

**National Human Rights Cities Gathering,
Washington, DC May 26-27, 2016
*Executive Summary & Outcomes***

1) Theoretical background

The idea of a human rights city is to create an infrastructure for the realization of all human rights for all members of the community through deepening democracy and promoting social justice. Universal human rights will only be achieved when these concepts are understood and practiced by all people.

The human rights city initiative is a vibrant example of “international law from below,” and local activists are becoming increasingly involved in efforts to connect international human rights norms and monitoring processes with local government agencies and communities. Dozens of cities all over the world have begun to incorporate human rights frameworks, but this development has received relatively little attention from policy analysts, and there has been limited coordination across such cities. In response, the Washington DC Human Rights City Steering Committee and the [American Friends Service Committee](#), convened a two day gathering on Human Rights Cities in Washington, DC on May 26 and 27, 2016. The convening built upon lessons from a similar gathering in Pittsburgh in 2015, continuing conversations about what we can learn from the various human rights initiatives taking place in cities around the world and exploring ways to cooperate and enhance the efficacy of this work.

Previous discussions among human rights organizers have revealed important international resources and opportunities for local organizing—including international treaty review processes, special initiatives of the United Nations such as the recent [Expert Working Group on People of African Descent](#), international reporting mechanisms such as UN treaty reviews and Inter-American Commission on Human Rights hearings, and models such as the [European Coalition of Cities Against Racism](#)’s anti-racism [10-Point Action Plan](#) and UNICEF’s [Rights Respecting Schools](#) initiative. Yet local organizers have yet to make extensive use of these opportunities. By strengthening national coordination and by providing better documentation that targets local human rights organizing, this project aims to respond to a need in the human rights movement.

2) Goals and objectives

We had two key goals for this initiative. First, we aimed to **strengthen relationships among local advocates for human rights cities**, national and international human rights advocates, scholar-practitioners whose work relates to human rights city organizing, and public officials who are exploring ways to better integrate human rights into municipal policies, programs and institutions. Second, we worked to **advance the state of knowledge about effective models and practices for realizing human rights cities** and improve our methods for reporting and sharing this information.

3) Achievements and challenges

Over one hundred people responded to our invitation, including individuals and organizations from local, national and international human rights organizations. Of those, over sixty participants attended the gathering. The outreach to local, national and international officials (including local D.C. US Government) and orgs has generated positive response to the initiative and new connections to international meetings, including an invitation from the World Human Rights Cities Committee to attend their 2016 Forum in Gwangju, Republic of South Korea ([World Human Rights Cities Forum 2016](#))

Like with any large scale event planning, we realized that we need more time and longer track-record for securing funding. The DC gathering has allowed us to make some small but promising steps in connecting with potential funders. Also, the lack of explicit youth participation and involvement at every step of the planning and implementation process was identified as an area of improvement as we look forward to our next gathering.

4) Lessons learned

The energy levels at both the Pittsburgh and Washington DC convenings suggested that we are at a particularly important time for local human rights work. There seems to be resonance among local organizers for using human rights frameworks, and it may be more possible now than in the past to help more activists learn about the work of the U.S. Human Rights Network, the human rights cities movement, and other initiatives like Cities for CEDAW to improve local implementation of international human rights. The context of today's Movement for Black Lives also heightens the sense of urgency for addressing long-standing structural/institutional racism. The human rights city approach provides a model that seems responsive to the needs of this political moment.

Human rights movements need to build political will, public voice, and to activate a constituency advocating for the United States to sign, ratify and implement international human rights treaties. U.S. government agencies have limited mandates, most of their work is restricted by technical and legal terminology, and they have limited resources and capacity for outreach to state and local officials. Movements can assist the communication with public officials at local and state levels by pushing for new mechanisms for consultation, information sharing, and coordination. Inter-agency working groups are a good start, but improvements are still needed. Efforts to strengthen national coordination among local human rights organizers can help advance efforts of federal officials working to implement national human rights treaty obligations.

Masters students at American University, Joshua Heath, Tahina Vatel, and Natasha Wheatley, prepared an analysis of human rights city organizing for this meeting. Drawing from interviews with organizers or government officials in six of the eleven U.S. human rights cities, they concluded that the establishment of a support system for human rights cities is essential to the long term success of the movement.

Discussions of strategies for alliance building around human rights focused a great deal on the need to create intentionality around the problem of structural/institutional racism. This is the aim of the U.S. Human Rights Network's "People Centered Human Rights." The intersections of various human rights and institutionalized racism were a primary focus in discussions, as was the need to broaden public discussions and to enhance concern among more privileged groups for the needs of the most affected communities. The human rights city initiative's focus on place provides a useful framework for addressing racial oppression, but an intentionality in regard to this must be sustained. In addition, human rights cities have the challenges of other coalition-building efforts of helping transcend the tendency of groups to work in issue-silos. The issue of housing/displacement emerged in discussions as a possible focal point to help connect diverse issues and constituencies in a cross-cutting human rights issue. Human rights city conveners should think of their work as being coalition leaders: creating space for groups to move out of issue silos. There is a need for humility in this work, and no one should 'own' the space. Rather, it must be seen as a collective resource, and the differences in capacities and skills of participants must be recognized. Human rights city organizing is about helping people see that their work in terms of human rights, and getting vastly different stakeholders to understand their distinct

roles—i.e., as local government administrators, educators, residents, clergy, etc.— in promoting and implementing human rights locally.

5) Action commitments

The convening generated commitments from participants to work at the national level to strengthen coordination and documentation of human rights city organizing and to organize local human rights activities.

Organization & Coordination

- Participants agreed to re-convene a national gathering of human rights city organizers in two years (2018). The meeting should take place in a formally designated Human Rights City, ideally in the U.S. south (the first two were in the northeast).
- A national steering committee will be established to carry forward the lessons of this gathering and develop resources and plans for the 2018 meeting. The Steering Committee composition should be intentional about prioritizing the voices and needs of those most impacted by human rights abuses and to recruit national leaders experienced at coalition-building within a human rights framework. Representatives from past host cities and from upcoming host city should also be included on the Steering Committee.
- Participants expressed an interest in developing our capacity to use free and open source technology and to ensure online protections of people’s rights to communication and privacy. The next convening should be used to help develop our capacities in this regard.
- Participants expressed an interest in strengthening our capacity to share information and to coordinate our actions. There is an interest in exploring how this might be done within the US Human Rights Network, with which many participants are familiar.

Human Rights Actions

- Participants committed to taking some action on December 10 as part of a national day of action to promote human rights Cities
- Participants committed themselves to organizing around [March 25 day of remembrance](#)—and work together to build and promote the archive project
- Participants agreed to honor and raise consciousness around Indigenous Peoples Day-October 12
- Participants agreed to support national focal points of human rights work, including upcoming UN special rapporteurs, the International decade on people of African Descent (USHRN’s Ubuntu Council); and local implementation of human rights treaty commitments.
- Existing human rights cities should encourage their “sister cities” to become human rights cities.