

Pittsburgh's Human Rights City Alliance: A Brief and Partial History (Spring 2015)

By Jackie Smith

Pittsburgh officially became the fifth Human Rights City in the United States in April of 2011, when students working in the local American Friends Service Committee's Racial Justice through Human Rights Program proposed the initiative to the Pittsburgh City Council. Following the passage of the Human Rights City Proclamation, however, there was no organized follow-up by activists to implement the Proclamation, but activists working as part of the Occupy movement drew attention to the city's new Human Rights Day designation as they mobilized for International Human Rights Day in December of that same year. Two years later, some of the same networks came together to plan an International Human Rights Day rally, recognizing an opportunity in the recent election of a mayor (Bill Peduto) who had been a City Councilman when the Human Rights City Proclamation was passed. We intended to hold our mayor accountable to promises he made as a Council member.

The core leadership of the Human Rights City Alliance in its early phase came from several faculty members and graduate students at the University of Pittsburgh, the local American Friends Service Committee, whose youth group made Pittsburgh a Human Rights City, and a handful of activists from some of the main social and racial justice groups in the city.¹ We recognized early on, following social justice leaders in other places, that work for human rights needs to begin with a focus on those who are least able to enjoy their rights.² Yet, these are the very same people who have the most difficulty attending meetings and otherwise participating in the work of the Human Rights City Alliance and other activist groups. Knowing that racial, generational, and other differences and tensions have long complicated efforts to build intersectional movements in the United States, we sought to learn from past experiences and to be intentional about our aim of building a multi-racial and multi-class alliance for human rights. We thus spent our first year working largely on issues most critical to low-income and African American residents. We sought guidance from leaders in those communities and worked to sensitize more privileged residents to the ways prevailing institutions and practices deny many people their basic human rights and dignity. We built a steering committee for the Alliance with an intentionality to have a majority leadership from historically oppressed groups.

Human Rights Cities--Expanding the Political Imagination

By calling people to imagine how our city could look if it was organized around the goal of promoting universal human rights, it became clear that we were inviting them to imagine a very different place. Participants quickly recognized that more than targeting any particular policy, we needed to change the mindsets of both politicians and the public, who were accustomed to thinking of local politics as mainly about attracting new revenues for the city and limiting taxes. Very quickly people could see (if they didn't already) that the privileging of economic growth in

¹ The American Friends Service Committee has been instrumental in other human rights cities as well, including Washington D.C.'s.

² See, for instance, the [Jemez Principles for democratic organizing](#) and the [U.S. Human Rights Network](#), which works for a "people-centered human rights movement" that centers its leadership on those most directly affected by human rights violations.

public policy meant that human rights would always be neglected as a target for policy making. In addition, the human rights lens clarified how economic growth systematically undermines the ability of some groups in the city—in Pittsburgh this is especially African Americans and immigrants—to enjoy even the most basic rights.³ From here, we invited residents to consider not just different policies but also new practices and institutions that could better accomplish the aims of our “Human Rights City.”

Using human rights as a framework for governance entails a paradigm change. We’re finding in the Human Rights City initiative in Pittsburgh that a big part of our work involves inviting people to re-think prevailing ways of thinking and acting, whether it be to push people beyond the parochial limits of U.S. political discourses or to encourage them to consider the possibility that work for radical change can happen both within and outside the boundaries of conventional electoral politics. At this early phase of our work, we spend a good deal of effort working with community leaders to encourage them to consider how a human rights framework might advance their group’s goals. We’re working against an often competitive non-profit culture that leads many organizers to be suspicious of our motives. We’re finding that attention to relationships has been key, and that we need to make sure we take time for that. We’re essentially working to change culture as much as policy, and that our work must take place at many levels—from policy arenas to schools and neighborhoods, to inter-personal and inter-organizational relations. Below we offer some illustrations of the Human Rights City Alliance’s work as it relates to the goal of advancing human rights in our community.

Advocacy for Marginalized Groups/ Fostering Social Cohesion

The prevailing economic system relies upon its ability to exploit inequalities among groups of people in order to maximize profits for the owners of capital. Thus, the globalized capitalist system has generated institutions that reproduce and expand inequalities and reinforce divisions and hierarchies in society and that inhibit communication and cooperation across differences. As a result, we’re finding in our Human Rights City work that even decisions about when, where, and how we hold our meetings are very political, and that work to be inclusive of diverse groups—especially those most impacted by rights violations—takes conscious planning and investment of resources. But we also have found that by creating spaces where people who do not ordinarily come together can meet, our Alliance is fulfilling an important need in our racially and class-divided city. Indeed, democracy depends upon public deliberation among all members of a community, and such deliberation is inhibited by our institutions. So the work we’re doing helps create new patterns of relations and advance both democracy and social cohesion. Moreover, by helping residents gain awareness of global human rights law and movements, we are hoping to help translate lessons from global experiences into local settings. Our one-on-one work with community leaders and volunteers also contributes to building the relationships that help nurture the values and practices of a democratic culture.

The most important public actions the Human Rights City Alliance organizes are public forums where participants can learn about human rights and the diverse experiences and perceptions of human rights as seen by other residents. Examples of this are our [International Human Rights Day rallies](#) and a panel we organized to honor [International Mother Earth Day](#). These events were designed to bring the voices of the most marginalized groups to the fore so

³ Pittsburgh has among the highest rates of Black poverty, infant mortality, and unemployment in the country. The political marginalization of African Americans, moreover, has led to their significant displacement through ongoing processes of gentrification (Center on Race and Social Problems 2015).

that we could reflect collectively on the challenges and opportunities for advancing “dignity and justice for everyone.” We also have worked to ensure that youth voices are heard in these spaces, which both nurtures young leaders while also helping older folks appreciate the needs and challenges faced by youth. It is clear in these meetings that more privileged participants are challenged by hearing the accounts of experiences of people denied their rights due to their race, class, gender, ability, etc. But our work to build a commitment to principles of human rights and to help build ongoing conversations and relationships among different organizations, leaders, and constituencies has helped sustain and build participation and support for the Human Rights City initiative. The Alliance’s work has benefitted from previous efforts of residents to fight racial injustice and division, which have, for instance, created an annual “Summit Against Racism” where we were able to organize panels, identify allies, and build networks to support the Human Rights City initiative and its racial justice component in particular (see our [report from the 2015, 18th Annual Summit Against Racism](#)).

Our most recent work around Human Rights Day led us to an innovation of holding “[Human Rights Days of Action](#)” rather than organizing just a single event to mark this day. This enabled us to reach out to a wider range of groups and encourage them to link their own work to a human rights framework. In turn, we helped publicize their human rights-related events to a larger audience. In this way we were able to expand the numbers of people working to frame their demands in terms of human rights as well as to enhance peoples’ awareness of the intersectionalities among movements.

In addition to holding public forums where residents can expand their understandings and awareness of human rights, we have also worked to support the recent Black Lives Matter mobilization against police brutality and racial discrimination. In the fall of 2014, Pittsburgh’s mayor appointed a new police chief, whom we welcomed to the city in October with an [open letter](#). The key point of the letter was to make sure our new chief was aware of Pittsburgh’s status as a Human Rights City. Since we have yet to see our elected officials internalize the identity and language of human rights, we were quite certain that it was up to us to make sure our Human Rights City status was communicated to the new chief. Moreover, we wanted to offer community support for human rights-oriented policing practices, and members of our group engaged in research to learn more about the recommendations from other cities and from the United Nations in this regard. Later that fall we joined the local Amnesty International chapter during their annual Human Rights Day letter writing action to issue a [letter to the police chief](#) raising specific human rights demands that had been identified by local groups working specifically on police accountability.

In addition to these activities, we spent much of the first year of our Human Rights City Alliance learning about the work being done in the community and speaking with community groups and leaders about their policy priorities and visions. This work informed our [Human Rights City Action Plan](#), which we made public at our 2014 International Human Rights Day rally. The [Action Plan](#) identifies some of the key demands and changes local activists see as essential to moving us closer to being a true Human Rights City—such as universal health care, eliminating racial disparities in education, and living wage laws—and promotes policies from other human rights cities and other proposals to advance human rights. It is intended as a blueprint to guide policymakers and local organizers, and it has inspired the creation of new task forces of volunteers working to implement specific components of the plan.

These actions illustrate how the Human Rights City Alliance has helped support the work of diverse organizations and leaders and build understanding and trust among groups that don’t

ordinarily work together. Such understanding and trust, and the networks of relationships behind this, are critical to nurturing shared identities and social cohesion. Because the human rights framework privileges voices of those marginalized by the existing institutions, it helps sensitize participants about power dynamics and exclusion, enabling group trust and cohesion to develop in ways that are impossible when these issues remain obscured. Thus, the *process of organizing* towards a “human rights city”—more than any single event or action—is what gradually helps unify participants around a shared project and set of principles that builds and deepens social relationships.

This is not an easy process. We remain a rather small network of committed organizers, and our work still consists largely of attending the meetings of other groups to learn more about their work and the concerns of diverse community residents, meeting with different community leaders to build relationships, and supporting collaborative projects. It requires patient and persistent effort to help demonstrate how uniting around human rights can strengthen the overall work for social justice in our city. Often we are seen as pushing just another issue and advancing the interests of our ‘organization,’ and we find ourselves working to transform prevailing activist mindsets. For instance, we frequently must stress that we are not attempting to be a new and distinct organization, but rather we are an alliance of diverse groups that can support cooperative and coordinated efforts toward a shared vision for social change, oriented around human rights.

Socialization for a Culture of Human Rights

Our work to transform Pittsburgh into a Human Rights City has helped participants appreciate that human rights cannot simply be legislated. The existing policy process creates limited space for even discussing human rights—much less for implementing policies that actually protect the most basic human rights for all residents. Participants quickly see the need to change the basic institutions of our society in order to realize this vision. As Human Rights City organizers have stressed, the goal is to make human rights a “way of life” for people in our region. This requires multiple kinds of activities in multiple places of social life. It encourages a transformation of values and priorities as well as a re-thinking of how people understand governance and ‘the political.’

One initiative taken in Pittsburgh in this regard has been the support for recognizing Indigenous Peoples Day on October 12th. The idea for this day first arose in 1977 at the International Conference on Discrimination Against Indigenous Populations in the Americas.⁴ In 2014, the Human Rights City of Seattle adopted a resolution renaming October 12 Indigenous Peoples Day in that city, explicitly linking the decision to that city’s status as a Human Rights City. One of our group members attended a rally organized by local activists honoring Indigenous Peoples Day in October of 2014, and he brought ideas from that rally to our meeting where we were planning that year’s Human Rights Days activities. Given the recent news about Seattle’s Indigenous Peoples Day, the group was especially enthusiastic about the idea of moving this initiative forward in Pittsburgh. We drafted a text to submit to City Council that was based on Seattle’s Resolution and that incorporated a demand made by local activists for “the teaching of Indigenous peoples’ history as recommended by Indigenous communities in our public schools.” The City Council of Pittsburgh passed a [Will of the Council “recognizing the 12th of October as “Indigenous Peoples’ Day”](#) on the eve of Human Rights Day in 2014.

Work on this initiative has helped participants in our alliance appreciate the importance of questioning the celebratory accounts of Christopher Columbus’s encounter with the Americas

⁴ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Indigenous_Peoples%27_Day

and the subsequent European settlement of the place native peoples call Turtle Island. Pittsburgh does not have a large population of indigenous peoples given its history of forced migration, relocation and genocide against the people who initially lived on this land. Thus, the voices of those displaced from this region are largely absent from our region's public discourse and consciousness. But the work of Indigenous social movements around the world that have been calling for Indigenous Peoples Day and reflections of human rights organizers convinced us of the importance of "truth telling" about this country's imperialist, colonial, and genocidal history as a key step in our work. By promoting Indigenous Peoples Day we could encourage greater public recognition of the rich culture and traditions of indigenous peoples as well as more critical reflection on the historical and continuing impacts of colonialism on indigenous communities and other communities of color. Truth-telling is essential to promoting healing and to realizing a culture of human rights. Thus, the transformation of consciousness and culture we are seeking with the Human Rights City initiative requires that we tell new stories about our past so that we can imagine a different future that advances '*dignity and justice for everyone.*' Toward that end, we are building a task force that is planning activities to raise public consciousness and to honor the first officially recognized Indigenous People's Day in Pittsburgh.

Human Rights Cities' experiences attest to the centrality of cultural work that encourages residents to incorporate human rights into their everyday lives and thinking. With the help of our local Raging Grannies and some more youthful artists, our 2014 Human Rights Day rally was punctuated with human rights caroling, and activists shared lyrics that we hope will inspire more thinking and creative actions around human rights. We have also worked with labor groups to encourage a broader human rights framing of labor activism, and this effort is further supported by the rise of a movement of fast food workers for a fifteen dollar minimum wage and the right to unionize. In cooperation with these and other activist groups, our Alliance joined in two weeks of action for human rights from mid-April to International Workers Day this year. Our presence among this coalition of groups is encouraging more organizers to think about human rights and the Human Rights City as a framework for organizing, and we hope that with time more will come to embrace this language and approach. By fostering more thinking and public discussion about human rights, we see this initiative as helping nurture a 'culture of human rights'—that is, a respect for human rights and dignity, a commitment to community and to cooperative and peaceful approaches to addressing social conflicts, and greater awareness of and commitment to those in the community (and beyond) who are excluded from the full enjoyment of human rights.

In Pittsburgh and elsewhere, the Human Rights Cities initiative has helped guide and inspire organizing processes aimed at incorporating human rights into public policy and the institutions of society. The orientation around advancing *universal* human rights—both economic social and cultural rights as well as civil and political rights—encourages attention to those groups that have been least able to enjoy such rights. It connects us with networks and resources outside our own community, and helps expand visions and models available for those grappling with the problems of local governance and community building. Such work is not likely to be the project of outside business elites, but instead it must be defined and led community residents, especially those most impacted by violence.

We have found in Pittsburgh that the Human Rights City framework has appealed to diverse groups and that it has been especially helpful in fostering new dialogue and learning among people who have had difficulty coming together in the past. As it does this, it encourages

critical reflection and discussion of the operation of power and inequality in our community, and has been a space where we actively confront questions about structural racism, how it is manifested in everyday practices and attitudes, and what steps we can take in our community to reduce and eliminate it.

We conclude with a few observations about how policy makers and analysts might better support the work of Human Rights Cities in transforming local governance.

- Prevailing institutions and funding practices tend to reproduce what Lang calls “institutional advocacy” that avoids conflict and contributes to the marginalization of less powerful groups. Conventional policy approaches focus on a few large, often well-funded players which are seen as organized voices of publics. In doing so these approaches neglect the voices of those most impacted by structural violence and ‘hollow out the foundations of civil society.’⁵ This calls for attention to building strong civil societies through public engagement and voice. Supporting groups that work to educate and incubate engaged publics and that support values of human rights and peace is essential.
- Projects like the Human Rights City initiative explored here are essential to the work of building a culture of human rights that can reduce violence in communities. These projects tend to be coalitions of different groups with few independent resources or staff, and thus they often rely on the leadership of a few motivated individuals and volunteers. Yet, their work to foster dialogue and understanding across diverse groups and to build social cohesion and unity around shared projects is critical to promoting peace. Thus, efforts to better support and encourage such people’s peace initiatives are needed.
- Strengthening international human rights can help reinforce local human rights initiatives and related people’s peace processes. At the same time, it contributes to strengthening international human rights law. Thus, policy makers and advocates should remain attentive to the important connections between global and local principles and processes related to human rights and their implementation. The work done by “translators” such as Human Rights City activists is critical to implementing global rights norms in local settings.

⁵ Lang, Sabine. 2013. *NGOs, Civil Society, and the Public Sphere*. (New York: Cambridge University Press), p. 209.