

# **ACHIEVING ABOLITION: FUNDING THE ANTI-DEATH PENALTY MOVEMENT**

**Summary Briefing**

**May 2023**



**HARM REDUCTION  
INTERNATIONAL**

**WORLD  
COALITION**  
AGAINST THE DEATH PENALTY

# HIGH-LEVEL SUMMARY

In the past 20 years, a growingly diverse, coordinated, and effective movement has achieved clear and significant progress towards universal abolition of the death penalty through high-impact campaigns on limited budgets. Growth in funding for civil society has been critical in securing gains. Now, changes in the funding landscape hint at a **financial cliff for abolition work**.

If not reversed, this trend risks reversing important gains and weakening the promotion of many fundamental rights: whilst seemingly a concentrated struggle, retention of the death penalty is closely correlated with a lack of fair trial rights, opaque criminal systems, racism and discrimination in law enforcement, shrinking civic space, and lack of safeguards for human rights defenders; with the death penalty disproportionately impacting the most vulnerable in society, including racial, ethnic, or religious minority groups. Thus, funding for the death penalty abolition strengthens and reinforces broader human rights struggles and should be viewed as a deeply connected issue.

[‘Achieving Abolition’](#) presents findings from a 2022 survey of 46 local, regional, and international organisations working on the abolition of the death penalty, including 18 based in the Global South.

# KEY FINDINGS

- a) In the past twenty years, **the death penalty abolition movement has grown significantly** in terms of members and organisational budgets (on average, +98% between 2012-2022). This has driven incredible progress towards abolition, through diverse but coordinated strategies. Clear signals are the abolition of capital punishment in law or practice by 33 countries between 2002 and 2022, and the 125 votes in favour of the 9<sup>th</sup> UNGA resolution on a moratorium on the use of the death penalty on 15 December 2022 (up from 104 in 2007).
- b) **Significant challenges remain:** over 30,000 people are on death row worldwide; executions continue to take place often shrouded in secrecy, including in some of the most populous and influential countries in the world (including China, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and the USA); civil society promoting abolition faces repression and abuse.
- c) The high 'return on investment' in the past 20 years has clearly shown that **adequate funding would advance progress** towards the universal abolition of the death penalty as well as connected human rights struggles. But it needs to be consistent and long-term.
- d) The average budget for abolition has increased significantly since 2012. Yet, **the movement remains under-resourced** and often operates by stretching funds. Of the 31 respondents that provided budget details, half had budgets for abolition equal to or less than \$30,000 in 2022.  
To maximise effectiveness, groups often rely on small donations of money and unpaid staff: 30% of respondents pursued abolition work only through volunteers.
- e) **The funding situation is deteriorating.** Respondents expressed concerns for the financial sustainability of abolition work in both the long and short term (in many cases, funding streams are due to end in 2022 or 2023, with no alternatives in sight). This is corroborated by indications of withdrawal of or reductions in death penalty funding by a number of philanthropic and institutional donors.
- f) It is time for a **redistribution of power and resources:** more flexible, context-sensitive, and equitable funding sources and flows are needed. Most countries that retain the death penalty are in the Global South, and local organisations are leading the work towards abolition. Yet, funders are predominantly based in the Global North, and funding is skewed towards bigger, Europe-based groups.

Joint funding applications and re-granting from North to South have been functional strategies, but they leave decision-making power with INGOs, reinforcing broader Global North-Global South power dynamics that the abolitionist (and broader human rights) movement have identified as needing to change.

# RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUNDERS

- a) **INCREASE and SUSTAIN** funding for the death penalty abolition movement.
- b) **CONVENE** a meeting of current, former, and potential abolition funders and advocates.
- c) **PRIORITISE** core, flexible, and long-term funding for civil society and **TACKLE** structural barriers and opacity in funding.
- d) **SUPPORT** the decolonisation of the abolition movement. Meaningfully advance the redistribution of power and resources, including by exploring the potential of innovative, regionalised/localised pooled funding that puts decision making power and funding in the hands of local organisations.
- e) **RECOGNISE** the many ways the death penalty is a harbinger of other deep, intersecting issues in the human rights field and fund death penalty abolition work from broader human rights portfolios.
- f) **EXPLORE** funding work on the death penalty in countries considered to be 'persistent executioners' (such as Iran, China, and Vietnam) in which donors have been reluctant to invest.