

Making the Global Local: Human Rights Cities
June 21-23, 2015 University of Pittsburgh
Conference Summary Report

This conference and workshop, organized by the Global Studies Center / UCIS, in cooperation with the Pittsburgh Human Rights City Alliance, explored the question of why, and to what effect, organizers in different parts of the world have increasingly used human rights frameworks to unite diverse coalitions around demands for social change at the local (municipal or regional) level. Faculty and graduate students at the University of Pittsburgh and local human rights organizers and policy makers were joined by experts from around the country and world for two days of exchange and discussion. Below we report on what we learned, and on some of the questions and puzzles that emerged as we analyzed the human rights challenges faced in Pittsburgh and other cities and considered how international norms and laws can serve as a resource for local human rights defenders and policy makers.

Session 1: Global Perspectives on Human Rights Cities—*This session provided a global perspective on the ways cities are implementing human rights or providing the organizing contexts for broad-based human rights movement-building. The history of the Human Rights City initiative is presented along with examples of how different cities have sought to translate human rights principles into local practice.*

Michele Grigolo, Nottingham-Trent University (UK), launched our workshop by presenting a broad overview of human rights cities, in which he includes not only formally designated Human Rights Cities but also other municipalities that incorporate human rights into their policies and practices. Regardless of their designation, all Human Rights Cities are **co-produced through collaborations** between civil society and governments—including mainly local governments, but also national governments, international organizations, as well as other cities. He emphasized how human rights implementation requires the active participation of civil society as well as “mainstreaming” human rights into policy and bureaucracy city-wide. It was clear from Grigolo’s presentation and subsequent discussions at our workshop that policies of neoliberal globalization directly contradict the realization of human rights. Increasingly, cities are facing critical challenges as shrinking budgets, fiscal constraints, and market ideologies limit their ability to ensure that all residents’ basic rights and needs are met. The Human Rights City framework offers a competing logic of governance to neoliberal globalization, prioritizing human needs and rights over markets and economic growth (though some questions were raised about the *right to the city* as an alternative). Another theme that ran across the discussions is the ways cities are embedded in legal frameworks defined at the state and national levels, and how this impacts work at the local level.

Viviana Della Siega, Institute of Gender, Law and Development, Rosario, Argentina shared her experience working to organize in Rosario, Argentina, which became the first Human Rights City in 1997. She noted that the Human Rights Cities initiative first emerged from women’s organizing around the 4th World Conference on Women (Beijing) in 1994. A major goal was to promote women’s human rights. The People’s Decade for Human Rights Education (PDHRE) began promoting its Human Rights Cities initiative in 1995, and Shulamith Koenig helped Rosario organizers apply the model in their city. Her description of the work reinforced the idea

that Human Rights Cities are “co-produced” by the actions of activists (*militantes*), scholars, and politicians. In Argentina it was critical after the dictatorship to build citizenship and fight discrimination. **Human rights learning and advocacy thus became a tool for deepening citizenship.** Examples of Rosario’s human rights work included programs to bring together leaders of the LGBTQ population and the police, a campaign against harassment on public transit, participatory budgeting, transforming school curricula, and women’s and Indigenous peoples’ rights initiatives.

Kathleen Modrowski, Long Island University and Jindal School of Liberal Arts and Humanities brought her experience working with the People’s Movement for Human Rights Learning (PDHRE) and shared examples from multiple countries, including two emerging Human Rights Cities in India. She stressed the idea that organizers have abandoned talk of “education” in favor of human rights “learning”—stressing the dynamic and non-hierarchical process of social transformation that is a part of people coming to know and claim their rights. Since Human Rights Cities do not focus exclusively on one constituency, they allow for multiple stakeholders to engage in the process. From the organizing standpoint, it is important that leaders help create bonds among multiple organizations with overlapping goals. The global perspective of human rights helps people see the larger dimensions of local problems, and they realize that they are not alone in their struggles. Global connections can help activists feel part of a much larger and stronger movement for human rights while providing resources in the form of model practices, campaigns, educational resources, individual expertise, and even prestige. They also help illuminate the global dimensions of local issues, and they enlarge what may be called “circles of caring.” Modrowski pointed to the importance of involving not just decision makers, but also technical contractors and experts working in and for cities. Promoting human rights learning among those carrying out municipal policies (including private firms contracting with city) is critical to helping residents enjoy their human rights. For instance, in Accra, Ghana’s Human Rights City, all municipal contractors are required to participate in human rights training. Modrowski identified some key obstacles for many Human Rights Cities, including: funding; sustaining leadership and momentum; religious conflicts and religious-secular divides; co-optation by political parties and officials; and overly ambitious goals.

Keynote address

"Tackling Structural Racism and Discrimination and Achieving Equality: the Role of Cities" Paul Lappalainen, Senior Advisor, Swedish Equality Ombudsman; European Coalition of Cities Against Racism, Stockholm, Sweden [[presentation slide show](#)]

*This presentation stressed the need for changes in laws and policies that would make it costly for organizations, municipal contractors, individuals and businesses to discriminate. Changes in attitude will follow. ‘People form structures, and structures shape people/culture’ It is critical to confront power inequities when working to advance human rights. ‘On their own, law, research and mobilization seldom lead to change, but together they can produce change.’ Civil society plays a critical role in monitoring and protecting human rights, and needs to be provided with authorization and resources to perform this vital work. Cities need to give greater priority to **human rights outcomes** rather than simply ‘opportunities.’ (Models of action are provided in the [European Coalition of Cities Against Racism Ten Point Action Plan](#))*

Session 2: Human Rights Organizing in the United States

Rebecca Landy, U.S. Human Rights Network. USHRN helps coordinate civil society engagement in international human rights mechanisms review – *International Human Rights Law is seen as a resource for mobilization and community learning*. USHRN uses international treaty monitoring processes as tools for learning and mobilization. It helps monitor local-level compliance with international Human Rights treaties like the Convention on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination and produces national civil society “shadow reports” to supplement/counter official reports made by the U.S. government to the United Nations and related international treaty monitoring bodies. USHRN works to support outreach, education, and mobilization of U.S. residents to promote human rights and strengthen international human rights law. One important project is the Human Rights Tribunals, documented in [Testimonies of Human Rights at Home - Documenting Injustice in the United States](#). USHRN also engages in *Human rights 101 workshops* to help local organizers understand international human rights processes and to address human rights issues in their communities.

Rob Robinson, USA-Canada Alliance of Inhabitants, National Economic and Social Rights Initiative (NESRI). Robinson’s remarks stressed the need to change the narrative around homelessness and poverty in the United States to reflect the experiences and realities of growing numbers of people around the world who are being excluded and dispossessed by the global economy. Based on his work with leading international movements fighting poverty and social exclusion, he argued that we should be using more forceful language to advance human rights claims. For instance, he raised the observation that “gentrification” is actually a form of “ethnic cleansing” since it evicts one group (low-income residents—often people of color) in favor of another. A human rights framework helps amplify the moral authority of claims around basic human needs (such as housing, the right to food, water, a healthy environment, etc.), regardless of whether or not these ‘rights’ are legally binding. The ability to appeal to international instruments and to engage UN mechanisms and officials can help focus and advance local struggles while at the same time reinforcing human rights claims-making elsewhere—such as in the case of Detroit’s initiative on the right to water. Echoing other presentation, Robinson observed from his extensive work that the human rights framework is effective at uniting people and groups that tend to organize around distinct single-issues around shared visions and goals.

Anja Rudiger, National Economic and Social Rights Initiative (NESRI). Rudiger’s presentation drew from her work with NESRI’s [Healthcare is a Human Right Campaign Collaborative](#), which emphasizes the need to build local organizing and leadership capacities to advance human rights over the long-term by changing discourses and holding public officials accountable to human rights. Why is the human rights frame effective? Like other speakers, Rudiger stressed its ability to focus attention on the extra-local, structural causes of human rights denials and its effectiveness at mobilizing participation and encouraging broad alliances. She also emphasized that human rights are people-centered, so the HR framework treats people as change agents; relatedly she stressed the power of individual stories in persuading people and building movements. Key challenges include the equality challenge of addressing the needs of the most impacted groups and building a human rights constituency to engage in long-term work. There is no ready-made constituency for human rights. Also, challenges of limited municipal jurisdictions and competition between cities as well as urban/rural differences complicate human rights work. Some examples of effective human rights advocacy include [Putting People First!](#) PA,

[Baltimore's United Workers Fair Development Recovery Plan](#), and [human rights budgeting](#) initiatives.

Carl Redwood, Hill District Consensus Group and University of Pittsburgh School of Social Work (respondent).-Redwood noted that Pittsburgh's Black population has seen huge shifts as a result of the city's approach to development. In recent decades, Pittsburgh has lost around 20,000 Black residents while surrounding suburban areas that are less accessible by public transit have seen their Black populations grow by around 30,000 residents. In short, African-Americans are being pushed out of the city in what is essentially a "forced migration" caused by gentrification and related policies. He echoed the importance of attending to the structural causes of homelessness and other issues while at the same time stressing the need for effective campaigns to identify and achieve small victories to sustain people's livelihoods as well as the movement. He also stressed the importance of the right to work and of the wage/labor system as integral to many of the issues being discussed.

Session 3: Human Rights Cities in North America: issues and challenges *This session outlined examples from human rights cities of practices and initiatives that can be effective in implementing human rights norms in local settings.*

Ken Neubeck, Eugene, Oregon Human Rights Commission Eugene's Human Rights City initiative began in 2007; it represents a "top-down" approach to building a Human Rights City. The Human Rights Commission helps lead the work and cultivate a culture of human rights in municipal governance. Eugene has developed a [Triple Bottom Line Analysis tool](#) to implement rights in local practices. All initiatives and grants must account for the impacts on economic development, environmental stewardship, and social equity. Neubeck emphasized that engaging with city works as *already* human rights workers had proved highly effective in winning acceptance for changes in policies and in operations. He also noted that after 7 years, many social justice organizations within the city had adopted the human rights framework and discourse.

Maigan van der Giessen, John Humphrey Center (Edmonton, Alberta) Edmonton became the first North American Human Rights City in 2003. Compared with Eugene, the approach in Edmonton is more bottom-up, as it is led by the [John Humphrey Center](#), a non-profit organization. The Humphrey Center works with public agencies, but much of its work focuses on grassroots organizing, training, and education. The presentation highlighted the Center's youth programs and culture, stressing the importance of story-telling and role-playing in their "Dignity Campaign." Here is a [link to a video of a mural project](#) that emerged from one of the Center's youth leadership projects addressing dignity.

We also discussed lessons from other Human Rights Cities, such as Jackson, Mississippi, which became the most recent U.S. Human Rights City in December 2014. Organizers with [Cooperation Jackson](#) have used this initiative to draw attention to the work they are doing from national and international allies. They also hope to defend the human rights advances made by their late mayor, Chokwe Lumumba, who had established a Human Rights Commission for the city during his brief administration. The Human Rights City initiative in Jackson is working to

advance racial equity and justice in the face of aggressive gentrification efforts led by the current city administration.

Closing Workshop: Building and rebuilding cities for human rights

Break-out groups discussed the lessons, models, and ideas for translating abstract notions of human rights into local contexts and actions and considered some of the broader challenges and opportunities in such efforts. We highlight some of the ideas raised in these discussions below. Participants also identified possible collaborations, and we made plans to continue working together to expand our networks and resources and to make Pittsburgh a Human Rights City.

Translating abstract rights to local contexts and actions

- Discussed varied audiences for local human rights message and how to engage residents from all walks of life in the work;
- Need for pro-active approach to communicating implications of international human rights law for local public officials;
- Need to promote *human rights learning* that helps all residents see the systemic causes of human rights violations and exclusions
 - We must confront liberal/radical distinctions in human rights discourses;
 - We must promote human rights learning among city leaders, officials, and staff.
- Need to create resources to aid human rights learning;
- Need to reach privileged groups to demonstrate how they are implicated in the perpetuation of human rights denial/violations;
- Need to create spaces for communities to come together to generate shared identities, understandings of rights, and alternative visions;
- Discussed the centrality of race and intersectionality in human rights work;
- Discussed use of story-telling/sharing experiences and examples of projects that facilitated this;
- Discussed using “days of action” to raise consciousness on human rights and the experiences of diverse members of the community;
- Considered opportunities for “clusters” of cooperation among human rights cities facing similar challenges (e.g., Rust Belt cities);
- Discussed how cities serve as nodal points for various social and economic processes that are not always under the jurisdiction of a single entity (city, county, etc.)

Discussion:

- Critical to human rights advocacy is advancing a **systemic analysis** and strategy that connects with people’s lived experiences. But system change takes time, and so our work needs to be framed in ways that allow for the achievement of “small victories” that can help sustain people’s involvement over the long-term.
- **Human Rights Cities as co-produced** by interactions between elites and grassroots movements. This calls for re-thinking our notions of politics to amplify voices of groups that have long been excluded from formal policy process and to transform the polity in order to achieve more equitable participation and outcomes. Priority is on improving

conditions for those most impacted by denials of human rights, and this requires both direct action and cooperation with public authorities.

- Conflict vs. consensus: liberal notions of human rights obscure the fundamental issue of power and inequality. What does it mean to have a transformative human rights agenda? What strategies can help build broad movement for human rights while also confronting fundamental conflicts over power and inequality? Human rights struggles **must engage questions of power** and inequality to be effective.
- Human Rights Cities try to open space for residents to expand their political imaginations and **develop a vision of a very different politics and society**. The practices outlined by speakers provided opportunities for residents to engage in thinking about strategies for making their visions a reality. They also involve building a broad alliance/movement that fosters a sense that such radical transformation is possible.
- **Language and rhetoric** proved to be important in our discussion. There is a need to actively confront and replace euphemistic terms like ‘gentrification’ with terms like “ethnic cleansing” or “forced migration” to stress the real impacts of discriminatory policies on residents who are most affected. Our language should express justified outrage at policies that reinforce inequality and discrimination and mobilize moral authority that can engage more residents in work to advance human rights.
 - Another linguistic matter is the use in the U.S. of the term ‘activist’ or ‘volunteer.’ Our guests from outside the United States noted that the term ‘militant’ is used elsewhere, a term that stresses the conflictual nature of political engagement.
 - One participant observed that many people in our society are *“too comfortable with their privilege” and too accepting of oppression*. Human rights organizing must confront such complacency if we are to realize human rights.
- The grounded epistemology of human rights conflicts with the bureaucratic and political desire to define things. We have to learn from people whose rights are most impacted, but this is hard in a real political context. Homelessness in Eugene an illustration.
- Human rights conflicts involve **understandings of the commons**. How has the market economy commodified things that should be considered human rights—such as health care, education, water? How can we reframe public discourse to help reclaim the commons for everyone? Does the human rights framework offer a compelling alternative to the neoliberal globalization project?
- **Building sustainable movement and effective, distributed leadership** for human rights is critical. This requires attention to cultural work and building a human rights culture. It also requires deliberate efforts to cultivate youth leadership.
- **Stress on learning vs. education** and the important transformational aspect that ties more easily to learning – most educated people don’t realize they are a big part of the problem (which is why learning is required)
- Human rights advocates and analysts tend to be good at identifying what’s wrong but not so good at proposing repairs. We need a vision for the change we want to realize and strategies for moving this vision forward--not just a list of what is wrong.
 - Models for institutionalizing human rights must be developed, documented and widely shared.

Selected Human Rights Organizing Resources

Toolkits and Organizing Templates

- American Friends Service Committee's [JustUs! Human Rights-based curriculum for youth](#).
- [Baltimore's United Workers Fair Development Recovery Plan](#)
- [European Coalition of Cities Against Racism 10-point action plan](#)
- [European Charter for the Safeguarding of Human Rights in the City](#)
- [Anti-Racism Toolkit](#)- by the Canadian Coalition of Municipalities Against Racism and Discrimination
- [Global Charter Safeguarding Human Rights in the City](#)
- [International Coalition of Cities Against Racism](#)-This UNESCO initiative brings together international and municipal leaders to share experiences and develop [action plans for fighting discrimination](#) in cities. The [U.S. Coalition of Cities Against Racism and Discrimination](#) formed in 2013 in Birmingham, Alabama.
- National Economic and Social Rights Initiative two-pager on [using human rights narrative for organizing](#)
- National Economic and Social Rights Initiative (NESRI) [Health Care is a Human Right Campaign Collaborative](#)
- [Eugene Oregon Human Rights Commission](#)
 - [Triple Bottom Line-analysis tool for implementing human rights in city programs](#)
- [Rights respecting schools program](#)-to advance the Convention on the Rights of the Child—promote restorative justice, inclusion/diversity, diffusion of HR principles throughout staff (see also [UNICEF-UK Rights Respecting Schools program](#))

Organizations and outreach resources

- [Putting People First!](#) Pennsylvania
- National Economic and Social Rights Initiative (NESRI) [People's Budget video](#) with a [slideshow presentation](#)
- National Economic and Social Rights Initiative [“More than a Roof” initiative on housing rights \(40 min. video\)](#)
- FILM: [Kelly Anderson – “My Brooklyn,”](#) a perspective on ‘gentrification’ from the viewpoint of displaced residents.

Research Articles and Reports

- MacNaughton and McGill, ["Economic and Social Rights: Implementation without Ratification,"](#) an article that discusses both the Vermont "Health Care is a Human Right" campaign and the Eugene, Oregon [Human Rights City Project](#).
- Open Society Foundation research on inclusion, democracy, anti-discrimination in EU Cities:
 - <http://www.opensocietyfoundations.org/reports/living-together-projects-promoting-inclusion-11-eu-cities>
 - <http://www.opensocietyfoundations.org/projects/home-europe/background>
 - <http://www.opensocietyfoundations.org/reports/muslims-europe-report-11-eu-cities>
 - <http://www.opensocietyfoundations.org/free-tags/home-europe-project>
 - <http://www.opensocietyfoundations.org/reports/europes-white-working-class-communities-report-six-eu-cities>