



The problem

Information drives the human rights sector. It is the single most valuable asset of human rights NGOs and serves as a powerful tool to combat the proliferation of human rights violations. NGOs gather information about violations to bring attention to the plight of victims and justice to the actions of perpetrators. Once collected, international NGOs use information to focus media attention, raise awareness and political pressure and help deliver justice in the form of truth commissions and tribunals. Without the collection and use of such information, human rights campaigns have a limited chance of success.

However, local and international human rights NGOs have told us that much of the violation and abuse information gathered by grassroots human rights groups is currently being lost to confiscation, destruction, or neglect, reducing their effectiveness and making it difficult or impossible for prosecutors, truth commissions and international human rights groups to use the information as evidence to hold the perpetrators of human rights abuses accountable.

The human rights community has indicated to us that it urgently needs a tool to collect, organize and securely store human rights violations information, allowing them to bring greater attention to human rights violations, to assist in the prosecution of perpetrators and to discourage further abuses. This tool should:

- Protect information from loss, theft or destruction.
- Ensure that records from human rights groups are preserved, allowing researchers to better assess the scope and scale of violations and to build a case of patterns of abuses based on information from more witnesses.
- Provide grassroots groups with power over their own information, allowing them to decide what to make public and what should be kept securely private.
- Enable activists, prosecutors, press and the public to have direct access to the voices of those affected by human rights violations.

The American Association for the Advancement of Science estimates that there are about 10,000 human rights NGOs throughout the world that collect information in the field in many forms. Research and interviews show that NGOs keep records using different methods ranging from hand or typewritten notes to computerized spreadsheets, resulting in inconsistent and haphazard record keeping that is difficult to share within the human rights sector. In addition, during field research, users told us that the information they stored locally in computer or paper format is vulnerable to theft, loss or destruction. At one human rights organization in Sri Lanka, for example, termites ate seven years of collected violation information that was stored in paper form.

The solution – Martus software

To solve this problem, Benetech, the leading technology nonprofit in the Silicon Valley, has developed The Martus Human Rights Bulletin System, an open source technology tool designed to assist human rights organizations in collecting, safeguarding, organizing and disseminating information about human rights abuses. It enables grassroots NGOs to securely store their records on off-site servers with easy-to-use software, preserving crucial evidence for research, investigation and prosecutions.

The software was designed in consultation with human rights groups and experts worldwide, particularly Dr. Patrick Ball, one of the world's leading human rights statisticians. The Martus team discussed this need with international human rights organizations such as Human Rights Watch, Lawyer's Committee for Human Rights, Open Society Institute, the United Nations and Amnesty International, as well as grassroots organizations from more than a dozen countries. In addition, before starting to write the software, Benetech conducted market research on the ground in Sri Lanka, Cambodia, Guatemala and Russia. More than a dozen groups in Guatemala, Russia, Sri Lanka and the US tested a pre-release version of the software, providing crucial feedback on design and usability issues that led to significant changes in the final version. Prominent testers and supporters include the Human Rights Commission of Sri Lanka, the Consortium of Humanitarian Agencies in Sri Lanka, the Centro para Accion Legal en Derechos Humanos in Guatemala [CALDH] and many others.

As a result, the Martus Human Rights Bulletin System addresses what users told us were the four critical requirements for software protecting the records of grassroots human rights groups:

Usable. The software is as easy to use as email, can run on an inexpensive computer and does not require a constant connection to the Internet.

Secure. Records are encrypted, stored securely at a remote site, backed up to multiple locations and protected by a unique password.

Searchable. Specific violations and identifying details can be searched by groups or outside researchers granted access to the records.

Transparent. The software is open source – any group can examine the code and make an informed decision about using Martus software.

The adoption and deployment of this technology will help ensure that the record of human rights abuse is protected and easily accessible.

Future applications of the Martus software include monitoring other issues like violence against women, human trafficking, environmental destruction and hate crimes. The software and its source code are available for download at www.martus.org.