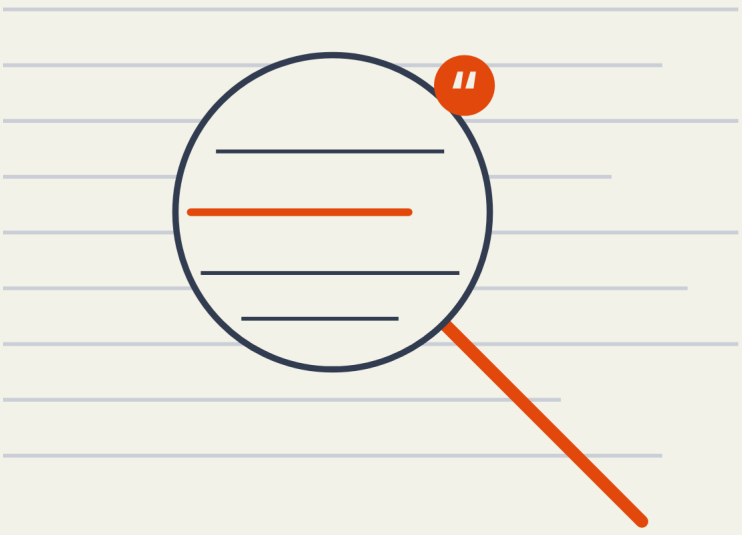
EiGHT

GUIDE

Reading, Evaluating and Citing NGO Claims

A guide to human rights and humanitarian output for policymakers, journalists, donors and the public



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Introduction

This guide sets out how to read, evaluate and cite the output of human rights and humanitarian organizations: separating evidence from interpretation, institutional positions from independent findings, and corroboration from repetition. Its standards apply equally to every organization and every cause.

These organizations are among the most influential sources of information on conflict, abuse and humanitarian need. Journalists, parliaments, courts, UN bodies, governments, donors and, increasingly, AI systems that summarize the web draw on their output.[1] A single finding can shape coverage, policy and legal proceedings far beyond the organization that produced it.

That influence is often earned. These organizations work where others cannot and record what would otherwise go unrecorded. Their missions also carry moral authority, which can give their claims a presumption of credibility.[2] But neither influence nor institutional authority is evidence of reliability. Well-established organizations have published claims later found to be flawed, and have corrected or withdrawn them, often only after outside scrutiny.[3] Such cases do not discredit an organization's other work; they show why every piece of work must be judged on its own merits. The examples in this guide, including examples of good practice, illustrate specific points; they are not judgments of the organizations' work as a whole. Some organizations appear more often than others, largely because they publish more and publish their reviews and corrections; how often an organization appears is not a measure of its reliability.

Using this guide

The guide has three parts, Reading, Evaluating and Citing, and is written for anyone who relies on NGO output:

- **Journalists and editors:** Attribute precisely, trace claims to their evidence, seek corroboration and the response of those accused, and carry corrections into later coverage.
- **Policymakers and officials:** Establish a claim's evidentiary status before relying on it in statements, resolutions, sanctions or funding decisions.
- **UN bodies, courts and inquiries:** Treat NGO submissions as material to be tested, not findings to be adopted, and check whether those sources rely on one another.
- **Donors and funders:** Funding confers credibility. Assess grantees' research standards, review and correction policies as part of due diligence[4]; recognize that your own priorities shape what is investigated; and do not treat work you fund as independently verified.

[1] On NGO information in advocacy networks, media and policymaking, see Margaret E. Keck and Kathryn Sikkink, Activists Beyond Borders: Advocacy Networks in International Politics (Cornell University Press, 1998); and James Ron, Howard Ramos and Kathleen Rodgers, "Transnational Information Politics: NGO Human Rights Reporting, 1986–2000," International Studies Quarterly 49 (2005): 557–587, https://howardramos.ca/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/ron-ramos-and-rodgers-2005.pdf. In the UN Universal Periodic Review, OHCHR prepares a summary of "credible and reliable information" provided by NGOs and other stakeholders: Human Rights Council resolution 5/1, 18 June 2007, annex, para. 15(c). The ICC Prosecutor may seek information from non-governmental organizations: Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court, art. 15(2).

[2] On the moral authority of human rights organizations, see Stephen Hopgood, Keepers of the Flame: Understanding Amnesty International (Cornell University Press, 2006).

[3] See, in this guide, the examples on Amnesty International's 2022 Ukraine press release (section 2.2) and the 1990 Kuwait incubator allegation (section 2.5), and the sources cited for each.

[4] On how funding and organizational insecurity shape NGO priorities, see Alexander Cooley and James Ron, "The NGO Scramble: Organizational Insecurity and the Political Economy of Transnational Action," International Security 27, no. 1 (2002): 5–39, https://www.belfercenter.org/publication/ngo-scramble-organizational-insecurity-and-political-economy-transnational-action.

- **Researchers and AI developers:** Cite NGO output as grey literature[5], not peer-reviewed research, and preserve attribution, dates and caveats.
- **The public:** Before sharing a claim, check who made it, what it rests on and whether it has been corrected.

SIGNS OF STRONG WORK

- **Methods explained:** How sources were selected, what was verified and how conflicting evidence was handled.
- **Sources identified:** Evidence traced to its origin, with third-party material attributed.
- **Limits stated:** Access restrictions, gaps and uncertainty ranges disclosed.
- **Findings distinguished:** Observations kept separate from inferences, legal assessments and recommendations.
- **Selection explained:** Why these sources, incidents and examples were chosen, and whether they are representative.
- **Context complete:** Relevant context on all sides, including evidence and explanations that cut against the conclusion, addressed rather than omitted.
- **Response sought:** The views of those accused requested and reported.
- **Corrections visible:** A public corrections policy, with changes dated and explained.
- **Material available:** Data, images or documents accessible where safety allows.

Treat these as claims to check, not proof of quality. A publication can explain its methods at length and still be selective in what it cites and the context it gives. Ask whether the sources and context are representative, and whether what was left out would change the conclusion. The more of these a publication demonstrably meets, the more you can assess it on its own terms. Their absence does not make a claim false; it limits what you can say about it.[6]

A source like any other

Claims by human rights and humanitarian organizations are source material. Evaluate them with the same care as any other.

Good sourcing applies the same standards to every source. Claims by governments, companies, political parties and armed groups are routinely treated with caution; claims by human rights and humanitarian organizations warrant the same scrutiny, whatever the moral authority of their missions.[7] Organizations with humanitarian goals can be mistaken, selective or shaped by institutional interests; openly partisan organizations can produce strong evidence. A strong record does not carry over to a new claim, and a poor record does not make a new claim false.

[5] The "Prague definition" of grey literature, adopted at the Twelfth International Conference on Grey Literature (2010), describes material "not controlled by commercial publishers, i.e., where publishing is not the primary activity of the producing body": Joachim Schöpfel, "Towards a Prague Definition of Grey Literature," GL12 Conference Proceedings (2011).

[6] These indicators draw on the International Bar Association Human Rights Institute and Raoul Wallenberg Institute, Guidelines on International Human Rights Fact-Finding Visits and Reports ("Lund–London Guidelines"), 2009; OHCHR, Manual on Human Rights Monitoring (2011); and the Berkeley Protocol (2022). Full references are given in section 1.2.

[7] Journalistic codes apply the same verification and attribution standards to all sources: Society of Professional Journalists, Code of Ethics (2014): https://www.spj.org/ethicscode.asp; Reuters, Handbook of Journalism (Thomson Reuters), on sourcing, attribution and corrections.

The role of users

Careful users help claims travel accurately.

Users share responsibility for how claims travel: describe the source accurately, trace the evidence, disclose material context, consult the original publication rather than a summary, and never present a claim with more certainty than the evidence supports. The authority of a claim depends heavily on the people who repeat it. Each time a claim is quoted in a news report, a UN document, a parliamentary debate or an AI summary, it gains weight, and can lose its qualifications, attribution and context, until an allegation reads as established fact.[8]

[8] On how repetition increases the perceived truth of claims, see Lynn Hasher, David Goldstein and Thomas Toppino, "Frequency and the Conference of Referential Validity," Journal of Verbal Learning and Verbal Behavior 16, no. 1 (1977): 107–112. On the persistence of misinformation after correction, see Stephan Lewandowsky, Ullrich K. H. Ecker, Colleen M. Seifert, Norbert Schwarz and John Cook, "Misinformation and Its Correction: Continued Influence and Successful Debiasing," Psychological Science in the Public Interest 13, no. 3 (2012): 106–131, https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/26173286/.

1 Reading

Understand what you are looking at, how it was produced and what shapes it.

1.1 What are you actually encountering?

When you encounter a report, public statement, video, social media post or other communication from a human rights, humanitarian or other NGO, what exactly are you encountering?

A human and institutional contribution to understanding events. It is not an unmediated account of reality: it reflects choices about what to investigate, which evidence to present, how to interpret it and what conclusions to draw. It may incorporate different sources, expertise, perspectives and institutional influences. The standards and scrutiny applied to it vary considerably and are largely determined and administered by the organizations themselves.[9]

This matters because NGO claims, particularly those from prominent organizations, are often received, shared and cited as authoritative accounts of events, without comparable attention to how their conclusions were reached or how well they are supported.[10]

Recognizing their human and institutional origins does not diminish their value. It is the starting point for assessing it. This guide offers a practical approach to examining NGO claims, weighing the supporting evidence and deciding how to use, share and cite them responsibly.

1.2 How the work is produced

Strong research follows recognized professional guidance. Check which standards a publication says it followed, and how it applied them.

Sector guidance includes the Lund–London Guidelines[11], OHCHR's Manual on Human Rights Monitoring[12], the Berkeley Protocol[13], the Istanbul Protocol[14] and the Minnesota Protocol[15]. These guidelines are non-binding and unevenly applied. They do not generally bind NGOs, which largely determine their own research standards and review procedures, and compliance is not subject to a consistent system of independent assessment.[16] EiGHT's

[9] Philip Alston and Sarah Knuckey (eds.), The Transformation of Human Rights Fact-Finding (Oxford University Press, 2016); Philip Alston, "Introduction: Third Generation Human Rights Fact-Finding," Proceedings of the ASIL Annual Meeting 107 (2013): https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/proceedings-of-the-asil-annual-meeting/article/abs/introduction-third-generation-human-rights-factfinding/384A93DD6419EABDD8728BB073AD9EC6.

[10] On which situations NGOs report on, and how their reports are received, see Ron, Ramos and Rodgers, "Transnational Information Politics" (2005).

[11] International Bar Association Human Rights Institute and Raoul Wallenberg Institute, Guidelines on International Human Rights Fact-Finding Visits and Reports ("Lund–London Guidelines"), 2009: https://www.refworld.org/node/67896. The guidelines set out "an agreed international standard of good practice"; they are not binding and include no compliance mechanism.

[12] OHCHR, Manual on Human Rights Monitoring, revised edition, Professional Training Series No. 7 (United Nations, 2011): https://ohchr.tind.io/record/4835

[13] OHCHR and Human Rights Center, University of California, Berkeley, Berkeley Protocol on Digital Open Source Investigations (United Nations, 2022): https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/3973652

[14] OHCHR, Istanbul Protocol: Manual on the Effective Investigation and Documentation of Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment, 2022 edition, Professional Training Series No. 8/Rev.2: https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/4065989

[15] OHCHR, The Minnesota Protocol on the Investigation of Potentially Unlawful Death (2016) (United Nations, 2017): https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/3973958

[16] Alston and Knuckey (eds.), The Transformation of Human Rights Fact-Finding (2016); Alston, "Third Generation Human Rights Fact-Finding" (2013).

Evidence and Integrity (E&I) Framework proposes mechanisms for that assessment.[17] It is often unclear which standards, if any, governed a particular publication. NGO publications are not uniformly subject to the formal safeguards used in academic research, medicine or law, such as independent peer review, ethics oversight, rules of evidence or procedures for challenging findings.[18] Evidentiary thresholds, review procedures and correction policies are often undisclosed or inconsistently applied, and stated standards are not always followed. Confidentiality and witness safety can legitimately restrict access to evidence; they do not remove the need for verification.[19]

Different processes for different outputs

One organization produces reports, analyses, operational updates, position papers, press releases, statements, social media posts, images, videos and campaign materials, each with different levels of verification and review. All of them make claims, and all of them carry the organization's authority. Formal reports may pass through research, legal and editorial review; posts and press releases often receive far less.[20] Format is no guarantee of reliability: formal reports can be wrong, legal analyses can reflect contested positions, and statements can precede verification. Attribute every claim with its evidentiary basis, whenever and however it was published.

LESSON

Oxfam — the Davos inequality statistic, 2016–17

Each January, Oxfam releases a headline inequality figure timed for the World Economic Forum. In 2016 it reported that the richest 62 people owned as much wealth as the poorest half of humanity.[21] In 2017 it reported that eight men did, and said that, with revised Credit Suisse data, the 2016 figure would have been nine, not 62.[22] The figures combined Credit Suisse wealth estimates with the Forbes billionaire list, and critics questioned how measuring net wealth treats people with debts.[23]

The headline traveled; the data sources, definitions and revision did not. A campaign statistic is only as good as its method note: read it before citing the figure.

Sources: NPR, 17 January 2017; Oxfam, An Economy for the 99%, January 2017

1.3 Influences on output

Knowing what shapes an organization's work helps you read it well.

Like any institution, these organizations are influenced by factors beyond the evidence. Influences do not make a claim wrong, but they shape which issues are investigated, which incidents are selected, how findings are framed and how quickly conclusions are reached.[24] The main influences are:

- **Mandate and mission:** What the organization investigates and what it excludes.

[17] EiGHT, The Evidence and Integrity (E&I) Framework: Evidence, Not Assurances, proposal, November 2026: www.eightrights.org.

[18] For the standards and procedures applied by UN fact-finding bodies, see OHCHR, Commissions of Inquiry and Fact-Finding Missions on International Human Rights and Humanitarian Law: Guidance and Practice, HR/PUB/14/7 (United Nations, 2015): https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/3949729.

[19] On protection of sources and informed consent, see OHCHR, Manual on Human Rights Monitoring (2011), on the protection of victims, witnesses and other cooperating persons; and the Berkeley Protocol (2022), on security and ethics.

[20] See the examples in this guide on Amnesty International's Saydnaya press release (section 3.1) and its 2022 Ukraine press release (section 2.2).

[21] Oxfam, An Economy for the 1%, briefing paper, 18 January 2016; French edition: https://www.oxfamfrance.org/sites/default/files/file_attachments/une_economie_au_service_des_1_oxfam_-_vf.pdf; Quartz: https://qz.com/596739/the-worlds-richest-62-people-now-have-more-wealth-than-the-poorest-3-6-billion-combined.

[22] Oxfam, An Economy for the 99%, briefing paper, 16 January 2017: https://www.oxfam.ca/publication/an-economy-for-the-99-percent/; methodology note: https://www.oxfam.de/dokument/13206/sperrfrist_20170116-0101_economy-99-percent-methodology.pdf; NPR, 17 January 2017: https://www.ijpr.org/2017-01-17/gulf-between-richest-and-poorest-is-wider-than-previously-thought-oxfam-says.

[23] Emma Haslett, "Oxfam's pre-Davos wealth report says the world's 62 richest people own half the wealth – but global inequality is actually falling," City A.M., 18 January 2016: https://www.cityam.com/?p=351514. On the Credit Suisse and Forbes data, see Oxfam's 2017 methodology note: https://www.oxfam.de/dokument/13206/sperrfrist_20170116-0101_economy-99-percent-methodology.pdf.

- **Advocacy:** Campaigns, contested positions and policy objectives.
- **Funding:** Donors, funding conditions and expectations.
- **Coalitions and partners:** Shared campaigns, research, sources and access.
- **Access and security:** Territorial control, restrictions and the freedom of sources to speak.
- **Leadership and culture:** Institutional priorities, dissent and the handling of errors.
- **Media:** Speed, visibility and pressure to attract attention.[25]
- **Ideology:** Political, philosophical or moral frameworks.

Separate the evidence an organization presents from the claims, interpretations and recommendations it builds on that evidence.

LESSON

Human Rights Watch — a restricted gift, 2012–2020

In 2012, HRW accepted $470,000 from the foundation of Saudi businessman Mohamed Bin Issa Al Jaber on condition that it not fund HRW's LGBT rights work in the Middle East and North Africa. When this came to light in 2020, HRW called it "a deeply regrettable decision," returned the gift and barred such conditions.[26] Disclosing and correcting the arrangement was the right response. The lesson: funding terms shape what is investigated, yet are invisible in the publications themselves.

Source: The Intercept, 2 March 2020

LESSON

Invisible Children — Kony 2012, Central Africa

Invisible Children's 2012 video calling for the arrest of LRA leader Joseph Kony drew tens of millions of views within days.[27] Fact-checkers noted that the LRA had left Uganda in 2006, and that the film's 30,000 abducted children were the total over some 25 years, not current captives.[28] The pressure for speed and a simple story shaped how a real abuse was presented.

Source: NPR, 8 March 2012

[24] Cooley and Ron, "The NGO Scramble" (2002); Clifford Bob, The Marketing of Rebellion: Insurgents, Media, and International Activism (Cambridge University Press, 2005); R. Charli Carpenter, "Lost" Causes: Agenda Vetting in Global Issue Networks and the Shaping of Human Security (Cornell University Press, 2014); Hopgood, Keepers of the Flame (2006).

[25] Ron, Ramos and Rodgers, "Transnational Information Politics" (2005), find that, alongside human rights conditions, previous reporting, state power, US military assistance and a country's media profile were associated with the volume of Amnesty International's country reporting. See also Bob, The Marketing of Rebellion (2005).

[26] The Intercept, 2 March 2020: https://theintercept.com/2020/03/02/human-rights-watch-took-money-from-saudi-businessman-after-documenting-his-coercive-labor-practices/.

[27] UPI, "Kony video reaches many young adults," 16 March 2012, reporting more than 100 million online views and a Pew Research Center survey: https://www.upi.com/Top_News/US/2012/03/16/Kony-video-reaches-many-young-adults/UPI-33001331934425/.

[28] NPR, Talk of the Nation, 8 March 2012: https://www.npr.org/transcripts/148235383.

GOOD PRACTICE

Médecins Sans Frontières — the Kunduz hospital attack, Afghanistan, 2015

On 3 October 2015, US airstrikes destroyed MSF's trauma hospital in Kunduz, killing at least 42 people, including 14 MSF staff, by MSF's later count.[29] MSF called for an independent investigation. A month later it published an internal review drawing on 60 staff debriefings, photographs, emails and phone records, including the GPS coordinates it had shared and its calls to military authorities during the strikes. The review found no armed combatants or fighting in or from the hospital, and stated its limits: "We don't have the view from the cockpit, nor what happened within the US and Afghan military chains of command."[30]

An organization reporting on an attack on itself has a direct stake in the account. Publishing the evidence and its limits made that account open to testing.

Sources: MSF, 5 November 2015

1.4 Strengths and limits

At their best, these organizations produce evidence that would otherwise not exist. At their weakest, they produce research that is thinly verified, selectively sourced or driven by advocacy, and present it with more certainty than the evidence supports.

Their strengths are access to hard-to-reach places and people, firsthand accounts, local and specialist knowledge, long-term monitoring and speed.[31] Their limits are structural. NGO research is typically:

- **Internally reviewed:** Usually not independently peer reviewed; internal review is not the same as independent peer review.
- **Illustrative:** Selected interviews or incidents document events; without appropriate methods they cannot establish prevalence.[32]
- **Investigative, not judicial:** Witness accounts are not tested by cross-examination and do not, on their own, establish legal responsibility.[33]
- **Often drawn from others:** Evidence often comes from partners, authorities or other organizations, so it is not always independently sourced.
- **Often linked to advocacy:** Research can serve advocacy goals, and errors are sometimes quietly amended or left standing.[34]
- **Partial:** An undocumented incident may still have occurred; incomplete evidence cannot support conclusions beyond its limits.

[29] MSF, "Afghanistan: MSF releases internal review of the Kunduz hospital attack," 5 November 2015 (later updated): https://www.msf.org/afghanistan-msf-releases-internal-review-kunduz-hospital-attack; MSF, initial internal review of the Kunduz hospital attack (PDF), November 2015: https://cdn-prod3.msf.dk/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/internal-review-msf-kunduz.pdf; MSF, Kunduz hospital attack factsheet: https://www.doctorswithoutborders.org/latest/kunduz-hospital-attack-msf-factsheet.

[30] MSF, "Afghanistan: MSF releases internal review of the Kunduz hospital attack," 5 November 2015 (later updated): https://www.msf.org/afghanistan-msf-releases-internal-review-kunduz-hospital-attack; MSF, initial internal review of the Kunduz hospital attack (PDF), November 2015: https://cdn-prod3.msf.dk/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/internal-review-msf-kunduz.pdf.

[31] Alston and Knuckey (eds.), The Transformation of Human Rights Fact-Finding (2016).

[32] On the difference between documenting incidents and estimating totals or prevalence, see Taylor B. Seybolt, Jay D. Aronson and Baruch Fischhoff (eds.), Counting Civilian Casualties: An Introduction to Recording and Estimating Nonmilitary Deaths in Conflict (Oxford University Press, 2013).

[33] UN commissions of inquiry generally apply a "reasonable grounds to believe" standard, below the criminal standard of proof beyond reasonable doubt: OHCHR, Commissions of Inquiry and Fact-Finding Missions: Guidance and Practice (2015).

[34] See the Al-Ahli hospital example (section 2.5) and the sources cited for it.

GOOD PRACTICE

Médecins Sans Frontières — Rohingya mortality surveys, 2017

With access to northern Rakhine State severely restricted, MSF surveyed Rohingya refugee settlements in Bangladesh covering more than 600,000 people. It estimated that at least 6,700 Rohingya were killed by violence in the month after 25 August 2017. MSF published its method, recall period and confidence intervals, and warned that the figure was likely an underestimate.[35] Evidence that would otherwise not exist, presented with its limits: cite it the same way.

Source: MSF, 14 December 2017

GOOD PRACTICE

Colombia — "false positives": documentation the state disputed

From the mid-2000s, human rights organizations documented army killings of civilians presented as guerrillas killed in combat. The government disputed the scale; FIDH reported more than 3,000 victims for 2002–2008.[36] In 2021, Colombia's Special Jurisdiction for Peace found at least 6,402.[37] On the core claim, the organizations were right and the official dismissal wrong.

Sources: FIDH, 2012 and 2021; Special Jurisdiction for Peace, February 2021

[35] MSF, "MSF surveys estimate that at least 6,700 Rohingya were killed during the attacks in Myanmar," 14 December 2017: https://msf.hk/en/node/6480.

[36] FIDH and Coordinación Colombia-Europa-Estados Unidos, report to the ICC Prosecutor, 29 May 2012: https://www.fidh.org/en/region/americas/colombia/FIDH-and-the-Coordinacion-Colombia.

[37] FIDH, February 2021, on the Special Jurisdiction for Peace finding: https://www.fidh.org/es/impactos-1543/colombia-justicia-reconoce-la-existencia-de-por-lo-menos-6-402.

2 Evaluating

Judge each claim on its own evidence. An organization's reputation does not determine its credibility. The greater the consequences of relying on a claim, the more demanding the scrutiny of its evidence and limitations should be.

2.1 History and controversies

An organization's track record is relevant. Use it with care.

Check for later versions, published corrections and responses to criticism. Openly published corrections are a sign of good practice, but later changes rarely receive the attention the original claim did.[38] Check whether the organization is subject to credible allegations, regulatory scrutiny or investigations bearing on the integrity of its research, and distinguish unresolved concerns from established failings. Look at methodology annexes, corrections pages, financial statements and funding sources, charity registers,[39] coalition memberships and published external reviews. Mention such context only when it bears on the specific claim.

[38] Lewandowsky et al., "Misinformation and Its Correction" (2012).

[39] For example, the Charity Commission for England and Wales register of charities: https://register-of-charities.charitycommission.gov.uk; and US nonprofits' IRS Form 990 filings, searchable through ProPublica's Nonprofit Explorer: https://projects.propublica.org/nonprofits/.

LESSON

Amnesty International UK — editorial safeguards, 2026

In July 2026, Amnesty International UK withdrew a briefing that had labeled organizations including Beira's Place "anti-rights," saying it had been published "without going through the established internal review processes."[40] It apologized and announced internal and independent reviews; the Charity Commission opened a compliance case.[41] Amnesty UK continued to produce output, including reports and public statements, but as of October 2026 it had not published the review findings or said whether, when or how the problems had been resolved.[42] Without public information about the review's findings or any resulting safeguards, readers could not assess whether later publications were subject to strengthened procedures. Where an organization has acknowledged a failure in its safeguards, look for public evidence that it has been fixed. Judge later output on its own evidence, assume neither that the problems persist nor that they are fixed, and note the open question where it is relevant.

Sources: Amnesty International UK, 13 July 2026; Civil Society, 22 and 30 July 2026

2.2 Methodology and verification

The best publications explain how they selected sources, what they verified and how they handled conflicting evidence. Look for that explanation, and note where it is missing. Methodological transparency varies: some publications explain their methods in detail; others offer brief accounts or none at all. Even a methodology section may omit source selection, verification or the treatment of conflicting evidence. Its presence is not proof of rigor.[43]

Triangulation, comparing witness accounts, documents, images and other sources, can strengthen observations, depending on the independence, quality and relevance of the sources.[44] The number of sources matters less than their independence, relevance and ability to substantiate the particular conclusion. Corroborating individual facts does not establish the broader conclusions drawn from them: whether incidents are widespread, systematic or legally characterized as alleged.[45] Ask:

- **Source selection:** How were witnesses and incidents identified, and can the sample support the conclusions?
- **Verification:** What was checked, and were the sources genuinely independent?
- **Conditions:** What access restrictions, intermediaries or pressures shaped the evidence?
- **Conflicting evidence:** Were contradictory accounts and alternative explanations addressed?

[40] Amnesty International UK, A Growing Threat (withdrawn), July 2026: https://www.amnesty.org.uk/knowledge-hub/all-resources/report-a-growing-threat-the-anti-rights-movement-in-the-uk-july-2026/.

[41] Civil Society, "Case opened into Amnesty charity as regulator contacts trustees," 22 July 2026: https://www.civilsociety.co.uk/news/case-opened-into-amnesty-charity-as-regulator-contacts-trustees.html; IBTimes UK, reporting Amnesty International UK's apology and announced internal and independent reviews, July 2026: https://www.ibtimes.co.uk/amnesty-uk-apologises-jk-rowling-centre-controversy-1811804.

[42] Amnesty International UK, apology for the A Growing Threat briefing (published 8 July 2026): https://www.amnesty.org.uk/briefing-review/; IBTimes UK, July 2026: https://www.ibtimes.co.uk/amnesty-uk-apologises-jk-rowling-centre-controversy-1811804; Amnesty International UK, news releases, September–October 2026: https://www.amnesty.org.uk/latest/. No published review findings or statement on resolution could be found as of 29 October 2026.

[43] On transparency of method in NGO fact-finding, see Alston, "Third Generation Human Rights Fact-Finding" (2013); and the Lund–London Guidelines (2009), on reporting methodology.

[44] OHCHR, Manual on Human Rights Monitoring (2011); Berkeley Protocol (2022).

[45] On the distinct evidentiary requirements for findings of fact and legal characterization, see OHCHR, Commissions of Inquiry and Fact-Finding Missions: Guidance and Practice (2015).

- **Scope:** Does the evidence support the scale and certainty of the findings, and are documented facts distinguished from inferences?
- **Review:** What internal or independent review was undertaken, and is enough disclosed for outside assessment?

Separate what the evidence establishes from what the organization infers. Where methods are undisclosed, state the limits on independent assessment and avoid greater certainty than the disclosed evidence supports.

LESSON

Amnesty International — Ukraine press release, 2022

Amnesty's August 2022 press release accused Ukrainian forces of endangering civilians by operating in populated areas. An independent panel it later commissioned found the legal conclusions "insufficiently substantiated": at most, Ukraine "could or might have" violated the law.[46] The panel cited insufficient attention to military context and inadequate engagement with Ukrainian authorities. Context is part of the evidence: leaving it out can change what a finding appears to show. Commissioning and publishing an independent review was good practice.[47] Credible challenges to an NGO's conclusions deserve substantive examination, even where its factual observations are not in dispute.

Source: Amnesty International, Independent Legal Review Panel report, 28 April 2023

GOOD PRACTICE

Amnesty International — the Axum massacre, Ethiopia, 2020–21

With access to Tigray restricted, Amnesty interviewed 41 survivors and witnesses, in person in Sudan and by phone in Axum, and analyzed satellite imagery showing signs of new mass burials. In February 2021 it reported that Eritrean troops had killed hundreds of civilians in Axum on 28–29 November 2020. It said it could not independently verify the overall death toll, and it had collected the names of more than 240 victims.[48] In March 2021, the Ethiopian Human Rights Commission found that Eritrean soldiers had killed more than 100 civilians in Axum.[49]

Stated methods, corroborating evidence and acknowledged limits allowed the finding to be assessed and later corroborated. Cite the documented victims and the stated uncertainty, not a single total.

Sources: Amnesty International, 26 February 2021; Al Jazeera, 24 March 2021

[46] Amnesty International, Independent Legal Review Panel report (ORG 60/6731/2023), 28 April 2023: https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/org60/6731/2023/en/.

[47] Amnesty International, Independent Legal Review Panel report, 28 April 2023; Amnesty International, Organizational Review (ORG 60/6795/2023), 2023: https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/org60/6795/2023/en/.

[48] Amnesty International, "Ethiopia: Eritrean troops' massacre of hundreds of Axum civilians may amount to crime against humanity," 26 February 2021: https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2021/02/ethiopia-eritrean-troops-massacre-of-hundreds-of-axum-civilians-may-amount-to-crime-against-humanity/.

[49] Al Jazeera, 24 March 2021, reporting the Ethiopian Human Rights Commission's preliminary findings: https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/3/24/eritrean-troops-killed-over-100-civilians-in-tigray-rights-group.

2.3 Numbers and data

Figures are often the most useful and most cited part of NGO work. They are also the most easily distorted: as they circulate, their sources and qualifications fall away.[50]

To use a figure accurately, establish:

- **Origin:** Who compiled it? NGOs often reproduce figures they did not collect.[51]
- **Type:** Is it a documented count, an estimate or a projection?
- **Definition:** What is counted, where and over what period? Are civilians and combatants distinguished?
- **Date:** What period does it cover, and when was it last updated?
- **Verification:** Did the NGO verify the figure, assess its source or simply reproduce it?
- **Uncertainty:** What gaps, assumptions and ranges accompany it?

Attribute figures to their original producer, keep their qualifications, and do not combine figures whose definitions differ.[52] An NGO's endorsement of a figure is not verification.

LESSON

Syria — trace figures to their source

The EU Agency for Asylum's 2025 Syria report drew on civilian casualty figures from the Syrian Network for Human Rights and the Uppsala Conflict Data Program.[53] Inclusion in an authoritative report did not verify them; their original definitions and methods still govern how they can be used.

Source: EUAA, Syria: Country Focus, March 2025, section 4.5.3

LESSON

Gaza — endorsement is not verification

In 2023, HRW's Israel and Palestine director said Gaza Health Ministry casualty figures "are professionally done and have proven to be reliable,"[54] while noting they do not distinguish civilians from combatants. The figures remained the ministry's; HRW's assessment of their reliability was not independent verification of the count.

Source: VOA Learning English, from VOA, AP and Reuters reporting, 6 November 2023

[50] Peter Andreas and Kelly M. Greenhill (eds.), Sex, Drugs, and Body Counts: The Politics of Numbers in Global Crime and Conflict (Cornell University Press, 2010).

[51] See the Syria and Gaza examples in this section.

[52] Seybolt, Aronson and Fischhoff (eds.), Counting Civilian Casualties (2013).

[53] European Union Agency for Asylum, Syria: Country Focus, March 2025, section 4.5.3: https://euaa.europa.eu/sites/default/files/publications/2025-05/2025_03_EUAA_COI_Report_Syria_Country_Focus.pdf.

[54] VOA Learning English, "How reliable are Gaza Health Ministry's death numbers?", 6 November 2023: https://learningenglish.voanews.com/a/how-reliable-are-gaza-health-ministry-s-death-numbers/7343831.html.

LESSON

International Rescue Committee — Congo's death toll, 1998–2010

The IRC's mortality surveys produced a widely cited estimate of 5.4 million deaths in the Democratic Republic of Congo since 1998.[55] In January 2010, the Human Security Report Project argued that the figure was roughly double what it should be, questioning the baseline mortality rate used and whether the areas surveyed represented the country.[56] The IRC stood by its estimate, noting that it had published its limitations and that the real figure could be "as low as 3 million or as high as 7.6 million."[57]

An estimate depends on its assumptions. Cite it as an estimate, with its range, its method and the challenges to it.

Sources: Christian Science Monitor, 22 January 2010; NBC News, January 2010

2.4 Competing evidence and interpretations

Weigh competing accounts by their evidence and reasoning, not by the standing of those advancing them. On the most contested questions, such as the legal characterization of conduct in armed conflict, or questions where the evidence and the values are both contested, the reach of a major NGO can let one interpretation dominate.[58]

Examine credible competing evidence, interpretations and responses seriously, not as a token rejoinder. This does not mean giving every position equal weight.

[55] NBC News (Associated Press), "Review of Congo war halves death toll," January 2010: https://www.nbcnews.com/id/wbna34958903.

[56] Christian Science Monitor, "New study argues war deaths are often overestimated," 22 January 2010: https://www.csmonitor.com/World/Africa/2010/0122/New-study-argues-war-deaths-are-often-overestimated; NBC News (Associated Press), January 2010.

[57] NBC News (Associated Press), January 2010.

[58] On how prominent organizations shape which issues and framings gain attention, see Carpenter, "Lost" Causes (2014); and Bob, The Marketing of Rebellion (2005).

LESSON

Darfur, 2004–2010 — competing legal characterizations

In September 2004, the US government determined that genocide was occurring in Darfur,[59] a characterization taken up by advocacy campaigns. In January 2005, the UN International Commission of Inquiry concluded that "the Government of the Sudan has not pursued a policy of genocide," while finding acts that "may amount to crimes against humanity."[60] Senior MSF staff called the genocide label inappropriate.[61] The ICC's 2009 arrest warrant for President al-Bashir excluded genocide; a second warrant in 2010, after an appeal, included it.[62]

Credible bodies examining the same events reached different legal conclusions. An organization's genocide characterization is one assessment among competing ones; cite it as such, alongside the others.

Sources: International Commission of Inquiry on Darfur, 25 January 2005; Le Monde, interview with MSF president Jean-Hervé Bradol, 14 September 2004; JURIST, February 2005; International Criminal Court, warrants of 4 March 2009 and 12 July 2010

LESSON

Amnesty International — the Gaza genocide finding, 2024

In December 2024, Amnesty International published a report concluding that Israel was committing genocide in Gaza.[63] Amnesty's own Israel section said it did not believe the conduct met the legal definition of genocide under the 1948 Genocide Convention, while describing the killing and destruction in Gaza as having "reached horrific proportions."[64] Israel's government rejected the report as "entirely false."[65] In January 2025, Amnesty's international board suspended the Israel section for two years. Its interim chair wrote that the section had "sought to publicly discredit Amnesty's human rights research and positions" and also cited allegations of racism within the section, which the section rejected.[66]

A legal characterization reached by one organization was disputed within it. As with Darfur, cite such a finding as that organization's assessment, alongside the competing assessments.

Sources: The New Arab, 5 December 2024; JNS, December 2024 and 7 January 2025; Malay Mail, 5 December 2024; The Media Line, 8 January 2025

[59] Secretary of State Colin Powell, testimony to the US Senate Foreign Relations Committee, 9 September 2004, reported by VOA: https://www.voanews.com/a/a-13-a-2004-09-09-20-1-67508707/283449.html.

[60] Report of the International Commission of Inquiry on Darfur to the UN Secretary-General, 25 January 2005; JURIST, February 2005: https://www.jurist.org/news/2005/02/darfur-genocide-inquiry-report-un.

[61] Jean-Hervé Bradol, MSF president, Le Monde, 14 September 2004, reproduced by MSF: https://www.msf.fr/sites/default/files/2004-09-14-Bradol.pdf.

[62] International Criminal Court, The Prosecutor v. Omar Hassan Ahmad Al Bashir, case information sheet (warrants of 4 March 2009 and 12 July 2010): https://www.icc-cpi.int/sites/default/files/CaseInformationSheets/AlBashirEng.pdf.

[63] Amnesty International, 'You Feel Like You Are Subhuman': Israel's Genocide Against Palestinians in Gaza (MDE 15/8668/2024), 5 December 2024; The New Arab, "Amnesty Israel denies parent group's genocide accusation," 5 December 2024: https://www.newarab.com/news/amnesty-israel-denies-parent-groups-genocide-accusation.

[64] The New Arab, 5 December 2024; JNS, "Amnesty Israel rejects parent group's genocide allegations," December 2024: https://www.jns.org/amnesty-israel-rejects-parent-groups-genocide-allegations/.

[65] Malay Mail, "Israel rejects Amnesty report accusing it of Gaza genocide as 'entirely false'," 5 December 2024: https://www.malaymail.com/news/world/2024/12/05/israel-rejects-amnesty-report-accusing-it-of-gaza-genocide-as-entirely-false/158996.

[66] The Media Line, "Amnesty International Penalizes Israeli Branch for Rejecting Genocide Report, Racism Allegations," 8 January 2025: https://themedialine.org/mideast-daily-news/amnesty-international-penalizes-israeli-branch-for-rejecting-genocide-report-racism-allegations/; JNS, "Amnesty International suspends Israeli branch for two years," 7 January 2025: https://www.jns.org/amnesty-international-suspends-israeli-branch-for-two-years/.

LESSON

Amnesty International — sex work, 2015–16

In August 2015, Amnesty International's International Council voted to support the "full decriminalization of all aspects of consensual sex work," including buying sex and organizing it, citing WHO, UNAIDS and UN sources and its own research in four countries.[67] It formally adopted the policy in May 2016.[68] More than 600 women's rights groups, survivors and others, led by the Coalition Against Trafficking in Women, opposed it as a policy that would "stand with exploiters, not the exploited," favoring the decriminalization of those selling sex but not of buyers or pimps.[69]

This is an institutional position on a question where the evidence and the values are both contested. Cite it as Amnesty's position, not as a human rights finding, and set it against the competing evidence and the models its critics support.

Sources: HIV Law and Policy, reporting Amnesty International's resolution, 11 August 2015; Coalition Against Trafficking in Women, 2015–16

LESSON

Human Rights Watch — A Decade Under Chávez, Venezuela, 2008

In September 2008, HRW published A Decade Under Chávez, arguing that political discrimination had been a defining feature of the Chávez presidency; the Venezuelan government expelled its two senior Americas staff hours after they presented it.[70] In December, 118 academics wrote that the report did not meet "even the most minimal standards of scholarship, impartiality, accuracy, or credibility," citing its "overwhelming reliance for factual material on opposition sources."[71] HRW's Americas director called the charge of political motivation "implausible" and said HRW would publish any substantiated criticism.[72]

Which sources a report relies on shapes the picture it presents, and the report, its critics and the government all had stakes in the outcome. Cite the findings with their sourcing, and note substantive challenges to their selection and framing.

Sources: Council on Hemispheric Affairs, December 2008; Upside Down World, December 2008

2.5 Amplification and circular sourcing

[67] HIV Law and Policy, August 2015, reporting Amnesty International's International Council resolution: https://www.hivlawandpolicy.org/news/amnesty-international-adopts-policy-protect-human-rights-sex-workers-2015.

[68] Amnesty International, Policy on State Obligations to Respect, Protect and Fulfil the Human Rights of Sex Workers (POL 30/4062/2016), 26 May 2016: https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/pol30/4062/2016/en/.

[69] Coalition Against Trafficking in Women, 2015–16: https://catwinternational.org/?p=529.

[70] Council on Hemispheric Affairs, "Human Rights Watch Report on Venezuela Under Fire," December 2008: https://coha.org/?p=2268.

[71] Council on Hemispheric Affairs, December 2008; Upside Down World, "More Than 100 Experts Question Human Rights Watch's Venezuela Report," December 2008: https://upsidedownworld.org/news-briefs/news-briefs-news-briefs/more-than-100-experts-question-human-rights-watchs-venezuela-report/.

[72] Council on Hemispheric Affairs, December 2008.

Repetition is not verification. A claim may acquire the appearance of independent corroboration as it passes through NGOs, UN bodies, governments and the media, even when every version ultimately rests on the same evidence.

Circular sourcing occurs when apparently independent sources rely on one another: an NGO finding appears in a UN report, which the NGO then cites as confirmation.[73] Watch for joint statements drafted by one member, shared partners and datasets, UN repetition of NGO submissions,[74] and media and AI recirculation. Count independent sources of evidence, not organizations, and use "independently corroborated" only where separate evidence exists.

LESSON

Xinjiang, 2018 — an NGO estimate becomes "the UN says"

At a 2018 UN committee review of China, a committee member said over one million Uyghurs were estimated to be detained, citing "credible reports" that matched a submission by the Network of Chinese Human Rights Defenders.[75] Headlines reported: "One million… held in secret China camps: UN panel." Later evidence, including the UN Human Rights Office's 2022 assessment, broadly supported the concern.[76] But at the time the figure was one NGO's estimate, not a UN finding, and should have been cited that way.

Sources: Al Jazeera, 10 August 2018; UN Human Rights Office, 31 August 2022

LESSON

Al-Ahli hospital, Gaza, 2023 — initial claims and later investigation

Within hours of the 17 October explosion, the Gaza Health Ministry said Israel was responsible and reported some 500 dead.[77] Several organizations, including MSF, the American Friends Service Committee and the World Council of Churches, repeated the attribution as fact before any had investigated.[78]

Human Rights Watch's later investigation pointed to "an apparent rocket-propelled munition, such as those commonly used by Palestinian armed groups," and stated its limits: it could not identify who fired.[79] The organizations later amended their statements, but as of October 2026 none had prominently explained or corrected the original attribution.[80]

Sources: Lawfare, 23 October 2023; MSF, AFSC and WCC statements, 17–20 October 2023; Human Rights Watch, 26 November 2023

[73] See the Xinjiang example in this section.

[74] In the UN Universal Periodic Review, OHCHR prepares a summary of "credible and reliable information" provided by NGOs and other stakeholders: Human Rights Council resolution 5/1, 18 June 2007, annex, para. 15(c).

[75] Al Jazeera, 10 August 2018: https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/08/10/one-million-muslim-uighurs-held-in-secret-china-camps-un-panel/.

[76] UN Human Rights Office, Assessment of human rights concerns in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, 31 August 2022: https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/3985699.

[77] Lawfare, 23 October 2023: https://www.lawfaremedia.org/article/governments-and-international-organizations-leave-the-record-uncorrected; Human Rights Watch, "Gaza: Findings on October 17 al-Ahli Hospital Explosion," 26 November 2023, recording the Ministry's attribution to Israel and its figure of 471 dead: https://www.hrw.org/news/2023/11/26/gaza-findings-october-17-al-ahli-hospital-explosion.

LESSON

Amnesty International — the Kuwait incubator story, 1990–92

In October 1990, a 15-year-old identified only as "Nayirah" told a US congressional caucus that she had seen Iraqi soldiers take babies from incubators in a Kuwaiti hospital and leave them to die.[81] Amnesty's December 1990 report on occupied Kuwait included the allegation, citing more than 300 deaths,[82] and President George H. W. Bush repeated the story in the weeks before the Gulf War. After visiting Kuwait, Amnesty stated in April 1991 that it had "found no reliable evidence that Iraqi forces had caused the deaths of babies" and issued corrections.[83] In January 1992 it emerged that the witness was the daughter of Kuwait's ambassador to the United States;[84] the following month, Middle East Watch found "no basis" for the allegation.[85]

An unverified account gained authority each time a credible organization repeated it, and the correction never matched the reach of the claim. Test testimony before relying on it, and give corrections the prominence of the original claim.

Sources: Amnesty International, 19 April 1991; Middle East Watch, February 1992; London Review of Books, May 1991

2.6 Independent checks

An organization's account of its own methods is a starting point, not a check. Establish what you can independently of it.

- **Go to the primary material:** Examine the images, data and documents themselves, not the description of them.[86]
- **Find separate evidence:** Use sources that do not rely on the organization or its partners.
- **Trace figures to their producer:** Read the original definitions, methods and caveats.
- **Seek the response of those accused:** Weigh it on its evidence.
- **Consult independent experts:** In technical areas, ask specialists with no stake in the claim.
- **Compare outputs and versions:** Check the report against its press release and posts, and look for later corrections.

Put questions to the organization only where its publication leaves material gaps, and note when it declines to answer.

[78] MSF UK, 17 October 2023: https://prezly.msf.org.uk/medecins-sans-frontieres-response-to-the-bombing-of-ahli-arab-hospital-in-gaza-city; AFSC, 17 October 2023: https://afsc.org/newsroom/bombing-al-ahli-baptist-hospital-unconscionable-we-need-ceasefire-now; WCC statement as republished by MECC, 19 October 2023: https://mecc.org/news-en/2023/10/19/statement-wcc-outraged-with-news-of-israeli-attack-on-al-ahli-hospital-in-gaza.

[79] Human Rights Watch, "Gaza: Findings on October 17 al-Ahli Hospital Explosion," 26 November 2023: https://www.hrw.org/news/2023/11/26/gaza-findings-october-17-al-ahli-hospital-explosion.

[80] Lawfare, 23 October 2023; WCC, revised statement, 20 October 2023: https://oikoumene.org/resources/documents/statement-wcc-outraged-with-news-of-an-attack-on-al-ahli-hospital-in-gaza-calls-for-a-new-reality-based-on-justice-and-human-dignity. No prominent correction or explanation by MSF, AFSC or WCC could be found as of 29 October 2026.

[81] Middle East Watch, Kuwait's "Stolen" Incubators: The Widespread Repercussions of a Murky Incident, vol. 4, no. 1, 6 February 1992: https://www.hrw.org/reports/pdfs/k/kuwait/kuwait922.pdf; John R. MacArthur, "Remember Nayirah, Witness for Kuwait?," The New York Times, 6 January 1992.

[82] Amnesty International, Iraq/Occupied Kuwait: Human Rights Violations since 2 August (MDE 14/16/90), 19 December 1990; see the accompanying action, MDE 14/19/90: https://www.amnesty.org/es/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/mde140191990en.pdf; Alexander Cockburn, "Human rights and wrongs," London Review of Books 13, no. 9, May 1991: https://www.lrb.co.uk/v13/n09/alexander-cockburn/human-rights-and-wrongs.

[83] Amnesty International, "Kuwait: Amnesty International calls on Emir to intervene over continuing torture and killings" (MDE 17/03/91), 19 April 1991: https://www.amnesty.org/ar/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/mde170031991en.pdf.

[84] MacArthur, The New York Times, 6 January 1992.

[85] Middle East Watch, February 1992.

[86] Berkeley Protocol (2022); Craig Silverman (ed.), Verification Handbook (European Journalism Centre, 2014).

GOOD PRACTICE

Amnesty International and Airwars — civilian deaths in Raqqa, Syria, 2017–19

The US-led coalition initially acknowledged 23 civilian deaths from its 2017 offensive on Raqqa, and raised that number in light of Amnesty's research.[87] Amnesty researchers investigated more than 200 strike sites and interviewed more than 400 witnesses and survivors; with Airwars, they combined that fieldwork with open-source evidence, satellite imagery analyzed by thousands of volunteers and authenticated video. In April 2019 they reported that more than 1,600 civilians had been killed, including 641 victims Amnesty verified on the ground. By then the coalition accepted responsibility for 159 deaths.[88]

Fieldwork and independent open-source evidence, published with their methods, tested an official account and changed it.

Sources: Amnesty International UK, 11 January 2019; Amnesty International, 25 April 2019

[87] Amnesty International UK, 11 January 2019: https://www.amnesty.org.uk/press-releases/syria-us-withdrawal-without-accepting-responsibility-raqqa-deaths-humanitarian.

[88] Amnesty International, "Syria: Unprecedented investigation reveals US-led Coalition killed more than 1,600 civilians in Raqqa 'death trap'," 25 April 2019: https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2019/04/syria-unprecedented-investigation-reveals-us-led-coalition-killed-more-than-1600-civilians-in-raqqa-death-trap/.

3 Citing

Describe every claim accurately, and in proportion to what has been established.

3.1 Citing a specific claim

Before citing or relying on a claim, answer four questions.

1 SOURCE	2 EVIDENCE	3 CONTEXT	4 STATUS
Who made the claim, and in what capacity?	Where did it originate, and what was checked?	What material limitations, relationships and context on all sides matter?	Is it an allegation, observation, finding, interpretation or recommendation?

Core rule: Identify the organization. Trace the original evidence. Disclose material context. Match the language of certainty to what has been established. Evaluate each piece of work on its own terms.

Source

Describe the organization by its function: "a human rights advocacy organization," "a medical humanitarian organization." "Advocacy" is a description, not a finding of bias. Avoid loose labels such as "rights group" or "watchdog."[89]

[89] SPJ, Code of Ethics (2014), which asks journalists to "identify sources clearly" so that the public can judge their reliability and motivations.

IF THE SOURCE SAYS…	WRITE, WHERE WARRANTED
"X proved widespread abuses."	"X reported evidence of specified incidents and concluded they formed a wider pattern."
"Several NGOs confirmed the figure."	"Several organizations cited figures originating with [original data producer]."
"X established that the conduct was a war crime."	"X assessed the conduct as a war crime under [stated legal framework]."
"Witness testimony proves…"[90]	"X based its account on interviews with people who said they witnessed the events."

Evidence

Find the earliest source of the claim and establish what the organization itself observed or checked. Evidence that an incident occurred does not establish responsibility, intent, policy or pattern; each requires its own evidence. Check what images and video actually show: where and when they were captured and whether they were altered.[91] An authentic image can show that an event occurred without showing who was responsible or why.

LESSON

Amnesty International — AI-generated protest images, Colombia, 2023

To promote its reporting on police abuses during Colombia's 2021 protests, Amnesty posted AI-generated images of the protests on social media, labeled as AI-produced.[92] It said the images protected protesters still at risk. Photojournalists and media researchers objected, noting visible errors, including a Colombian flag with its colors in the wrong order.[93] Amnesty removed the images and said it took the criticism seriously and would not use AI-generated images again until it had a clear policy.[94]

Labeling helps, but a synthetic image of a real event can still circulate as a record of it. Establish whether an image documents an event or illustrates it.

Sources: The Guardian, 2 May 2023; PetaPixel, 2 May 2023

Context

Give context on all sides. Include relevant context about the organization and about those it accuses, report whether those accused were asked to respond and what they said, and represent credible competing accounts in proportion to their evidence. State documented restrictions on the research and how they affect the evidence. Do not speculate: armed-group presence does not, on its own, prove interference.

[90] See the Kuwait incubator example (section 2.5): an allegation relied on by Amnesty International and repeated by President Bush was later found to have "no basis."

[91] Berkeley Protocol (2022); Silverman (ed.), Verification Handbook (2014).

[92] Luke Taylor, "Amnesty International criticised for using AI-generated images," The Guardian, 2 May 2023; see also Artnet News: https://news.artnet.com/art-world/amnesty-international-faces-backlash-from-photographers-for-creating-a-i-generated-images-of-protestors-2294348.

[93] Taylor, The Guardian, 2 May 2023.

[94] PetaPixel, "'It devalues photographers': Amnesty deletes AI images after backlash," 2 May 2023: https://petapixel.com/2023/05/02/it-devalues-photographers-amnesty-deletes-ai-images-after-backlash.

SITUATION	CONTEXTUAL WORDING
Remote research	"X relied on remote interviews and imagery; its researchers did not visit the site."
Restricted access	"Ongoing hostilities and access restrictions limited on-site corroboration."
Third-party figures	"X cited figures compiled by [source]; the extent of X's independent verification was [specified]."
Documented interference	"X reported [specific restriction or interference] affecting its collection of evidence."

GOOD PRACTICE

Amnesty International — abuses by a Rohingya armed group, Myanmar, 2017–18

While documenting the Myanmar military's campaign against the Rohingya, Amnesty also investigated abuses by the Rohingya armed group ARSA. In May 2018, drawing on dozens of interviews and photographic evidence, it reported that ARSA was responsible for killing up to 99 Hindu women, men and children in northern Rakhine State on 25 August 2017, stating that "human rights violations or abuses by one side never justify abuses or violations by the other."[95]

Reporting abuses on all sides, including those that complicate an organization's wider findings, gives readers the full context. Look for it, and note when it is missing.

Sources: NPR, 23 May 2018

[95] NPR, "'They Were All Slaughtered': Amnesty Says Rohingya Militants Massacred Hindus," 23 May 2018: https://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2018/05/23/613662601/rohingya-militants-massacred-hindus-amnesty-says-they-were-all-slaughtered.

Status

Separate what happened, who was responsible, the intent, the legal characterization and the proposed response; each requires different evidence. An NGO's legal assessment is not a judicial determination.[96] Compare the report with its press release, headlines and posts for shifts in certainty. Say what was independently checked and what was not: "X reported…; a separate investigation by Y found…" or "X's account could not be independently verified."

LESSON

Amnesty International — from estimate to headline, Syria, 2017

Amnesty's report on Saydnaya prison, based on 84 interviews, estimated that "between 5,000 and 13,000 people" were executed from 2011 to 2015.[97] Its press release led with "as many as 13,000"; some headlines reported 13,000 alone.[98] Each step moved further from the evidence. Cite the estimate with its range and basis.

Sources: Amnesty International, 7 February 2017; VOA, 7 February 2017

LESSON

Save Darfur Coalition — an estimate presented as fact, 2007

The coalition's advertisements stated that "400,000 innocent men, women and children have been killed." In August 2007, the UK Advertising Standards Authority ruled that there was "a division of informed opinion about the accuracy of the figure" and that it should have been presented as opinion, not fact.[99] Access restrictions explain uncertainty; they do not license certainty.

Source: Christian Today, 15 August 2007; Sudan Tribune, 15 August 2007

[96] OHCHR, Commissions of Inquiry and Fact-Finding Missions: Guidance and Practice (2015).

[97] Amnesty International, Human Slaughterhouse: Mass Hangings and Extermination at Saydnaya Prison, Syria (MDE 24/5415/2017), 7 February 2017: https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/mde24/5415/2017/en/; executive summary: https://www.amnesty-international.be/sites/default/files/2017-02/human_slaughterhouse_exec_summary_en.pdf.

3.2 Checklist before citing

Before you cite, share or rely on a claim, check that you have done each of the following. The responsibility is yours as the user, whatever the organization did or did not do.

- ☐ Have you described the organization's role and the type of output accurately?
- ☐ Have you named or linked the specific publication?
- ☐ Have you traced the claim to its original source, and checked that apparently separate confirmations are genuinely independent?
- ☐ Have you attributed figures to their producer, with type, definition and date?
- ☐ Have you disclosed access limits and other material conditions on the research?
- ☐ Have you kept observation, attribution, intent, legal analysis and advocacy separate?
- ☐ Have you checked whether the organization sought a response from those accused, reported what they said, and sought it yourself where you can?
- ☐ Have you represented all sides fairly: relevant context on each side, the response of those accused, and credible competing evidence and interpretations, in proportion to their evidence?
- ☐ Have you stated what was independently checked, by whom, and what was not?
- ☐ Have you established whether images and video document events, illustrate them or are AI-generated?
- ☐ Does your headline or conclusion match the evidence?
- ☐ Have you checked whether the claim has been corrected, qualified or superseded, and does your citation reflect the latest available information?
- ☐ Is the evidence sufficient for the consequences of relying on it?

[98] Amnesty International, "Syria: Investigation uncovers government's secret campaign of mass hangings and extermination at Saydnaya Prison," 7 February 2017: https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2017/02/syria-investigation-uncovers-governments-secret-campaign-of-mass-hangings-and-extermination-at-saydnaya-prison/; VOA Learning English, 7 February 2017: https://learningenglish.voanews.com/a/amnesty-international-reports-syria-kiklled-thousands-in-hangings/3710144.html.

[99] Christian Today, "Watch your facts, UK ad watchdog warns campaigners," 15 August 2007: https://www.christiantoday.com/news/watch-your-facts-uk-ad-watchdog-warns-campaigners; Spiked, 14 August 2007: https://www.spiked-online.com/2007/08/14/darfur-pornography-for-the-chattering-classes/; Sudan Tribune, 15 August 2007: https://sudantribune.com/?p=23524.

Glossary

Common terms in NGO output and in this guide: what each means, and what it does not establish on its own.

TERM	MEANING, AND WHAT IT DOES NOT ESTABLISH
Allegation	A claim not yet established to the standard relevant to its use.
Amplification	Repetition or endorsement of a claim; not new evidence.
Circular sourcing	Apparently independent sources that rely on one another or on the same original source.
Confirmed count	Individually documented cases meeting a stated definition.
Corroboration	Additional supporting evidence; its value depends on source independence.
Documented	Collected and recorded; not the same as externally verified.
Estimate	A figure derived from modeling or extrapolation, not individual documentation.
Finding / conclusion	An assessment reached through a stated process; not settled fact.
Grey literature	Research and reports issued outside formal academic or commercial publishing, usually without independent peer review.[100]
Illustration / synthetic image	An image created or generated to represent events; not a record of them.
Independent	Independent of specified interests or interference; say what is independent of what.
Institutional position	An organization's adopted stance; may combine evidence and advocacy.
Internal review	Checking by an organization's own staff; procedures vary and are rarely published.
Interview / witness account	Information from a person; not necessarily sworn or judicially tested.
Peer review	External expert assessment under a defined process; not the same as internal NGO review.
Primary source	Original record, observer or data producer; not automatically reliable.
Projection	A forecast of future conditions; not a count of what has occurred.[101]
Reasonable grounds to believe	An investigative threshold, not a criminal standard of proof.[102]
Retraction / correction	Withdrawal or amendment; identify what changed and why.

[100] On the Prague definition of grey literature, see Schöpfel, "Towards a Prague Definition of Grey Literature" (2011).

[101] For example, the Integrated Food Security Phase Classification distinguishes current analyses from projections: IPC Technical Manual Version 3.1 (IPC Global Partners, 2021).

[102] OHCHR, Commissions of Inquiry and Fact-Finding Missions: Guidance and Practice (2015).

TERM	MEANING, AND WHAT IT DOES NOT ESTABLISH
Testimony	In law, evidence given by a witness, usually under oath, in a legal proceeding. NGOs often use the term for any person's account; that use does not establish oath, verification or cross-examination.[103]
Triangulation	Comparing different evidence to corroborate a finding; only as strong as the sources' independence.[104]
Verified	Checked through an identifiable method; specify what and by whom.

[103] Bryan A. Garner (ed.), Black's Law Dictionary, 11th ed. (Thomson Reuters, 2019), "testimony": evidence that a competent witness under oath or affirmation gives at trial or in an affidavit or deposition.

[104] Norman K. Denzin, The Research Act: A Theoretical Introduction to Sociological Methods (Aldine, 1970).

Methodological foundations and use

This guide reflects principles in OHCHR's Manual on Human Rights Monitoring; the Berkeley Protocol on Digital Open Source Investigations; Alston and Knuckey (eds.), The Transformation of Human Rights Fact-Finding (Oxford University Press, 2016); and established journalistic standards of attribution, verification and correction, including the Reuters Handbook of Journalism.[105] These are methodological touchstones, not endorsements of this guide. Specific legal and evidentiary standards depend on jurisdiction and context.

EiGHT offers this guide as a non-binding public reference. It is not an accreditation scheme, a judgment on particular organizations, or a substitute for specialist legal and methodological assessment. This edition is dated November 2026; corrections can be submitted through www.eightrights.org.

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[105] OHCHR, Manual on Human Rights Monitoring (2011); Berkeley Protocol (2022); Alston and Knuckey (eds.), The Transformation of Human Rights Fact-Finding (2016); Reuters, Handbook of Journalism (Thomson Reuters), on sourcing, attribution and corrections; SPJ, Code of Ethics (2014).

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