRHs must implement "four eyes principle" which requires that any financial activity is reviewed by another competent individual in the organisation and it takes at least two people to approve an action before it is taken.
- **Monitoring and reporting** - ensuring that expenses are tracked against budget and properly documented. Where possible, an external audit should be commissioned to verify accounts of the HRH. However, that task can be entrusted to a competent member organisation or another external party.

### EXPERIENCE IN THE NETWORK SHOWS THAT WELL-FUNCTIONING HRHS:

- ▶ Maintain overall annual budget and accounts, which include total contributions and expenses
- ▶ Ensure proper accounting and internal control
- ▶ Set annual salaries for staff
- ▶ When possible, have an independent audit

### RESOURCE: COST SHARING IN HUMAN RIGHTS HOUSES THAT HAVE PREMISES

Most HRHs either own or rent joint premises. HRHF has developed a formula that offers a fair way of sharing costs among the organisations that use both individual offices and joint space in the HRH.

The formula has been tested in numerous HRHs over the years. Scan the QR code or [click here](#) to download the formula!



# MEMBERSHIP OF HUMAN RIGHTS HOUSES

Human Rights Houses are created by independent human rights organisations that share the values of cooperation and believe in being stronger together. HRHs are thus membership-based organisations that bring together like-minded actors to promote and protect human rights. By joining a HRH, member organisations maintain their autonomy and their core human rights work while gaining a joint platform to work together towards a common goal.

At the same time, member organisations are key drivers of success behind HRHs. Members decide how they wish to organise their joint work and determine the structure, focus and strategy of a HRH. Two key factors that make HRHs stronger and better able to address the human rights challenges are a shared vision for a HRH among member organisations, and active, engaged and invested member organisations.

## SHARED VISION AMONG MEMBER ORGANISATIONS

A shared vision is what brings human rights organisations together to establish a HRHs. Having a common understanding of the role that the HRH plays in the country and how that role relates to the missions of its member organisations is key to amplifying collective efforts and avoiding real or perceived competition among all actors involved. A vision that is shared can amplify the missions of its member organisations and lead to a bigger human rights impact. At the same time, differing views of the members about the HRH and their own role within the HRH can lead to dysfunctional relationships among the members, as well as between the members and the HRH itself.

Experience in the Network shows that there is value in member organisations revisiting and adjusting the vision regularly. Internal and external changes might call for redefining the vision for a HRH to make sure that it meets the expectations and needs of its members and broader civil society in the country.

## HUMAN RIGHTS HOUSE TBILISI

### CASE STUDY

Human Rights House Tbilisi was established as a centre providing services to victims of human rights violations in one place. Over time, members have redefined a joint vision of HRH Tbilisi that focuses on the protection of Georgian and Eastern European HRDs and the empowerment of local and newly established human rights organisations and groups in Georgia. The Board and the management of HRH Tbilisi have remained true to this vision and have consistently implemented the strategic priorities of HRH Tbilisi. As a result, HRH Tbilisi established itself as an important regional actor in Eastern Europe successfully protecting Georgian, Azerbaijani, Belarusian and Ukrainian human rights defenders at risk and serving as one of the key pillars of protection infrastructure in Georgia. HRH Tbilisi has also gained recognition and trust among local HRDs and organisations/initiatives all across Georgia, so much so that it has become a platform for many diverse regional defenders.





## ACTIVE, ENGAGED AND INVESTED MEMBERS

Membership strength is another important factor contributing to the good governance of HRHs. This includes engaged and invested current members but also a willingness to accept new members.

Engaged members invest time, financial resources and participation in the HRH as it provides them with mutually beneficial experience and value that advances the goals of both the HRH and their organisations individually. Active members provide strategic direction for the development of the HRH, and contribute to strengthening the joint platform for human rights work in their country. Strong, active, engaged and visible members are key for a successful HRH, as they are the owners, decision-makers and representatives of the HRH.

In the ever-changing human rights environment, HRHs should have routines for reviewing their membership. The engagement of members is naturally susceptible to change. Members might have periods when they are engaged more or less, based on available capacities, priorities, needs and willingness of members and the HRH. To ensure that the membership remains mutually beneficial for the member organisations and the HRH itself, regular review of the membership is a must.

The Human Rights House Concept is flexible and allows members to leave and new members to join the HRH. Inclusion of new members to the HRH can bring new ideas but also help the HRH better address new emerging needs of the local community. In order to do so, HRHs are thus strongly advised to develop specific membership criteria and procedures for accepting and excluding members and reviewing membership.

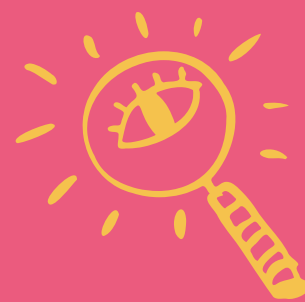
## EXPERIENCE IN THE NETWORK SHOWS THAT WELL-FUNCTIONING HRHS HAVE:

- ▶ Shared vision for the HRH among member organisations
- ▶ Active, engaged and invested member organisations
- ▶ Criteria for inclusion and exclusion of members as well as membership review procedures



## READ MORE

- ▶ Establishing a Human Rights House: Manual
- ▶ Human Rights House Concept
- ▶ Human Rights Houses in the Network



# STRATEGY

Human rights work is an investment that takes time.

Civil society organisations committed to good governance should have a clear vision, long-term mission, and a multi-year strategy that allows them to work towards the human rights change in society they want to achieve. Having a long-term strategy that outlines joint vision, mission and goals can inspire commitment to the HRH among current members and may attract new ones.

Each good strategy should explain the theory of change: what kind of change the HRH aims to achieve and how that change is expected to happen in a particular context. HRHs should agree on their theory of change and the impact that it tries to achieve, and then work backwards to determine what steps need to be taken to achieve that impact. Risk assessment is an important part of the strategy.

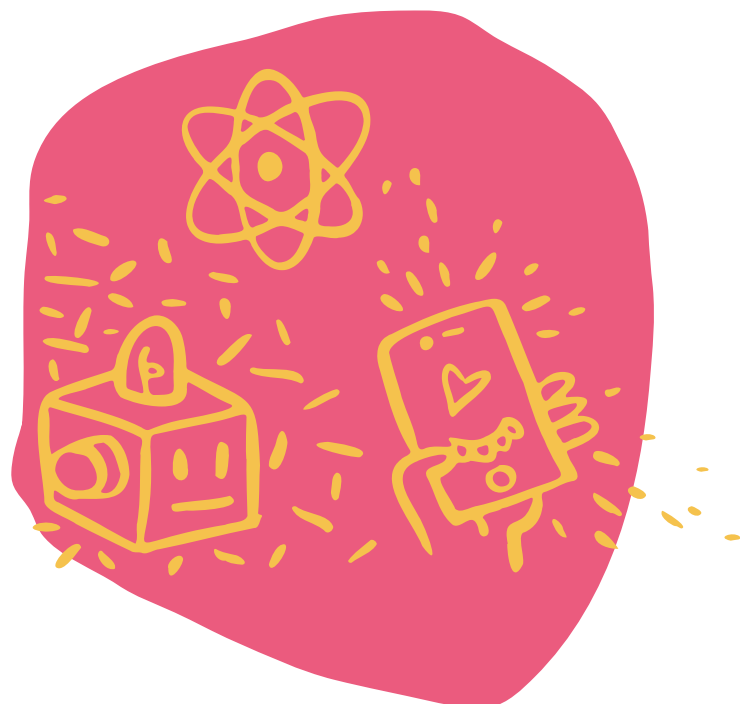
## EXPERIENCE IN THE NETWORK SHOWS THAT HUMAN RIGHTS HOUSES WITH SUCCESSFUL STRATEGIES HAVE:

- ▶ Defined what the HRH aims to achieve and how
- ▶ Developed implementation plans to achieve the strategy
- ▶ Followed a consultative process of involving the broader community in defining the strategy
- ▶ Assessed risks and prepared a risk assessment plan

## HUMAN RIGHTS HOUSE FOUNDATION

### CASE STUDY

HRHF has long been resorting to results-based management to implement its strategies. It is HRHF's preferred management strategy, not only because it helps with monitoring and reporting, but also because it ensures a focus on achieving results, improving performance, and integrating lessons learned into management decisions. While the HRHs are recommended to introduce results-based management in their operations, adoption of other management strategies that help steer the efforts of the HRH and its members toward fulfilling their strategic missions and goals is just as welcome.





# GOOD GOVERNANCE IN TIMES OF CRISIS

During recent years, we have witnessed unprecedented crises globally, regionally and nationally: the COVID-19 pandemic, the brutal suppression of peaceful protests in the run-up to and aftermath of the 2020 presidential election and ongoing mass repressions in Belarus, the escalation of military conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan; the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine and repressions against civil society and political opposition in Russia, to mention a few. None of these crises are totally alike and yet all of them severely affect civil society organisations. While there is no one recipe for good governance of organisations in crisis, experience shows that good governance principles are just as important to maintain when confronted with such situations.

Depending on the type of crisis, some good governance principles may seem and be harder to implement. Decisions previously taken during regular board meetings might need to be taken more urgently. An organisation might urgently need to shift its activities and realign its resources accordingly.

**Amidst any crisis, there is often an inclination to overlook good governance principles, even if temporarily, because there is a lack of time, human or financial resources and there are other, more pressing needs and concerns that need to be addressed here and now.**

However, organisations that follow the principles of good governance are generally better prepared for crisis as there is sufficient internal and external trust, responsible decision-making, clear processes and procedures that give leadership and management the possibility to manoeuvre difficult situations, and people know what they need to do, how to approach situations and who to turn to when a standard solution is not available.

Even in the most difficult times, trust remains key: trust built within the team, between the Board and management of an organisation as well as among the organisation's members can help cope with any crisis.

To ensure continued adherence to the organisation's mission, values-based decision-making and empowering work environment, HRHs and their member organisations affected by any type of crisis are encouraged to consider the following:

## ► ENSURE PARTICIPATORY DECISION-MAKING WHENEVER POSSIBLE

While this may seem time-consuming, decisions made by groups of people sustain a system of checks and balances and legitimise decisions both internally and externally, even in crises situations. Decisions should be documented. For various reasons, a lot of decisions today are made on various messaging platforms rather than in meetings, which may seem sufficient as a record-keeping system. However, it is best to copy and paste decisions into a separate document for archiving purposes, since they may need to be referred to at a later stage by people not participating in the chats.

## ► MAINTAIN INFORMATION FLOW

Some crises require different levels of access to information to ensure the security of organisations and their beneficiaries. The usual channels of conveying information might no longer be sufficient. In times of crisis, stress and uncertainty, it is ever more important to inform people not only about what decisions have been made but also about the process: why and how a certain decision was made and how this decision affects everybody.

## ► ENSURE A SAFE SPACE FOR CRITICAL REMARKS AND QUESTIONS

Allow and create space for staff to ask questions, and voice their concerns and critical remarks. Encourage critical voices to suggest solutions as they see them and explain why. Give proposed solutions consideration wherever possible and inform staff about the results.

## ► REVISIT ESTABLISHED PROCEDURES IF NECESSARY, RATHER THAN ABANDONING THEM ALTOGETHER

Even in times of crisis, be consistent in terms of following the established procedures. However, if the procedures do not seem to work or are not feasible under the circumstances, consider revising them rather than abandoning them altogether. In a difficult external context think of what degree of transparency and accountability you can maintain internally and externally rather than giving up on them.

## ► FIND TIME TO CHECK IN WITH STAFF

All crisis seem to have at least one thing in common: they create a sense of lack of time and resources for anything other than actions directly aimed at dealing with the crisis. At the same time, they also give rise to uncertainty, stress, confusion and otherwise negatively affect people. It is important to find time and ways to informally check in with the team so that people feel each other's solidarity and support, and nobody feels left out.



# SHARE YOUR GOOD PRACTICE WITH US

## WE WOULD LOVE TO HEAR FROM YOU

This guide has been created to be a living document that can be updated with new case studies and good practices. If you have a case or practice that you would like to share with us, then please get in touch.



**GET IN TOUCH**







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