



minority  
rights  
group  
international

40 years  
protecting  
minorities  
1969 to  
2009

**Cover image** A Bedia boy attends school alongside other children from the community in Rajasthan, India.  
Abbie Trayler-Smith/Panos

# minority rights group international



Minority Rights Group International (MRG) is a non-governmental organization (NGO) working to secure the rights of ethnic, religious and linguistic minorities and indigenous peoples worldwide and to promote cooperation and understanding between communities.

Our activities are focused on international advocacy, training, publishing and outreach. We are guided by the needs expressed by our worldwide network of partner organizations which represent minorities and indigenous peoples. MRG works with over 150 organizations in over 50 countries. Our governing Council, which meets twice a year, has members from 10 different countries.

MRG has consultative status with the United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC), and observer status with the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights (ACHPR). MRG is registered as a charity and a company limited by guarantee under English law.

Registered as  
Minority Rights Group

Charity no. 282305

A company limited by  
guarantee in the UK  
no. 1544957

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# The story of Minority Rights Group International

As editor and proprietor of the Observer newspaper in the 1960s, David Astor was troubled by the regular reports of ethnic persecution around the world that crossed his desk.

Pogroms against minorities had not stopped with the end of the Second World War, religious intolerance was again on the rise, and the legacy of colonialism and conflict had created new vulnerable minorities in both the global North and the South. A new movement for human rights was gaining strength, and Astor had already helped campaigners seeking to champion the cause of political prisoners. But he felt something was missing.

He brought together a small group of journalists, academics and anti-apartheid campaigners to try to address a 'deeply-held belief that the most crucial issue of the later twentieth century would concern the treatment accorded to minorities throughout the world'. At that time images of destruction and starving children from the



## The founder David Astor

David Astor was the editor and proprietor of the Observer newspaper when he founded MRG

Nigerian Biafran war sparked an unprecedented public reaction, bringing home to people the horrors of inter-ethnic conflict, but not its causes. Astor proposed using what he described as 'the higher blackmail', publishing information about human rights violations and discrimination in order to shame governments into improving their record.

With a first major grant secured from the Ford Foundation, a press conference in London in November 1969 launched Minority Rights Group, 'an organization for the defence of oppressed minorities worldwide'.

This booklet tells the story of MRG and how it has become the dynamic organization it is today.

“...an organization for the defence of oppressed minorities worldwide...”

# Exposing injustice



**Above** Bedouin children play amongst the ruins of their house destroyed by Israeli bulldozers, The Negev. Robin Hammond/Panos Pictures

**Right** Cover of MRG publication 'The Two Irelands: The problem of the double minority' by Harold Jackson and Ann McHardy (1972).

Minority Rights Group International (MRG) quickly set about highlighting the human rights violations experienced by different minorities around the world. The emphasis, as it has been ever since, was on gathering first hand research to give voice to what minorities themselves actually need and want.

Six initial reports were commissioned on minorities experiencing discrimination. *The Two Irelands: the double minority* (1971) was described by Chatham House as 'the best pages on Ireland's contemporary political problems that have found their way into contemporary literature'. The report was welcomed by Catholic and Protestant





**Left** A reader enjoys an MRG report.

commentators for its balanced representation of the problems encountered by both communities in Northern Ireland.

'By the end of the decade MRG had produced fifty reports, investigating minority issues in almost every corner of the globe', noted Roland Oliver, the organization's first Chair. 'Eritrea and Tigray, the Basques and the Catalans, the Kurds and the Palestinians to name but a few.'

By 1988, MRG had published and reprinted more than 150 reports. Half a million copies had been sold. In 1990, MRG published the first edition of a directory of the world's minorities, containing 160 entries on minorities worldwide. It provided crucial context to the difficult situation of minorities, and highlighted the lack of equality many of them experienced on a daily basis. The 21st century has seen this resource migrate to the internet; MRG now publishes online the World Directory of Minorities and Indigenous Peoples. Covering every country and territory in the world, updated on a monthly

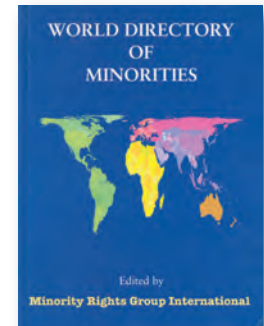
basis, it provides a unique encyclopaedia of minorities and current affairs, and is free to use.

Today, MRG continues to expose violations of minority rights and is noted for its humane and unbiased views. From the plight of Iraq's beleaguered minority communities, to the lack of implementation of Roma peoples' rights in the EU, MRG reports call global attention to minority voices that might otherwise remain unheard.

MRG also now publishes the annual State of the World's Minorities, an essential reference for those working in human rights, development or current affairs, containing the unique 'Peoples Under Threat' table, charting those communities most at risk.

“MRG reports call global attention to minority voices that might otherwise remain unheard”

**Below** Cover of MRG publication 'World Directory of Minorities', 1997 edition.



## The editor MRG's first Director

Laurie Gandar was a pioneering editor of the Rand Daily Mail in South Africa. When in 1965 he started publishing articles about the terrible conditions in which black prisoners were held, he was ordered to stop by the police, his paper repeatedly raided, and threatened with prosecution. But he didn't stop. He and his reporters went on publishing the truth about apartheid for four more years before he was eventually convicted and forced out, turning his sights in 1969 to highlighting injustice against minorities around the world for MRG.

# Winning protection



**Above** Groups of women and Dalits, who were underrepresented in previous governments, were first to celebrate after an elected assembly met with the intention of declaring Nepal a republic (May 2008). Tomas van Houtryve/ Panos Pictures

**Right** biology class in Peje/Pec, western Kosovo, offers Roma teenagers the chance to catch up with the education curriculum's science component so that they can join their peers at the local school. OSCE/William Henley

But to win real protection for minorities, more was needed than just exposing injustices. Increasingly MRG sought to use international pressure and the authority of international law.

MRG gained consultative status with the United Nations in 1974. With the move towards direct advocacy, MRG began to make the most of this status and established a successful track record supporting minority and indigenous peoples' rights at the UN. MRG affiliate groups sprang up in Belgium, Finland, France, Italy, the Netherlands and Sweden.

But while many governments acknowledged the importance of human rights in general – or at least paid lip service to it – the need to ensure protection for minority communities still regularly proved controversial. It took many years of advocacy before the UN General Assembly adopted by consensus the UN Declaration on the Rights of Persons belonging to National or Ethnic, Religious and Linguistic Minorities in 1992, a major step forward for MRG's work to secure international agreement on minority rights.

MRG has always believed that the best long-term advocates for minority rights are members of minority communities themselves. With the formation of an official UN working group on minorities in 1995, MRG started to train minority lawyers and activists in how to use the UN system to defend their rights. Each representative was then supported to make their case before the UN and government delegations.

Training programmes expanded to include new groups and new techniques. MRG's Roma programme, for example, run in collaboration with the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), trained young Roma in fund-raising, programme design and evaluation for NGOs. The unique mentoring approach was later adopted by the World Bank.

MRG has now provided intensive training programmes on advocacy and human rights for over 3,000 minority and indigenous leaders worldwide, building a sustainable movement for change.



## The lawyer Maja Daruwala

Maja Daruwala, a human rights lawyer from India, was MRG's Chair from 2002-2005

MRG has helped secure the following key advances in minority and indigenous rights:

- UN Declaration on the Rights of Minorities 1992
- Council of Europe Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities 1995
- Establishment of UN Special Adviser on the Prevention of Genocide (2004) and UN Independent Expert on Minority Issues (2005)
- UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples 2007
- UN Forum on Minority Issues 2008



“MRG has always believed that the best long-term advocates for minority rights are members of minority communities themselves”

# Promoting diversity and reconciliation

“ MRG has promoted techniques in early warning and constitution-building to ensure that tensions are addressed at an early stage ”



MRG has always believed in a vision in which different communities can live together in harmony in society, and diversity is protected and celebrated.

In the 1990s, for example, the education project Refugee Voices brought minority issues to life in UK classrooms. The programme encouraged children to imagine life as

young refugees; it proved so popular with children and teachers that some editions were reprinted within 11 months. But global events in that decade delivered a profound shock to faith in inter-ethnic cooperation.

MRG had increasingly raised concerns confronting minorities in Central and Eastern Europe at the UN



level, and with the fall of the Berlin Wall called for minority rights protection in the region to be an urgent international priority. But the disintegration of the former Yugoslavia brought bloodshed on a scale not seen in Europe since 1945. For MRG, it meant that work on human rights needed to incorporate a new focus on conflict prevention and reconciliation.



**Left** Batwa children in the northern Rwandan province of Ruhengeri. Benon Mugaruwa/MRG

**Below** Indigenous Quechua children in Ecuador, Chimborazo. Jeremy Horner/Panos Pictures



For over ten years MRG and some 20 NGOs in South-East Europe have worked together on a joint programme to promote minority rights and inter-ethnic dialogue, including between Serbs, Croats, Bosniaks, Roma and Albanians, contributing to the process of reconciliation in the region. Another long-term programme in countries, including Bangladesh, India,

Indonesia and Pakistan, seeks to improve protection for religious minorities and enhance cooperation between communities in a region where religious conflict has already claimed many lives. Leading up to the tenth anniversary of the Rwandan genocide, MRG successfully campaigned for a new UN watchdog on genocide prevention. Recently, MRG



## The peacemaker Neelan Tiruchelvam

A member of MRG's Council for five years, Neelan Tiruchelvam was a Tamil MP who sought to bring an end to Sri Lanka's long-running civil war. His tools were dialogue, respect for the rights of all, and the idea that communities' grievances could be addressed by giving them a greater say in managing their own affairs.

'Because of his unwavering commitment to constitutional solutions to

Sri Lanka's inter-ethnic conflict, he was in constant personal danger in his own country,' his obituary noted. He became Chair of MRG in April 1999, but his talks with the Sri Lankan government over using devolution to achieve a negotiated settlement provoked the ire of Tamil Tiger separatists, and on 29 July 1999 he was assassinated by a suicide bomber in Colombo.

Ten years on, MRG has launched a new project in Sri Lanka to end discrimination against minorities and to promote dialogue between communities.

has promoted techniques in early warning and constitution-building to ensure that tensions are addressed at an early stage.

MRG now works with in-country partner organizations to advance minority rights and peaceful development in some of the most conflict-affected countries in the world,

including Iraq, Somalia, the Democratic Republic of Congo and Nepal.

# Campaigning with communities



At the turn of the 21st century, like many others working in the field, MRG confronted the fact that international agreements on human rights were worthless unless they were implemented on the ground. As the organization grew further, it built new partnerships and employed new techniques to hold national governments to account for how minorities were treated.

In East Africa and the Horn, MRG supported Pastoralist communities to create Parliamentary networks and Elders Councils in Ethiopia, Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda. Regional networks also brought together representatives across the four countries to

help maximise influence on the governments concerned to improve Pastoralists' access to education and development and reduce conflict. MRG is also assisting in the establishment of a regional advocacy network for the Batwa community, which focuses on Rwanda, Burundi, Uganda and the Democratic Republic of Congo.

National advocacy plans, agreed with partner organizations, often introduce minority communities to a new dialogue with their governments and an opportunity to get their claims heard. But when governments refuse to listen, it is sometimes necessary to take them to court.

“ Minority Rights Group International helped win a UN ruling on caste discrimination that has extended legal protection for the 250 million low caste Dalits across India and Asia ” **The Guardian, 2002**



MRG began its first legal case in 2003. Since then, it has challenged the denial of access to high office in Bosnia and Herzegovina before the European Court of Human Rights; promoted a major claim for indigenous land rights in Kenya before the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights; and submitted evidence of war crimes and crimes against humanity in the Democratic Republic of Congo to support a prosecution before the International Criminal Court. Together with other organizations, we helped win a European Court ruling banning the segregation of Roma children in schools in the Czech Republic, and helped secure representation for minorities in the

Botswana House of Chiefs after a 40-year struggle.

Recent years have also seen MRG use the full resources of the internet to help harness international public opinion to defend minority rights and support communities facing discrimination and dispossession.

'In four decades,' MRG's Director Mark Lattimer says, 'MRG has gone from being a think tank to an organization that works in over 50 countries with 150 partner organizations. We believe that it is this partnership with communities on the ground that can lead to the greatest advances in minority rights in the years to come.'

## The campaigner Saad Eddin Ibrahim

Working to promote the rights of minorities in Egypt and more widely in the Middle East, MRG found a valuable partner in Saad Eddin Ibrahim, who first joined MRG's Council in the mid-1990s. The founder of both the Ibn Khaldoun Center for Development Studies in Cairo and the Arab Organization for Human Rights, Saad Eddin was arrested in 2000 with over 20 of his staff and charged with using international funds for election monitoring and for damaging Egypt's image abroad. Tried twice before state security courts, he faced seven years imprisonment. MRG condemned the charges as politically-motivated, and sought his release through international pressure including a *démarche* from the EU.

Saad Eddin and his co-defendants were finally set free on appeal in December 2002, and acquitted at a retrial three months later.

After his release, Saad Eddin wrote to MRG: 'You have been early and tireless campaigners during our long ordeal and we cannot thank you enough for all you have done.'

**Left** Dalit women in a village in Tamil Nadu

**Below** Karamojong children. The Karamojong are pastoralists who live in semi-permanent settlements, Kotido district, Uganda. Crispin Hughes/Panos Pictures



# The challenge today

The threats to minorities around the world today have changed since MRG was founded, but remain as grave.

In three-quarters of the current armed conflicts around the globe, ethnic or religious groups are the principal targets. Minorities are believed to make up over half of the world's children who are currently denied access to school. Women from minority communities face double discrimination: they are less likely to get an education and more likely to suffer violence. Climate change threatens to affect us all, but indigenous communities from the Arctic to the Horn of Africa – people who leave the lightest environmental footprint on the

land – are facing the imminent loss of their habitats as global warming continues.

MRG was founded on the belief that minorities should be represented equally in society, and that violations against their rights should be exposed. In the 40 years since, MRG has highlighted the plight of people displaced by conflict, barred from development and discriminated against in access to education, employment and participation in public life. Today, MRG is recognised and respected by decision makers, opinion formers and grass roots campaigners as an authority on how to implement minority rights to build a better world.

Please add your voice to ours.



Above San grandmother with her grandson, Botswana. Giacomo Pirozzi/Panos

# Getting involved



## Research

Use MRG's World Directory of Minorities and Indigenous Peoples to learn about the minority issues in your own country or where you work. Help us build awareness in the struggle for justice. See the MRG website or go to:

<http://www.minorityrights.org/directory>

## Donate

Make a donation to support our work for minorities at:

<http://www.minorityrights.org/donate>

## Campaigns and News

MRG regularly updates its website with news and statements on the situation of minorities across the world. We also need your support for our online campaigns which demand a better deal for minorities.

For more information on our campaigns and news go to:

<http://www.minorityrights.org>

# People and money

## Council members

### Chair

Kevin Boyle

### Treasurer

Arjan Buteijn

Ade Adeniji  
Hurst Hannum  
Miriam Hooker  
Mukesh Kapila  
Mehr Khan Williams  
Lekha Klouda  
Reem Mazzawi  
John Packer  
Lydia Ramahobo  
Bill Samuel  
Stella Tamang  
Melakou Tegegn

## Committee members

Steve Burkeman  
Amna Karim  
Philip Rudge

## Our Staff

### MRG Headquarters London

Adeyinka Adeyeye  
Snježana Bokulić  
Lucy Claridge  
Cecile Clerc  
Paile Chabane  
Chris Chapman  
Neil Clarke  
Eva Csergo  
Olu Coker  
Emma Eastwood  
Kristen Harrison  
Nurcan Kaya  
Galina Kostadinova  
Mark Lattimer  
Gloria Mark  
Farah Mihlar  
Marusca Perazzi  
Lilian Pons  
Kathryn Ramsay  
Sadiya Shaikh  
Carl Söderbergh  
Daniel Szucs  
Tadesse Tafesse  
Preti Taneja  
Shelina Thawer  
Claire Thomas

### MRG Europe Hungary

Ján Fiala  
Ildikó Magyar  
Isabel Pinaud  
Bernadett Sebály

### MRG Africa Uganda

Jollie Kemigabo  
Paul Mulindwa

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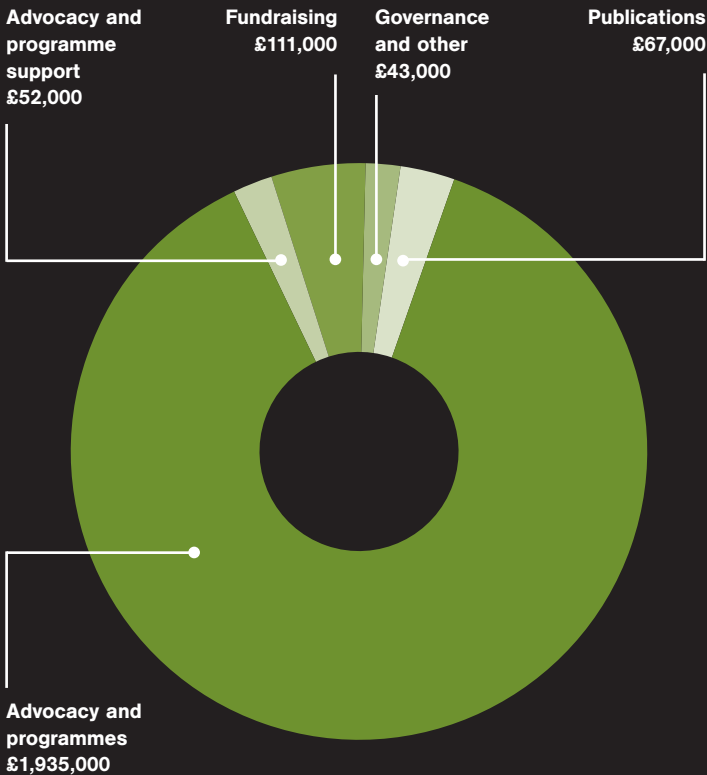
In addition to those few already mentioned in these pages, we would like to record our gratitude to all those who have been central to the inception and success of MRG over the years, including in particular the officers, direc-

tors and original trustees, Michael Scott, David Kessler, Jim Rose, Jo Grimond, Ben Whitaker, Sir John Thomson, Alan Philips, Hugo Brunner, Vincent Brenninkmeyer, Patrick Thornberry, Kristina Hedlund Thulin, Martin Pick,

Edward Mortimer, Wim Jacobs and the many others whose commitment to minority rights has inspired us.

And special thanks to Upasana Wahi for her research for this publication.

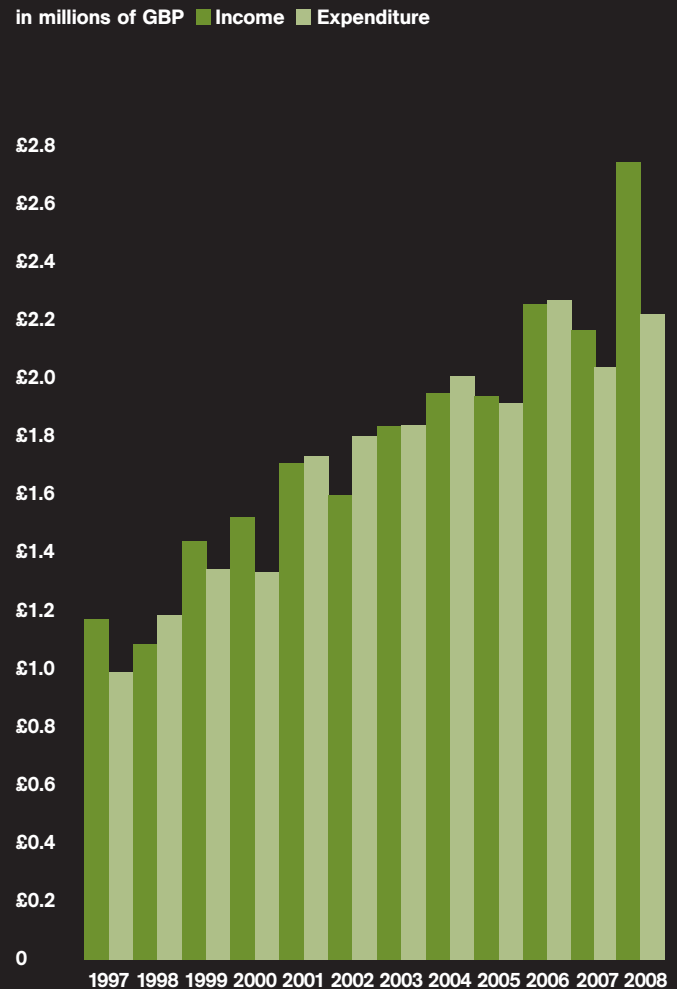
## How the money is spent 2008



MRG's full statutory report and accounts for 2008 were approved by the trustees in April 2009, prior to submission to the Charity

Commission and to Companies House. They received an unqualified audit report and copies may be obtained from MRG's London office.

## Income/expenditure growth 1997-2008





**minority  
rights  
group  
international**

**54 Commercial Street  
London E1 6LT**

**Tel**

**+44(0)20 7422 4200**

**Fax**

**+44(0)20 7422 4201**

**Email**

**minority.rights@mrgmail.org**

**Web**

**www.minorityrights.org**

Children playing outside at a  
community school in Mozambique.  
Giacomo Pirozzi/Panos Pictures