The Power Differential Principle
A Systems Thinking Approach to Human Rights Advocacy

TITLE: The Power Differential Principle

AUTHOR: Ahmed E. Souaiaia, Ph.D.

AFFILIATION: University of Iowa, USA

KEYWORDS: Systems Thinking; Human Rights Advocacy; Power Differential Principle; Vulnerability; Determinant Systems

CONFLICT OF INTEREST: The author declares no competing interests.

FUNDING: This research received no specific grant from any funding agency.

Citing It: Souaiaia, Ahmed E. “The Power Differential Principle.” HUQUQ Journal, June 2026.

ABSTRACT:

This article introduces the Power Differential Principle, a systems-based approach to human rights advocacy derived from the Systems Thinking Framework (STF). It argues that advocacy should be directed toward actors whose agency is threatened by determinant systems they cannot effectively resist rather than by ideology, identity, or political affiliation. Drawing on STF's concepts of determinant and contributory systems, dynamicity, and the relationship among work, energy, and time, the article develops a framework for identifying vulnerability through systems mapping and variable mapping. By treating vulnerability as a relational and event-specific condition, the Power Differential Principle offers a dynamic methodology for assessing rights violations and remediations and guiding advocacy under changing social conditions.

Introduction

Human rights scholarship and advocacy frequently confront a recurring dilemma: How should scholars, educators, and advocates determine where they stand when rights claims become entangled with politics, ideology, identity, and power?

For many scholars, the challenge emerges in the form of a perceived tension between objectivity and advocacy. Human rights researchers are often encouraged to maintain neutrality, even when the rights they study are under attack. Some adopt the position that their responsibility is limited to the production of knowledge and that advocacy belongs to a different domain altogether. Others align themselves with governments, political movements, or international institutions that appear to advance human rights goals, only to discover that those same actors may later participate in or enable human rights abuses.

Advocates face similar challenges. Organizations and individuals frequently develop relationships with political actors whose commitments to human rights appear genuine when they occupy positions of opposition but become less clear once they acquire power. In such circumstances, advocates may find themselves torn between loyalty to political allies and loyalty to the principles they seek to defend.

These challenges expose a fundamental weakness in many approaches to human rights advocacy: Decisions are often guided by ideology, political affiliation, identity, historical narratives, or organizational commitments rather than by a systematic assessment of the conditions producing rights violations.

This article argues that human rights advocacy should be guided by what may be called the *Power Differential Principle*. Derived from the Systems Thinking Framework (STF), particularly its emphasis on determinant and contributory systems, dynamicity, systems mapping, and the relationship among work, energy, and time in the production of outcomes, the principle holds that advocacy should be directed toward those who lack access to determinant systems capable of protecting their agency, interests, and existence. Rather than asking which side is politically correct, morally appealing, or historically favored, advocates should ask a different question: Where does determinant power reside, and who is vulnerable to its exercise?

The *Power Differential Principle* is grounded in three propositions. First, human rights abuses are systemic outcomes rather than isolated acts. Second, power is distributed through interacting systems that continuously change over time. Third, effective advocacy requires continual systems mapping and recalibration as power relationships evolve. Through this approach, human rights advocacy becomes a dynamic process guided by vulnerability and agency rather than ideology and allegiance.

This article contributes to human rights scholarship in three ways. First, it develops a systems-based conception of power grounded in the distinction between determinant and contributory systems. Second, it introduces the *Power Differential Principle* as a normative and analytical guide for human rights advocacy under conditions of unequal power. Third, it proposes systems mapping and variable mapping as operational methods for identifying vulnerability and directing advocacy within environments characterized by dynamic social change. Collectively, these contributions provide a framework for transforming human rights advocacy from an identity-driven or ideology-driven practice into a systems-based methodology centered on vulnerability, agency, and changing configurations of power.

Power, Vulnerability, and Human Rights: Existing Approaches

The relationship between power and human rights has occupied scholars across multiple disciplines, including political theory, sociology, philosophy, peace studies, development studies, and critical legal scholarship. Although these traditions differ in their assumptions and methods, they share a common concern with understanding how power shapes human agency, social conditions, and the distribution of opportunities and constraints. Despite extensive attention to the nature of power and vulnerability, relatively little attention has been devoted to the practical question of how human rights advocates should determine where advocacy ought to be directed when power relationships are dynamic and continuously changing.

Power and Domination

Modern discussions of power have been shaped significantly by the work of Michel Foucault, who challenged the tendency to view power solely as a possession of states or rulers. For Foucault, power operates through dispersed networks of institutions, norms, practices, and forms of knowledge. Power is productive as much as it is restrictive; it shapes how individuals understand themselves and their social environments. This insight broadened the study of power beyond formal political authority and demonstrated that domination may occur through ordinary social processes rather than overt coercion alone.

Similarly, Steven Lukes argued that power operates through multiple dimensions. Beyond direct decision-making, power may shape agendas by determining which issues are considered legitimate subjects of debate. More profoundly, power may influence preferences, perceptions, and beliefs, causing individuals to accept conditions that operate against their interests. Lukes' framework expanded the analysis of power from observable actions to the underlying structures that shape social possibilities.

In peace and conflict studies, Johan Galtung introduced the concept of structural violence, drawing attention to forms of harm embedded within social, political, and economic systems. Structural violence occurs when social arrangements systematically prevent individuals or groups from realizing their basic

needs and capabilities. This approach shifted attention away from isolated acts of violence toward the broader systems that generate inequality and deprivation.

Taken together, these perspectives demonstrate that power cannot be reduced to visible acts of coercion. It operates through institutions, ideas, structures, and relationships. Human rights abuses therefore cannot be understood solely as the actions of individual perpetrators but must be examined as outcomes emerging from interconnected social systems.

Vulnerability, Agency, and Human Rights

A parallel body of scholarship has emphasized the concepts of vulnerability and agency as central concerns of human rights discourse.

The work of Amartya Sen is particularly influential in this regard. Sen's capability approach shifts attention from formal rights and resources to the substantive freedoms individuals possess to pursue lives they have reason to value. Human flourishing depends not merely on the existence of rights but on the practical ability to exercise agency. This perspective highlights the importance of examining the conditions that enable or constrain human action.

Likewise, Paulo Freire explored the relationship between oppression and liberation through educational and social systems. Freire emphasized that oppression is sustained not only through material structures but also through cultural and psychological processes that shape consciousness itself. Liberation therefore requires transforming the conditions that limit agency and participation.

Human rights scholarship has increasingly adopted similar concerns. Contemporary discussions frequently focus on vulnerable populations, marginalized communities, and groups exposed to systematic exclusion. These approaches have contributed significantly to understanding the unequal distribution of power and opportunity within societies.

However, vulnerability itself remains difficult to define. Individuals and groups may be vulnerable in one context while possessing substantial power in another. Moreover, vulnerability may change as social, political, economic, and technological conditions evolve. This raises a practical challenge for advocates seeking to determine where their efforts should be directed.

Although these approaches illuminate important dimensions of power, vulnerability, and agency, they generally stop short of providing a systematic method by which advocates can determine where advocacy should be directed when multiple actors possess overlapping forms of power and vulnerability. The practical problem is not merely identifying oppression or recognizing vulnerability, but determining how advocates should respond when power relations shift, when actors simultaneously occupy positions of power and vulnerability, or when previously vulnerable actors acquire determinant systems capable of imposing outcomes on others. Existing scholarship provides valuable analytical insights into the nature of power, but it offers limited operational guidance for advocacy under such conditions.

The Missing Question: How Should Advocates Decide?

Existing scholarship provides valuable insights into the nature of power, domination, agency, and vulnerability. However, much of this literature focuses on explaining how power operates rather than on providing a systematic methodology for determining advocacy positions under changing conditions.

Human rights advocacy may confront situations in which multiple actors make competing claims of victimhood, vulnerability, or injustice. Political identities, historical grievances, ideological commitments, and organizational loyalties frequently complicate efforts to determine where advocacy should be directed.

In such circumstances, appeals to fixed categories of victim and perpetrator may prove inadequate because power relations are rarely static.

The challenge is particularly acute in complex conflicts involving multiple actors, overlapping systems of influence, and rapidly changing conditions. An actor that appears vulnerable in one context may exercise substantial power in another. Likewise, an actor traditionally viewed as powerful may become vulnerable when confronted by stronger systems operating at a different scale. Static classifications struggle to account for such dynamics.

What remains underdeveloped in the literature is a framework capable of methodically identifying vulnerability as power relationships change over time. Existing approaches offer important insights into the nature of power, but they generally do not provide operational guidance for determining where advocacy should be directed when the relevant systems and variables are continuously evolving.

Drawing on the Systems Thinking Framework (STF), this article proposes the Power Differential Principle as a response to this challenge. The principle shifts attention from identities, ideologies, and historical affiliations to the distribution of determinant and contributory systems operating within a specific event. Through systems mapping, variable mapping, and continual reassessment of changing power relations, the framework offers a practical methodology for identifying vulnerability and guiding advocacy under conditions of dynamic social change.

Building on the Systems Thinking Framework's distinction between determinant and contributory systems, its emphasis on dynamicity, and its method of systems mapping, this article extends STF into the field of human rights advocacy by proposing the Power Differential Principle as an operational guide for identifying vulnerability and directing advocacy efforts.

Unlike existing approaches, which primarily explain how power operates, STF provides a methodology for analyzing how changing configurations of determinant and contributory systems alter conditions of vulnerability over time. Its contribution is therefore not merely descriptive but operational: It offers a systematic process through which advocates can identify, reassess, and respond to shifting power differentials within complex social environments.

Human Rights and the Problem of Advocacy

The relationship between scholarship and advocacy is often portrayed as a conflict between objectivity and commitment. However, this distinction is misleading.

A physician is expected to maintain scientific rigor while simultaneously caring for patients. Commitment to evidence does not require indifference to suffering. On the contrary, concern for vulnerable persons is embedded within the ethical foundations of medicine.

Human rights scholarship should be understood similarly. Sympathy for victims of abuse is not a threat to objectivity. Rather, it is an ethical orientation consistent with the purpose of the field itself. Human rights professionals should be trained not only to analyze rights violations but also to recognize their responsibility toward those whose agency and dignity are threatened.

The challenge, therefore, is not whether advocates should care. The challenge is determining how advocates should decide where to direct their concern when social realities become complex and contested.

Systems Thinking and the Nature of Power

Although the concept of power occupies a central place in human rights discourse, it is often invoked without sufficient precision. The Systems Thinking Framework provides a way to conceptualize power that is both analytical and operational.

Within STF, power may be defined as the capacity of a system to produce, prevent, or alter outcomes affecting the agency, conditions, opportunities, or existence of another actor. Power is therefore not merely a possession of individuals or organizations. It is a property of systems and relationships. This definition derives from STF's broader proposition that outcomes emerge as a function of work, energy, and time, represented abstractly as $X = f(W,E)/t$. Power therefore resides not merely in resources or authority but in the capacity of systems to organize work and energy across time in ways that shape outcomes affecting others.

Individuals exercise power because they occupy positions within systems that enable them to influence outcomes. Consequently, power should be analyzed as a systemic phenomenon rather than solely as a personal attribute.

A key distinction within STF is the distinction between determinant systems and contributory systems.

Determinant systems directly produce outcomes. Contributory systems reinforce, sustain, legitimize, or enhance those outcomes. For example, military force capable of compelling obedience functions as a determinant system. Economic resources, legal authority, ideological narratives, diplomatic support, religious legitimacy, and media influence may function as contributory systems that strengthen the effectiveness of the determinant system. However, systems are not permanently determinant or contributory. Their role depends upon the specific event under examination.

Identifying determinant systems requires asking a fundamental systems-thinking question: If this system were removed from the event, would the outcome still occur in substantially the same manner, with comparable effectiveness, and within a similar timeframe? Systems whose removal would fundamentally alter, prevent, or significantly delay the outcome may be classified as determinant. Systems whose removal would affect the intensity, legitimacy, efficiency, or sustainability of the outcome without fundamentally producing it may be classified as contributory.

Within the Systems Thinking Framework, this distinction reflects the relationship among *work*, *energy*, and *time* in the production of outcomes (*events*) ($X = f(W, E)/t$). Determinant systems possess the capacity to mobilize work and energy in ways that substantially shape not only whether an outcome occurs but also when it occurs. Actors controlling *determinant systems* frequently exercise power by compressing the time required to achieve desired outcomes, delaying competing outcomes, or restricting the ability of other actors to mobilize sufficient work and energy within the available timeframe. Contributory systems may assist, reinforce, legitimize, or sustain these processes, but they generally do so with less capacity to determine the timing and direction of the outcome. Because systems interact *dynamically*, the classification of a system as determinant or contributory is always provisional and subject to reassessment as conditions, variables, and temporal constraints change.

This provisional classification reflects a central STF principle: *Systems cannot be understood apart from the events they produce*. Whether a system functions as determinant or contributory depends on its role in generating a particular outcome rather than on any fixed characteristic inherent to the system itself (Souaiaia, STF, 2026).

For analytical purposes, power may be categorized according to the systems through which it operates:

- Physical power: military force, policing capacity, and coercive violence.
- Political power: executive authority, legislation, and institutional decision-making.
- Economic power: control of resources, labor, production, and finance.
- Informational power: control of media, education, communication networks, and knowledge production.
- Cultural power: influence derived from social norms, symbols, traditions, and collective identities.
- Legal power: authority exercised through constitutions, courts, and regulatory systems.
- Diplomatic power: the ability to mobilize external actors and shape international responses.

The significance of any category depends upon the event being analyzed. A military force confronting unarmed civilians is clearly determinant. In another context, informational systems may become determinant if they control access to knowledge, shape public behavior, or legitimize violence. Power therefore cannot be reduced to a single variable. It is best understood as a dynamic equation composed of interacting systems whose relative significance changes according to context.

The most consequential concentrations of power emerge when multiple systems become networked together. States, corporations, and large organizations often possess interconnected military, economic, legal, informational, political, and diplomatic systems. Their ability to produce outcomes derives not from any single source of power but from the interaction of multiple systems acting together.

The principle of *dynamicity* occupies a foundational position within the Systems Thinking Framework. Social systems continuously change as actors enter and exit relationships, variables shift, and determinant systems emerge, weaken, or disappear. Consequently, conditions of vulnerability and domination are themselves dynamic rather than fixed. Any framework that relies on static identities or permanent classifications of victim and perpetrator risks misidentifying vulnerability as circumstances evolve. The Power Differential Principle is therefore a direct application of dynamicity to human rights advocacy. It requires continual reassessment of power relationships as systems change and insists that advocacy positions be recalibrated whenever shifts in determinant systems alter the distribution of power.

Time as a Dimension of Power

Within the Systems Thinking Framework, time is not merely a passive background against which events unfold. It is an active dimension of power. Because outcomes emerge through the relationship among work, energy, and time, actors capable of influencing the temporal conditions of an event possess an important form of power.

Determinant systems frequently derive their effectiveness from their ability to compress time. States, corporations, military institutions, and other actors possessing determinant systems often seek to accelerate desired outcomes, reduce the time required to mobilize resources, and prevent opponents from organizing effective responses. The ability to achieve outcomes rapidly is itself a manifestation of power because it reduces the work and energy required to sustain action over extended periods.

Conversely, actors lacking determinant systems often attempt to alter the temporal dimension of a conflict by extending time. Unable to match the work or energy available to dominant actors, they may seek to increase the costs associated with maintaining a desired outcome. By prolonging resistance, delaying implementation, or forcing repeated mobilization of resources, vulnerable actors may weaken the effectiveness of determinant systems and alter the overall power differential.

Historical examples of this dynamic appear across political, economic, military, and social contexts. Powerful actors frequently seek decisive outcomes achieved within compressed timeframes, while

vulnerable actors often seek to prolong events in ways that increase the work and energy required to sustain domination.

This temporal dimension helps explain why vulnerable actors are not necessarily powerless actors. While they may lack access to determinant systems capable of rapidly producing desired outcomes, they may nevertheless influence the power differential by altering the temporal conditions under which those systems operate. Throughout history, populations confronting dominant states, occupations, institutions, or economic systems have often sought to extend time in ways that increase the work and energy required to sustain domination. Conversely, actors controlling determinant systems frequently seek to compress time in order to reduce resistance and secure outcomes before alternative systems can emerge. From an STF perspective, many struggles over rights are therefore not simply struggles over resources or authority; they are also struggles over time itself.

From an STF perspective, these strategies are not merely tactical decisions. They reflect competing attempts to shape the temporal conditions through which outcomes emerge. Power therefore consists not only in controlling resources, institutions, or systems, but also in influencing the timing through which work and energy are translated into outcomes.

This temporal understanding of power follows directly from STF's abstraction $X = f(W,E)/t$. The ability to compress, extend, accelerate, or delay the translation of work and energy into outcomes represents an important dimension of determinant power. Conversely, vulnerable actors often seek to alter temporal conditions precisely because time may be the only variable they can influence when access to determinant systems is limited (Souaiaia, STF, 2026).

The Power Differential Principle therefore requires advocates not only to identify which actors control determinant systems, but also to examine how those actors use time to accelerate, delay, sustain, or prevent outcomes affecting the agency of others.

The Power Differential Principle

The Power Differential Principle emerges directly from the systems-based understanding of power. The principle holds that human rights advocacy should be directed toward actors whose agency is threatened by determinant systems they cannot effectively resist, counterbalance, or negotiate. The principle rejects ideology, political affiliation, nationalism, religion, ethnicity, organizational loyalty, and historical narratives as primary criteria for determining advocacy positions. Such factors may provide context, but they do not determine where advocacy should be directed. Instead, advocates should assess the distribution of determinant and contributory systems within a specific event and identify which actors possess the capacity to impose outcomes and which actors remain vulnerable to those outcomes.

Importantly, the principle does not classify actors as permanently powerful or permanently vulnerable. Vulnerability is relational, contextual, and dynamic. An actor may be vulnerable in one event and dominant in another. Likewise, an actor that lacks power in one dimension may possess determinant power in a different dimension.

This distinction is crucial because human rights discourse often relies on static categories of victim and perpetrator. The Systems Thinking Framework rejects such fixed classifications and instead focuses on the active systems producing outcomes at a given moment. A group that is marginalized within a broader political structure may nevertheless become the dominant actor within a specific event if it activates a determinant system against another vulnerable population. Conversely, a powerful institution may become vulnerable when confronted by stronger systems operating at a different scale.

The relevant question is therefore not which actor is generally weaker. The relevant question is which actor lacks access to the determinant systems shaping the outcome under examination.

Vulnerability as a Relational and Event-Specific Condition

A common misunderstanding of rights advocacy is the assumption that individuals, groups, or institutions can be categorized permanently as either powerful or vulnerable. Such classifications often emerge from historical narratives, ideological commitments, or social identities. The Power Differential Principle rejects this approach.

Within the Systems Thinking Framework, *vulnerability* is not an intrinsic characteristic of an actor. Rather, it is a relational condition that emerges from the interaction of systems within a specific event. An actor is *vulnerable* when confronted by *determinant systems* capable of producing outcomes that the actor cannot effectively resist, counterbalance, or negotiate through alternative means.

Consequently, terms such as powerful, weak, dominant, or vulnerable should be understood as descriptive rather than categorical. They describe a *relationship* within a given set of circumstances rather than a permanent attribute of an individual, group, or institution.

This distinction is critical because actors frequently occupy different positions across different events. A group that lacks *determinant power* in one context may acquire determinant power in another. Likewise, an actor that is vulnerable in one situation may become dominant when circumstances change or when additional systems become available.

Consider a situation in which a politically *marginalized organization* is subjected to coercive state action. Systems mapping may reveal that the organization lacks access to determinant systems capable of resisting the state's exercise of power. In that event, the organization occupies the vulnerable position.

However, if members of that same organization subsequently direct violence against unarmed civilians, the systems map changes. The relevant event is no longer the confrontation between the organization and the state. The relevant event becomes the relationship between armed actors and unarmed civilians. In that event, the civilians occupy the vulnerable position because they lack access to determinant systems capable of protecting themselves from violence. The advocacy position therefore shifts.

This shift does not represent inconsistency. On the contrary, it reflects fidelity to the principle itself. The purpose of advocacy is not to remain loyal to actors, identities, organizations, or historical narratives. The purpose is to identify vulnerability wherever it emerges and to oppose the use of determinant systems that deprive others of meaningful agency.

This understanding reflects one of the foundational insights underlying systems thinking and one of the oldest observations about change in human experience. The philosopher Heraclitus famously observed that no person steps into the same river twice because both the river and the person are continuously changing. The same principle applies to social systems. Every event unfolds within changing conditions. Actors enter and exit relationships. Variables shift. Systems emerge, weaken, combine, and disappear.

Human rights abuses are therefore not static conditions but dynamic outcomes emerging from changing relationships among systems. Their assessment cannot be reduced to fixed rules, permanent identities, or ideological loyalties. Effective advocacy requires continual reassessment of the *power differential equation* as circumstances evolve.

From this perspective, the task of rights advocacy is not to defend the weak as a category. It is to identify those who are rendered vulnerable by the active configuration of determinant systems operating within a

specific event and to ensure that power is not used to deprive them of the ability to defend their agency, dignity, and existence.

Operationalizing the Principle: Systems Mapping and Variable Mapping

The practical application of the Power Differential Principle requires systematic analysis.

First, advocates must identify the active systems involved in an event.
Second, they must distinguish determinant systems from contributory systems.
Third, they must identify the variables influencing how those systems interact.

This process reflects STF's method of systems-mapping and variable-mapping, which seeks to identify not only active systems but also the variables shaping their relationships and capacities to produce outcomes (Souaiaia, STF, 2026). These variables may include resources, organizational structures, geography, technology, information flows, social legitimacy, external support, cultural norms, and temporal conditions.

Fourth, advocates must construct a power differential map showing which actors possess determinant systems and which actors remain exposed to their exercise.

Finally, because social systems are dynamic, the analysis must be repeated whenever significant changes occur.

This process transforms advocacy from a reactive moral impulse into a systematic practice grounded in empirical observation and principled analysis.

Illustrative Application

Consider a labor dispute between workers and a multinational corporation.

Initially, the corporation may possess extensive economic, legal, informational, and political systems. Workers may possess limited organizational capacity and relatively few determinant systems capable of protecting their interests. Systems mapping would therefore identify workers as the more vulnerable side, and advocacy would focus on protecting their ability to organize, negotiate, and defend their rights.

Suppose, however, that union leadership later acquires substantial coercive influence and begins using intimidation or violence against workers who choose not to participate in collective actions. The systems map changes. In that specific event, the vulnerable actors become those workers subjected to coercion.

The advocacy position therefore shifts.

This shift does not represent inconsistency. It reflects fidelity to the principle itself.

The objective is not loyalty to particular organizations or identities. The objective is protection of agency and resistance to domination wherever determinant systems are being used to impose outcomes upon vulnerable actors.

Limitations and Challenges

The Power Differential Principle does not eliminate disagreement or guarantee perfect judgments for systems are complex and information is often incomplete. Determining which systems are determinant may itself be contested. Different observers may produce different systems maps based on available evidence. Moreover, power operates across multiple dimensions simultaneously. An actor may be vulnerable in one

respect while possessing substantial power in another. Such situations require careful analysis rather than simplistic conclusions. Nevertheless, these challenges do not undermine the principle; these challenges reinforce the need for rigorous systems-mapping and continual reassessment.

Indeed, the existence of ambiguity is one reason why static ideological approaches are often inadequate. The more complex the social environment becomes, the more valuable a systems-based methodology becomes.

A further challenge concerns replicability. If different advocates or researchers examine the same event, will they identify the same determinant systems and reach similar conclusions regarding vulnerability? The answer depends largely on the rigor of the systems-mapping process and the quality of available information. Although perfect agreement may be unattainable, the framework seeks to improve consistency by directing attention toward observable systems, identifiable variables, and demonstrable power relationships rather than ideological commitments or identity-based assumptions. Future refinements may further improve the reliability and comparability of systems-based assessments across different contexts.

Future Directions

The Power Differential Principle is intended as both a theoretical proposition and a practical methodology. Future research may test the principle through comparative case studies, historical analyses, and empirical examinations of how determinant systems operate across different forms of conflict. Such research may contribute to the development of more precise methods for identifying determinant and contributory systems, measuring changes in power distributions, and evaluating how different observers apply systems mapping to the same event. These investigations may also help clarify the conditions under which the framework produces consistent assessments of vulnerability across diverse social and political contexts.

Conclusion

The Systems Thinking Framework offers more than a descriptive lens for understanding human rights. It provides a practical methodology for determining where advocacy should be directed in complex and changing environments. Its central contribution is the Power Differential Principle: the proposition that human rights advocacy should be guided by the distribution of determinant power rather than by ideology, identity, political affiliation, or organizational loyalty.

Through systems mapping, variable mapping, and continual reassessment of determinant and contributory systems, advocates can identify vulnerability as it emerges within changing social conditions and direct their efforts accordingly. Human rights advocacy is therefore not a matter of choosing sides based on political preference. It is the disciplined practice of identifying power, locating vulnerability, and protecting the agency of those who lack the systems necessary to defend themselves against domination. As systems change, advocacy must change with them. Fidelity belongs not to factions but to the principle itself.

At its core, the Power Differential Principle rests on a simple proposition: rights advocacy should not be determined by who an actor is, but by the systems within which that actor is situated. By shifting attention from identities to relationships, from allegiances to power structures, and from static classifications to dynamic systems, the principle offers a practical framework for navigating the complexities of contemporary human rights work. In doing so, it seeks to preserve the central purpose of advocacy itself: ensuring that those who lack the power to protect their agency are not deprived of the ability to defend their existence, dignity, and future.

References

Foucault, Michel. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. Translated by Alan Sheridan. New York: Vintage Books, 1977.

Foucault, Michel. *The History of Sexuality, Volume I: An Introduction*. Translated by Robert Hurley. New York: Pantheon Books, 1978.

Freire, Paulo. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. 30th Anniversary Edition. New York: Continuum, 2000.

Galtung, Johan. "Violence, Peace, and Peace Research." *Journal of Peace Research* 6, no. 3 (1969): 167–191.

Lukes, Steven. *Power: A Radical View*. 2nd ed. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005.

Sen, Amartya. *Development as Freedom*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1999.

Sen, Amartya. *The Idea of Justice*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009.

United Nations. *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*. New York: United Nations, 1948.

United Nations Development Programme. *Human Development Report 1994: New Dimensions of Human Security*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1994.

Young, Iris Marion. *Justice and the Politics of Difference*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990.

Young, Iris Marion. *Responsibility for Justice*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011.

Systems Thinking Framework

Souaiaia, Ahmed E. *The Systems Thinking Framework: Principles, Mapping, and the Analysis of Social and Natural Systems*. Monee, IL: IST Institute Press, 2026.

Souaiaia, Ahmed E. "Reading and Interpreting Ibn Khaldun's Economic Philosophy." *Journal of Philosophical Economics* 17, no. 1 (2023): 1–33.

Souaiaia, Ahmed E. "Economics, Work, Ethics, and Conscience in Ibn Khaldun's Thought." *Islam Today Journal* 29, no. 2 (2023): 45–71.

Souaiaia, Ahmed E. "The Bridge of Becoming: Reimagining Work and Capital through Ibn Khaldun and Western Economic Thought." *Islam Today Journal* 30, no. 1 (2024): 1–42.

Additional Works on Power, Rights, and Social Systems

Arendt, Hannah. *On Violence*. New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1970.

Clegg, Stewart R. *Frameworks of Power*. London: Sage Publications, 1989.

Mann, Michael. *The Sources of Social Power*. Vol. 1. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986.

Tilly, Charles. *Durable Inequality*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998.

Wallerstein, Immanuel. *World-Systems Analysis: An Introduction*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004.