

**Amnesty International USA**

To: Area Coordinator Steering Committee, Todd Schwarz  
CC: Ann Burroughs, AIUSA Membership Committee, Margaret Huang, Steve Hawkins,  
From: Rachel O'Leary  
Re: ACSC Board Presentation  
Date: July 7, 2015

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Dear Michael, Nick, David, Carroll, Laura, and Todd,

I'm writing to follow up on your presentation at the Board meeting on Saturday, June 6. Since I started as Deputy Executive Director in September of last year, I have been committed to implementing a strategy that sustains member leadership at the core of AIUSA. I, along with MMD staff, share some of the concerns that you raised and we've been working to address them in a strategic way that allows us to move forward together. While there are points of agreement between us, I'm also concerned about some of the inaccuracies in your presentation. I'd like to clarify those points in the spirit of coming together.

In 2009, Amnesty International USA experienced a financial crisis, much like many of our counterparts in the nonprofit sector. At that time, there were several program and staff cuts, including Deputy Regional Directors, who at the time were responsible for coordinating and managing many of the programs and projects that drove growth and activism through grassroots campaigns. Later, in 2012, Regional Directors were laid off, along with Office Administrators in Regional Offices, and a Field Organizer position in the Southern Region was cut. At the end of 2013, the National Youth Coordinator position and Executive Assistant positions were cut in what was the final step in a process that had shrunk MMD staff from as many as 43 staff in 2005 to 15.5 staff (including a half-time Executive Assistant). At the same time, MMD budget for 2014 was cut by nearly 70% from 2013 levels. Our Director of Events subsequently left the organization two weeks before the AGM.

All of this happened just four months before I took the role of Deputy Executive Director, and before Jiva Manske took the role of Deputy Director. Soon after Jared Feuer left after serving on the MMD team for nearly ten years, we opened the search process for a new Deputy, and Jiva was hired. On his first day, April 24, 2015, Samantha Rodgers, my predecessor, announced her resignation, and in late May, I was appointed interim Deputy Executive Director, and thus assumed a joint role of managing Field Organizers in the Northeastern and Western Regions and taking on Executive Team responsibilities, a dual role that I juggled for the next eight months. During that time, Jiva managed Field Organizers in the Mid-Atlantic, Midwest, and Southern Regions. In September of 2014, I accepted the permanent Deputy Executive Director position, but our budget didn't allow us to staff our management roles until January of 2015.



I give this background so that there's shared understanding of the context under which both Jiva and I started in our roles. When we began to assess the needs of this department and the programming to which it is connected, we saw many of the problems that you have outlined in your presentation. So, in addition to continuing to support and manage field staff to meet goals that had been set at the beginning of 2014, and making sure that programs like Regional Conferences, Write for Rights, and the Annual General Meeting would have a chance at success, we also prioritized rebuilding the resources that our grassroots activism and member leadership needs to be successful.

In 2014, there was no budget for printed materials, and Field Organizers only had a small fraction of the travel budgets they've had in the past, about \$2,000 per person for the year. Field staff were also under incredible strain, managing competing requests from campaign and program staff, Country Specialists and other members leaders, local and student groups, newly activated people, and community partners, in addition to organizing Regional Conferences and doing their best to meet the ambitious student group growth goals that were set for them by my predecessor at the beginning of the year. Despite that, our regional conferences grew, our AGM grew, and our student and local groups grew.

To keep our growth sustainable, we knew that our first priority needed to be developing a budget that included an increase back to 2013 levels for field operations, including more substantial budget for Field Organizer travel and for membership materials. We also included a proposal that increased staff in our department, prioritizing member communication and empowerment infrastructure, as well as capacity for the Field team. That budget was approved in December, and we set out recruiting new staff and rebuilding.

In late January, Jesús Canchola Sánchez started as the Director of Member Engagement, and Adam Cross started as Member Engagement Associate. They immediately set out with developing a strategy for improved communications with membership, including but not limited to member leadership. The Member Engagement team has worked closely with members (including Area Coordinators and Country Specialists) to make the Activist Resource Community a viable space for member support and empowerment, and have grown ARC usage by 10% in the last quarter. They have also surveyed all Area Coordinators and Student Activist Coordinators about communication and training needs; they expanded that survey to local and student group members, with a total of nearly 300 responses that have helped inform next steps about how we can best communicate with each other.

Similarly, Field Organizers, Area Coordinators, and Student Activist Coordinators are right now in the process of calling all active local and student group coordinators to learn more about what has been working, what they need, and how we can all build together with the resources we have. To date, they have reached about 25% of groups in the areas for which we currently have Field Organizer coverage, and although we have not started analyzing data, these conversations have reportedly been fruitful and supportive for staff and members, alike. Finally, our second Field Director started on May 1, filling out the staff leadership, and adding supervision, strategic, and organizing capacity to our activism, organizing, and group support efforts. We are still in the process of hiring a new Field Organizer in the West, and have just hired a new organizer in the South with the support of Michael Andrews as part of the hiring committee.



Much of the internal staff change we've managed has been to move away from numerical goals, and toward impact goals. Part of the problem of only reporting numbers is that it doesn't tell us much about what's actually happening in the lives of people. We've also found that the old system of only having numerical goals for Field Organizers did not place a sufficiently high value on working with and through member leaders to reach those goals. For those reasons, we have conducted the surveys mentioned above, so that we can all have a more accurate and transparent understanding of how groups are operating and what they need to be successful; we are also in the process of setting new goals for 2015, which are due to our Human Resources Department by July 15.

We are all still relatively new to our roles, so with all of this in mind, we offer these corrections to the ACSC presentation in the spirit of building trust and transparency, along with another request that Jiva and I be met with partnership, and with an assumption that we are doing our best to support membership empowerment and grassroots power with the decisions we are making. Neither of us would have accepted these roles if we did not believe in the power of Amnesty members to change the world, and we are doing our best to create structures and systems to empower all of our members to do just that.

With the above context, I respectfully ask that you let us know more about the institutional knowledge that you have, especially about what has worked and how those systems might be the seeds of new ideas for how we can strengthen and build together. When you have concerns with MMD staff that you have not been able to resolve, I ask that we both agree to abide by AIUSA procedures and policies for raising concerns. Our policy states that issues should be raised directly with staff (in the case of the ACSC, that should start with raising the issue with your liaison, Jiva); if that isn't productive, concerns should come to me; if the issues aren't resolved, you should go to the ombudsperson, help members and staff to resolve conflicts. I attach our policy for raising grievances to this email for clarity. As a note, I have notified our ombudsperson of this grievance, and forwarded him all of the emails and materials from the board report.

In what follows, we have some corrections to slides that were presented to the Board. Titles of the slides are used to guide our feedback on each slide.

### **Shared Leadership**

- **AGM Program Committee:** in the past, it had 5 regional reps, plus a youth rep, who had sign-off but no substantive input into the AGM planning process. For the 2015 AGM, the Program Committee included the regional reps, but also included a rep from the ACSC, NYAC, Legislative Coordinators, Regional Death Penalty Abolition Coordinators, and the Country Specialist program in order to have broader input and leadership. The plan is to continue to build that group's capacity to have an even stronger role for 2016. This committee gives an up or down vote on the proposals that have been vetted through the co-groups, and does not have the authority to make changes to approved proposals.
- **Regional Conference Program Committees:** In the same way as above, the Events and Field teams have collaborated to revise the terms for Regional Conference Program Committees so that there is more robust participation from members, and so that they are not committees in name only. The recruitment for Program Committees is slated to happen in mid to late June, and will be led by Field Organizers.



- The increase in local and student groups is based on the data that we have available in our database, which showed the growth that we reported. We have reached out to every group we have, and hope to have a better sense of the health of groups in Q3.

#### **Grassroots Support Amnesty INTERNATIONAL**

- All of our work is within the international human rights framework, and that is part of the value we add to the movement. While there are strong social justice movements in the United States, there is no unified human rights movement connected to an international human rights network; as Amnesty has always done, we believe that we add value by connecting individuals to that international human rights network and framework. We work closely with the IS and other section staff to make those connections real, and appreciate hearing the ways you and other members are making those connections, too.
- In 2015, MMD has worked with the Campaigns and Programs departments and Digital and Strategic Communications departments to mobilize members around the following issues (this is a sample, as we have advocacy emails that go out nearly weekly, if not multiple times per week):
  - Raif Badawi's imprisonment and torture in Saudi Arabia
  - Torture in Chicago, Mexico, Morocco, Nigeria, and the Philippines, as well as by the CIA
  - Sexual and reproductive rights in Paraguay
  - Massive human rights violations by the Nigerian government in their search for Boko Haram
  - Raising awareness about specific cases of police violence in New York City at the AGM
  - Freeing Albert Woodfox from over 43 years of solitary confinement
  - Repealing the death penalty in Nebraska

#### **August Training**

- The development of the Human Rights Leadership Institute has included the following steps so far:
  - Feedback from last year's training was taken seriously, particularly feedback that the focus on creative actions was not valuable, that sessions about campaigns and governance were very well received, and that we needed at least 3 full days of training
  - That feedback, along with input from the member surveys, plus input from field staff who work with S/ACs has fed into a skeletal 3 day agenda without content. The basic outline has an eye toward a day on organizing and activism, a day on communications and messaging, and a day of strategy development
  - Next steps include opening the application (which will be available via ARC), plus broader consultation with existing member leaders to actually develop the content of the training, plus identifying staff (field organizers) and member leader (AC, SAC, Country Specialist, NRC, and LC) facilitators for sessions design and implementation.
- Our dates for the HRLI have been subject to venue availability and are Thursday through Sunday, not Monday-Friday.
- We have a budget that includes space for 100 participants; as with any training for S/ACs and other volunteer leaders, we're looking for geographical balance, which ideally amounts to about 10 S/ACs per Field Organizer. If trends from past years hold, we expect about 50% or more new S/ACs at this year's training, as the SAC program is a one to two year commitment.



- To our knowledge, becoming a Student Activist Coordinator or an Area Coordinator has always happened through application, so this year's application is no different other than requiring the training. This is in part because last year several S/ACs could not make the training, and therefore did not participate in meaningful S/AC duties with Field Organizers. This is also just one way to receive training, and Member Engagement is working on a robust training program for the fall, and has been working with members to revise old materials as a step in that direction.
- All participants who come to the training will be members; this is a shift from past years, in which paying dues was not a requirement. Because many current S/ACs do not currently pay dues, we shifted to language that says that if people are accepted to the training they must become a member in good standing in order to attend.
- Most of our members are also members of other organizations; we do not require sole commitment only to AIUSA to lead within AIUSA.
- We have no plans to raise funds for other organizations, or to train anyone from a partner organization unless they are a member in good standing and can demonstrate commitment to working on Amnesty International campaigns.

Again, we agree with much of the rest of what is in the presentation, and as mentioned, have taken steps to address those that are under our purview. We also share frustration that the website is not as user friendly as we'd like it to be, and reimbursement takes too long, and do our best to push our Finance department to be swift about turning those around. We currently still have a small budget for group support that is managed by Field Organizers, and will gladly present to the Board a budget that includes more resources for groups again, as we did last year.

As an aside, I reached out to Jared Feuer for his opinion on about some of the challenges that the organization has faced in local groups and he offered these thoughts that he said could be shared out:

*"Hi Rachel, I remember one of my first conversations on Amnesty staff; I was literally in my first week and I went for lunch with Laura Moye to get a lay of the land. This was in 2005, when the organization was perhaps at peak finances, and we spoke of the struggles that local groups were facing. The problem was acute a decade ago, and not just at Amnesty. We all know of the 'bowling alone' change in societal patterns that creates serious headwinds for sustained local volunteer-based presence.*

*During my ten years, many, many approaches were tried to address this challenge. One that stands out is when each Field Organizer was asked to identify specific communities to redouble their efforts to support or launch new local groups. With this focused energy, we started to see an uptick in local groups, but it wasn't sustainable. It required a tremendous investment of staff time and energetic local leaders who don't have to change jobs and/or locales. It's not the same as it was 25 years ago. Again and again, different initiatives have been tried. The reality is that the local group model has to be revisited and be reborn - perhaps under the sponsorship of a local organization, or in a quasi-staff capacity, or something else. Patterns change, communities change - old ways get disrupted.*

*What makes this conversation particularly difficult at Amnesty is that there is tremendous nostalgia and support for local groups in their pre-90's version. Exceptions are held up as proof that the old can be new, and - this is the second challenge - staff are employees. Their jobs are food, shelter, and health insurance. There is not yet an environment at Amnesty where staff are truly safe in raising the hard*



*issues about internal matters. If Amnesty is going to address this issue, it must create an open environment. I'm not casting blame, but there is a structural issue preventing the right discussion. I love Amnesty, and I say this in a generous spirit: it needs to figure a way forward as one organization if it is going to address hard issues like the changing role of local groups. And this it has not done within at least a decade. I wish you all the best - this is tough work and requires something new. I hope the ACSC and Board and others join you in a deep form of partnership."*

In February, the ACSC wrote a letter to the Board outlining several grievances. None of those grievances had been raised directly with Jiva or myself. We responded, including providing information that was requested, as well as asking that ACSC members communicate directly to Jiva or me in the future if there are issues. We received a commitment to raise concerns directly with us. Now, just three months later, we found ourselves looking at another set of grievances, almost completely unrelated to the ones in February, and again, no direct communication before the ACSC went to the Board, which does not comply with our organizational grievance policy.

Jiva and I spoke with the ACSC on June 30, and reached some clarity and made some agreements around first steps to a more productive relationship. However, there is much work to do, and I am still processing some of the specific comments that were made about me at the board meeting. After an extraordinarily difficult year with a brutal schedule, it is bruising and demoralizing to have feedback from members that says we didn't do enough, and have our commitment to the organization questioned. It is clear to me that the issues that the ACSC raised in the board meeting are long standing ones, not ones that have arisen as a result of our leadership in the last fifteen months. That ad hominem criticism was both unfair and untrue. These are longstanding and well-documented complaints that predate both Jiva's and my tenure at AIUSA. Additionally, Jiva and I both have given up personal time and turned down other professional opportunities to stay and serve AIUSA; I believe that we deserve the respect of dialogue and the opportunity to respond to issues before they are raised as a grievance. The presentation at the board meeting was hurtful to others and me on the MMD team, and I think we will all have to work to rebuild trust moving forward.

If we don't treat each other with the dignity and respect that undergirds the mission of our work, then we have failed. Moving forward, we need to ensure that our communication is such that we approach each other with a sense of collaboration. MMD needs to hear from the ACSC about the substantial history that you have with the organization, including support in understanding the projects that the ACSC has worked on in the past and how those projects have worked, as well as your ideas for what is needed moving forward. Just as importantly, we need to know that staff contribution is valued and respected.

On the June 30 ACSC call, we spent an hour and a half going over your concerns and hopefully, provided some clarity. I mentioned that I would be sending this memo, and I thank you for reading it and for truly listening to our feedback. Jiva and I have committed to meeting with the ACSC as often as necessary and to doing whatever is in our power and ability to do to build a productive relationship, and to addressing some of the issues that are within our ability to address. I hope that we can find a way to move past the conflict that has marred the MMD staff/member relationship for many years.

Rachel