AMNESTY TECH EMPOWERMENT:

Transforming digital security support for human rights defenders

THE ENGINE ROOM

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL

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This report is based on research conducted by The Engine Room with support from Amnesty International from June 2020 to September 2020.

Research: Laura Vidal and Sara Baker, The Engine Room

Writing: Sara Baker, The Engine Room

Editing: Laura Guzmán, The Engine Room

Layout design: Salam Shokor

Project advisor: Danna Ingleton, Amnesty International

Interviewees: Niki Frencken, Danna Ingleton, Mark Kiggundu, Tanya O'Carroll, Ramy Raoof, Marceau Sivieude, Amnesty International; Dan Ger, KASH; Daud Gideon, ROWL; Gordon Lam, Dialogue and Research Initiative; Reverend James Ninrew, Assistance Mission for Africa

INTRODUCTION

Amnesty International had been supporting human rights defenders (HRDs) with physical protection for years when it became increasingly clear that digital threats were part of the spectrum of violence and abuse HRDs face. Traditional digital security support around this time, however, typically consisted of one-o interactions where the practitioner would address a particular threat or facilitate a training with little to no follow-up[01]. Danna Ingleton, Deputy Director of Amnesty Tech, described this approach as a "tool-centric, parachute model[02] of training," and Amnesty's use of this model showed that the e ects were mostly limited to short-term behaviour change if any change at all.

Many practitioners and organisations had been working toward new digital security support models that focus on long-term behaviour change and sustainability, like Front Line Defenders' and APC's 'train-the-trainers' approach, and Amnesty Tech wanted to build on these models and figure out how to be e ective in this space. This desire led Amnesty Tech to develop the Tech Empowerment project, switching their focus from basic trainings with as many HRDs as possible to long-term accompaniment with a smaller group of beneficiaries. To do so, in 2016, Amnesty began developing the idea of placing technologists in regions where they could build networks and provide long-term direct support on digital security and critical tech literacy to civil society organisations.

This case study explores what worked and what didn't in Tech Empowerment—and, importantly, highlights Amnesty International's biggest lessons learned in two years of doing Tech Empowerment work. It is based on interviews with Amnesty Tech sta and the local civil society organisations they supported in South Sudan and Kenya, as well as a review of key programmatic documents, all of which took place in June and July 2020. While Amnesty International is not the only organisation that supports HRDs in this way, their experience can help other organisations and practitioners transform to long-term support by building on lessons learned.

01 Learn more about the limitations of this approach through The Engine Room's Ties That Bind: Organisational Security for Civil Society, https://www.theengineroom.org/civil-society-digital-security-new-research.

02 A parachute model involves responding to urgent needs as they come up rather than building long-term capacity.

GETTING STARTED

Funding is often the first step with a new initiative, and Tanya O'Connell, Director of Amnesty Tech, talked to Open Society Foundations and Ford Foundation, two funders Amnesty already had a relationship with, about what Amnesty was seeing in the field. One of the issues trainers identified was that HRDs felt helpless when faced with the complexities of technology and the consequences of digital attacks, a problem that required relationship building and accompaniment or mentoring rather than training alone.

With initial funding, Amnesty hired two technologists to test the new approach of long-term accompaniment. The idea was to place these technologists in regional offices, where they would work with a few local organisations over two years to build regional tech and security capacity instead of the parachute model, which focused on more people with less impact. Tech Empowerment would seek local organisations that met the following criteria:

- Previous experience with Amnesty International
- Some funding of their own
- Significant need and desire for improved security

Putting a team together was tougher than expected because they had to find people who possessed both knowledge of technology and HRD context, and because Amnesty Tech and the regional offices had to conduct the hiring process jointly. Given how new and innovative the work was, there were different expectations between hiring parties, as well as uncertainty regarding what technologists would actually do. As one technologist said, "The people having a say in hiring were not completely aware of what the team would be doing."

Danna kicked off the project by meeting with regional offices and the new technologists. But, shortly after kick-off, Tech Empowerment hit another unexpectedly long phase: helping the new technologists adapt to Amnesty International, a large, traditional organisation. Within this sprawling organisation, Amnesty Tech, a global team of technologists and tech researchers, was still doing the difficult work of helping different sections and regional offices understand the role technology plays in human rights. As the first technologist working in a regional office, Sadibou Sow, Technology Advisor in West Africa, was a test case for integrating technology as a theme into the work of regional offices. With Tech Empowerment project staff working in different locations, Sadibou and Mark Kiggundu, who led the Tech Empowerment project in East Africa, were embedded in regional offices among other teams that had little knowledge of technology. Mark said, "I think most people felt like I was the IT guy in the local office."

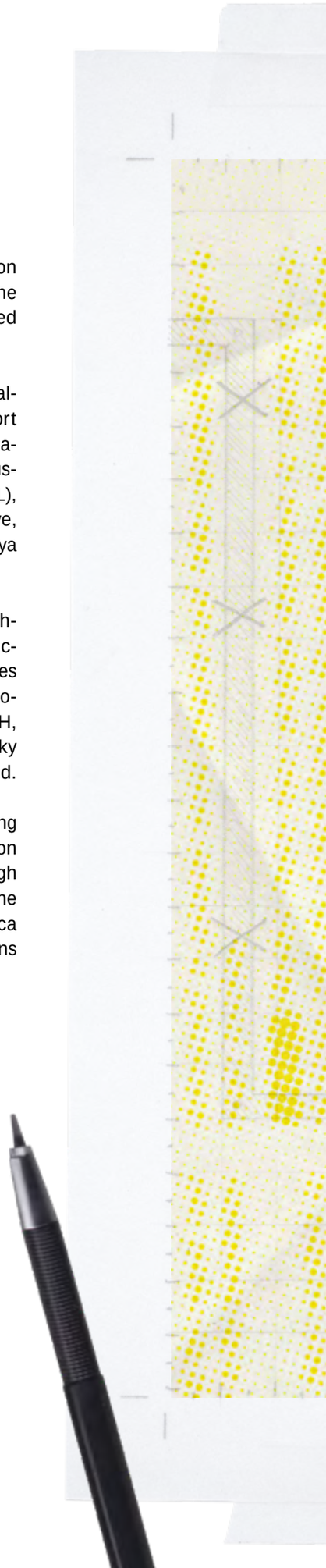
For people without an NGO background, joining Amnesty International can be overwhelming. Not only did Sadibou and Mark have to translate their work to regional o□ces, but they also had to adjust to Amnesty's processes and understand grant guidelines. Zahra Asif, Research, Campaigns and Communications Assistant with the Surveillance Team at Amnesty Tech worked closely with Sadibou and Mark, and said the technologists across Amnesty Tech had to learn to see their work in the bigger picture of Amnesty's way of working. She explained:

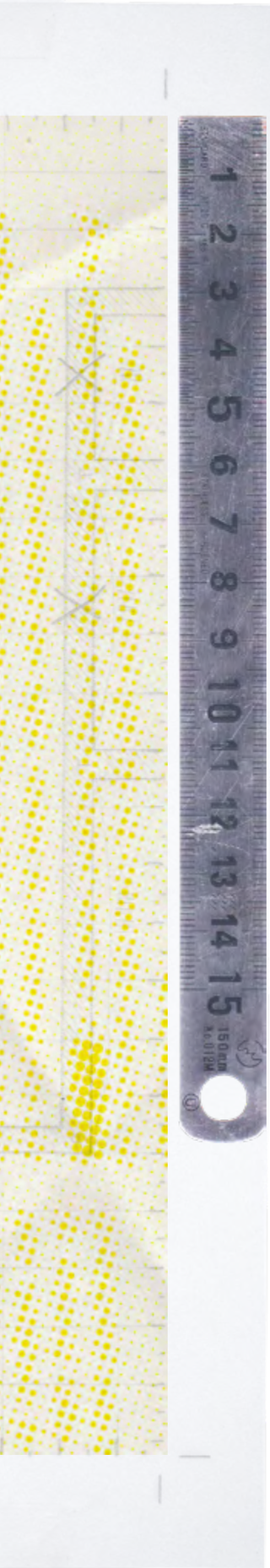
"[The technologists] can reverse engineer malware but struggle with Excel sheet reports on their activities because they've just never had to do it before. It's a very NGO thing." For the first six months, Danna provided extra support to the new technologists, and Amnesty learned a great deal about how to better prepare technologists to work within their structures.

It wasn't until a few Amnesty International researchers in South Sudan and Kenya saw the value of having Mark on board that he was able to find local civil society organisations to support thanks to the researchers' contacts. Tech Empowerment identified four East African organisations for support, including three in South Sudan—Assistance Mission for Africa, which focuses on peace and protection of human rights work, Remembering the Ones We Lost (ROWL), which documents the names of victims of civil conflict, and Dialogue and Research Initiative, which documents human rights violations—and an LGBTQI+ service organisation in Kenya called Keep Alive Societies Hope (KASH).

In describing the need apparent in these organisations, Niki Frencken, South Sudan Researcher, said, "There are quite a number of brave South Sudanese activists that are out there documenting human rights violations, or incidents that could amount to war crimes and crimes against humanity," yet they didn't know how to do this work safely for themselves and the people whose testimonies they were collecting. Likewise in Kenya, Dan Ger, the IT o□cer at KASH, said most of their sta□ engage with beneficiaries through social media, a necessary but risky communication method because LGBTQI+ people's lives can be ruined if their data is exposed.

Partner selection for West Africa, on the other hand, was complicated by di□culty in finding organisations that met the criteria. Many of the HRDs Sadibou spoke to wanted to focus on formal digital security training because they were accustomed to building capacity through training, and many did not have internet access or the ability to prioritise digital security in the midst of urgent economic and social matters. Additionally, there were locations in West Africa where Amnesty simply does not have access, frustrating their ability to identify organisations and build relationships.





IMPLEMENTING AND ADAPTING THE PLAN

The pilot began in earnest in 2018. Once relationships between technologists and local organisations were established where possible, the support process started with an **assessment** to determine security gaps and needs for each organisation. From this, team members developed plans to build knowledge and skills around both digital and physical security in terms of documentation, field work and daily o□ce life. Niki described part of the assessment: “What is the o□ce situation like? What is the location? Is the neighborhood safe? How's the wifi box secured? How are the papers secured? Who makes a copy? Who knows about the documentation work? Who holds passwords? You'd be really in depth into the organisational aspects of the audit.”

The long-term plan involved a combination of **training, mentoring** and the development of a **security plan.** For example, Mark worked with KASH to develop the following objectives:

- Carry out a needs and capacity assessment of KASH Kenya at their two o□ces in Kisumu.

- Address time-sensitive or critical threats that can be done within the assessment time frame through training, group activities or device and software configuration.

- Write a comprehensive report about the current digital security and capacity needs within the organization showing detailed recommendations to improve the posture to a more secure and resilient organization.

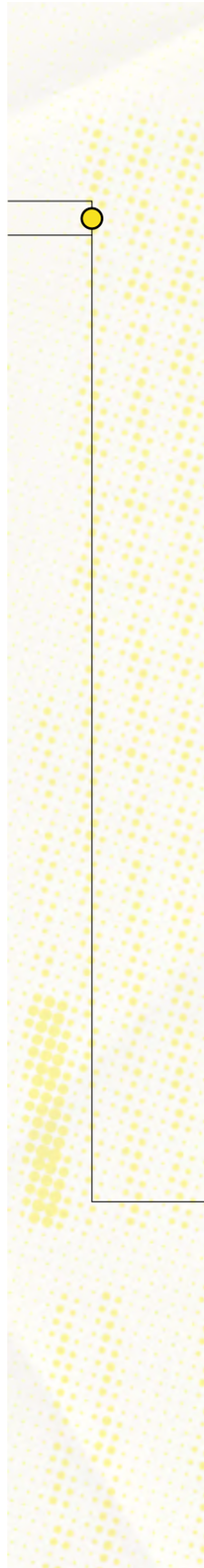
- Work with the current IT O□cer to implement recommendations over the coming months.

All of the East African partners we spoke to were able to pinpoint a few examples of concrete impact, such as using secure email and learning how to recognise sensitive data, and they all had a sense that their organisations experienced a positive change in attitude around technology. Despite sta□ turnover in East African organisations, everyone grew to understand the need for security on some level and developed a desire to continue to improve. They described the work as collaborative and the relationships as positive. Daud Gideon of ROWL explained, “Our volunteers are now more able to navigate a hostile-looking environment. To me that has been a [sustainable impact] because they're more aware of the risks and how to protect themselves.”

For East African organisations, Mark led initial trainings and then visited each organisation in person on a regular basis for mentoring. He led a wide range of activities from interviews and device assessments to software installation and policy development. The first round of support, which included steps like updating operating systems and turning on encryption, was easy and e□ective because it was all work Mark could do himself, but challenges popped up as he moved on to the next steps in response to the assessment. He had to follow each organisation’s pace and priorities in the midst of fluctuating conditions and complicated political contexts: “It's back and forth, it's not a straight line.”

Since the circumstances in West Africa made it impossible to implement the plan as originally envisioned, the team, in agreement with the funder, adapted to the context. They developed a new project called **Secure Squad**, which identified individual technologists throughout the region to work between the regional technologist and local contacts. Although some of local contacts were part of organisations, the work in West Africa became more about these individual focal points rather than direct support to organisations.

Sadibou identified individuals who could start chapters in various locations, had them go through a human rights online course he developed to capture their level of digital security expertise and, where possible, traveled to each location to lead initial training. Afterwards, he worked with them to situate their learnings in the context of each country and support relevant goals, including more training, conducting research, gaining visibility in the local space and building partnerships. Tech Empowerment brought the Secure Squad chapters together at a regional event, where they could build relationships, and Sadibou helped chapters work with each other remotely. Overall, Sadibou developed Secure Squads of one or more people in Chad, Mauritania, Cameroon, Ivory Coast, Togo, Benin, Senegal and Burkina Faso.



LESSONS LEARNED

The complexity of digital security

All of the team members we interviewed described digital security as a complex topic that was its own obstacle. It was sometimes tough to train people because their starting point was too basic. Often, people forgot what they had learned around tools or processes, and even forgot passwords. Mark said, “You train someone, they practice, they feel confident and then you go away for four days [and they tell you], ‘I locked something very confidential. I don't remember the password.’”

Partner engagement and stability

Mark would work in collaboration with organisations for weeks to plan his visits and then find key sta unavailable due to other responsibilities, time o and frequent sta turnover. Key people were trained and then left because their contract ended and grants were sporadic, causing the Tech Empowerment team to backtrack. Mark said sta turnover “tears apart the whole plan and everything that you’d built within the organisations.” Although this problem limited the impact of training, local partners continue to see training as important to their progress. Reverend James Ninrew of Assistance Mission for Africa noted, “The digital world is dynamic. You can’t say, 'I trained you two years ago and that’s enough.' You need to refresh that, update the data that you provided.”

Regional travel

When Covid-19 hit, Tech Empowerment team members could no longer travel to visit organisations for mentoring. All mentoring became remote. This shift disrupted the initiative because connection problems in some locations limited opportunities for support and it was easier to build and maintain relationships in person. Even before the pandemic, there were travel di-culties in West Africa due to few direct connections and high cost. Sadibou sometimes had to travel through countries outside of the region, such as Morocco, to get to locations with Secure Squad chapters, adding significant time, cost and stress.

Trust and power

In countries with recent conflict, trust can be an issue. Niki described some organisations in South Sudan as being extremely careful with the information they share internally as well as externally. In addition to building trust within their own teams, local organisations must also feel able to trust the Amnesty team–as a whole and as individuals–especially since even being associated with this large human rights organisation can be a risk. The issue of trust can be further complicated by power dynamics. Danna pointed out that HRDs sometimes fear being fully transparent because they don’t want to say something that will keep Amnesty from working with them. Amnesty International’s status, including its origins and leadership in the Global North, automatically introduces a power imbalance that can make local civil society sceptical of the support.

In 2020, as the Tech Empowerment pilot draws to a close, the Amnesty Tech team is mostly stationed in Berlin, where the Amnesty International Germany is very supportive of their work, although they still have technologists in a few other locations and other sta in London and Toronto. They recognise that this location can exacerbate the power imbalance described above, and it's a continuous struggle. Amnesty Tech Director Tanya O'Connell stated, "We don't want to be an organisation of techies in the Global North, to have a centre of expertise in the Global North, with a partial view of what is going on around the world. That's the history of Amnesty. That is the history of most of the organisations that have money behind them."

Placing technologists in regional o ces

The internal governance of Amnesty International played a big role in what worked and what didn't, especially considering that Tech Empowerment project members were spread across different locations in o ces with other teams. Ramy Raoof, an Amnesty technologist, described a complex managerial model that a ected timelines, which, in the digital security field, tend to be urgent. The joint management of technologists by Amnesty Tech and regional o ces, the need to involve country teams in local endeavors and the complexities of national politics all meant that many decisions and requests had to go through several layers of approvals. Through these struggles, Amnesty learned a lot about how to integrate new technologists[03] and the o ces did eventually understand the Tech Empowerment project, lamenting that they wished they had understood better from the beginning. Danna described this transformation as the biggest internal impact.

Partner organisations mentioned an additional problem with regional locations. "Sometimes we need immediate help, and it's not possible because of the distance," said Reverend Ninrew. The partner would make a request, and the technologist would travel to them. Regional locations were intended to decrease the physical distance between technologists and organisations, but in the end they weren't close enough. Partners suggested having a local technologist who works partly for Amnesty and partly for local organisations would solve this problem.

Measuring change

The team's ability to measure the impact of the technologists' work was limited because Amnesty was unable to find people with backgrounds in digital security, human rights and evaluation, and there were no funds for that aspect of the project. In fact, there is a lack of evaluation frameworks, guidance and experience for practitioners in the broader space.[04]

There is also the fact that behavioural change takes time, so long-term impact shows up further down the road. Furthermore, Danna cautioned that power dynamics may prevent partners from speaking honestly, making it more di cult to determine the true impact.

Ultimately, the initiative played out so di erently in the two regions that it was di cult to evaluate the strength of the model. Tech Empowerment had to balance their capacity to take on partners with opportunities for testing the methodology. Danna said, "We still have a lot of questions about whether or not this model is right." It may be that it's right for certain contexts but not others.

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03 Within a year of hiring the first two technologists in West and East Africa, Amnesty secured additional funding to expand the concept and hire three more technologists in places like Tunis and Beirut.

04 This is a common problem faced by security practitioners, which led The Engine Room to work with Internews to develop an adaptable framework for measuring impact in organisational security at https://orgsec.community/display/OS/Monitoring+and+Evaluation+Framework++for+Organisational+Security

WHAT WORKED WELL

Mentoring

According to both partners and Amnesty staff, the mentoring aspect of Tech Empowerment was valuable. In East Africa, Mark was able to address issues over a fairly lengthy period of time with hands-on support that enabled real learning. As Niki said, "That's the way humans learn: through practical application and being reminded of the substance."

Mark's skill at teaching contributed to this success. Niki called him "a patient and dedicated mentor." This led, for example, to one partner successfully protecting documents while being pursued by South Sudan's National Security Services. Mark's mentoring on digital security did not just improve the security of partner work but also how staff felt about it. Gordon Lam, Dialogue and Research Initiative's executive director, said Mark made his team more confident in their work overall.

All of the organisations we spoke to in East Africa described positive working relationships with the Tech Empowerment project, noting that the technologists were interested in getting to know the staff and in communicating daily. This kind of relationship building enabled the most learning, and, as a result of seeing this impact, Amnesty is altering their approach. They will soon stop conducting security training unless it's part of a bigger project connected to research, which involves more relationship building. They have incorporated this lesson into their strategy.

Research

Tech Empowerment eventually benefited from Amnesty Tech's Security Lab in Berlin, launched in 2019 to investigate the technical elements of cyber attacks. Working with Amnesty's Security Lab to research threats enabled the Tech Empowerment project to prevent attacks and create useful tools. They discovered that locking down and cleaning up devices as part of the digital security process also meant destroying evidence of threats. Technologists had to think through how to document while also keeping HRDs safe, which is one reason Amnesty is now focusing more on research. One of the tools they developed documents data on devices before cleaning them, an example of how an observed need informed product development.

The Tech Empowerment team also saw the need to engage HRDs in research more and to build the capacity of HRDs to identify issues and do their own investigations. Through a Ford-funded fellowship starting in 2020, Amnesty will train a cohort in the Global South to do malware forensics, a major research gap in the field. Research like this will help Amnesty and others in the field better understand and respond to the digital problems HRDs face.

While Amnesty did see benefits to the long-term support Tech Empowerment provided, it requires significant resources and ultimately does not fit into their strategy going forward. The need for strategic research was clear, however, and that work is more aligned with Amnesty's overall goals.

Local champions

With sta turnover and inconsistency in engagement, focusing on a “local champion” in each organisation was a key approach. These are people who became focal points for the mentorship and whose acknowledged role was building their expertise in issues of digital security and protection. Mark expressed confidence in KASH’s improvements on self-su ciency, in particular, because they have a local champion who is still there. That person can maintain improvements and support other sta in learning, keeping impact going even if some sta leaves. Mark added: “We addressed some of the biggest challenges they had. They're in a safer position as an organisation. They can protect the information of their clients better, they can communicate to their clients much more securely than before. It was basically going from no security to very strong security.” Partners we spoke to agreed that the local champion is crucial.

Connecting people

Tech Empowerment brought together members of the Secure Squad in a regional forum held in Dakar, Senegal, in November of 2019. Not only did this event strengthen links between the members and Amnesty, but also created a sense of community as they returned to their individual locations throughout West Africa. Marceau Sivieude, Deputy Director, Research West & Central Africa, reported that many of these volunteers will continue their work beyond Amnesty’s support, though he worries that it might be di cult to maintain that sense of community.

It’s clear that relationships are critical to security support. Whether it’s the technologists themselves, technologists and local organisations or di erent teams, taking time to understand each other’s work and experiences, build trust and learn from each other are key elements of successful long-term support. As Zahra said, this is how Sadibou “single-handedly created a network in the region.”

Recommendations for conducting long-term accompaniment

1. **Support the operational and programmatic integration of technologists.** This will require significant administrative resources, guidance and time. Building trust between technologists and country or regional teams is key.

2. **Commit to diversity in hiring.**
In many (if not all) parts of the world, technology is still largely dominated by men, but providing context-respecting support and recognising diverse needs requires people from various demographics.

3. **Start small.**
Starting small can create space to improve before scaling up.

4. **Develop detailed criteria for partner selection.**
Ideally, these criteria would include proxies for sustainable support—for example, sta who have been on board for a certain amount of time.

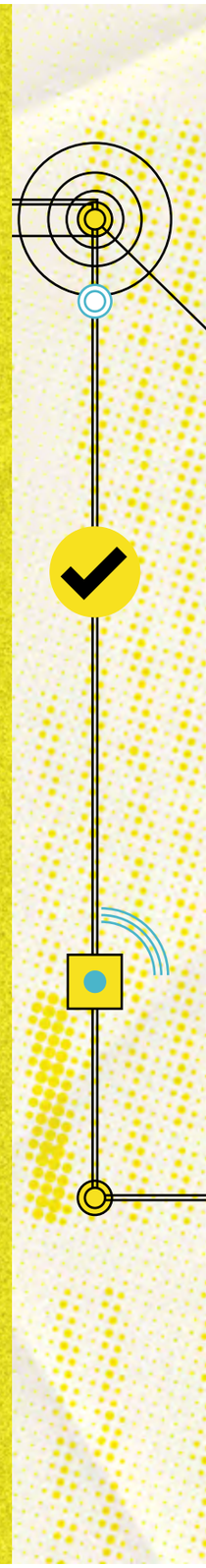
5. **Move at the speed of trust.**
For Amnesty Tech Empowerment, every step took longer than anticipated. Relationships building can't be rushed, and external circumstances disrupt plans. Space out the timeline and adapt as necessary.

6. Listen and adjust accordingly.
Recognise that partners have a voice and listen to what they say they need. Working with partners with low digital literacy requires strong pedagogical skills and empathy.

7. Explore the local landscape.
Learn about the civil society and human rights context, the experiences and capacity of partners, and local barriers that might pop up.

8. Understand how HRDs balance risk with work.
They may not be able to follow all recommendations because of how such guidance restricts the work itself. An audit might identify the use of Facebook as a problem, but it might be their only platform for reaching people.

9. Find funding to upgrade equipment.
Many small human rights organisations work with old, donated computers and outdated software. Among other factors, behaviour change is limited by access to updated hardware and software.



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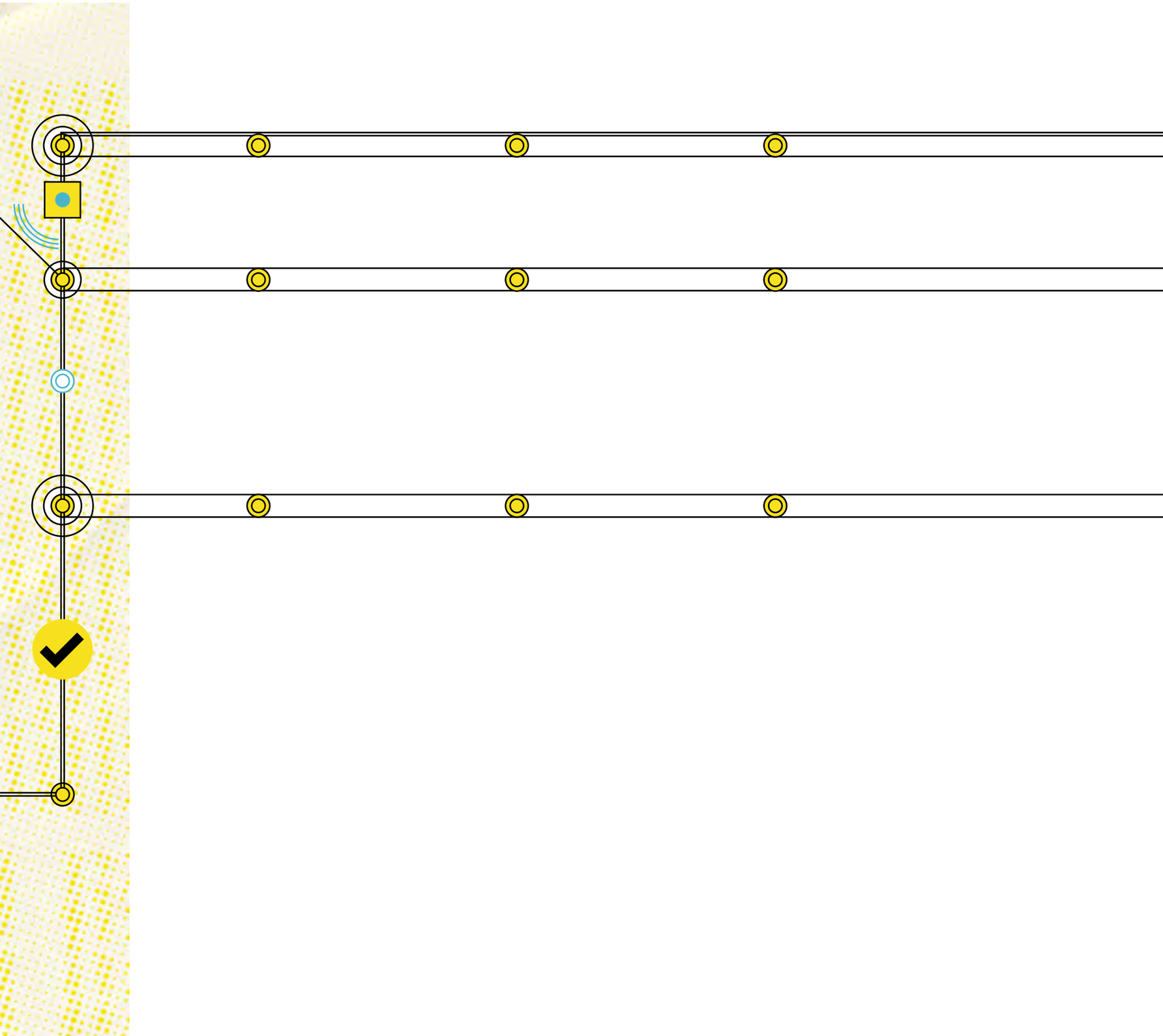
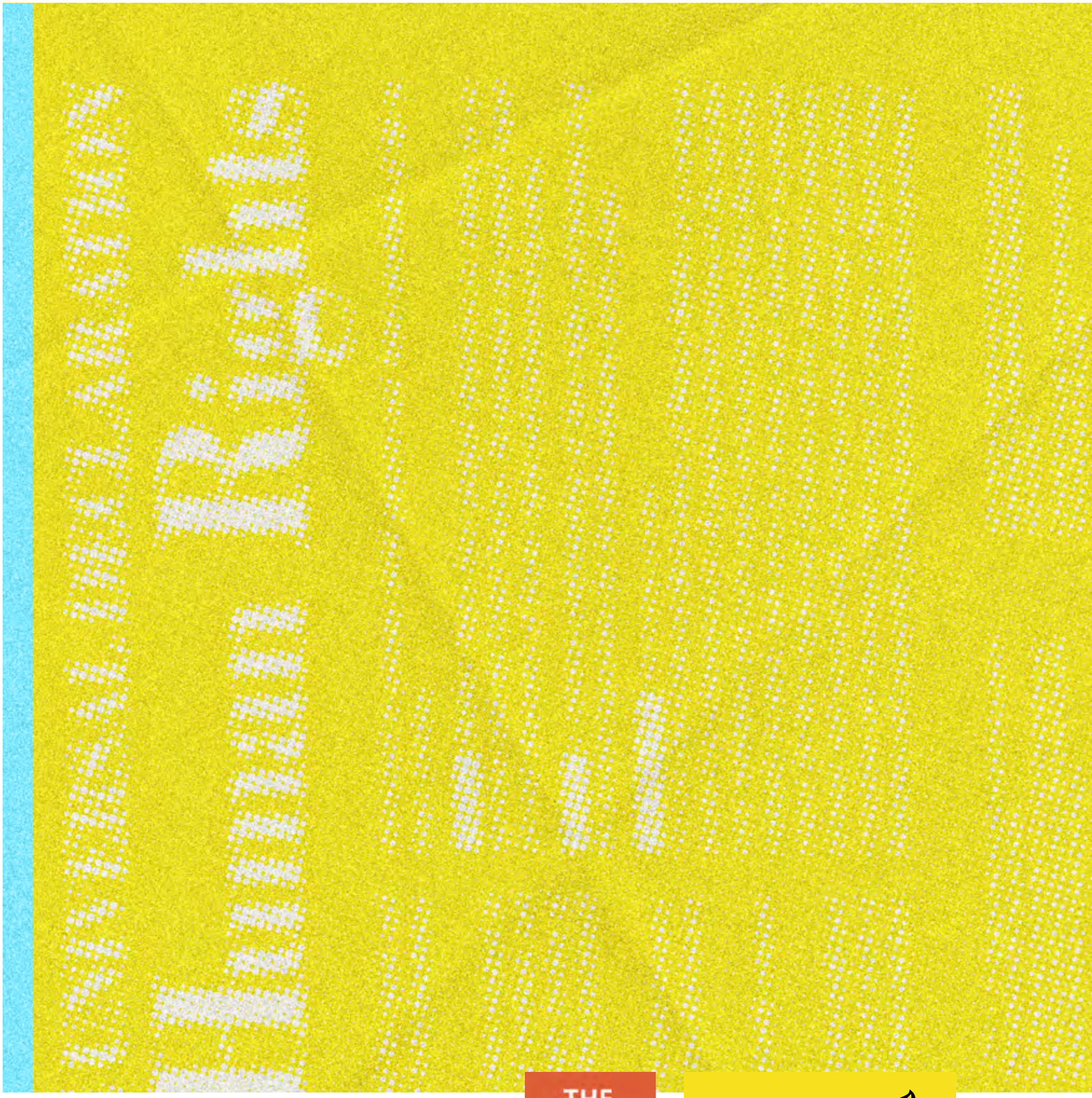
https://www.amnesty.org/en/tech/
@amnestytech
danna.ingleton@amnesty.org





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