

Concept Note

Human Rights Paper Presentation

Local Government, Human Rights and Sustainable Development: Reimagining Human Rights Cities

Cities are rising. More than half of the world's population currently lives in urban areas, a figure that is expected to increase to two-thirds by 2050. In order to meet this challenge, cities are claiming new roles in governance – administering local programs with greater independence from the state and, increasingly, asserting their presence in the international sphere. As their governance role increases, cities are called upon to address all of today's risks, such as technological breakthroughs, urbanization, gentrification, migration, social inclusion, climate change and globalization, etc. They increasingly claim this role by positioning themselves as Human Rights Cities, Cities of Refuge, Climate-friendly cities, or cities that work towards the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

In fact, cities are actively engaged in the implementation of the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). For instance, SDG No. 11 calls for making cities and urban settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable, in order to deal with “acute challenges in managing rapid urbanization—from ensuring adequate housing and infrastructure to support growing populations, to confronting the environmental impact of urban sprawl, to reducing vulnerability to disasters.”¹ Moreover, SDG No. 16 further contributes to the localization of human rights by promoting peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, and the building of effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels. Human rights based institutional design at local levels plays a central role in facilitating equal and inclusive access to services.

¹ See, <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/sdg11>

The intersection between the SDGs and human rights provides the unique opportunity to guide priority-setting, decision-making, and policy implementation in cities. In fact, by creating “a powerful alliance between human rights norms and development goals at the local level”, cities could create the conditions under which human rights based approaches can influence and shape city services, responding to human needs of local residents.² Cities are the most efficient and effective body for utilizing human rights norms as frameworks for policy development and decision-making at local levels.

Around the world, cities oversee basic services like water, sanitation, public transportation, public health, and emergency response provided to residents and visitors alike. Cities provide public spaces for leisure and self-expression. And, they oversee the quintessential aspects of democracy, providing spaces for participation in decision-making (e.g. consultation, elections, etc.). In doing all of this, and much more, they establish rules and regulations that can (or, can fail to) ensure mutual respect for the rights of local inhabitants and all others who come within their jurisdictions.

It is in this framework of increasing participation of cities in the implementation of human rights at local levels that the notion of “human rights cities” has emerged. The Gwangju Declaration of 2011 defines human rights city “as both local community and a socio-political process in a local context where human rights play a key role as fundamental values and guiding principles”.³ The human rights city concept supports a process where local government, including its deliberative organs, civil society organizations, the private sector and other stakeholders ensure the application of international human rights standards.⁴

This year’s forum will explore and highlight the different challenges and opportunities that cities and local authorities face in providing access and implementing international and constitutional human rights standards. In addition, the forum welcomes the exploration of inter-linkages, including both challenges and opportunities, that the implementation of the UN Sustainable

² See, <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/sdg16>

³ See, Gwangju Declaration on Human Right City, 2011 World Human Rights Cities Forum, para. 4. Available at: https://www.udg-cisd.org/sites/default/files/Gwangju_Declaration_on_HR_City_final_edited_version_110524.pdf

⁴ See, <http://rwi.lu.se/the-swedish-human-rights-city-project/>

Development Goals (SDGs) at local levels could generate vis-à-vis the effective enjoyment of human rights by members of local communities. Studies focusing on institutional developments of cities are encouraged, including the creation of innovative institutional structures that facilitate the fulfillment of state authorities' human rights obligations at local levels.

Call for papers:

The 9th World Human Rights Cities Forum (WHRCF 2019) is inviting researchers, PhD candidates, practitioners, activists, and graduate students to present papers related to the present call on "Local Government, Human Rights and Sustainable Development: Reimagining Human Rights Cities". Approved submissions will be presented in the Senior Session (for established scholars, experienced human rights activists, and PhD holders) or in the Junior Session (for young researchers, rising human rights activists, and graduate students).

In particular, the forum encourages the submission of papers related to the following topics:

1. Placing the notion of Human Rights Cities in its theoretical/international context – the impoverishment of contemporary political discourse and the eclipse of the nation-state as the sole international actor for the implementation of human rights obligations within their national territories;
2. Assessing the analytical/critical potential of, and challenges confronting, the Human Rights Cities initiative from a human rights perspective, including the 'right to the city' and the future of urban justice in balancing distributional equity, social solidarity, and individual empowerment;
3. Broadening our understanding of the role that governmental and non-governmental agents (e.g. local administrators, advocates, activists, human rights scholars, etc.) play in implementing the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and Human Rights at local levels;

4. Exploring the prospects for *g/oca*/human rights innovation (including technological innovations such as the case of Smart Cities) that could provide innovative solutions for both facilitating access to human rights at local levels and improving accountability of local authorities as duty bearers;
5. Evaluating the institutional frameworks and local authorities' responsibilities in facilitating the access to human rights related services at local levels by individuals or groups in situation of vulnerability;
6. Cities are not immune to the effects of climate change and environmental hazards. Local authorities are responsible for the development of strategies able to address/mitigate the environmental related effects that could restrict or otherwise interfere with the enjoyment of the right to a clean and healthy environment at local levels. Analyzing the role of local authorities in developing proactive strategies for integrating human rights and ecological concern – sustainable development goals and climate resilience contributions are, therefore, welcome.

Additional examples of possible contributions within these topical categories might include:

- 1. Local Eco-Democracy as an Antidote to Reactionary Politics: Countering Destructive Talk with Constructive Action.*
- 2. Human Rights and Sustainable Development Education: Thinking Locally to Act Globally.*
- 3. Urban Network Advocacy for Human Rights and Sustainable Development: New Roles for Public Health Workers.*
- 4. Libraries as Laboratories: Democratizing Access to Rights-Relevant Information Technology.*
- 5. The Role of Indigenous Peoples or Minority Groups in the Coproduction of Sustainable and Rights-Enhancing Local Services.*
- 6. Human Rights Based Approaches in Training Public Officers: empowerment of local authorities in implementing human rights at local levels.*