

“THE HUMAN RIGHTS MOVEMENT NEEDS TO LEARN FROM ITS PEERS”

• *Interview with Carlos Quesada* •

By *Sur Journal*

Thinking about the future is not an easy task for the human rights movement. However, it is not a new or innovative matter: for many organizations, this issue has been on the table year after year. Obviously, the pandemic and “post-pandemic” context raises very concrete concerns about survival and relevance, especially when working in Latin America. How did, and still do, human rights organizations deal with the recent challenges? How have the last few years affected their work agenda and redefined their internal dynamics in a context of great uncertainty about the present and the future? These are questions we will attempt to answer in this edition of Sur.

In an interview with Sur Journal, Carlos Quesada, Executive Director of Race and Equality, a civil society organization that works internationally, talks about the institutional lessons learned from the pandemic, the importance of self-care and strengthening organizational capacity and the challenges of intersectionality and financing, among other issues. He also shares regional advocacy strategies and practices currently being implemented that are part of the exercise of collectively imagining and building possible futures.

Sur Journal • Tell us a little about the organization Race and Equality. What is it about and what does it do?

Carlos Quesada • We are an institutional capacity-building organization. Basically, we work to strengthen civil society organizations in Latin America, mainly in the countries where we work, in order to achieve two fundamental objectives: for one, so that they can use the Inter-American and international human rights systems. Our organization works "backstage". We do not speak on the behalf of the organizations; instead, we empower them to use certain tools so they can access the systems. For example, in the case of CERD and the UPRs, we help civil society organizations elaborate and send in their shadow reports. Then, we initiate advocacy work so that the organization itself does the advocacy work. We do not give training only on the systems and how to use them, but also on how to do effective advocacy work. We train organizations to prepare reports – we call them *reports for human rights advocacy*.¹ So, we are not in the forefront of anything; we always support and give voice to organizations. We are like a ghost organization. But why is it important to empower organizations? Organizations need to know what to do and what happens with what they are doing. Over the years, we have built close ties with rapporteurs of both the Inter-American and the universal systems, and we exert pressure so that the organizations can use the system. However, we also engage directly in strategic litigation when organizations are unable to do so. For example, we have brought before the Inter-American system cases of journalists in Nicaragua, cases of violations of freedom of expression because the victims are not an organization; they are individuals. In these cases, our work is to engage in strategic litigation directly and also, in the case of Cuba, the Dominican Republic and certain cases in Colombia, when we identify victims who do not have the support of other organizations. But in general, ideally, we are an institutional capacity-building organization that strengthens other organizations' capacity to use the systems.

Sur • How old is the organization?

C.Q. • I founded the organization in 2014, but before that, I used to work for an organization called *Global Rights: Partners for Justice* in the United States. In a way, I transferred what we had already been doing there to this organization and so, I can say that I have worked with Criola,² Geledés³ and other organizations for many years, always doing the same kind of thing: working behind the scenes, so to speak, with the organizations themselves taking the lead. In the case of Colombia, we worked with Afrodes⁴ when it was what people in Colombia call a "first generation" organization, as they literally were the victims. Now, we are very happy to see organizations such as Afrodes and others in Colombia get as far as they have. This involves institutional capacity. Geledés, for example, now files complaints with the Inter-American system on their own. When people don't need us any more, it means we did something right. That is a bit of the philosophy behind institutional capacity-building.

Sur • What structural challenges did the pandemic and the situation afterward raise for the organization? How did this affect its institutional policies? What kind of measures did you have to put into place and what lessons did this bring?

C.Q. • I would like to look at the positive side. In relation to opportunities, it was [about learning] *to adapt to* what was coming up fast. I remember that we had planned a face-to-face workshop in May 2020 with Víctor Madrigal, the UN Independent Expert on sexual orientation and gender identity. My LGBT team and I closed the office in the third week of March and we immediately thought, “What are we going to do?” We already used tools such as Zoom and Skype because as an international organization, we have 65 people around the world, an office in Bogotá and Rio de Janeiro and partners, a small office in Geneva and consultants spread out in other locations. So, working online was not something new. The challenge was to adapt the workshops to hold them online. How do we make sure people do not get bored and tired? We learned a lot from the workshop with Víctor. What we did was adapt ourselves to virtuality. We started paying for the webinars; they are free up to a certain point, but then you have to pay and then, there were other options. The 3-day workshops could no longer be held in three days. We had to reduce them to 3 sessions held in 3 different weeks. This meant we had to start mobilizing early.

The major challenge that we faced at the internal or institutional level had to do with *how we were feeling* as individuals inside the organization. I live in Washington DC and there were three months where it was almost like if we stuck our nose outside, they would arrest us in the street. Washington is very close to New York and Covid-19 hit New York really hard. So, of course, these were big challenges for the staff in DC – there was great concern about what was going to happen, and then, at the international level. Obviously, in the second month, I contacted our donors and told them, “Well, we need to know if you are going to continue funding us. We have to readjust the budget because right now, I need to guarantee the staff that they are going to continue working.” The donors’ response was actually quite positive. They told us, “you need to prioritize your staff”.

Another thing we did was to hold *group sessions*. Now, it seems like everyone talks about it, but at the time, many people (especially in Latin America) did not like to talk about psychologists. So, we hired psychologists for these online sessions. Suddenly, we would be in a Zoom meeting and a colleague would appear on screen with three small children running around all over the place, and she’d feel bad, as if she was not giving it her best – misconceptions about what others think; “they’ll think I’m not working”, etc. So, in June 2020, we managed to hold internal training processes, which were not mandatory. Every month and a half, we would have a session with a group psychologist so we could say how we were feeling. Important things to mention here are: first, *stability*: we were fortunate because many other donors did not do the same. And I refer to our donors, private and public – they all adapted. And the other thing I like to see as an opportunity is that we realized that we had managed to do everything we wanted and there was *money left over*. We had to request what is called “no cost extensions” to be able to use the funds for something else. This was very positive in the midst of this process, but I know that other organizations, especially in Latin America, did not have the same luck. Even in the United States, many NGOs closed their doors or reduced their staff.

About the lessons learned: virtuality. In the end, we were fed up with working online, but the truth is – and it is important to say this – online work will continue to be used as a complementary instrument or tool. It brought us closer – not only the institution, but myself and the partners – because we carried out an entire process mediated by online technologies. This allowed us to ask our partners how they were. Since people in the United States were vaccinated much earlier, we brought staff from Latin America to get vaccinated in the United States when the vaccine was not yet available in their countries. When colleagues from Colombia and Brazil arrived in Miami to get vaccinated, we took advantage of this opportunity to hold face-to-face meetings. Another important thing is that we hired people online. We thus discovered that seeing people face-to-face is not essential for something to work. I think that's important.

Sur • One of the organization's recent publications is on self-care.⁵ This was an issue that organizations had already been discussing even before the pandemic. How did the pandemic give new importance and meaning to self-care?

C.Q. • In the United States, there is a culture of working more than 8 hours a day; it is considered normal to work 10 to 12 hours a day. And as human rights defenders, we believe that we have to work long days. I think the pandemic left us with that – well, that you don't have to work 12 hours to do what can supposedly be done in 8 hours or less. Secondly, something that can be applied to all areas of work, not only human rights, is the need to see each other not just as co-workers, but as human beings with needs and frustrations.

When we put out this material on self-care, it was interesting because in one of the group sessions with the psychologist, I asked a colleague, "how are you?", and it was as though I had scolded her. She started to cry and cry, but I had only asked her how she was. That is when we realized, while talking to the psychologist, that many people obviously feel pressured. And the message was clear: to care for others, we need to take good care of ourselves. We had already been working on this in 3 very difficult countries: Cuba, Nicaragua and Colombia. This was having strong psychological effects on our colleagues, people from civil society organizations in these 3 countries. Situations of violence affect you as a human rights defender, but also as a human, and it was like that even before the pandemic. So, there were already things that we knew we had to protect ourselves from.

We then implemented something called "pandemic day" in the whole organization. All one had to do was let people know that "tomorrow, I am taking a pandemic day", which was a day to do whatever. You can do whatever you want. You only have to let us know that you will not be available because you're going to take a pandemic day, and it's all good. And there were several times when someone would say, "maybe that person isn't working because they are taking a pandemic day." So, we already knew that it was someone who was taking care of themselves, dealing with their process. Honestly, in recent months, no one has asked for a pandemic day, but we haven't eliminated them. They are there for anybody who wants them.

We work on very difficult issues. Working with human rights is not easy. What is more, we carry the weight of our own personal issues as well: relationships, home, family, etc. I always tell them that if they want a personal day off, they should just let their supervisor know. We also offer psychologists on an individual basis: we offer to pay for intensive psychological support for up to three months. Many have accepted this psychosocial support. As for self-care, feminist organizations had already been working on all the sexual and work harassment that women defenders suffer in human rights organizations – in other words, this was not a new issue either. The reasons are different, but one has to take care of oneself. Period. We have to care for ourselves.

We also pressure people to take their days off or their holidays. In these cases, we use the argument on self-care. This has helped improve internal communication and led to much more horizontal relations (I don't know if this has been the case in other organizations).

Sur • The racial issue is – or at least in Brazil it is – a big challenge in terms of self-care, institutional policies and mobility within organizations. Tell us about the role of race (which seems central) in your work.

C.Q. • Race as such, or racism, is not the sole focus. It is one of the three main issues we work on, which are gender, race and sexual orientation/gender identity. Therefore, for us, intersectionality is fundamental. The issue of race is very important because it is something we have been working on since *Global Rights*. For example, as civil society, we fought to get the Inter-American Convention against Racism and/or Racial Discrimination and Related Forms of Intolerance and the other convention, the Inter-American Convention against All Form of Discrimination and Intolerance, approved. They started as one, but then, they had to be separated because of the English-speaking Caribbean countries.⁶ The convention is my baby. I began working on the convention in 1998 as part of the preparations for the Santiago Conference in the lead-up to Durban, where we managed to get the states to ask the OAS whether or not it was necessary to have an Inter-American convention against racism. Civil society's view was, "Why is there no Inter-American convention against racism? There is an international convention, but it is not the same. We want an Inter-American convention". Back then, in 1998, led by the Brazilian mission and Brazilian civil society, we asked the OAS, in the framework of the Santiago action plan,⁷ about the need to create a convention, and that is where the convention began. We put all our bets on that convention. The Afro-Brazilian movement was key for this because as a strategy, while lobbying Brazil, we demanded that a Rapporteurship on Afro-descendent peoples be created in the Inter-American Commission. At the time, Silvio José Albuquerque Silva, who was a member of the CERD and is now the Brazilian ambassador to Kenya, played a key role in the process. I am mentioning all this because I define myself as an Afro-Latino gay man, and this new instrument was super important. Then, we had to convince Costa Rica and Uruguay to ratify it because it needed to be ratified by two countries in order to come into effect. It took a lot of work and our strategy was impressive. And one thing that is intrinsic to the entire convention is the issue of intersectionality. A black, lesbian women

living with a disability in a favela is not the same as a black woman with a PhD in Brazil, who also suffers from discrimination. We are not saying who suffers less. But when you are in certain conditions, your rights are violated more. So, our organization was created with this intention: *race, equality and human rights*.

Even though it is a very important matter, in other countries, we work on other issues. In Nicaragua, we work on civil and political rights, in addition to racial issues. In Colombia, we work on civil and political rights too; the same in Cuba. But in other countries, we work hard on racial issues.

It is also important to say that we included ‘race’ in the organization’s name on purpose – not as a biological, but rather a sociological concept. That is why for me, the issue of intersectionality is very important. Obviously, not all people enjoy the same rights equally.

Sur • Tell us more about the structural challenges that the human rights movement in the region faces.

C.Q. • I think that the compartmentalization of rights prevents us from recognizing other rights. This happens to the feminist movement with the trans movement, the black women’s movement to the indigenous women’s movement, and in other cases. We cannot continue compartmentalizing rights. I believe that this is a big challenge for the human rights movement, since its compartmentalization has hindered the full recognition of rights – and often, even collaboration with peers. During the pandemic, I saw human rights organizations that helped some organizations, but not others – and often deliberately.

This is a major challenge, which is why we created *RegionaR* [Regional Forum on Human Rights]. The idea is: let’s stop talking about individual concerns and talk about collective challenges, the opportunities we have and the strategies we can build together. Because if there is anyone who clearly knows what they want, it’s the anti-rights people. It is all very clear for them and they can sum it up in one paragraph. An anti-rights person in Peru, Mexico or any other country can tell you in one sentence what “gender ideology” is. But if you talk to the traditional rights movement in Latin America, we do not have a clear language for contesting the anti-rights groups, nor to use among ourselves. Therefore, it is difficult to go beyond the labels – “I work on this, on that” – to come together and be able to say that a structural problem our organizations face is the sustainability of the movement, access to resources. Since it is a challenge for the entire human rights movement, then let’s get together to discuss this to try to come up with joint strategies for delivering the same message to donors. We all get along great until a call for funding comes out and we start fighting over funds. And the donor’s part in this also seems quite perverse. It is important for donors to understand that sustainability is a challenge and it could end up weakening the human rights system.

Another challenge, related to sustainability, has to do with independence because when you apply for something, usually it has already been pre-defined. There is a disconnect between

what donors want and reality, and we, in the middle, have to adapt the reality we face to the donors' agenda. I tell donors this. Some listen, others simply tell us, "sorry. It has already been decided"! I think it is important that they hear this from other organizations, not just one. Because if they hear it from Carlos Quesada from *Race and Equality*, that's one thing, but if they also hear it from Camila Asano from Conectas, or they hear it from Rodnei Jericó from Geledés and others, it shows that the movement is concerned.

That is the idea of *RegionaR* – to enable us to raise our common concerns with donors, but also with the Inter-American Commission and the universal system. Because another thing here in Latin America is that we have idolized the international and Inter-American system. But that's not right! We have to criticize them when necessary. We are becoming complacent despite the fact that there are still many challenges. I argue that if we do not organize around a common language based on respect and coherence among human rights organizations, the future of human rights is at stake.

Sur • How do we strengthen solidarity transnationally to address the important issues that you have mentioned? Is *RegionaR* a strategy to move forward on this, to build stronger ties that do not yet exist?

C.Q. • Yes, indeed, when we started working on *RegionaR*, we held a process of listening to a lot of people who had the same concerns: "Here, we are becoming divided, we are killing each other over resources and the donors don't understand us". One very important aspect that we want to give visibility to through *RegionaR* is that we have to learn from one another. The human rights movement has to learn from its peers. I will never forget the time when during the steering committee's first meeting, with 14 organizations attending, we began talking about human rights in general and the organization Abya-Yala said, "wait. Everything you are saying sounds wonderful but that is not how we see the world and that is not how we see human rights". It was like a slap in the face. It was a wake-up call for all of us: we need to learn from each other. The feminist movement needs to learn from the Black movement; the LGBT movement from the children's rights movement; the indigenous movement from other movements; we have to learn from the indigenous movement. That was, I believe, the structure that managed to coalesce in *RegionaR*: we have to learn from each other before we build something together. And we went through a whole process in the two years in the lead up to the conference,⁸ where plans were made and many people participated. The organizations themselves had to invite other organizations so it wasn't just a group of friends getting together. Back then, I didn't know even 10% of the organizations that came. Everyone wanted to learn from everyone else. This was an important lesson: we, from the human rights movement, can reach out to one another and learn from each other in order to create. I think that we need more of these moments in the Latin American movement – times when we stop focusing on specificities to see the things that unite us in our struggles and based on these struggles, we help each other. We need more spaces where we do not compete among ourselves. This is where we are going

with *RegionaR*, which is only beginning. The idea is to continue growing, to continue developing this philosophy. So, for example, we do not talk about race, gender or sexual identity; we talk about our common problems, how donors see us, how to have more horizontal conversations with donors, those kinds of things. How to learn from the movements, recognize differences, respect them and, when possible, learn from them. *RegionaR* was a very valuable experience. I don't know where it is heading, but I believe that it was a good start and it went well.

I want to end with this: the world is evolving and so, the human rights movement in Latin America has to evolve too. We are constantly evolving, but we don't truly understand this, nor do donors, but our movement is evolving.



Carlos Quesada.
Personal archive photo.

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*Interview conducted by Maryuri Mora Grisales on December 2022.
Original in Spanish. Translated by Karen Lang.*

NOTES

- 1 • “Manual on “, International Institute on Race, Equality and Human Rights – Race and Equality, June 2020, accessed December 31, 2022, https://raceandequality.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/Manual-IDH_web_ilustrado.pdf.
- 2 • Criola, Homepage, 2022, accessed December 31, 2022, <https://criola.org.br/>.
- 3 • Portal Geledés, Homepage, 2022, accessed December 31, 2022, <https://www.geledes.org.br/>.
- 4 • Afrodes, Homepage, 2022, accessed December 31, 2022, <http://www.afrodescolombia.org/>.
- 5 • “Guía para el autocuidado: ‘Si yo me cuido, puedo cuidar a los demás’”, International Institute on Race, Equality and Human Rights – Race and Equality, May 2022, accessed December 31, 2022, https://raceandequality.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/GUIA-AUTOCUIDADO_FINAL.pdf.
- 6 • The LGBT issue was the problem, as in many English-speaking Caribbean countries, being LGBT is still a crime and so, they said, “We will not move forward with the convention unless we do two separate ones”.
- 7 • “Second Summit of the Americas”, OAS, 1998, accessed December 31, 2022, <http://www.summit-americas.org/chileplan.htm>.
- 8 • The 2nd RegionaR Conference was held in Bogotá between November 29 and 30, 2022; 150 organizations participated in the event. For more information: www.regionar.org.



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