

Defending the defenders:

how funders can respond to increased dangers facing human rights and environmental defenders

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Some maintain that God put non-human animals on earth to provide for the needs of their human masters. Over the past half-century, growing numbers of people have come to recognise the sentience and even personhood of all species and advocate for their rights within a single, interdependent community or ecosystem of which humans are but one part.

For this ecosystem to sustain itself, the rights of all persons, human and non-human animals must be respected. Ironically, global society has evolved to a point where human lives are put on the line every day, to ensure that respect. Human rights and animal rights defenders face increasing dangers, deserving the attention of the philanthropic sector.

The Arcus Foundation's two mission areas – social justice focused on LGBT communities and conservation of great ape populations and their habitats – are distinct. Each programme has its strategy complete with goals, outcomes and measures of success. And yet, both share a common, growing concern – the increased threat to individuals and organisations defending human rights and the environment.

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This concern is framed within a larger context that funders and NGOs have dubbed 'the closing space for civil society'. Over the last few years, many funders within the human rights community have begun to coalesce around this issue, focusing attention on increased government restrictions on cross-border philanthropy, tighter controls on dissent that include complex NGO reporting requirements and crackdowns on public demonstrations. Human rights and environmental defenders, in particular, have borne a heavy price for their activism and advocacy in opposition to government actions and corporate hegemony.

One of the most horrifying examples is that of Berta Cáceres, a defender of the environment and of indigenous land rights in Honduras, and awardee of the prestigious Goldman Environmental Prize, who was assassinated after multiple death and kidnapping threats. Two other Hondurans – Rene Martinez, a



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human rights defender who ran a violence prevention centre and transgender activist Paola Barraza, were both murdered in 2016.

We can also point to the 2014 shooting of Emmanuel de Merode, director of the Virunga National Park in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, a UNESCO-designated World Heritage Site and home to the world's critically endangered mountain gorillas. A 2016 [Global Witness report](#) listed mining as the industry most linked to murders of environmental defenders, followed by agribusiness, hydroelectric dams and logging.

As these examples increase in number, funders must make every effort to defend those individuals who are engaged in environmental conservation and human rights work in hostile contexts. Arcus has supported several intermediary organisations including the Urgent Action Fund and the Fund for Global Human Rights, to protect and safeguard those on the frontlines.

On the conservation side, we co-funded the Oscar-nominated film *Virunga*, which enabled millions of people to learn about the park, its mountain gorillas

and the threat posed to de Merode and other defenders experienced on a daily basis.

Arcus has joined other foundations in the Funders' Initiative for Civil Society, a coordinated response to the closing space that is encouraging donors to align their resources to enable cross-border grant making and civil society. By raising the visibility of these issues, and coordinating with local NGOs to impact policy and diplomacy, funders can use our influence and resources to perpetuate civil society and ensure that the work of individuals protecting our earth and all its inhabitants can advance without constraint.

Annette Lanjouw and Jason McGill are co-executive directors of the Arcus Foundation. Arcus is dedicated to the idea that people can live in harmony with one another and the natural world. To learn more, visit www.arcusfoundation.org