**Social Dreaming between the Local and the Global**

*The Human Rights Coalition in Utrecht as an Urban Utopia*

Hans Sakkers and Barnita Bagchi

Hans Sakkers (Head of the Department of International Affairs of the City of Utrecht, and initiator of the Utrecht Human Rights Coalition) and Barnita Bagchi (University Lecturer in Comparative Literature, Coordinator of the Humanities Honours Programme at the department of Languages, Literature, and Communication at Utrecht University and member of the local Human Rights Coalition in Utrecht).

In 2012, in the presence of the Queen of the Netherlands, the High Commissioner for UN Human Rights, Navanethem Pillay, declared Utrecht the first human rights city of the Netherlands. (van den Berg 2016, 51) This was a big honour for an initiative that started just three years before, when Utrecht began to conceptualize the translation of human rights to the local level. Labelling several policies and initiatives as human rights gave a new drive, synergy and extension to things that happened already, and put more weight on them. Instead of using human rights primarily as a legal frame, the aim in Utrecht was to develop what has been called “a local human rights culture.” In 2011, a Local Human Rights Coalition was born (henceforth ‘the Coalition’), consisting of local civil society organizations, lawyers, the municipality, academics, NGOs, grassroots initiatives, cultural institutions, social responsible businesses, and others. The Coalition aims to create awareness and ownership of local human rights in order to enhance the translation of global value(s) into local practice. The Coalition focuses on a local, bottom-up approach, while at the same time sharing best practices and strategies with other cities, national and international wide.

This article describes how the Coalition developed and explores how the local Coalition could be seen as a form of urban utopianism and urban social dreaming, as explored in this volume. First the local human rights approach is described and the organisational aspects of the Coalition and its main characteristics are delineated; some reflections from some members of the human rights coalition follow; in boxes, we provide excerpts from blog posts by Coalition members; we then draw together some cautious conclusions about the impact that local nurturing of human rights can have on urban social dreaming.

**Theorizing localising human rights**

Rights, which are claims to well-being and justice, are often fought for, gained, and lost, in cities (Oomen, Davis, and Grigolo 2016). Human rights are mobile, globally prolific and yet contested and vernacularized drivers of justice and visions of a better world (Merry 2006), and human rights manifest in art and literature too(Authers 2016; Bagchi 2016b). Cities are frequently the focus for people and ideas that move globally, as well as social laboratories for justice (Oomen, Davis, and Grigolo 2016) often enacted through literary, artistic, and media activism (Bagchi and Monachesi 2016; Deb 2016). Oomen has argued that human rights have had a paradoxical position in the Netherlands: there is a contrast in the emphasis on human rights in foreign affairs policies of the Netherlands, and the lack of domestic reference to these rights in the Netherlands (Oomen 2016, 42). Oomen’s urging that human rights be “brought home” in local Dutch policy contexts is concretised by an initiative such as the Utrecht Coalition.

Utopia articulates dreams of a better life and anticipations of the future (Bloch [1954-1959]/1986); a “social dreaming” (Claeys and Sargent 1999, 1-5), utopia combines social and imaginative experimentation. Even if the word is invented in Europe in 1516 by Thomas More, utopia has manifestations in and has travelled between all inhabited continents. Utopia manifests itself in the city, across the world. David Pinder, who published on critical urban utopianism, asked in 2002 “What is the role of utopian visions of the city today? What is their use at a time when, for many people, the very concept of utopia has come to an end?” (Pinder 2002, 229) He then argued against the abandonment of utopian perspectives: instead advocating a “rethinking of utopianism through considering its potential function in developing critical approaches to urban questions. The tendency to authoritarianism in utopian urbanism certainly needs acknowledment and criticising, but this need not entail a retreat from imagining alternatives and dreaming of better worlds. Instead, it is necessary to reconceptualise utopia, and to open up the field of utopian urbanism that for too long has been understood in an overly narrow way. (Pinder 2002, 229). David Harvey, too, arguing for taking back the right to the city by its citizens, writes, “We cannot do without utopian plans and ideals of justice. They are indispensable for motivation and for action. Outrage at injustice and alternative ideas have long animated the quest for social change. We cannot cynically dismiss either. But we can and must contextualize them.” (Harvey 2003, 940). The city also yields texts and practices of memory and amnesia, while such reconfigurations of the past often help to constitute utopian urban visions of the future (Boyer 1994; Crinson 2005). Historian Samuel Moyn argues that the human rights paradigm is a utopian programme: “with the political standards it champions and the emotional passion it inspires, this programme draws on the image of a place that has not yet been called into being. It promises to penetrate the impregnability of state borders, slowly replacing them with the authority of international law” (Moyn 2010, 1). Following Moyn, Utrecht developed a human rights approach that puts less the legal than the inspirational character centre place. In the words of the historian Nicole Immler: “Departing from a definition of human rights that describes alongside its *legal* nature also its *utopian* character” allows one to explore how “human rights function as a *social imaginary* on the individual level and their impact in the political but also broader social and cultural realm” (Immler 2018, 194). According to Immler considering human rights as a *social imaginary* has much to offer for a critical, bottom-up approach in the human rights field, as it reveals the “need to be *transculturally justified*, but also to be translated into *local practice*” (Immler 2018, 199). For all cities the increasing pluralisation of the last decade had its challenges. As Arjun Appadurai has taught us: “Globalization is not simply the name for a new epoch. It is marked by a new role for the imagination in social life….more persons see their lives through the prisms of the possible lives offered by mass media in all their forms” (Appadurai 2013, 13 and 54). This process of globalisation asks for new ways to moderate diversity in a positive way. We follow Hans Alma who advocates a kind of *active pluralism* “in which differences are not just tolerated, but in which people actively search for understanding and mutual respect” (Alma 2018, 7).

To differentiate between cities Richards and Duif emphasize that it is particularly important for smaller cities to connect imagination as social practice to the city as a place and space: “Dreams are intangible, ephemeral, and mobile. This gives them considerable power and immediacy. But it also means dreams are vulnerable. To become reality, dreams need to be shared: they need to be owned by more than one dreamer. For small places, it is important to link good ideas, or dreams, to the location. Big cities will take ideas from everywhere, and appropriate them” (Richards and Duif 2019, 223).

**Establishing a local human rights coalition**

In 2009, the City of Utrecht was asked by the European Fundamental Rights Agency to collaborate on an international ‘Joining Up’ Fundamental Rights project, which investigated how cities together with national governments and NGOs could take responsibility for human rights at local level. In this initial phase the municipality of Utrecht, together with the Netherlands Institute of Human Rights (SIM) of the Utrecht University and the national Equal Treatment Commission investigated the quality of its municipal policies. Ten policies areas were selected in relation to their relevance for the political agenda at that moment, and were critically reviewed from a human rights perspective. The policy assessment (City of Utrecht, 2012) was sent to the city council and functioned as a starting point for improving local policies. The assessment did not cover all policy areas, but tried to strike a good balance between policy themes that had priority on both sides of the political spectrum. During this initial phase of becoming a human rights city municipal officials were trained (by staff members of Amnesty International) and the involvement and knowledge of the Utrecht population on human rights issues was surveyed. After this first stage the focus of the local human rights approach changed into the direction of creating a local coalition with many local, national and international parties (Sakkers 2017, 369).

Through the years the human rights narrative became politically a regular point of reference: Although the local human rights project in Utrecht was embraced from the beginning by politicians such as the Mayor and some Deputy Mayors, it had a sceptical reception in the administration and its management in the beginning. Between 2010 and 2018 a particular Deputy Mayor was appointed with responsibility for local human rights issues. Slowly also the higher administrative levels -because of the bottom-up process and the political will to support the initiative- started to realize that human rights could truly work as a framework to improve the quality of life of citizens. Crucial in this change was the fact that in the city council too members slowly began to refer to human rights treaties during assessment and discussion of concrete situations and policies. In 2018 for the first time the City Council referred to Utrecht openly as a human rights city in the Coalition Agreement for 2018 – 2022. (Gemeente Utrecht, 2018, 16)

**Bottom-up reflections from members of the Human Rights Coalition**

In three boxes below, some events, which members of the Coalition co-organized or took a leading role in, are described, through extracts from blog posts, most to be found on the Coalition web-site (humanrightsutrecht.nl). In the agenda or diary section of the web-site, the Coalition places notices of activities and meetings around human rights in Utrecht. In the blog section, Coalition members write posts offering background information, personal contributions and news.

**Mariangela Lorenzo and Friso Wiersum**, both active members of the coalition, reported on an event (15 March 2018) about opportunities in education, part of the run-up to the municipal elections. The role that education can play in the creation of equal opportunities was debated. The Dutch Inspectorate of Education published in 2017 their report on the state of education, and one of the key points in it was to highlight large differences between schools, as a result of which much social talent remained untapped. The kick-off to the Utrecht event was provided by Mohammed Saiah, who told his personal story of how important motivational teachers are, and he highlighted the difficulties that young people who grow up in deprived areas often face, sometimes because schools in such areas do not challenge their students to perform at their best. As a candidate for councillor, he laid out concrete measures he would support to advance education, such as smaller classes and bridge classes. Many of those issues also recurredin the public interview with Ilja Klink, head knowledge and innovation at the Inspectorate, and in the presentation of Micha de Winter, Professor of Education and Pedagogy at the University of Utrecht. David advocated the Utrecht initiative of the city schools that counteracts segregation because pupils from different schools meet each other there. According to him, education should offer hope to the development of students who participate as full citizens in our society. The Inspectorate would therefore measure not only data (language and mathematics skills) but would also evaluate schools on other points pertaining to inclusion and the shaping of full citizens.

From the beginning, the initiative and Coalition have attracted the attention of researchers and institutions. A research application was jointly written with Barbara Oomen, an expert on human rights from a sociological perspective; this made two years of funding by the Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research (NWO) available for reflection on the way the Coalition created impact on local level. The research was conducted by Esther van den Berg and accompanied and supported by the Coalition from 2012 till 2014. Scholarly ideas were brought into the process. Ideas from researchers such as Oomen, Merry, Moyn, Appadurai, Immler and Alma started to play a major role in the self-reflection and positioning of the Coalition. The context in which Utrecht worked on establishing a human rights coalition was accompanied by some dilemmas and tensions that are relevant in understanding the dynamics of it:

*Firstly*, generally when people in the Netherlands think of (violating) human rights, they often think of situations in countries far away (Oomen 2011, 2). They do not realize that these rights are also violated on the local level and that by preventing these violations and raising consciousness and ownership of local human rights, the quality of life of all inhabitants - and especially for those who are marginal in mainstream society - can increase significantly. This means that the Coalition works against the background of a broader view and set of opinions at national level that is slowly transformed at local level.

*Secondly*, there is an interesting tension between, on the one hand, the pragmatic and instrumental question of how human rights contribute to and have impact on the city as an open, inclusive and just space and, on the other hand, the view that human rights are a more general, ethical imaginary and, above all, an inspiration in which impact is much more an indirect, fluid and long-term phenomenon.

*Thirdly*, the cooperation in the Coalition touches upon a local ideology with regard to why the initiative is undertaken in the city of Utrecht: a priority of the city council is to govern the city by a high degree of citizens’ engagement and by multi-stakeholder processes. The local human rights coalition is an example of what such cooperation between a local authority, civil society, scientists, business and citizens can look like, and represents the critical bottom-up cooperation that Utrecht wants to achieve. However, the active participation of the municipality itself in the creation of a local human rights platform creates a paradoxical situation: the chance of using the human rights narrative for empowering increases, but the direct participation of the municipality in this awareness process could also mean the possibility of controlling social criticism of the government at an early stage.

**Organisational aspects of the Coalition**

The Coalition brings together many organizations, with crossovers between different initiatives, which would otherwise remain unexplored. A platform is offered to citizens, experts, companies, NGOs, the cultural sector and other stakeholders to meet each other. By discovering crossovers, organizations learn on what topics or integrated policy areas and with which partners it is beneficial and effective to collaborate. In this way, interesting and useful new partnerships arise. Through these partnerships, local policies are strengthened and cooperative conversations with other cities in the Netherlands and in other parts of the world are created.

The partnership has the structure public-community-private. Since the coalition is unique in the Netherlands, several national organizations (ministries, the Dutch association of municipalities, the Ombudsman, researchers, the national human rights institute) have been supporting the initiative, in addition to the local partners. So far, the leading partner, or better, the facilitator, is the City of Utrecht. However, the coalition is increasingly horizontally structured, with the city of Utrecht becoming more and more a member of the coalition like the others. Therefore, the leading role can be seen as the facilitating role. Since the objective is to stimulate a bottom-up movement, the ideal form to realize this is an informal network structure with formal consequences. The network creates opportunities to grow by giving people and organizations the chance to exchange, motivate each other, and come up with new initiatives. Localising human rights became a connection - of the local actions and awareness to a global imaginary - to build bridges between interest groups and to exchange experiences and ideas under one common ‘umbrella’. In the words of Arjun Appadurai the Coalition became part of “a critical and new global cultural process: the imagination became a social practice” (Appadurai, 1996, 31).

Within the network, actors meet in many occasions and activities other than planned meetings of the local human rights coalition. This facilitates a more informal and low-threshold way to exchange ideas, knowledge, resources, and important issues. Although the Coalition consists of many organizations, the core group consists of around 14 persons. In this core group, the municipality is also represented. The main task of this core group is to decide about the (thematic) focus points of action in the coming period and planning and preparing the meetings (Cafés and other formats) that are open for the whole Coalition. Besides their function of sounding and steering board, the core group is also continuously including more active actors in the network and is also engaged in mobilizing organizations to be more conscious of the importance of local human rights and the contribution they can deliver to establish a local human rights culture.

In addition to the many meetings of the coalition and the associated organizations, a lot of time and energy is spent setting up and maintaining a digital meeting place in the form of a Coalition website on which a blog and agenda for events, an archive, and member organization overview is updated weekly and gives an entrance to the local human rights community.

**Characteristics of the Utrecht approach**

What are the key characteristics of Utrecht’s human rights approach?

*A first characteristic* is related to the many cultural expressions, such as exhibitions, theatre, music, symposia, in which widespread attention was given to the local awareness of the importance of human rights. This is part of a longer process. When Utrecht was candidate for the European Capital of Culture in 2013 it combined the bidding process with organising a special programme for the celebration of the 300th anniversary of the Treaty of Utrecht (Vrede van Utrecht 2013), a program focusing on local and international peace making as well as human rights. An analysis by Nicole Immler and Hans Sakkers (2014) of several cultural programmes of European Capitals of Culture at that time by revealed that human rights issues had become increasingly a topic in those cultural programs. The authors observed a “slight shift in the programme’s content, from a competition-based marketing of local identity towards a more universal value-discourse,” suggesting that this emerging value paradigm illustrates how such cultural programs as kind of laboratory could contribute to a conceptual reflection on changing Europe. They argue that this emerging value paradigm signals a slight shift in the definition of ‘culture’: namely considering and evaluating culture in regard to its potential to create new forms of solidarity, via strengthening ‘local bonding’ and linking it to global references at the same time. This indicates new approaches of cultural practice at the local level, but also for European cultural policy. This could be sceptically read as shifting the identity-debate and its limitations from one field (culture) to another (value), but could also be read as a critical reflection on Europe and its cultural policies. The analysis of the ECoC programmes shows that thematizing the relation between local practices and global challenges indicates ways to re-think the format and the role of the ECoCs within European cultural policies. (Immler and Sakkers 2014, 23). Those insights were taken as inspiration when the Coalition was designed and chose to follow the line of imagination. The intention was to become a kind of cultural movement with a universal moral point of reference. Many programmes were developed, amongst which the House of Eutopia, in Zijdebalen, and a major human rights outdoor exhibition, Making Peace, at the Maliebaan. In 2014 the exhibition was offered to the city of Sarajevo at the commemoration of 100 years World War One. With these kinds of cultural activities, the Utrecht human rights initiative therefore not only focuses on bringing local people to the attention of human rights and the relevance for their own city, but also programs a new relationship between 'local practices and global values.

**Barnita Bagchi**, a member of the core group of the HRC, wrote on The Utrecht Utopia Network web-site, a blog post on two Human Rights Cafes organized by the coalition. Her post was disseminated on social media through the Coalition. On 8 December 2017, at the venue Het Huis Utrecht, a space for authors, freelancers, and city-dwellers, a Human Richs Cafeabout Utrecht as a Human Rights City after the municipal elections took place. On 10 December, World Human Rights Day, a broad manifesto of the Human Rights Coalition was circulated, which the Coalition encourages concerned people from Utrecht to support.

One of the main points Bagchi made from the audience is that we need to get involved and involve others from many different migratory backgrounds, including the skilled migrants or Highly Skilled Migrant category, in civic initiatives and civic conversations: there is an even bigger pool of talent, voice, and expertise to speak about real achievements and continuing discrimination, and the ways to solutions. A Nicaraguan activist for the land rights of indigenous peoples, now in Utrecht for a few months under the umbrella of Utrecht as Shelter City, spoke of the way in which legislation is endangering the rights of local communities in Nicaragua, with less and less possibilities for environmentally-sensitive development. She also spoke of how vital it is for activists such as her that Utrecht remain a Shelter City. Bright O. Richards, who came from Liberia to the Netherlands as refugee, and is now an acclaimed theatre-director, presented us with a first draft of his show, The Bright Side of Life, about the lives of asylum-seekers, refugees, newcomers in the Netherlands. in a way that kept the show a two-way street.

*A second characteristic* is that the Coalition shapes the ethical or moral background for new plans. The Coalition initiative has had a significant impact on the long-term societal ecosystem in Utrecht by concrete actions and stimulation of ongoing discussions: the outcome was a slowly but surely growing awareness of the importance of human rights. Co-initiated by the municipality itself, several policies were directly and indirectly influenced by this local human rights culture. A notable example is the Bed, Bath, and Bread project developed by organizations in the city of Utrecht, that exceeded national policies but perfectly suited the international human rights regime. The city of Utrecht provides shelter to destitute irregular migrants, espousing the right of the city to provide Bed, Bath and Bread to everyone, irrespective of residential status. On this issue the city of Utrecht among others started a case at the European Committee of Social Rights for undocumented refugees against a decision of the Dutch state that was won in 2013. (European Committee of Social Rights 2013) Working through local NGOs (such as SNDVU, Weerdsingel, Toevlucht, Seguro, MOO, STIL, and Vluchtelingenwerk) the City of Utrecht provides shelter and access to medical care. Safe spaces and trusted community partners make it easier to address underlying issues of irregular status, such as how to secure a legal residence permit, or assistance with returning home. Services also support mediation with national immigration authorities. In their first ten years, Utrecht found solutions in 94% of cases in the form of a residence permit, voluntary return or restoration of the right to care within the federal asylum system. Another impact of the human rights culture in Utrecht was the establishment of the European funded Plan Einstein; an innovative, ‘future free’ approach developed by the municipality of Utrecht and its partners in the reception and integration of refugees. At Einsteindreef in the Utrecht district of Overvecht, refugees live together with local youngsters. Residents of Plan Einstein and neighbourhood members in Overvecht can follow courses Entrepreneurship and English here, and/or participate in a practical programme for entrepreneurship and work or join other activities. (Oliver 2018)

Participants can work to strengthen the professional skills they need in work, such as collaboration and networking. Furthermore, participants can get help with starting a business, acquire skills in entrepreneurship, receive individual coaching and expand their professional network. This can boost the prospects of refugees and local residents for a better future, regardless of their status and regardless of where that future lies.

*A third characteristic* of the Utrecht approach is the principle that “human rights treaties are a legal regime, but also a cultural imaginary” (Sakkers 2017, 371). Strategic challenge for cities is the connection between universal values translated in international law and the local practice to translate the values into concrete imaginations and realities. Key in this approach is not putting too much focus on the juridical aspects. It is especially this conceptual level of learning that brings cities to new territory: there are countless experts in the field of human rights, and there are academics who have extensively thought about the development of local imaginaries, but the combination with practical experience is hardly or not present. Utrecht started a collaboration with other human rights cities and developed in line with the experiences of these other cities their own, Utrecht-appropriate approach.

*A fourth characteristic* is the political neutrality of the initiative. The Coalition has succeeded in placing several human rights issues on the political agenda without politicizing them and creating political tensions. This approach also reinforced the belief that human rights should inspire innovative initiatives with a kind of neutral language that is available for everyone, always and everywhere. Human rights should be an inspiration for all political parties: Human Rights are ‘simply’ there and the world community agreed on them by ratifying the human rights treaties. In the Utrecht situation, this kind of neutrality is cultivated to minimize the risk that different political interests would turn against the use of human rights at local level. The first aim of the Coalition was to make human rights a sustainable and long-term discourse of the city. This neutrality could negatively be seen as a kind of avoidance of the 'struggle and conflict’ that is an inevitable part of a human rights process. Utrecht distinguishes itself with this approach, particularly from a number of Spanish, French and South American cities that rely more on Henri Lefebvre's “the Right to the City” (1968) concept, which is more the struggle to regain the city's capital and power by its citizens. The Utrecht approach of localising human rights focuses however on its role of moderating the different views on urban reality, and offering interested parties a beckoning perspective.

**Nynke Oude Vrielink**, Coalition member, interviewed Laura Coello Eales of Inclusive Works, one of the member organizations of the coalition, and asked her about the goals, opportunities and dreams of the Foundation (18 August 2018). For Inclusive Works, an inclusive society is one in which people with different backgrounds have equal opportunities to participate, for example, in finding a job. Through projects, research, training and workshops about jobs and about an inclusive labour market, Inclusive Works carries out its mission. It works with minorities as well as with majorities. Activities take many forms. After organizing a children’s story writing contest, for example, many authors writing about multicultural subjects were inspired in their work. Or take the fact that in the job search training Inclusive Works offers to young people, training in the improvement of writing skills is an important component. Interns and volunteer are welcomed, and mentored. Inclusive Works also actively propagates an international outlook, looking outward to global best practices, and to how European policy is actually implemented in Europe. On being asked about how Netherlands is different to other countries in her sector, Coello Eales found that there is a slow change in which instead being defined as assimilation, integration was being viewed as a process of mutual learning and adjustment between migrants and the rest of society.

*A fifth characteristic* of the Utrecht approach is the relative absence of the national level in the local method of becoming a human rights city. Although Utrecht (together with the Dutch Association of Municipalities (VNG), Amnesty International, the Institute for Human Rights in the Netherlands, and human rights researchers) has tried (Amnesty International 2012) over the years to set up a national network to support local human rights in Dutch municipalities and create a common lobby aimed at influencing the national government, this did not get a foothold due to the low enthusiasm in other municipalities. (Oomen and v.d. Berg, 2014, 170) Utrecht, (later accompanied by the city of Middelburg) due to the lack of other cities in the Netherlands that could serve as sparring partners, started to look for other human rights cities in Europe and beyond. For this reason, an intensive international network, supported by organisations as the Fundamental Rights Agency in Vienna and the UCLG in Barcelona, has developed over the years with cities like Graz, Gwangju, Barcelona, Vienna, Gothenburg and Nuremberg. These cities learn from each other's examples on questions as: how to communicate the theme of local human rights, how to embed it in the municipal organization, how to develop a form of monitoring, how to deal with political changes, would you sign a specific city charter or just refer to the global conventions and agreements, how do you make it a local movement, what themes do you focus on, how formal should the cooperation with many urban parties be, what role can scientists and journalists play, et cetera.

*A sixth characteristic* is therefore the international connectedness of the local Coalition. Since 2011 members of the Coalition are regularly invited to exchange experiences, within and outside Europe, about the Utrecht human rights approach. Step by step, a worldwide network of mutually supportive human rights cities has been developing. To mobilize local human rights organizations and bring them into contact with each other under an international umbrella, the Coalition has been working on the annual week of local democracy and human rights (an initiative of the Council of Europe) under the title of 'Human rights: What about your backyard?’ Local organizations opened their doors to the public during these weeks and offered special meetings to inform the general public about their activities. The promotion of the programme was centrally facilitated, inter alia through a website and a widespread activity calendar. By participating in such European programmes, the importance of human rights to local organizations is easier to explain: Local organisations suddenly became part of a larger international movement. This gave many participants a clear additional meaning to their own activities. While an organization used to focus its identity on e.g. supporting the deaf in Utrecht society, the same organization became also part of a worldwide movement of organizations that together try to give human dignity a face. Organisations and their members became part of a bigger story and dream.

*A seventh characteristic* is the attempt to stay away from city-marketing rhetoric in regard to the local human rights initiatives in Utrecht. There is no clear ‘branding’ strategy around the activities of the Coalition, which resulted also from the lessons that were drawn from the European Capital of Culture bidding process. The European Capitals of Culture analysis showed that there is a shift from city-marketing towards more value-oriented rethinking the role of culture. We suggest that this emerging value paradigm also illustrates how such cultural programmes as a kind of laboratory could contribute to a conceptual reflection on (and beyond) Europe (Immler and Sakkers 2014, 3). Another reason for this position is that the Coalition believes that the sensitivity of human rights issues does not fit with selling stories about the city. When it comes to human rights, it is difficult to be perfect and to come close to the utopian dream: human rights remains a programme for the future, an aspiration to work on. Since Navanethem Pillay made her announcement in the presence of a large audience, Utrecht communicates more openly its human rights ambitions, trying to find an inspirational but also a self-critical as well as reflective kind of storytelling.

 *An eighth and last characteristic* positions the Coalition as an example of “public value management” which is a specific contribution to the approach to enhance a local human rights culture. The public sector has known several kinds of management styles, from the old public administration towards the new public management, towards, lately, public value management. (Stoker 2006) Whereas in academic literature a transition from old public administration and new public management towards public value management has been described quite extendedly, in practice this transition is rarely made in cities and other administrations. Sally Merry describes a third and increasingly influential meaning of human rights: “Human rights are both a system of international law and a set of values. In recent years, as human rights have become fundamental to ‘‘transition to democracy’’ projects, they have also become critical to what is called “good governance”. These are three rather different ideas about what human rights are and when and how they can be used” (Merry 2010, 106). The Coalition could be seen as an experimentation to define and challenge collective value inspired on one hand by the set of values as mentioned by Merry, and on the other hand by bottom up value creating by changing combinations of local partners in the Coalition.

**Scrutinizing the impact of the Coalition**

In this final part of the article we evaluate the degree in which the human rights discourse of the Coalition could be called a collective dream on local level. What can we say about the actual relevance of the local human rights narrative for Utrecht as a city?

Locally, a wide range of policies has been developed or changed since the adaptation of the human rights discourse in 2009: a children rights agenda, LGTBI policies, anti-poverty programmes, healthy urban living and air quality measures, the shelter/refugee city programme, anti-discrimination policy agenda, free tap water (public space), improved accessibility for the disabled, participation (good governance) laboratories, privacy protection programmes, ombudsman facilities, et cetera. But what exactly has been the impact of human rights as an imaginary? Is the ‘dream’ slowly but surely demonstrably present as a mirror and check on values? Are human rights seen as a realistic imagination, allowing the imagination to shape and change reality? How do people in Utrecht talk about human rights and do they manage to put the normative and judgmental legal narrative into perspective, and do they also see human rights as an inspiring alluring future that challenges innovative initiatives?

A survey (Gemeente Utrecht, 2010) shows that 90% of Utrecht residents consider it “important” to “very important” that the municipality protects human rights. According to the Utrechters the 5 most important human rights are: 1) We are all free and equal; 2) Freedom of thought, conscience and religion; 3) Freedom of opinion and expression; 4) Right to education; 5) No discrimination.
One in five Utrecht residents has done volunteer work in the context of human rights. And the most known human rights organizations are: Amnesty International, Equal Treatment Commission, the Discrimination Hotline, Article 1.

 In 2015 Marieke Duchatteau investigated what kinds of discourses are dominant among members of the Coalition and whether they differ greatly from each other. The results of this analysis show that there are two different kind of discourse-coalitions established in Utrecht: The first group approaches human rights from the ethical and universalistic discourse, the second group looks primarily at human rights from an ethical point of view. Duchatteau compared the discourses of both groups and although there are some differences, the similarities are noticeable: in both groups the notion of 'human dignity' predominates. The differences are small: the first group emphasizes the necessity of a legal system and the usefulness of proclaiming the title 'Utrecht Human Rights City' just like the other group. The other group places a little more emphasis on taking into account contextual differences (localising) when implementing human rights. However, not one of the groups sets other discourses above the ethical discourse (Duchatteau 2015, 7).

Although the impact of the human rights imaginary on decision-making is mostly an indirect one, we could say that the moral dream of human rights has arrived in Utrecht. In practice, however, a good cognitive and imaginative basis is not enough to actually work together. Therefore the Coalition is all about facilitating cooperation and collaboration; and about mutual empowerment of the several specific initiatives and organisations. The Coalition works above all through people who volunteer to create connections and events. Communication in the Coalition takes place both virtually and face-to-face. Many interns, often students at the university, offer energy and skills to the Coalition. The Coalition offers a platform in civic society, in a growing and diverse city facing many challenges. One way to do this is to hold four Human Rights Cafés a year. These cafés are a way for organizations to network and explore crossovers. The cafés are also important in enhancing the use of the human rights narrative by organizations. Events such as Human Rights Cafés, and the theatrical and other cultural artistic performances that are often part of the events of the Coalition, ground the human rights activism in an everyday world of dialogue, sharing and art.

Let us comeback to the hypothesis of Richards and Duif that while big cities can afford to appropriate ideas from everywhere, for “small places,” it is key “to link good ideas, or dreams, to the location.” (Richards and Duif 2019, 223) Perhaps we can best describe the Utrecht case as a medium-sized European human rights city fitting in between these two models. And perhaps it is the size of Utrecht that creates the mix of on the one hand introducing the universal language of human rights, the *Sustainable Development Goals*, the *Shelter City*, *Children Rights*, *Multilingualism*, and, on the other hand, organizing all those specific local initiatives that are unique to Utrecht, such as the annual celebration of Sint Maarten, the celebration of the Peace of Utrecht, the Gandhi statue and the annual Gandhi walk, the Climate Planet as local SDG hub, the development of Plan Einstein as innovation-oriented refugee shelter, the Esperanto Café, the Peace School movement, the initiatives of Vrijbit (the national privacy movement), the national school for Sign Language, et cetera, more plausible. It is precisely in the amalgamation between the desire to take responsibility for the universal human rights agreements and the locally rooted and motivated initiatives, that the feeling arises that human rights become part of the local culture, or in the words of Barbara Oomen, where the “homecoming of human rights” becomes tangible and touchable (Oome 2011, 7).

 In projects such as Liveable Cities carried out by Lancaster University ImagiNation Design Lab, scholars have posited that urban futures, “generated by a polyphony of multiple voices, should be envisioned in ways that enable their inherent pluralism to emerge as a defining characteristic of the vision. This is particularly important when dealing with the complexity of cities, the context of our research” (Pollastri, Dunn, Rogers, Boyko, Cooper, and Tyler 2018: S4366). Such scholars suggest ways of using participatory design methods and information visualisation techniques to co-create and represent urban futures as “composite” scenarios rather than “coherent” narratives (Pollastri, Dunn, Rogers, Boyko, Cooper, and Tyler 2018: S4366). While use of such participatory design methods might be very fruitful in Utrecht too, the active pluralism of the everyday, socially, and culturally grounded work that the Coalition undertakes, and the large number of narratives of urban futures energized by the urban human rights-based initiatives in Utrecht we have mentioned earlier suggest to us that Utrecht is already a living laboratory of social dreaming in the specific form of a Human Rights City by city-denizens, civic society actors, and planners and policymakers.

**Epilogue**

Since 2009, however, the world has changed. Although the financial crisis of 2008 has become less visible in the most European cities, the situation and perspective from a human rights perspective radically changed and became more dangerous. As Philip Alston, UN Special Rapporteur on Extreme Poverty and Human Rights, pointed out in 2017, ‘The populist agenda that has made such dramatic inroads recently is often avowedly nationalistic, xenophobic, misogynistic, and explicitly antagonistic to all or much of the human rights agenda. As a result, the challenges the human rights movement now faces are fundamentally different from much of what has gone before. (Alston 2017, 1-2).

The wars in the Middle East, the refugee crises, the infiltration and fake news campaigns from Russia, disruptive policies from the US, all led to a strong rise of extreme right-wing and fascist politics in Europe (Snyder,2018). In several European countries and cities, elections were won by politicians who are now using their position to attack democracy, fundamental values and institutions. They openly battle constitutionality, human rights, truth and factuality. The campaigns threaten in particular a number of specific ethnic and lgtbi groups, but are also a frontal attack on the fundamental freedoms of everyone. Moreover, many cities, national governments and indeed Europe as a whole designed new policies that strongly restrict the rights of migrants and refugees. Building borders of barbed wire became a normal practice in large parts of Europe.

If the concept of a human rights city still had an aura of luxury 10 years ago, in 2019 the awareness is growing that the fight for the ethical and moral order as expressed by human rights is in full swing. Protest movements worldwide counter those new extreme right-wing and fascistic trends, showing that human rights do matter. Cities have been and will be the places where the European open democratic society will be put to the test. They can function as a laboratory for a pluralized Europe in the largest sense of the term.

**REFERENCES**

Alma, Hans and Vanheeswijk, Guy (eds.). 2018. *Social Imaginaries in a Globalizing World*. In series; Religion and its Others: Studies in Religion, Nonreligion and Secularity. Berlin/Boston: De Gruyter..

Alston, Philip. 2017. "The populist challenge to human rights." *Journal of Human Rights Practice* 9( 1): 1-15.

Amnesty International and VNG (Dutch Association of Municipalities), 2012. *Goed bezig: De betekenis van Mensenrechten voor gemeenten*. Den Haag: VNG, 2012. https://vng.nl/files/vng/publicatie\_goed\_bezig\_over\_mensenrechten.pdf

Appadurai, Arjun. 1996. *Modernity at large: Cultural dimensions of globalization*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Authers, Benjamin, ed. 2016. Special Issue of *Australian Journal of Human Rights*, *Utopias and Promises of Human Rights* 22.2.

Bagchi, Barnita, and Monachesi, Paola**.** 2016, July. “City utopias, City Futures: Narrative, Play, and Urbanism in the Context of Two Asian Megacities.” Paper presented at international workshop on Urban Futures, Urban Utopias: Narrative, Play, and Planning, Institute of Development Studies Kolkata, Kolkata.

Berg, Esther van den. 2016. “Making human rights the talk of the town: civil society and Human Rights Cities, a case study of the Netherlands.” (p. 44-63). In *Global Urban Justice: The Rise of Human Rights Cities,* ed. Barbara Oomen, Martha Davis and Michele Grigolo.). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Bloch, Ernst. 1954-59/ 1986. *The Principle of Hope* (3 Volumes). Trans. Neville Plaice, Stephen Plaice, and Paul Knight. Cambridge MA: MIT Press.

Boyer, Christine**.** 1994. *The City of Collective Memory: Its Historical Imagery and Architectural Entertainments*. Cambridge: MIT Press.

Cassese, Antonio**,** ed.. 2012. *Realizing Utopia: the Future of International Law*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Claeys, Gregory, and Sargent, Lyman Tower**.** 1999. *The Utopia Reader*. New York: NYU Press.

Claeys, Gregory**.** 2011. *Searching for Utopia: The History of an Idea*. Thames & Hudson Limited.

Crinson, Mark**.** 2005. *Urban Memory: History and Amnesia in the Modern City*. London: Routledge.

Deb, Nilanjana**.** 2016, July. “The tide of migrants ebbs and flows: Envisioning Calcutta as born-again cosmopolis.” Paper presented at international workshop on Urban Futures, Urban Utopias: Narrative, Play, and Planning, Institute of Development Studies Kolkata, Kolkata.

Duchatteau, Marieke**.** 2015. *Utrecht Mensenrechtenstad; Het lokale mensenrechtendiscourse in kaart gebracht*. Masters Thesis, Utrecht University. <https://www.utrecht.nl/fileadmin/uploads/documenten/bestuur-en-organisatie/internationale-zaken/2015-10-Marieke-Duchatteau-Masterscriptie.pdf>

European Committee of Social Rights. 2013. *Decision on Immediate Measures.* <https://www.njb.nl/Uploads/2014/11/CC90DecisionImmediateMeasures-en.pdf> Accessed on 20 Oktober 2018.
Gemeente Utrecht. 2012. *Human Rights in Utrecht; How does Utrecht give effect to international Human Rights Treaties?* <https://www.utrecht.nl/fileadmin/uploads/documenten/bestuur-en-organisatie/internationale-zaken/2015-10-Human-Rights-Utrecht.pdf>. Accessed October 20, 2018.
Gemeente Utrecht. 2018. *Utrecht: Ruimte voor iedereen*. <https://www.utrecht.nl/bestuur-en-organisatie/college-van-b-en-w/coalitieakkoord-2018/>. Accessed on 20 October 2018.

Harvey, David. 2003. "The right to the city." *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 27(4): 939-941.

Huebner, Angela J., and Sherry C. Betts**.** 1999. "Examining fourth generation evaluation: Application to positive youth development." *Evaluation* 5(3): 340-358.

Immler, Nicole L. and Sakkers, Hans**.** 2014. “(Re)Programming Europe: European Capitals of Culture: rethinking the role of culture*.*” *Journal of European Studies*, Vol. 44(1): 3 –29.

Immler, Nicole L**.** 2018.”Human Rights as a Secular Social Imaginary in the Field of Transitional Justice. The Dutch-Indonesian ‘Rawagede Case”. In: *Social Imaginaries in a Globalizing World*, ed. by Hans Alma and Guy Vanheeswijk. 193-222. Series Religion and its Others: Studies in Religion, Nonreligion and Secularity.) De Gruyter.; https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110435122-009;

Kennedy, Rosanne, and Maria Nugent**.** 2016. “Scales of Memory: Reflections on an Emerging Concept.” *Australian Humanities Review* 59 (2016): 61-76.

Merry, Sally Engle**.** 2006. “Transnational Human Rights and Local Activism: Mapping the Middle.” *American Anthropologist*, 108(1), 38-51.

Merry, Sally Engle; Levitt, Peggy; Rosen, Mihaela Serban; Yoon, Diana H**.** 2010. Law From Below: Women’s Human Rights and Social Movements in New York City. Law & Society Review, Volume 44, Number 1. (101 – 128)

Moyn, Samuel. 2010. *The Last Utopia: Human Rights in History*. Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, England.

Oliver, Caroline; Dekker, Rianne and Geuijen, Karin**.** 2018. *The Utrecht Refugee Launchpad*. Evaluation Interim Report. Roehampton University, Oxford University and Utrecht University.

Oomen, Barbara**.** 2011. “Small Places: The home-coming of human rights in the Netherlands.” Inaugural lecture, 2 December 2011,, Utrecht University Roosevelt Academy In Middelburg.

Oomen, Barbara**.** 2013. *Rights for Others: The Slow Home-Coming of Human Rights in the Netherlands*. Cambridge University Press.

Oomen, Barbara and Berg, Esther van den**.** 2014. “Human Rights Cities, Urban Actors as Pragmatic Idealistic Human Rights Users.”: *Human Rights & International Legal Discourse*.8(2): 160-185.

Oomen, Barbara, Davis, Martha, and Grigolo, Michele**.** 2016. *Global Urban Justice: The Rise of Human Rights Cities*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Pinder, David**.** 2002. “In Defence of Utopian Urbanism: Imagining Cities after the ‘End of Utopia.” *Geografiska Annaler: Series B, Human Geography*, 84(3‐4), 229-241.

Pinder, David**.** 2005. *Visions of the City: Utopianism, Power and Politics in Twentieth Century Urbanism*. New York: Routledge.

Richards, Greg & Duif, Lian. 2019. *Small Cities with Big Dreams, Creative Placemaking and Branding*. *Strategies*, Routledge, New York.

Pollastri, Serena, Dunn, Nick, Rogers, Chris, Boyko, Christopher, Cooper, Rachel, and Tyler, Nick.2018**.** "Envisioning Urban Futures as Conversations to Inform Design and Research." *Proceedings of the Institution of Civil Engineers-Urban Design and Planning* 171(4)::146-156.

Sakkers, Hans. 2015. “Utrecht: Enhancing the Quality of Life by Localizing Universal Human Rights: Empowering a Local Network with Global Value.” Application prepared for European Public Sector Award.

Sakkers, Hans**.** 2017. “‘Decentralisatie’ en Mensenrechten in Nederland. Lokale praktijen in een nationale én internationale context”. In: NTM NJCM-Bulletin.,. 3. 367-375. [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/319718021\_'Decentralisaties'\_en\_mensenrechten\_in\_Nederland\_-\_Lokale\_praktijken\_in\_een\_nationale\_en\_internationale\_context](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/319718021_%27Decentralisaties%27_en_mensenrechten_in_Nederland_-_Lokale_praktijken_in_een_nationale_en_internationale_context) (Accessed on 20 October 2018).

Stoker, Gerry**.** 2006. “A New Narrative for Networked Governance?” The *American Review of Public Administration* 36(1) 41-57.

Van den Berg, Esther. 2016. “Making Human Rights the Talk of the Town: Civil Society and Human Rights Cities, A Case Study of the Netherlands.” In *Global Urban Justice*, edited by Barbara Oomen, Martha Davis, and Michele Grigolo, 44-63. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Ward, JoAnn Kamuf**.**  2012. *Bringing Human Rights Home: How State and Local Governments Can Use. Human Rights to Advance Local Policy*.. Human Rights Institute. Columbia Law School.

**BLOGPOSTS**

Bagchi, Barnita**.** 2018. “Untitled blog post,“ Utrecht Utopia Network. <http://utrechtutopianetwork.nl/?p=142>
Lorenzo, Mariangela, and Friso Wiersum**.** March 15, 2018. “Utrecht Debat eerst Kansen Onderwijs,” Human Rights Utrecht, http://humanrightsutrecht.nl/2018/03/15/utrecht-debateert-kansen-onderwijs/
Vrielink, Nynke Oude**.** 18 August 2018. “Inclusive Works: We kijken buiten Nederland, om het in Nederland uit te voeren,” Human Rights Utrecht, <http://humanrightsutrecht.nl/2018/08/18/op-bezoek-bij-inclusive-works-we-kijken-buiten-nederland-om-het-in-nederland-uit-te-voeren/>

**WEBSITES**

Local Human Rights Coalition website since 2016: [www.humanrightsutrecht.nl](http://www.humanrightsutrecht.nl).

Local Human Rights Coalition website from 2010 till 2016: [www.humanrightsutrecht.blogspot.com](http://www.humanrightsutrecht.blogspot.com)

Coalition video impressions e.g. <https://vimeo.com/79671719> and <https://vimeo.com/120604583>. Accessed October 20, 2018.

Vrede van Utrecht 2013 / House of Eutopia. <http://www.vredevanutrecht2013.nl/event/house-of-eutopia>. Accessed October 20, 2018.

Plan Einstein. <https://plan-einstein.nl/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/Folder_Engels_def.pdf> Accessed Oktober 20, 2018.