



(REVIEW ARTICLE)



The role of human rights organizations in shaping civil society

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World Journal of Advanced Research and Reviews, 2025, 27(01), 1148-1153

Publication history: Received on 28 May 2025; revised on 05 July 2025; accepted on 08 July 2025

Article DOI: <https://doi.org/10.30574/wjarr.2025.27.1.2539>

Abstract

This study explores the role of human rights organizations in the development of civil society and addresses the issue of their legal status on the international stage. The relevance of the topic is underscored by the growing number of such organizations and their increasing influence at both national and international levels. The paper examines several key areas in which human rights organizations impact civil society, including the protection of human rights, raising public awareness, contributing to the formation of international norms, and engaging in cooperation with governments, other institutions, and marginalized or civically engaged groups. A central issue discussed is the lack of a clearly defined legal status for human rights organizations globally. The study proposes that the international community formally recognize and standardize this status. This proposal is justified by the notable rise in the number of human rights organizations and their expanding influence on global practice. In addition, the paper reflects on how civil society interacts with different domains of public life, particularly the political and economic spheres. This research is intended for legal professionals, human rights advocates, and members or organizers of civic organizations, as well as concerned individuals seeking to contribute to the protection and promotion of human rights.

Keywords: Human Rights Organization; Civil Society; Human Rights; Protection of Rights; Influence; Legal Framework; International Norms; Social Structure

1. Introduction

According to Hugo Grotius [5], human rights are the moral claims individuals invoke within the societies they inhabit—values and attributes inherent to human beings by virtue of their humanity. Henry Shue's "tripartite duty" theory, introduced in 1980 [5], asserts that states hold a threefold obligation to respect, protect, and fulfill the fundamental human rights of their citizens.

This study focuses on the contribution of human rights organizations to the development of civil society institutions. Most of these organizations do not operate primarily as service providers but rather as politically engaged actors whose activities are often more visible and, at times, contentious. Their outspoken stance on rights issues frequently brings them into direct conflict with state institutions, which are typically the target of their criticism. Beyond their institutional function, these organizations not only embed themselves into the structure of civil society but also take on the role of defending the very space in which civic engagement occurs—safeguarding its boundaries and resisting efforts to curtail it.

The aim of this research is to examine the various ways in which human rights organizations influence civil society, while also addressing one of the central challenges they face. The relevance of this work stems from the growing number of human rights organizations worldwide. Its originality lies in identifying their position within the structure of civil society and raising the issue of the legal ambiguity surrounding their status at the international level.

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2. Methods and Materials

This study employs a method of data collection and structural analysis. Drawing on sources [2, 3, 4], the research investigates the place of civil society within broader human systems, particularly in relation to the political and economic domains. Sources [1, 5, 6, 7, 8] are used to explore the specific characteristics of human rights organizations, their roles, and their impact within civil society. The methodology centers on differentiating and describing the mechanisms through which these organizations exert influence. Key conceptual terms are defined and embedded into an integrated analytical framework. A descriptive approach enables an in-depth analysis of the role of human rights organizations, while identifying causal relationships provides the basis for the conclusion that a unified legal status is needed for all such organizations operating within the sphere of international law.

3. Results and Discussion

Civil society comprises a diverse set of interconnected elements, including civic associations (environmental, youth, cultural, and others), human rights organizations, churches and religious communities, professional associations, independent media, various forms of civic engagement and protest, local self-governance, and certain political parties and movements. It also encompasses non-state institutions related to property, labor, entrepreneurship, upbringing, education, culture, the media, and the family unit [3, 6]. Figure 1 illustrates how civil society intersects with different domains of public life [2].

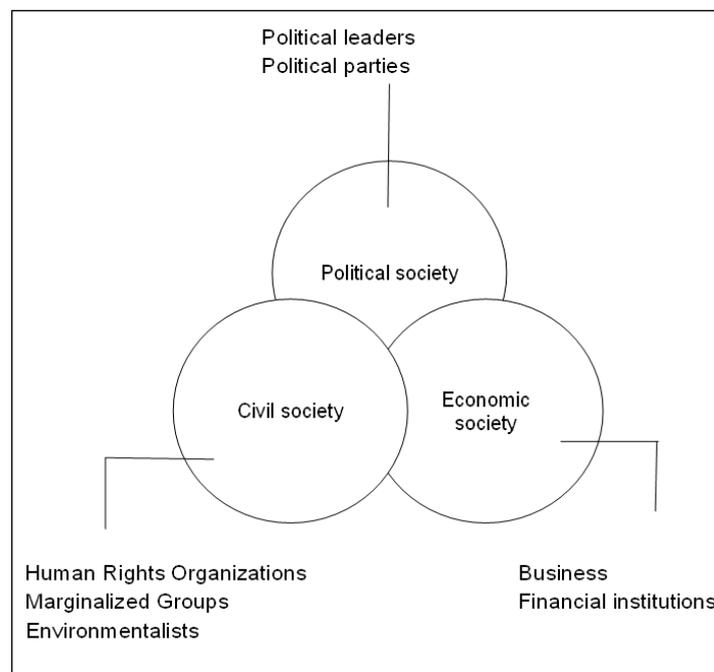


Figure 1 Groups of Civil, Political, and Economic Societies [2]

This study focuses on human rights organizations. These organizations play a critical role in shaping civil society by contributing to national development, fostering social cohesion, and reinforcing stability and security. Their influence manifests through several key mechanisms.

First, through the protection of human rights. Human rights organizations combat individual rights violations, provide direct assistance to those affected, and advocate for changes in national, regional, and international law. They monitor human rights conditions at local, national, and global levels, conduct research, document violations, and produce detailed analytical reports. These reports aim to bring issues of accountability to the attention of state institutions and other stakeholders. The monitoring and reporting function is essential for exposing hidden abuses, identifying systemic patterns, and proposing concrete policy responses to address the problems uncovered.

Such organizations offer legal support and representation to individuals and communities whose rights have been violated. Their services include consultations, legal representation in court or other institutions, and broader advocacy efforts. These actions help victims gain access to justice and assert their right to protection.

In addition to assisting individuals, human rights organizations strive to reform policies and legal frameworks that perpetuate human rights violations. Their efforts are grounded in a rights-based framework, illustrated in Figure 2.

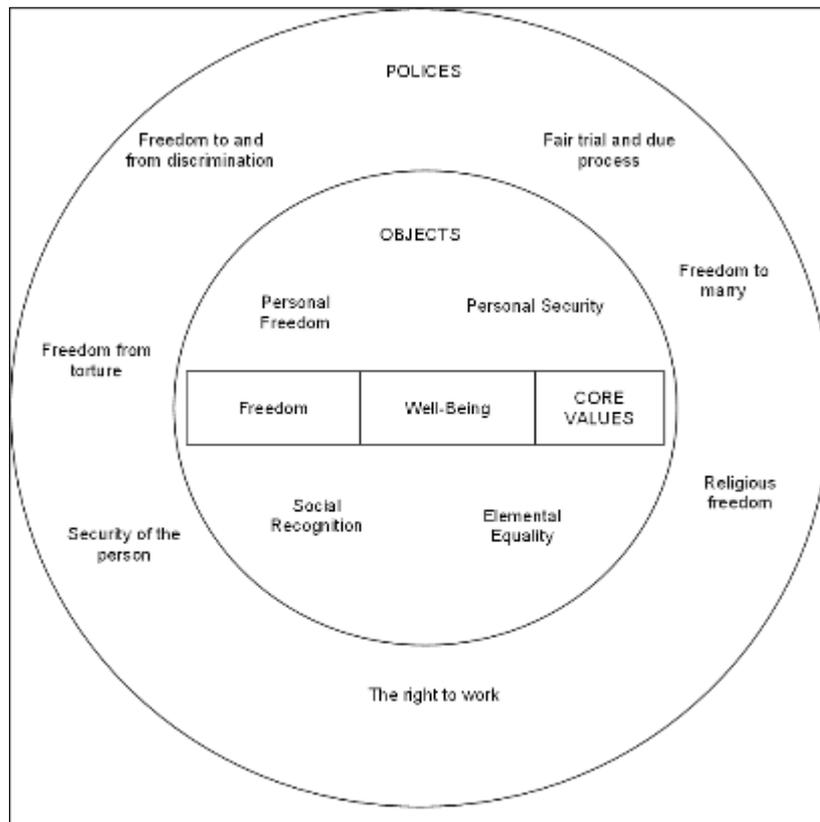


Figure 2 Human Rights Structure Model [7]

Human rights are fundamental to ensuring human dignity and collective well-being. They are characterized by their universality, indivisibility, and inalienability—meaning they apply to every individual without exception and remain valid regardless of circumstances. These rights form the basis for a just society and a life marked by freedom and wholeness, where personal integrity, freedom of thought, expression, and association are guaranteed regardless of gender, religion, race, or other distinguishing attributes [4].

The protection of human rights plays a strategic role in fostering social stability and peace. When such rights are violated, the likelihood of social unrest, tension, or even open conflict increases. Conversely, their protection serves as a tool to eliminate the root causes of injustice and public discontent, strengthening trust, encouraging cooperation, and promoting dialogue across social and cultural divides.

Human rights groups are tasked with the essential mission of empowering vulnerable populations—including ethnic minorities, women, and Indigenous communities—by working to eliminate discriminatory practices, supporting their inclusion in civic life, and defending their right to equal access to resources, opportunities, and protections. They achieve this through educational initiatives and vocational programs designed to equip individuals with the skills and knowledge needed to overcome systemic barriers and improve their quality of life.

Beyond education, these organizations take on a strategic responsibility to represent and defend the rights of groups excluded from public life. By establishing direct communication with these communities, identifying urgent issues, and amplifying their voices to the broader public and policymaking institutions, they help elevate their social standing and lay the groundwork for more equitable participation in society.

A central component of their work is legal literacy. Human rights organizations design and implement public awareness campaigns that inform individuals about their rights and the mechanisms available to protect them. Through participation in public discourse, protest movements, awareness campaigns, and advocacy efforts, they influence institutional processes and shape decision-making and policy development.

In addition, these organizations engage in educational and academic initiatives aimed at deepening knowledge of human rights and cultivating a culture of respect. This includes the development of methodological materials, thematic workshops, public educational events, and campaigns—often targeting younger audiences. At the same time, they conduct analytical research that provides the empirical foundation for advocacy work and policy influence [8].

Crucially, collaboration with governmental bodies and other stakeholders—including international institutions and grassroots movements—enables human rights organizations to achieve greater impact. Participation in coalitions, partnerships, and networked initiatives creates opportunities for knowledge exchange, resource sharing, and the adoption of best practices, thereby amplifying their effectiveness and influence in advancing human rights.

International partnership and the growth of transnational collaboration occupy a central role in advancing human rights agendas and driving sustainable change. By sharing strategies, resources, and experiences, organizations from different countries are able to pool their efforts, adapt successful practices, and enhance their collective impact on transforming social and legal realities. Knowledge exchange among human rights actors enables a more nuanced understanding of global human rights challenges and fosters the creation of context-sensitive and effective responses.

Cross-border cooperation among civil society groups creates opportunities for joint utilization of both financial and non-financial resources. By uniting efforts, organizations gain access to vital funding, technical expertise, analytical insights, and expert support—resources that significantly strengthen initiatives and lead to more tangible outcomes. Financial contributions support the implementation of core projects, while non-financial inputs—such as legal guidance, research findings, and policy analysis—serve as catalysts that amplify the impact of advocacy campaigns and informational outreach.

In parallel, many human rights organizations actively contribute to the formulation of international norms, influencing the creation of legal frameworks and monitoring their application within global regulatory systems. These organizations frequently participate in capacity-building initiatives aimed at empowering individuals, communities, and other civil society actors engaged in the defense and promotion of human rights. They deliver training programs, practical workshops, and thematic seminars, while also producing educational materials designed to strengthen the skills of human rights defenders, grassroots activists, and members of marginalized communities. Through such capacity-building efforts, they enhance the resilience and effectiveness of the broader human rights ecosystem [5,6].

Importantly, human rights organizations are becoming increasingly prominent on the international stage. Their involvement in shaping international legal instruments—such as treaties, guiding principles, and global standards—demonstrates their growing influence in the global legal sphere. Yet, despite this influence, their legal standing in international law remains largely undefined.

The majority of human rights organizations operate at the national level, and as such, their legal status, including their rights and obligations, is primarily governed by the domestic laws of the countries in which they are registered. A number of globally active organizations—such as Amnesty International, CARE, Oxfam, and Médecins Sans Frontières—function across borders. In these cases, their legal status is typically determined either by the legislation of the state in which they are formally registered or, if unregistered, by the legal framework of the country where their main office or structured operations are based. Even organizations with an international mandate that are nationally incorporated remain subject to the legal norms of their founding state. Nevertheless, beyond national legislation, the international legal system also acknowledges a defined set of legal rights for human rights organizations and outlines the permissible boundaries of their operations [1].

These rights are not consolidated into a single legal instrument but are instead derived from various treaties, legal norms, and established practices. Table 1 outlines the general legal entitlements typically granted to human rights organizations under international law.

In conclusion, human rights organizations play an essential role in defending human rights and monitoring violations worldwide. Their increasing significance in international legal processes underscores the urgency of formally defining their legal status on the international level. Such recognition would not only legitimize their work but also enhance their capacity to operate effectively within the global human rights framework.

Table 1 Legal Rights of a Human Rights Organization (compiled by the author based on [1])

Legal Right	Description
Right to Freedom of Association	The right to form, join, and operate organizations freely.
Right to Recognition and Participation	The right to be legally recognized and to participate in public and legal processes.
Right to Protection	The right to be safeguarded from unlawful interference or persecution while conducting lawful activities.
Right to Initiate Legal Proceedings	The ability to bring cases before courts or other legal bodies.
Right to Access Loans	The right to secure funding through credit mechanisms.
Right to Use Savings Within Certain Limits	Permission to manage and utilize financial reserves for organizational needs.
Right to Issue Organizational Securities	The ability to create and distribute securities on behalf of the association.
Right to Acquire Movable and Immovable Property Without Prior Permission	Provided the property is necessary for fulfilling the organization's mission.
Right to Receive Gifts, Bequests, and Grants	Subject to applicable tax laws and exemptions.

4. Conclusion

Civil society plays a pivotal role in supporting international human rights institutions, serving as a crucial bridge between governing bodies and the communities they are meant to protect. Organizations such as Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch exemplify this function, taking the lead in monitoring human rights violations and producing rigorous analytical reports that often inform the decisions of international bodies.

Through public engagement and resource mobilization, human rights organizations sustain attention on rights-related issues, ensuring they remain part of both national and international agendas. Their large-scale advocacy campaigns apply pressure on powerful actors, facilitating accountability and reinforcing the credibility of international human rights mechanisms.

These organizations also act as intermediaries between marginalized groups and global institutions, helping ensure that the needs and voices of the oppressed are represented at forums such as the Human Rights Council and the United Nations.

At the same time, the legal status of human rights NGOs within the international legal system remains ambiguous. Despite the evolution of these organizations from early grassroots movements to the complex and diverse structures seen today, their global proliferation underscores the urgent need to establish clear legal provisions. These provisions must not serve as tools of constraint or suppression but rather reflect the complex environments in which these organizations operate, recognizing their strategic importance both locally and globally.

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