

# THE JOURNEY OF AMNESTY TECH:

How a large organisation integrated  
technology into human rights work



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## How a large organisation integrated technology into human rights work

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

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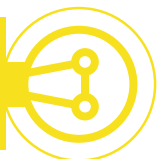

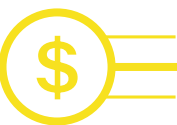
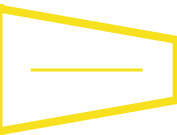

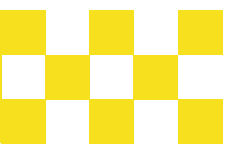
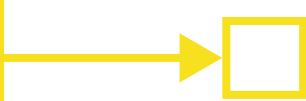

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# INTRODUCTION



As more civil society organisations explore the impact of technology on their work and the communities they serve, especially with states and institutions launching surveillance systems in response to Covid-19, it's a good time to learn from organisations that have long been addressing the intersection of technology and human rights. Integrating digital technology as an issue in a global, bureaucratic space can challenge established ways of working.

In 2012, Amnesty International started thinking about technology in a transformative way—as a contested space where activism for, and threats to, human rights were unfolding. Central to this way of thinking is Amnesty Tech, a “global collective of advocates, hackers, researchers and technologists”<sup>01</sup> that works within the sprawling Amnesty International movement of an International Secretariat, seven regional offices and 70 country offices. At the time of writing, the programme consists of 15 people based in seven countries. This group addresses such tech-related issues as surveillance, big data and AI, and censorship in relation to human rights.

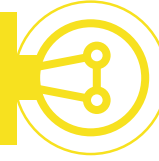
This case study is based on interviews with some of Amnesty Tech's founders, advisors, team members and partners, as well as a review of key programmatic documents, all of which took place in June and July 2020. What you will find is a map of the journey of Amnesty Tech—the programme largely responsible for pushing a large, traditional human rights organisation into integrating the subject of technology into their programmatic work—along with the lessons they learned along the way. At the end, there is a handy list of recommendations for your own journey. Though this case study focuses on the work of Amnesty International, a large, traditional organisation, smaller, activist-led organisations have also pioneered important approaches to technology and human rights work. Their work may lie beyond the scope of this present study but has much to learn from as well.

Civil society cannot afford to ignore the impact technology has on human rights and the activists that work to uphold those rights. We hope this case study energises you to take on the vital work of supporting cross-movement learning and action.

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**01** Amnesty International. Amnesty Tech. Retrieved from <https://www.amnesty.org/en/tech/>

# THE INSPIRATION



Several external events and internal conversations led to the idea for Amnesty Tech. The first spark was the Arab Spring, a series of uprisings across the Middle East and North Africa from 2011 to mid-2012. Since social media was instrumental in spreading protests, this period enabled people to see the positive impact technology could have on human rights. Tanya O'Carroll, now director of Amnesty Tech, spoke of "the immense hope of those days," adding that it seemed like the tech tools used could "remove the gatekeepers of the past" and "amplify the voices of people directly."

The Arab Spring had provoked conversations at Amnesty, and within civil society as a whole, about how tech was changing the field of human rights activism. In 2012, Amnesty hired Tanya as Project Officer, Technology and Human Rights, the first post to aid the organisation in addressing a new set of opportunities and threats linked to emerging technologies. Yet, most people saw technology only as a communication tool, or, as Amnesty Tech's co-founder Sherif Elsayed-Ali said, "a medium at best." Like-minded people within the organisation began discussions with each other. Danna Ingleton, the current deputy director of Amnesty Tech, said, "When I started working with the physical protection of defenders, I quickly realised that there was a digital side, so I started engaging with [Tanya and Sherif as] people who were interested in technology." Sherif said the three of them understood that technology needed to be looked at "for what it means for human rights in and of itself."

Eventually, Amnesty International began incorporating digital security into their work with human rights defenders. Their initial approach was to train as many human rights defenders (HRDs) in digital security as possible, improving the ability of these individuals to protect themselves from digital threats such as surveillance. This approach would later be replaced with long-term accompaniment of a few human rights organisations for deeper impact through the Tech Empowerment project, led by Amnesty Tech and which showed them that the most important role they could play in that space was not necessarily in training or mentoring but in researching digital threats.<sup>02</sup>

Through their Security in Human Rights Campaign, Amnesty International invited people to submit ideas for technology to support HRDs at risk from late 2011 to early 2012. This led to Amnesty Tech's first official project, Panic Button, an app that turns a human rights defender's (HRD) phone into an alert system by notifying trusted contacts of an emergency. While the project was beset with technical difficulties, including false alerts and a lack of resources,<sup>03</sup> it was also a vehicle to help people inside Amnesty International think more deeply about technology. Tanya pointed out:

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**02** For more information on the lessons from Tech Empowerment, see the companion case study "Amnesty Tech Empowerment: Transforming digital security support for human rights defenders"

**03** O'Carroll, Tanya. (2017). Panic Button: Why we are retiring the app. Retrieved from <https://www.theengineeroom.org/panic-button-retiring-the-app/>

What was valuable about that project is that it was this shiny thing that people could understand, that allowed you to have much broader conversations on how technology is impacting our entire sector: how is it impacting the ability to do research? What does human rights monitoring look like in the digital age? What are the new landscapes of threats faced by journalists, activists and human rights defenders?

If Panic Button pushed people in the right direction, the information Edward Snowden leaked in 2013 about widespread surveillance apparatuses in the United States and other countries solidified the move to integrate technology into Amnesty International's work. The Snowden revelations launched a worldwide discussion about tech-facilitated surveillance as a human rights violation. This played a crucial catalytic role in putting tech as a human rights issue on the radar of senior leadership at Amnesty International, encouraging them to recognise the need for a dedicated team.







# THE NAVIGATORS



While current events and a concrete project helped Amnesty International change course, it was the difficult work of internal advocacy that truly propelled the change. It might be easy to think that the integration of technology into Amnesty International's work was "a natural progression," Alix Dunn, an informal advisor, points out, but it was really "the fruit of a lot of negotiation and strategy." This behind-the-scenes work can get unfairly overlooked in the creation story of new programmes.

People we interviewed described a corporate atmosphere with a hierarchical culture and traditional ways of working rooted within the bigger organisation of Amnesty International. Along with a limited understanding of the implications of technology, these are all barriers to change within an organisation. To complicate matters further, Amnesty International is enormous, with dozens and dozens of offices around the world; each team approaches projects in their own way and has their own influence. Understandably, Sherif described laying the groundwork in this context as "years of hustling."

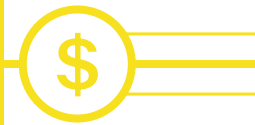
Advocates like Tanya, Danna and Sherif had to first convince senior leadership of the problems technology causes for HRDs and then make the possibilities concrete, as with Panic Button. Alix said Tanya was "the main fire" behind the advocacy effort, but Sherif's senior position gave him more freedom to negotiate. He said, "I had been there longer. I had a lot of capital in the organisation. I could just pitch, push things through, in a way." The Panic Button project gave Tanya the chance to present directly to senior leadership, but it was Sherif's internal credibility that enabled them to pitch the idea for a team. Working together ended up being a useful strategy to make change happen within the organisation.

Milena Marin, who works in the Crisis Programme, was also instrumental in helping Amnesty International think about a new direction. As Alix pointed out, Milena imagined "little islands or pockets of innovation" with projects and tools that could advance research. This idea was useful in considering how different perspectives enrich a single project—each team would see different potentials and risks that could feed into strategy.

These advocates with long-term vision and persistence were critical to moving forward in an organisation resistant to change. Understanding the culture at Amnesty International—how to advocate and whose support was required for different stages, strategies that worked and arguments that didn't—was an important prerequisite for making the vision a reality.

Outside allies were also essential. Since Amnesty International did not have experience working this way, advocates sought advice from external actors like Privacy International, who helped by introducing contacts and sharing experiences. Outside allies also clarified where the gaps were and where Amnesty Tech could be most helpful.

# THE RESOURCES



One way Tanya and other advocates were able to move forward was by promising to be budget neutral. They would work with what they already had until they could get funding from outside sources. Developing the project without resources from Amnesty International required the creation of a strong strategy and mission followed by significant engagement work. Initial funding then came from Amnesty International Germany, with Secretary General Markus N. Beeko funding three positions, including the first technologist, a hacker in Berlin.

At this time, funders were developing an interest in the intersection of technology and human rights, and Alix noted that they were likely primed for the kind of work Tanya was bringing to them. Tanya's experience in digital rights spaces helped her build a relationship with Ford Foundation, which was working on projects around technology for public interest. Tanya said that Ford's knowledge and interest made fundraising feel more like strategy discussion, especially with Amnesty's global presence creating an opportunity to scale ideas. She said:

I was able to say, looking at this landscape, where does Amnesty fit in? [Reporting on] the trends and what is happening, but also being of direct support to civil society and human rights defenders by hiring people that are local to the region or at least grounded in the regional dynamics. That was the model and the vision that Ford helped to realise.

The founders quickly realised that this wouldn't be a single project or department, but an entire section of the organisation's work that would need a significant and stable amount of resources. They raised funds for specific projects and kept going from there. In addition to existing relationships with funders, Amnesty International's secure funding and reputation made it easier to obtain new funding, and Amnesty Tech now benefits from diverse funding streams.



# THE ROUTE

Putting the Amnesty Tech team together took time. It took around a year and a half to get the organisation to commit 1.5 posts to create a team (Tanya's full-time position and half of Sheriff's time as a manager), and then another year before Amnesty created a full-time management post and added a researcher position, bringing the team to three. In 2015, the nascent tech and human rights team benefited from hosting a Ford Mozilla Fellow, their first technologist—an experience Tanya described as “a real gamechanger”.

It was the first time we had a technologist on staff. And that made a difference. Technologists give a different vision and a new language to the policy team, the research team. He was also very good at speaking to management and gave a lot of credibility to what we were saying. What if you could do that, but in every single regional office?

Once a team was up and running, it focused initially on combating surveillance online, both mass surveillance programmes and targeted attacks against HRDs.

The team learned a great deal from the organisation's experience with the Panic Button project. Willingness to openly learn from failure has been critical to their success, enabling them to experiment, try new approaches and pivot depending on the impact of those approaches. Panic Button helped them understand the complexity of project development in this field, the difficulty behind designing an app with the organisation's name on it and the offline dynamics of planning in an emergency, an aspect of activism that goes beyond technology.

Since then, Amnesty Tech staff have established regional networks of contacts, working directly with HRDs to help them understand threats. They have also provided support to country teams involved in their research. Danna spoke of the intensity of work on the early investigative reports where “they had to do so much at once: frame tech as a human rights issue, figure out the methodology from scratch and convince people it was the right one, while defending it as a relevant subject to report on.” Tanya pointed out that most Amnesty researchers and country teams saw surveillance as “a hazard of doing human rights work” rather than an actual human rights violation requiring the same kind of documentation and response as unlawful detention. “Our initial reports about the impact of surveillance on HRDs started to change that attitude,” Tanya said, “but it took time and remains a challenge in the human rights field.”

The team's steady growth within Amnesty and success at attracting external funding allowed them to launch a larger research programme in 2018. Amnesty Tech is now one of two flagship research programmes at the International Secretariat, and their Disrupting Surveillance, Security Lab and AI/Big Data teams currently represent seven countries. These teams have created additional tools, built regional networks, co-hosted conferences, published research reports, run campaigns and supported court cases. They have also spent time building relationships with people inside institutions for advocacy purposes, which has helped them to be successful in campaigns; for example, they coordinated closely with dissenting workers inside Google as part of their Drop Dragonfly<sup>04</sup> campaign.

**04** Amnesty International. (17 December 2018). “Amnesty welcomes reports of an end to Dragonfly.” Retrieved from <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2018/12/amnesty-welcomes-reports-of-an-end-to-dragonfly/>

Importantly, tech-related projects continue to serve as learning vehicles for the organisation as a whole. This learning is crucial, given the broader climate in which strategically incorporating tech into operational and programmatic work is increasingly a necessity for civil society organisations. Understanding the holistic impact of tech choices, and how those choices reflect Amnesty’s politics and values, necessitates collaboration and conversation across the organisation as a whole.





# THE ROADBLOCKS

In an organisation as large as Amnesty International, convincing senior leadership of a new direction is only part of the struggle. People in regional and country offices were also reluctant to apply a technology lens to their work. The first Amnesty Tech hires in particular had a difficult job of building internal understanding and interest, especially considering how abstract concepts like surveillance can be. Ramy Raoof, Tactical Technologist, said, “Amnesty was not prepared to hire and manage technologists in that model.”

This effort continues, however, especially because the organisation is large and bureaucratic in its way of working. Claudio Guarnieri, Head of the Security Lab, said, “It still takes time for us to carve our space within this massive organisation that is still trying to get its head around what this tech stuff is.” Milena agreed that there is still a lot of internal work to do to integrate various tech-related projects under a coherent strategy: “This is because of the complexities of Amnesty and its legacy, and the way that the organisation is structured.”

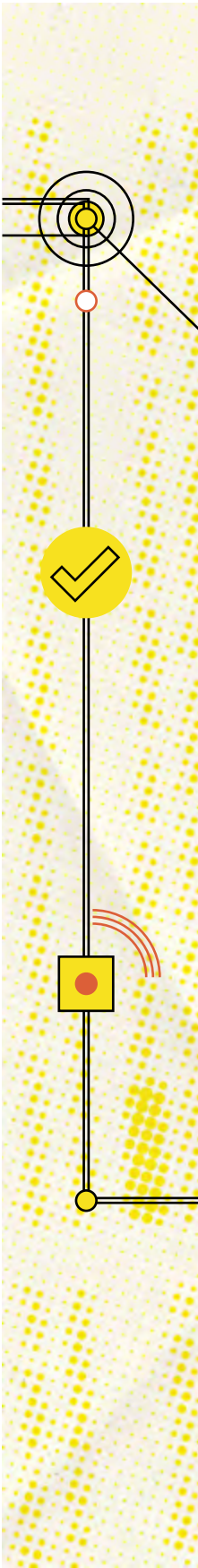
Many of the people we spoke to described Amnesty International’s structure as a hindrance. In the beginning, Amnesty Tech had not figured out the right profile for some of the early hires, which increased the time and resources needed for induction and slowed down project timelines. They ultimately realised they needed technologists who understand human rights and are comfortable working with bureaucracy. Still, it’s difficult for technologists to adapt to Amnesty International’s structure, which one called “a very big machine.” Staff described bureaucratic hurdles in getting things approved, realising who needs to be on board with what, and understanding at what speed work can move. In some ways, having a more agile tech team sits in contrast to legacy processes and policies around technology that are typically much slower—such as getting laptops or running digital infrastructure.

Fortunately, Amnesty Tech learned a lot from these experiences and modified their hiring process to better address identified needs. For every technologist, they look to hire someone with a more traditional human rights skillset, such as a human rights researcher, lawyer or advocate. These people find it easier to speak the language of human rights and can work to lubricate the relationships between the technologists and the rest of the organisation.

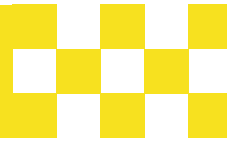
One of the biggest challenges in the programme’s day-to-day work is that staff have found fairly low digital literacy among human rights defenders. One technologist said, “Generally speaking, it’s very, very difficult to find human rights defenders who are tech savvy. When we have interviews with them or when we do forensics it’s difficult sometimes to make them understand what kind of phenomenon they have been exposed to. It’s difficult to explain the mechanics of the attacks and how they can protect themselves.” Often, they simply want to know if they and their phone are safe, but “there are no immediate and simple answers and solutions.” Technologists emphasised the need for a human approach and welcoming attitude with patience and pedagogical skills.



All of the above, from integrating technologists to supporting HRDs, can be exacerbated when leadership is in the Global North while many of the communities served are in the Global South. Most institutions like Amnesty International have ways of working that are influenced by the North, embedding norms that are not responsive to the contexts of people in the South. Furthermore, some people expressed concern that due to the power that comes along with Amnesty International’s size, long history and connections, smaller organisations could be pushed out of the space. This power is also what made the work possible in the first place, however.



# THE ARRIVAL



Despite barriers to getting Amnesty Tech started and obstacles along the way, the programme has achieved significant impact for the organisation, human rights defenders and the movement. The work of Amnesty Tech has transformed the way Amnesty International views their work, seeing surveillance as a human rights issue and addressing technology in their organisational strategy. Alix described the ripple effect this kind of change has:

Organisations at some point realise that you're going to make technology choices, whether they're explicit or not. When you go through that transition of it being implicit and operational and then explicit and programmatic, you have to hire people. And then when you hire people, where do they sit? And then when you make that decision, you end up figuring out how you should reorganise around those issues. And then it blows up your entire organisational way of thinking.

In the past, Amnesty Tech had to reach out to other sections to raise awareness of technology, but now those sections come to them for advice. Tanya gives Covid-19 as an example:

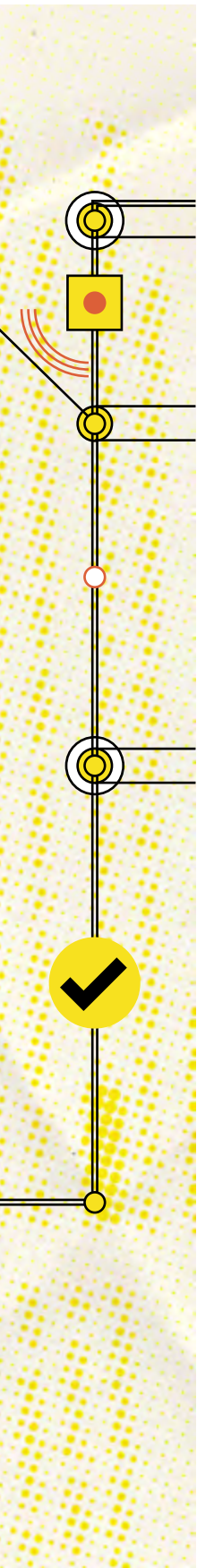
Many Amnesty sections have come to us now that there are contract tracing apps and technologies being rolled out in their countries. Before, we were always pitching the relevancy of our work but external events are doing that job for us, increasing the demand for tech expertise from across the Amnesty movement. This gives us opportunities for research and advocacy that simply weren't there two years ago.

In other words, if Amnesty International had not taken on this work when they did, the organisation would not be prepared to push back against growing surveillance under the guise of pandemic tracing.

Claudio described the visibility and respectability Amnesty Tech has gained inside the organisation as a real success, saying, "It still feels weird to me sometimes looking at Amnesty's social media accounts pushing our work when 10 years ago, that didn't seem to be a thing that would be possible." Milena added, "The change I've been witnessing in the last few years is phenomenal; the elevation of the topic on the organisational level from nobody cares...to an acknowledgement that this is one of the top issues that we need to focus on is incredible."

Ultimately, technology opened up a new way of addressing the same old issues, which infuses the work with new energy. Tanya said, "We're dealing with the same power dynamics and the same abuses, but now we can do it in different ways. Now there is a new way to find the problem and to do activism. There are new theories of change that we can devise."

The shift has updated Amnesty International's work and helped the organisation keep up with problems and perspectives that are increasingly urgent. As Sherif said, "There are the big forces [like technology] that drive a change in society and drive both the protection and risks in human rights more generally. Unless you are addressing these and integrating them into an analysis, you're just not keeping up." Moreover, Claudio said that even if some projects fail, they are moving in the right direction, "dragging this huge human rights organisation into the next phase."



The outcomes for HRDs, whether indirect or direct, are also impressive. Amnesty Tech has strengthened Amnesty International's advocacy on tech issues, especially in terms of strategic litigation, which Alix noted no longer feels "like David and Goliath" because Amnesty Tech has people fully dedicated to these issues who "really know their stuff, legally and technically." This growth is one reason they were able to bring a case against spyware firm NSO Group, which the Israeli government agreed to hear in early 2020.<sup>05</sup> Unfortunately, Amnesty did not win the case,<sup>06</sup> but more people are now aware of problems with NSO Group, and Amnesty showed civil society and surveillance companies that it is possible to use existing legal systems for accountability.

Country offices have been able to better support HRDs thanks to Amnesty Tech's research. Danna says the reports they publish contribute to this impact, and adds, "Now if we have an indication that a human rights defender is being surveilled in some country, we can call that country team and tell them 'here's what we think is happening,' and they'll engage with us. It didn't used to be that easy." Some of their reports have also influenced concrete changes that benefit HRDs. The Toxic Twitter report,<sup>07</sup> for example, led to changes in Twitter's policies and processes.

Having technologists and traditional researchers on the same team creates opportunities that would not exist otherwise. Recently, Amnesty Tech's work on contact tracing apps has protected people's data. Tanya said, "Because we have people who can reverse engineer apps on staff, we can actually [analyse] contact tracing apps." They have published findings on this themselves, sent reports to the BBC and contacted states directly. Recently, they found a vulnerability in Qatar's contact tracing app, exposing the data of millions of people. The night before the app was set to become mandatory, Amnesty alerted Qatari authorities, and within 24 hours the leak was fixed.

Finally, Amnesty Tech's work has furthered the movement by building evidence for surveillance as a human rights violation and by bridging organisations and knowledge, which Tanya calls "the work of translation." She said:

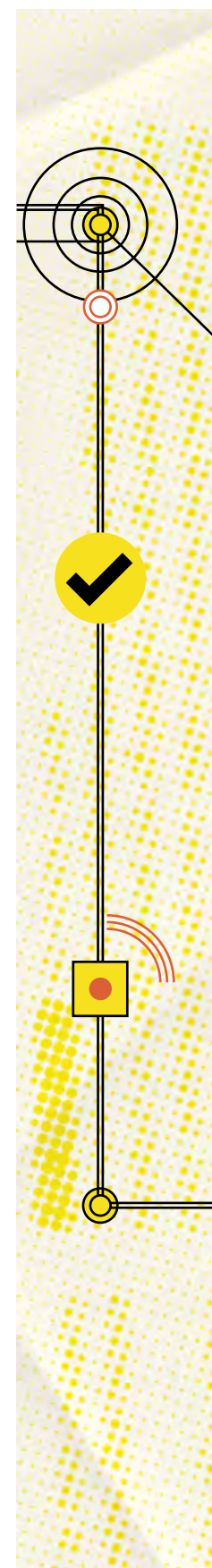
Everyone who is in tech will follow Citizen Lab<sup>08</sup> because they are at the frontier. Everyone who is not in tech, which is the bulk of human rights organisations, will follow Amnesty. We're doing big translation work to switch tech issues to direct human rights issues and build the capacity of human rights workers to defend themselves and do their work safely without the threat of detention, torture, and constant harassment and surveillance. This for me is the impact that Amnesty Tech can bring by being positioned on the inside of a traditional human rights organisation like Amnesty.

**05** Amnesty International. (16 January 2020). Israel: Court decides to hear case against NSO behind closed doors. Retrieved from <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2020/01/israel-court-nso-case-behind-closed-doors/>

**06** Amnesty International. (12 July 2020). Israel: Court rejects bid to revoke notorious spyware firm NSO Group's spyware licence. Retrieved from <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2020/07/israel-court-notorious-spyware-firm-nso/>

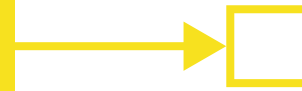
**07** Amnesty International. (2018). Toxic Twitter: A toxic place for women. Retrieved from <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/research/2018/03/online-violence-against-women-chapter-1/>

**08** Part of the University of Toronto, Citizen Lab focuses on research and development in information and communication technologies, human rights and global security. <https://citizenlab.ca/>





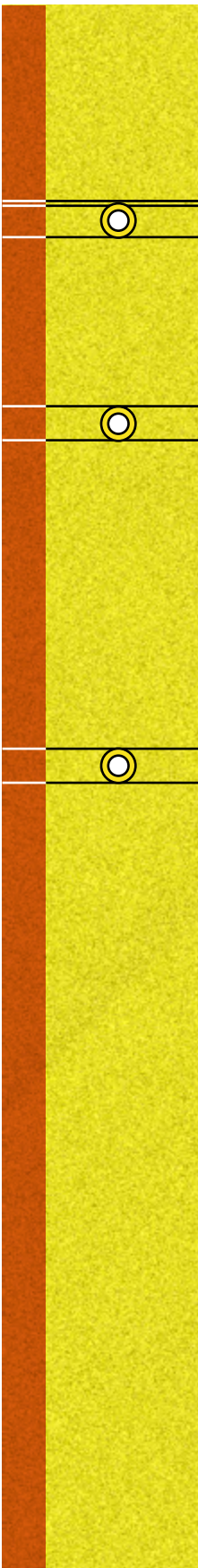
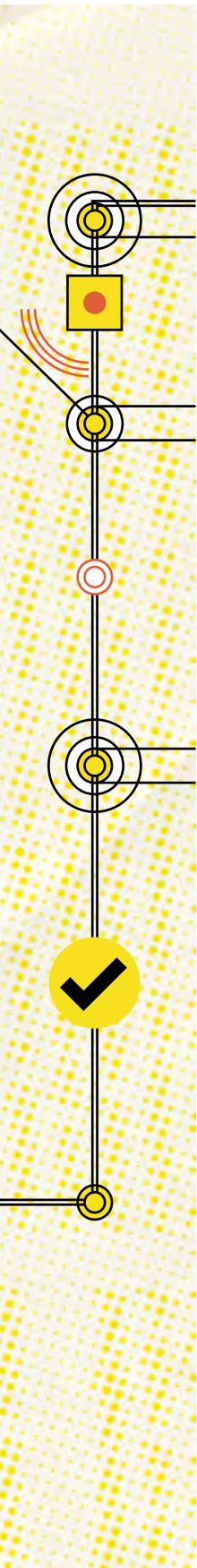
# THE NEXT STOP



One consequence of the success of the programme thus far has been an increase in internal demand for support, and the timeliness of the team's agenda combined with ongoing political and technical developments mean there are far more issues and objectives than can currently fit into staff's workload. Beyond just being responsive to others' needs and demands, having space to experiment, build, iterate (and potentially fail, too) would give the team more opportunity to see what works by, for example, building products to meet community needs or responsively designing new approaches as community needs arrive. But funding for this kind of innovative, experimental work is often hard to come by.

Going forward, Amnesty Tech's strategic focus revolves around challenging the power of Big Tech and the surveillance-based business model that underpins more and more digital services. Being part of a large global human rights movement that has previously taken on challenges such as securing a global arms trade treaty gives Amnesty Tech permission to think big and with long-term horizons. Their plans in this area have been elevated as one of the whole organisation's global priorities in Amnesty International's latest strategic plan (2021-2028).

Situated within the broader Amnesty International umbrella, Amnesty Tech has the power to creatively and strategically address emerging issues on rights and technology, such as the growing impact of tech on economic and social rights. Broadly speaking, the need for more attention on accountability and rights in tech is clear, and Amnesty's work in this space offers an inspirational roadmap for others looking to disrupt inequitable tech practices.





## **Want to incorporate technology as a theme in your work?**

### **Here are some tips from Amnesty Tech.**

#### **1. Recruit a champion.**

Many in human rights are still reluctant to embrace tech as a human rights issue. Changing minds requires someone with passion and dedication.

#### **2. Get political support from senior leadership.**

Focus on getting leadership on board in order to create an organisation-wide mandate. It's a plus if they can be convinced to give financial support too.

#### **3. Take time to shift staff thinking from tech as a tool to a lens.**

Everything doesn't just happen once the technology is there. Do the work to get everyone on the same page.

#### **4. Start small.**

It can be tempting to try to do too much at once, but this causes chaos that can sink the whole endeavor.

#### **5. Diversify leadership.**

Consider power imbalances that might affect the team's wellbeing and the impact of the programme.

#### **6. Hire technologists.**

Bringing a technologist on board can introduce a new perspective with new questions and solutions.



## **7. Fully integrate technologists.**

Seek people who understand technology as a social issue or are willing to deepen their understanding. Keep in mind that people who have not worked in a large, traditional organisation will need a lot of support in the beginning.

## **8. Create an interdisciplinary team.**

This work requires people from multiple backgrounds learning from each other. It's not IT. It's at the intersection of different disciplines.

## **9. Focus on collaboration instead of competition.**

Cross-team collaboration is critical. Facilitate conversations across departments about how to apply organisational values to technology.

## **10. Be proactive about impact.**

Develop an impact framework to measure success and figure out how to meaningfully use the findings.

## **11. Be critical with research.**

Without a detailed and thorough technical analysis, some organisations jump to conclusions about emerging technology, which enables the forces behind violations to discredit the work.

## **12. Consider context.**

Don't just replicate one organisation's model. Explore what works in different contexts.





<https://www.amnesty.org/en/tech/>  
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