Minority Rights Group International (MRG) is the only worldwide organisation that works on minority rights, and, more generally, on the spectrum of minorities issues as well as on indigenous peoples. Forty-two years after its founding, MRG recently decided to transform its approach to become a campaigning organisation, combining a variety of methods with the one goal of bringing about real change in the lives of minorities and securing them the rights to which they are entitled.

A brief history

MRG began in 1965. For many years it was a very small organisation, largely based on commissioning and publishing reports describing the situation of minorities around the world. Over the years, the situation of hundreds of different minority groups has been described and recorded, often for the first time in English. MRG became known as an authoritative voice.

MRG’s work has expanded into new areas, becoming involved in the formulation and development of international standards on minority rights, and contributing to the ability of international institutions to protect and apply these rights. MRG’s efforts bore particular fruit in the early 1990s, when minority issues were briefly at the centre of world attention upon the end of the Cold War, and notably as a contributing factor in the outbreak of war in the former Yugoslavia. MRG played a role in the development of the first new international standards in minority rights in many years, the UN Declaration on the Rights of Persons Belonging to Ethnic or Religious, Linguistic or
Religious Minorities, and the Council of Europe's Framework Convention, and their monitoring bodies.

Moreover, MRG began to work increasingly with minority groups themselves, largely through training them on using the international mechanisms and standards. Although still working worldwide, MRG developed particular regional focuses: South and Southeast Asia; East Africa; and Central and Southeast Europe. Two notable communities MRG has worked with for many years have been the Twa of Central Africa and the Roma of Europe. One project, bringing minorities to Geneva to train them on minority rights and enabling their participation in the annual session of the UN Working Group on Minorities has been particularly successful; thanks to MRG many minorities have henceforth been able to articulate their problems before UN fora.

In more recent years, MRG has undertaken two new types of activities. The first was direct working in and with the media, in having its first official media officer (albeit part time) in the 1990s, which by 2006 had become a full department. In 2002, MRG began its first work on litigation, assisting minorities to bring legal cases for the implementation of their rights, with the aim also of helping set precedents for minority rights.

**Bringing it all together – the campaigning approach**

In 2004, MRG made a fundamental shift in its strategy. This was based on a comprehensive review of MRG’s work, and the situation in the world in the 21st century. In effect, MRG asked itself what its actual purpose should be, and it was felt as a human rights organisation with strong links on the ground that this should be about securing real implementation of rights. This was a significant shift for the organisation, which effectively had spent its first four decades with the much more limited aim of raising awareness of minorities and minority rights.

Having decided to focus on change, the organisation decided that the best way to do this would be to become a campaigning organisation. This was based on an assessment of MRG’s work over the years. It was seen that whilst the organisation could produce what were acknowledged to be very good reports, trainings, etc., it was not clear what, if any, impact these had had. For example, a report could be acknowledged as very good, but then be simply filed away. An excellent training session would still only last a few days, without any guarantee as to what would be done afterwards. Similarly the media is notorious for only addressing an issue for a day or two, whilst minority issues take years to resolve. And there are plenty of wonderful legal judgments that have not been implemented.

Therefore, MRG decided to officially “campaign” for change. By campaigning it does not necessarily mean public campaigns (indeed sometimes publicity is not desired). Campaigning means having a specific goal and a time-limited period in which a variety of methods are used to build up towards achieving that change. These methods can include publishing information and solutions; using international mechanisms; using the media and litigation; and others. MRG now aims that all of its work will be part of campaigns.

Finally, at the same time, MRG decided to focus its work around five major themes, which themselves became the long-term campaigns. These were done so the organisa-