

The Human Rights Cities Movement: A Brief History

The Human Rights Cities initiative was launched by the [Peoples Decade for Human Rights Education](#) (PDHRE) in the wake of the 1993 World Conference on Human Rights in Vienna. The initiative aims to mobilize people in communities to “pursue a community-wide dialogue and to launch actions to improve the life and security of women, men and children based on human rights norms and standards.”¹ The process of becoming a Human Rights City can vary, and some communities start with a City Council resolution designating the city a Human Rights City. In other contexts, organizers work to build broad community alliances to support human rights principles before seeking a formal Human Rights City designation. The key point is residents’ intention of using human rights as a framework for community governance and the active engagement of popular groups in support of this aim.

Rosario, Argentina became the first Human Rights City in 1997, motivated by residents’ desires to prevent another military dictatorship and to reduce overall violence and social exclusion. Since then, activists around the world have been developing this model for transforming policymaking and raising public consciousness. The idea of Human Rights Cities has been spread especially by PDHRE through a variety of mechanisms, including at the World Social Forums, where tens of thousands of social justice organizers have gathered on an annual or bi-annual basis since 2001. Currently there are more than two dozen Human Rights Cities around the world, with growing numbers in the United States.²

Recognizing that prevailing social policies have done little to effectively address social problems such as poverty and social exclusion, human rights cities advocates contend that this initiative helps mobilize civil society actors in support of a policy agenda that prioritizes social justice and community needs over values such as economic growth and “development” which typically define policy agendas. While conventional approaches allow business and other elites to define priorities and policies, the Human Rights City initiative:

encourages local communities to take charge of their own future by understanding their needs and the causes of the various forms of deprivation ... and acting on that understanding. Where a vibrant civil society and responsive local government exist, human rights communities complement and reinforce their efforts to tackle poverty and social ills. The added value of the Human Rights Cities Program in such a context is to channel those efforts around national and international commitment to human rights. Where local government is ineffective, corrupt, or non-existent and few opportunities are available to mobilize beyond the family and clan, a human rights cities initiative is a vehicle for raising awareness and transforming that awareness into action for social change.³

Beyond providing a model for local organizing, the Human Rights City initiative is also valuable for its ability to connect local communities with a global human rights movement. It thus offers a rich body of international human rights law that validates and reinforces local claims. The value of such international connection cannot be underestimated for its role in motivating community engagement, providing guidance and models for local action, and gaining attention from policy makers and other elites in the

¹ Marks, Stephen P., Kathleen A. Modrowski, and Walther Lichem. 2008. [Human Rights Cities: Civic Engagement for Societal Development](#), p. 45. (New York: People’s Movement for Human Rights Learning & UN Habitat).

² Washington D.C. became the first U.S. Human Rights City in 2008, followed by cities including Eugene, Oregon; Chapel Hill, North Carolina; Boston; Seattle; Pittsburgh, and most recently Jackson, Mississippi.

³ [Human Rights Cities: Civic Engagement for Societal Development](#), p. 18

community. PDHRE's examination of the impacts of Human Rights City organizing in cities around the world led to the conclusion that:

Those who have participated in the creation of Human Rights Cities have acquired a skill set and confidence for questioning those power relations that make deprivation of human rights possible. They use the legal and administrative systems to their advantage and address problems of urban poverty as participants in change rather than victims of fatality or recipients of charity. They develop the ability to analyze problems in terms of deep causes rather than merely treating symptoms. The idea that social and economic injustice is "the way the world is" yields to awareness that people can change their condition by civic engagement for societal development based on human rights.⁴

With this very invitation to residents to envision what it would mean to have a city that prioritized and actively worked to promote human rights, Human Rights City initiatives are invoking creative social and political leadership from people and communities. One observer observed the impacts that had in Washington D.C.:

One DC [a group organizing around the Human Rights City framework in Washington D.C.] is working towards empowering residents, empowering the community in the Shaw and the District to know and claim their rights. It is this work that begins to make DC a human rights city, as organizing working-class and low-income communities of color and helping them build the power necessary to claim and protect their own rights is at the core of what human rights mean.⁵

Helping people know and embrace their rights also reinforces their understanding of the indivisibility of economic and civil/political rights, thereby reducing the likelihood that the initiative will be co-opted or channeled by elites. It encourages collective, critical reflection on the overarching principles and values around which we build our society. Such reflection opens space for considering and imagining radically different alternatives. For example, Sacajawea Hall, a climate justice organizer who is part of Jackson Mississippi's Human Rights City initiative, articulates the idea of a "people-centered human rights," which encompasses a system-level anti-violence emphasis that is essential to addressing the problems that plague many modern cities:

A people's centered human rights framework grows out of what oppressed people define for ourselves based on our struggles and goes beyond the limits of international legal text, it confronts white supremacy, settler-colonial capitalism, patriarchy and other systems of oppression that deny us our human agency and dignity. *This framework is grounded in the understanding that we can only realize our full human rights when we change social relationships, structures and institutions....* We have to put forth our people-centered human rights framework, link it with the emerging Rights of Mother Earth Framework and the concept of "buen vivir" (roughly translated as "living well together") and reclaim our agency, social space, and the right to live in harmony with each other and our provider and sustainer, Mother Earth.⁶

⁴ *Human Rights Cities: Civic Engagement for Societal Development*, p. 146-147.

⁵ <http://thedisorderofthings.com/2013/08/25/washington-dc-a-human-rights-city/>

⁶ Hall, Sacajawea. 2015. "[Reflections on the People's Summit on Climate Change and our Climate Justice Movement.](#)" Grassroots Global Justice Alliance, emphasis added.

Here we see the emphasis on re-defining the basic relations of society in ways that confront and challenge the current order based in the violence of colonialism, patriarchy, and racism. By naming the violence of this social order and creating spaces where residents can reflect upon and work to re-shape those fundamental social relations, projects like the Human Rights Cities help address systemic/ structural violence that plague communities and hamper effective governance. Importantly, we're also seeing in these discussions serious efforts to connect human rights with environmental justice, or rather to force people to confront and transform the violent nature of humans' relationship with the Earth. The ideas of *buen vivir* and Rights for Mother Earth expressed in the quote above are clearly integral to the realization of human rights, yet they are also fundamentally incompatible with the existing social and political order. By creating a space where residents can discuss what it means to be a human rights city, Human Rights City projects help focus attention on the violent structures that are the root cause of many problems that cities face.

Human Rights Cities thus help translate global human rights principles into local settings. In many places, Human Rights City participants are some of the few local actors actively promoting public awareness of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and other human rights treaties. For some participants in the United States, the opportunity to read (often for the first time) the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and to confront the gap between its principles and the experiences of people in their community is jarring. Projects such as the monitoring of international human rights treaties such as the Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Racial Discrimination,⁷ and the introduction of local legislation to implement global treaties such as the [“Cities for CEDAW” initiative](#), are common elements of Human Rights Cities. And annual celebrations of International Human Rights day help reinforce people's understandings of the history and universality of human rights.

In short, as spaces where residents can share their visions of a better community and where they can discuss concrete strategies for advancing such visions, Human Rights Cities offer invitations for participants to expand their political imaginations. The Human Rights Cities model flips the script of how policy is formulated and implemented, and it engages residents in the work of defining community needs and problems and in developing effective solutions to those problems. This approach expands the resources available to governments by mobilizing citizens into the work of policy development and implementation. Whereas conventional approaches tend to limit the possibilities for problem-solving to institutionally defined options, the Human Rights Cities' bottom-up approach expands the possibilities for creating new solutions by tapping the “political imagination” of residents working together to define the kind of city they want and to engage constructively in the work of building and governing such a city. As budget constraints, social inequalities, and aging infrastructure promise to make the work of municipal governance increasingly challenging, the Human Rights Cities model offer a source of new resources that can strengthen communities.

⁷ The [U.S. Human Rights Network compiles a “shadow report”](#) to bring together evidence from communities around the U.S. to compare with the official U.S. report made under the CERD review process.