**HUMAN RIGHTS CITIES NETWORK**

**Report to the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights**

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This contribution is made in the context of the Human Rights Council resolution 39/7, which requested the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) to prepare a report on “effective methods to foster cooperation between local government and local stakeholders for the effective promotion and protection of human rights at their level through local government programmes, including raising awareness of the Sustainable Development Goals, and to indicate the major challenges and best practices in this regard, and to submit the report to the Council prior to its forty-second session”.

1. **Introduction**

Urbanization is one of the dominant global trends of the 21st century. Today more than half of the world’s population lives in urban areas and by 2030, this number is expected to rise to 60%. In most cases, rapid urbanization goes with more slums, an increased number of people living in precarious conditions, and greater inequalities. By respecting, protecting and promoting human rights, urbanization has the potential to be turned into a positive trend, contributing to improve the lives of the majority of the world’s population. And cities are in a ideal position to strengthen a human rights-based approach in the way municipalities govern. Engaging with cities’ inhabitants through learning and education contributes to making human rights norms accessible and concrete to people, hence empowering them locally to know and claim their rights. In turn, this increases the ability and accountability of individuals and institutions responsible for respecting, protecting and fulfilling human rights - knowing their voices carry beyond their communities to Europe. In this regard, providing opportunities to people to understand and engage directly in public affairs is of essence to initiate a human rights city.

The Human Rights Cities Network is an online platform, where information on what constitutes a human rights city and good practices are accessible to all. This unique initiative aims at interconnecting efficient human rights cities and like-minded people who can expand their knowledge and share their experiences, to significantly increase the number of Human Rights Cities in Europe. This network enhances the vital role cities and local authorities play in protecting, promoting and fulfilling human rights. The vision is to make human rights a reality for everyone in the city, leaving no one behind; and in doing so to foster participatory democracy and social justice.

The network helps implement the full spectrum of human rights for people living in urban settings, by supporting local authorities’ actors and political decision-makers to strengthen their work within a culture of human rights. It also connects Human Rights Cities practitioners who can contribute to the development of concepts, guiding practices and operational strategies, to enhance human rights cities movement. Ultimately, the network publicises new ways to promote and protect human rights at local level through models where an integrated approach of human rights is entrenched in local governance and management processes, hence redefining the city as a more liveable and dignified space.

The Human Rights Cities Network has five main objectives:

* Create an interactive community of human rights cities practitioners in Europe and beyond
* Exchange locally-developed good practices and knowledge through interaction with civil society actors, academic institutes, and pertinent national or international institutions
* Support municipalities and democracy actors to connect, promote and scale up the development of human rights cities
* Develop a guiding framework with a methodology, models and tools linked to relevant human rights instruments and policy at the national, European and institutional levels
* Tackle challenges and provide solutions that can lead to a successful development of human rights cities

1. **Human Rights Cities Network’s strategic priorities**

To foster cooperation between local government and local stakeholders for the promotion and protection of human rights, the network has identified strategic priorities:

* Networking between human rights cities practitioners, as well as national, European and international institutions
* Disseminating knowledge and information gathered on human rights cities, and keeping updated on new trends and developments in the field.
* Exchanging systematically among city actors on good practices where public policies make human rights accessible and a reality for all. It includes human rights education and learning within the society, starting with local authority staff and anyone in contact with the population, to entrench a culture of human right in public services and institutional development.
* Analysing good practices to advance the methodology, models and tools to support knowledge sharing and role-players to respect, protect, and promote rights’ holders.
* Promoting a holistic approach by integrating human rights as overarching “indivisible values” in policy making, in daily governance, hence encompassing ways of addressing human rights separately depending on the public policy (health, education, housing, freedom of expression, etc.).
* Monitoring periodically achievements and progress, through peer review mechanisms and based on appropriate frameworks taking into account human rights mainstreaming and public services’ results of people-centred public policies

The Excellence Knowledge Centre aims to further human rights education and the knowledge of human rights cities. This centre provides two layers of information: general information accessible to all, and specialised information available to human rights cities practitioners.

The network’s guest cities and associate members are references on localisation and mainstreaming of human rights in an urban context. Brainstorming workshops, exchange of views on specific matters and multi-level dialogues on human rights cities’ concepts, methodology and practices are to be provided to the members. By sustaining inspiring practices and human right policy at municipality level, the network explores new dynamics across Europe.

1. **Human Rights Cities in Europe: policy and actions-oriented perspectives**

Human rights are key to advancing and developing a sustainable urbanization. This requires a socially inclusive process that promotes equality, combats discrimination in all its forms and empowers individuals and communities. A human rights approach is vital to make cities work for people as places of equal opportunity for all, where people can live in security, peace and dignity.

Using human rights as a common ground, focusing on vulnerable groups, putting individual’s rights at the centre of policies, or reformulating a human rights narrative in a different language are success factors to change perspectives and promote a human right culture as part of Human Rights City development. It is fundamental to address people’s concerns and build a local framework where human rights are accessible and meaningful for people. Giving the opportunity for educational debate contributes to rebuilding social ties and bringing trust within societies. Engaging the city’s population in direct democracy and an inclusive policymaking process enhance confidence building between municipalities and citizens. As a result, it ensures the ownership of human rights localisation by the inhabitants of the city. The city of York (UK) and the York Human Rights City Network is a good example of an approach seeking to use human rights to address local, everyday priorities.

In the current socio-economic context in Europe (economic crisis, migration, populism and inequalities), the 2030 Agenda and the New Urban Agenda provide additional opportunity to reinforce human rights mainstreaming in the context of SDGs implementation. The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development sets the basis for a sustainable urban development process, through the implementation of Sustainable Development Goals (SDG 11 & 16 in particular). Governments are committed to leaving no-one behind, envisaging “a world of universal respect for equality and non-discrimination”, including gender equality, and to reaffirm the responsibilities of all States to “respect, protect and promote human rights, without discrimination or distinction of any kind”. As such, if democracy is to be enhanced and social justice build in urban settings, localising human rights at the city level is essential to reach out the left behind. From that perspective, the SDGs offer a unique opportunity to create strategic links with human rights norms at the local level, hence strengthening awareness and engagement of local stakeholders in the wider human rights framework. Complementarity is to be based on key principles: equity and non-discrimination, participation and inclusion, and transparency and responsibility. Therefore, a more systematically integrated human rights approach would enlist human rights principles to guide priority-setting, decision-making, and implementation of public policies at municipality level.

As a “Global Goals City”, Utrecht provides promising practices using the SDGs as a guiding framework to orient the city’s development. The operational targets of the Global Goals will be used for the assessment framework in 2030 for evaluating the impact of their local human rights policies. Moreover, the Human Rights Coalition initiative of Utrecht is shown to have had a significant impact on the long-term societal climate by creating long term awareness through concrete actions and ongoing discussions. Co-initiated by the municipality itself, the public policies are directly and indirectly influenced by this ‘local human rights culture’.

Lessons learned demonstrate that every stakeholder (i.e. mayors, members of parliament, civil society, international organisations, etc.) have a role to play and a responsibility to take. A human rights city creates a direct connection between local policies prioritising people’s interests and how city government operate, hence attracting new forms of partnerships and promoting innovative methods of communication. Often when human rights become the guiding norm for local governance, it is accompanied with a socio-political process where engagement and inclusion of inhabitants is a priority. The overall process will increase the ability and the accountability of individuals and institutions responsible for respecting, protecting and fulfilling human rights. In this regard, the Human Rights Cities Network is innovative. Through this platform the European municipalities can interconnect and learn from each other about “human rights for all”, hence feeding research and advancement on tangible human rights in urban settings. Gathering good practices, producing comparative analysis and sharing of experience is fundamental to promote human rights cities.

1. **Challenges and opportunities**

Until now, there is neither a common framework nor a methodology to become a human rights city. Core elements could possibly be identified from lessons learned and existing promising practices to better promote human rights cities. collaboration already exists between research institutions, notably associate members such as the Raoul Wallenberg Institute, the University College Roosevelt and Utrecht University. Ideally, other academic institutions such as the Ludwig Boltzmann Institute of Human Rights in Vienna or the Centre for the Promotion of Human Rights at the Local and Regional Levels and the European Training and Research Centre in Graz could be associated. Multi-stakeholders’ collaboration is needed to advance on a guiding framework with a methodology, principles and practices linked to human rights instruments and policy, in view of framing human rights cities movement. Furthermore, a regional network of human rights cities enhances local governance and consolidate democracy, while moderating negative trends.

There is a rich diversity of approaches among human rights cities across Europe but also across regions including Asia and the United States. A strong interest exists to build bridges and to further exchange good practices, but also to develop regional and global networks of human rights cities. The 2018 Gwangju World Human Rights Cities Forum notably recommended the development of a Global Human Rights Cities Network for 2020. Several organisations including the United Cities and Local Authorities, the Raoul Wallenberg Institute, the US Alliance of Human Rights Cities and the Human Rights Cities Network are contributing to this project.

One of the main challenges remains however to localise the international human rights standards and build synergies between local and international levels. Efficient coordination and clarity in sharing responsibilities between national and local government is required to tackle potential conflicts. Based on research, exchanges and discussion, the following good practices provide opportunity to support human rights cities development. At local level, new forms of coalitions breaking silos and promoting intersectionality, as well as inclusive engagement of the community in the planning and the governance of the city are critical. A socio-political process is often the basis to support people in identifying human rights in their daily lives, and build commitments around the common grounds. Such process, implies that public officials are human rights educated and trained to forge a human rights-based approach in their daily management, hence ensuring people-centred approach. To that end communities and public authorities are invited to jointly rethink the society around solidarity and put equity principles into practice.

From a UN perspective, some ways could further connect local governments with the international human rights system. As for example, systematically consult local authorities in the Universal Periodic Review (UPR), the work of human rights treaty bodies and Special Procedures of the Human Rights Council, as well as in the implementation of their recommendations would be a good practice. If SDGs are used as an entry point to the broader human rights framework, a certain alignment between the Voluntary Local Review and the UPR would also enhance policy coherence at UN level. Moreover, in the context of regional and global human rights cities networks development (2018 Gwangju WHRCF), the establishment of a UN training and learning centre targeting local authorities’ staff would certainly be of added value. Reinforcing the competences of municipalities’ actors with a solid understanding of their human rights responsibilities towards city’s inhabitants would definitely contribute to entrench human rights as core values in their local governance. These types of measures would complement a comprehensive approach at UN level to strengthen local government role in promoting, protecting and fulfilling human rights.

To conclude, democracy can never be taken for granted. In a context of emerging forms of governance, cities are at the forefront of human rights practices and should assert their power. A human rights integrated approach as a guiding norm of governance at local level contributes to promote a human right culture. Well entrenched in decision making process and management structure, a human rights-based approach empowers all stakeholders to play a role and endorse their responsibilities to take part in making their city a human rights city.

The human rights cities development is still a developing movement with potential to support proactive human rights cities in making human rights a reality for all. There is no one size fit all but rather a diversity of approaches, which deserves academic researches to recognise common elements allowing human rights cities to unite nationally and internationally. Acknowledging human rights cities good practices through regional and global network would certainly further promote their development. In this context, attention from European and UN institutions may also contribute to adjust institutional mechanisms to new ways local governments develop to effectively protect, promote and realise human rights in urban settings.