Guidance framework for creating a Human Rights City

FOREWORD

Our world is growing increasingly complex and challenging, and cities are grappling with conflicts, climate catastrophe, deepening inequalities, and the impact of poorly regulated digital technologies. The local implementation of international human rights norms and standards is critical for achieving the vision of "a world that is safe, peaceful, just, equal, inclusive, sustainable and prosperous", agreed last year in the Pact for the Future. Cities must be at the forefront, driving the changes needed to reshape our economic, social and environmental systems for the good of all.

This guidance framework, elaborated in cooperation with the European Union Fundamental Rights Agency, is intended to help cities to embed human rights, including the right to development and the right to a clean, healthy and sustainable environment, into all aspects of urban governance. Local governments operate close to the people they serve, enabling them to engage directly and take immediate action to improve daily life and the realisation of human rights. Through rights-based approaches to public services, including housing, health care, education and the protection of public safety, cities can build social cohesion and trust, and make sure no one is left behind.

We thank the local human rights defenders, city officials, local political leaders, scholars and organizations that have pioneered the movement of Human Rights Cities. This framework draws upon their valuable efforts and experiences. Our hope is that this publication will serve as a practical guide in ensuring greater enjoyment of human rights by everyone, in every city.

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"Gwangju's history exemplifies the transformative power of collective action for justice and human dignity. By joining the Human Rights Cities movement, Gwangju seeks to collaborate with other cities that place human rights at the core of urban life for all."

– City of Gwangju

"As cities, we are jointly faced with major tasks in the field of zero-emission, circular economy, housing, migration, equity and digitalization (among others), where international standards, like human rights, must be translated locally. That is a big and complex task and we need each other's support for that."

– City of Utrecht

"Joining the Human Rights Cities movement is an affirmation of Rabat's ongoing commitment to place people at the centre of priorities and the well-being of residents at the heart of public policies, ensuring that every inhabitant can thrive and fully enjoy their fundamental rights."

– City of Rabat

"In December 2014, the City Council passed the declaration "Vienna–City of Human Rights" to implement a human rights-based approach with its four pillars: non-discrimination, participation, transparency and accountability in all governmental levels of the city. The city is committed to respect, protect and fulfil human rights and intends to serve as a role model at the local, national and international level. It is now more than ever necessary to connect local initiatives on human rights to the international level."

– City of Vienna

"We are the governments closest to the population, and we therefore have the most direct insight and the greatest ability to recognize the needs and aspirations of inhabitants, as well as the responsibility to act accordingly and generate effective responses through public policies and concrete actions to advance a dignified life for all people."

– City of Mexico City

Bringing human rights home to the local level

Local governments hold a pivotal role in realizing human rights. As political actors, democratic institutions and the closest level of governance to communities, local governments are well-positioned to respect, protect and fulfil human rights, and they also have an obligation to do so as states' international human rights obligations extend to all levels of government. The implementation of human rights at the local level is also integral to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, which is grounded in international human rights law.

International human rights treaties provide crucial frameworks for safeguarding human rights, but their true effectiveness lies in their implementation, which can meaningfully transform the daily lives of rights holders. By addressing the needs and realities of their communities, local governments are in a unique position to translate human rights norms and standards into concrete solutions that benefit all inhabitants, notably in urban planning and the delivery of public services, such as housing, water and sanitation, education, health, social security, and the protection of public safety.

Today, more than half of the world's population lives in cities, and this figure is projected to rise to almost 70% by 2050. Urbanization entails a greater role for cities to enhance human rights protection in the context of global challenges such as the triple planetary crisis, conflicts, rising inequalities and slow or reversed progress on the Sustainable Development Goals.

Co-creation of Human Rights Cities

Creating a Human Rights City represents a transformative approach to urban governance, emphasizing the integration of human rights into the fabric of cities. The co-creation of Human Rights Cities is crucial, as collaboration between local governments and civil society organizations, academia, national and local human rights institutions, city networks, businesses, and international human rights bodies helps identify emerging issues, address discrimination and systemic inequalities, and implement solutions that uphold human rights. By fostering inclusivity, expression of diversity of perspectives and meaningful and safe participation, cities can adopt more effective and sustainable decisions that are responsive to the needs of all residents, particularly persons and groups that are marginalized, face discrimination or are in a situation of vulnerability. Such partnerships and feedback mechanisms strengthen accountability and transparency in local governance and public service delivery.

Global movement of Human Rights Cities

The term "human rights city" emerged in the early 1990s. Shortly after the 1993 World Conference on Human Rights, the international non-profit organization, People's Decade for Human Rights Education (PDHRE) launched the "human rights cities" initiative. Since 1997, when Rosario, Argentina, became the world's first human rights city, the human rights cities movement has expanded globally. Cities from different regions have embraced the human rights city model, each with their unique approaches and priorities. This guidance framework supports cities in applying international human rights norms and principles at the local level.

Steps to becoming a Human Rights City

Creating a Human Rights City requires action across three key areas: political and legal **foundations**, institutional **structures** and operational **tools**.

FOUNDATIONS

Political leaders and policymakers prioritize human rights in local governance and ensure that human rights are integrated into the political priorities, setting a clear vision and commitment to safeguard that local laws, policies, services and practices are in compliance with international human rights norms and standards.

Priority Foundations

> A mayor or another governing body of the city can publicly declare the local government's commitment to become a Human Rights City, for example through a mayor's statement or by adopting a charter, a declaration or a city council decision, based on international and regional human rights treaties. A formal commitment to uphold human rights that is reaffirmed annually would contribute to further integration of human rights into local governance.

Advanced Foundations

> Enact a local ordinance to adopt a human rights-based approach to local governance.

> Embed a human rights-based approach in all local laws, strategies, development plans, policies and programmes.

STRUCTURES

A Human Rights City establishes local human rights structures and bodies within its administration and creates mechanisms for accountability.

Priority Structures

> Establish an office, department or structure within the local government with a mandate to coordinate, advance and oversee the implementation of human rights locally, and to provide legal assistance to facilitate access to justice for all.

> Establish a consultative participatory body on human rights to ensure the meaningful participation of diverse stakeholders, such as civil society organizations, academia, businesses, persons and groups that are marginalized, face discrimination or are in a situation of vulnerability, such as, though not limited to, minorities, persons with disabilities, children, youth, older persons, persons experiencing homelessness, persons living in poverty, migrants, asylum seekers and refugees.

Advanced Structures

> Establish a human rights complaint, oversight and redress mechanism at the local level, such as a local Human Rights Commission or an ombudsperson.

> Promote an enabling civic space and create mechanisms for meaningful and safe participation of residents in the planning, implementation, monitoring, evaluation and decision-making processes of the city.

> Establish a participatory and independent mechanism for monitoring and evaluating the city's human rights performance.

> Establish a local Internal Oversight body to address corruption related complaints, using a victim-centred and human rights-based approach.

🔧 TOOLS

At the local level, a Human Rights City ensures that local laws, policies, services and processes align with international human rights norms and standards. The local government develops and implements measures, programmes, methods and tools to support the promotion and protection of human rights, including on monitoring progress, in collaboration with local communities, civil society, academia, national and local human rights institution and other stakeholders.

At the international level, a Human Rights City participates in knowledge exchanges among local governments worldwide, contributes to OHCHR and the United Nations human rights mechanisms as well as the SDG review mechanisms under the auspices of the High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development.

Local level	International level
Priority Tools > Conduct a thorough baseline analysis of the current human rights situation at the local level, through a participatory process, identifying gaps, challenges, good practices and opportunities.	> Develop partnerships and cooperate with cities worldwide and international networks of cities promoting human rights at the local level such as UCLG, fostering exchanges of knowledge, promising practices, peer-to-peer learning and advocacy actions.
> Develop a local human rights strategy and/or action plan and ensure sufficient human and financial resources for their implementation.	> Engage with OHCHR and the United Nations human rights mechanisms and bodies, including the Universal Periodic Review,

> Provide regular capacity building on human rights law and principles for elected local government officials, civil servants, teachers, judges, law enforcement officials, community leaders, youth and other relevant local actors.

> Report annually on the city's human rights situation, including reporting to international human rights mechanisms directly or through the national mechanism for implementation, reporting and follow-up (NMIRF) on human rights when it exists.

United Nations treaty bodies and the special procedures of the United Nations Human Rights Council. Contribute to reporting to and implementation of recommendations made by OHCHR and the United Nations human rights mechanisms, for example through the NMIRF on human rights.

	Local level	International level
Advanced Tools	> Embed human rights in all strategies, development plans, policies, services and processes of the city. Ensure that these policies and programmes respond to the needs of local communities and to the recommendations made by the United Nations human rights mechanisms.	> Provide technical assistance and resources to cities and regions through decentralized cooperation. Ensure that human rights are integrated into decentralized cooperation agreements and international partnerships, whether related to the environment, economy, culture or other policy areas.
	> Apply a human rights-based, participatory and transparent process for budgeting.	> Assess potential extraterritorial impacts of human rights laws, policies and programmes outside the city's territory, thus contributing to the enjoyment of human rights by people living outside the borders of the city.
	> Apply a human rights-based approach to public procurement by integrating international human rights norms and principles, including labour standards and the principles of equality and non-discrimination, into the selection and award criteria and performance clauses in public procurement.	> Prepare Voluntary Local Reviews to the High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development.
		> Advocate for the inclusion of local governments' human rights issues and views in UN fora.

> Launch communication campaigns and raise public awareness on human rights, including anti-racism and non-discrimination, in collaboration with civil society.

> Develop indicators and collect, disaggregate and analyse data to assess the local human rights situation and to adopt evidence-based laws, policies and programmes.

> Apply international human rights norms and principles in the design, development, procurement, use and regulation of digital technologies and digital public services, and invest in building digital literacy and skills.

> Conduct human rights impact assessments of local laws, policies and decisions.

> Stay informed about emerging global trends, challenges and opportunities. Adapt local laws, policies and practices to align with new international human rights norms and standards.

> Establish a comprehensive protection program for civil society actors, particularly human rights defenders, through different types of support, including temporary and safe relocation, securing humanitarian visas in collaboration with the national government, livelihood assistance, psychosocial support and other services.

Resources

The United Nations Human Rights Council:

> UN Human Rights Council resolutions on local government and human rights:

- **57/12** (10 October 2024)
- **51/12** (6 October 2022)
- **45/7** (6 October 2020)
- **39/7** (27 September 2018)
- **33/8** (29 September 2016)
- **27/4** (25 September 2014)
- **24/2** (26 September 2013)

> Reports of the Human Rights Council Advisory Committee:

- **A/HRC/30/49**
- **A/HRC/27/59**

OHCHR:

> OHCHR's reports on local government and human rights:

- **A/HRC/56/32**
- **A/HRC/51/10**
- **A/HRC/42/22**
- **A/HRC/38/22**

> **OHCHR website on cities, local and regional governments and human rights**

UCLG:

> **European Charter for the Safeguarding of Human Rights in the City (2000)**

> **UCLG Global Charter Agenda for Human Rights in the City (2011)** – *new version forthcoming*

> **UCLG Pact for the Future (2023)**

Other resources:

> **EU FRA Human rights cities in the EU: a framework for reinforcing rights locally (2021)**

> **EU FRA Human Rights Cities in the European Union: a guide to support local authorities in making human rights part of people's daily life (2022)**