HUMAN RIGHTS CITIES NETWORK (HRCN)
REPORT TO THE OFFICE OF THE UNITED NATIONS HIGH COMMISSIONER FOR HUMAN RIGHTS

The HRNC report responds to the **Call for inputs: Human Rights Council resolution 51/12 on local government and human rights.** The resolution 51/12 requests the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights to organize a one-day expert meeting on enhancing capacity-building for local governments to incorporate human rights into all their work, as a basis for developing guidance tools on human rights education for local governments, and to prepare and present a summary report for the fifty-sixth session of the Council.

1. Background

The Human Rights Cities Network (HRCN) is non-profit making organisation, based in Belgium, with a geographical scope in Europe and beyond. Human rights and participative democracy are at the centre of our work. Our vision is to make human rights a reality for everyone and therefore, to foster inclusive democracy and social justice. We connect inspiring cities' initiatives and reinforce the development of the human rights cities' movement at the local, the regional and the global level.

We advocate for a stronger collaboration between local authorities, civil society and political decision-makers to strengthen a human rights-based approach at the core of they work. Through its online platform, the network connects human rights cities practitioners willing to contribute to the development of concepts, guiding practices and operational strategies, to enhance human rights cities movement.

The Human Rights Cities Network focus on five main objectives:

- Create an interactive community of human rights cities practitioners in Europe and beyond

- Exchange locally-developed promising practices and knowledge through interaction with civil society actors, academic institutes, and pertinent national or international institutions

- Support municipalities and democracy actors to connect, promote and scale up the development of human rights cities

- Develop a guiding framework with a methodology, models and tools linked to relevant human rights instruments and policy at the national, European and global levels

- Tackle challenges and provide solutions that can lead to successful development of human rights cities.

2. Introduction

The world has changed faces. Globalisation implies cross border territories and interactions in a space of flows structured by urban networks. Cities, as nodes in a network, become concentrations of diverse people, functions and institutions. Because democracy and human rights start where people live, cities are the best place to exercise these rights. Therefore, human rights cities are in a strategic position to better address inclusion, gender equity, accessibility of public services and social justice through their local governance. The spatial organisation of the city, citizens and services are vital to democracy and equity.

The recent Eurocities Pulse Survey highlights that the top priorities for city leaders in 2023 include climate action, the clean energy transition, economic recovery, urban mobility, migration, housing and tackling inequalities. European cities have also demonstrated their central role when tackling challenges, such as the Covid-19 pandemic and the repercussions of the Russian war in Ukraine. With estimates saying that 80% of the EU's population will live in cities and urban areas by 2050, it is clear that major global challenges are increasingly becoming urbanised. Like many global challenges – such as climate change, pandemics, social inequality, cultural diversity, poverty, housing, migration – the social agenda is concentrated in these cities. The complexity and the urgency of these challenges cannot be tackled in urban areas without the consent and the engagement from the population, and more specifically the civil society.

Many of the social, economic and environmental issues Europe is facing have an urban dimension and are most likely to have a larger impact in cities. Social demands related to the specific context (socio-economic dynamics, social geography) of cities is increasing. To respond, local authorities need to localise their social policy and embed fundamental rights and democratic practices in co-production with civil society. The political economy analysis of the city - the interrelationships of individuals, local governments, and public policy - shows that efficient urban services delivery is driven by the local needs of the population.

The HRCN recognizes the vital role of cities in tackling major global issues and building a just, green and prosperous urban future. The COVID-19 pandemic and the ongoing economic crisis have demonstrated the predominant role of cities and their importance as a new political actor at national but also at regional and international level.

As national welfare policies and provisions are under pressure and as social needs and challenges are increasing, cities need to fill gaps and cater for ever more policies. Guaranteeing human rights asks for powerful urban policies and solidarities. Like urban governance needs to be pragmatic and transversal, the participation of social movements and civil society is necessary to enhance democracy at local level. With the increased responsibilities of cities comes a more important role in respecting, protecting and fulfilling human rights. The local level is becoming crucial for ensuring the full enjoyment of human rights by all citizens, without any forms of discrimination.

3. Capacity building gaps and needs

The network identifies two major gaps that need to be bridged. The first one is related to the discrepancy between theory and practice. On one hand, cities are uniquely positioned to facilitate a translation of rights and values enshrined in international Treaties and in human rights standards into tangible experiences in people's everyday life. On the other hand, there is

a critical lack of understanding of the relevance and usefulness of human rights standards and their application at local or regional levels. As for example, the key EU document that enshrines the fundamental rights of EU citizens and residents is the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union. However, a underlined targeted consultation conducted by the European Commission has shown a low level of awareness of the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights among local authorities as well as among citizens. This example illustrates the need to improve the effectiveness of human rights instruments ensuring the protection and promotion of rights, freedoms and principles that it brings together.

The HRCN recognises that part of the solution resides in the necessity to provide training and capacity building to raise citizens' awareness and knowledge of their rights, but also to support local authorities in their shared responsibility to implementation Sates' human rights obligations at local level. Through its analysis of human rights cities, the network focuses on the necessity for both, local authorities and the citizens, to have a common understanding on how human rights can be translated into people's everyday life. By doing so, the HRCN found that one of the most efficient way is to co-develop local policies with a human rights-based approach.

The second gap is rooted in cities' lack of user-friendly and adaptive tools that would allow them to conduct human rights monitoring and reflect the findings in the design and implementation of their policies. The development of such tools, particularly the co-creation and the piloting of a standardised monitoring system is at the heart of the HRNC on-going work. The focus should be on the co-creation and the active participation of citizens and civil society because human rights are better guaranteed in the context of an open and informed democratic debate. However, the debate is better informed if all participants are equipped with the necessary knowledge and so far, the majority of EU citizens lack awareness of their human rights.

Through the participation to the [Recharging Advocacy for Rights in Europe (RARE)](#) programme and as a member of the [European Civic Forum](#) the HRCN also turnd its attention to civil society at home. Civil society is an essential partner at all levels to address local, regional and global trends challenging democracy and fundamental rights in Europe and beyond. A sustained and joint effort is therefore needed from local governments, as the primary duty bearer in direct contact with the population, to ensure that the civil society is key partners for protecting democracies.

There is a need to empower cities and civil society to defend democracy, protect the human rights values and build a sustainable future. Urban areas are where the potential for innovation lies to solve global challenges at the local level, creating the ground to recharge democracy. The urgent transitions require a direct action at local level and innovative forms of urban governance integrating *cross-cutting policies* and participatory democracy approaches. With the socio-economic crisis and the rise of anti-democratic movements, a special attention to the rights of women, minorities and marginalized or underrepresented groups is crucial to protect and promote democracy for All. Liveable cities imply good public services, a redistributive economy, active citizenship and more solidarity.

To take up the many challenges aiming at guaranteeing access to human rights for every citizen, cities need more and better data, and above all good monitoring and assessment instruments.

4. Human rights cities: initiatives and perspectives

At European level, the EU Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA) acknowledges the local authorities' role in putting human rights on the map by introducing creative initiatives to strengthen people's rights. In 2021, the FRA report on "Human rights cities in the EU: a framework for reinforcing rights locally" underlined the important role of cities in promoting human rights locally. The framework for human rights cities looks at the foundations, structures and tools that can help cities integrate human rights in a holistic and sustainable way in their work. This framework - developed in partnership with many stakeholders including the HRCN – was complemented in 2022 by a new guide on "How to make human rights part of everyone's daily life – a guide for local authorities". This guide presents the framework for human rights cities in the EU and contains practical advice on how the elements of the framework can be implemented.

At global level, the growth of the human rights cities movement is reflected with the involvement of the OHCHR and UNESCO in the annual World Human Rights City Forum (WHRCF), to which the HRCN is participating and contributed as a member of the WHRCF International Committee from 2019 to 2022. Other landmark initiatives such as the *Global Campaign "10, 100, 1000 Human Rights Cities and Territories by 2030*, launched in 2023, at international level by cities, and part of activities of the Committee on Social Inclusion, Participatory Democracy and Human Rights (UCLG-CISDPDH), underpin the growing importance of human rights cities development in the world.

Human rights cities provide a diversity of models and practices around the globe. However, at present there is **neither formal accreditation nor international or regional minimum standards** framing their development. There is still a **lack of awareness and knowledge on how to become a human rights city**, as well as on the procedures to mobilise citizens and communities' engagement in actions contributing to solidarity, social justice and democratic processes. While international human rights law instruments and standards are signed and endorsed at the national level, in reality they are mainly implemented and enforced by local authorities. Because there is no harmonised commitment framework for human rights yet and a lack of pragmatic tools guiding cities' actor in the translation of human rights in reality at the local level, there is a need to address the shortfall of transparency and accountability enforcement mechanisms.

In fact, **a standardized assessment system based on international minimum standards has not been created yet to frame the development of a human rights city**. In Europe, the Fundamental Rights Agency (FRA)'s new Framework for locally-based Human Rights Action, is a landmark in this regard. Nevertheless, it still lacks a specific tool to monitor the achievements of both existing and still-in-the-making human rights cities. The need for this kind of instrument is regularly underlined by cities and the HRCN in several meetings or fora organised by the FRA, the WHRCF or the OHCHR, but no system has been elaborated yet.

In this context, the HRCN is advocating for specific mechanisms to support cities actors, mainly local authorities and civil society, in building and own a common monitoring system to better integrate human rights into public policies.

At present, the growth of a multiplicity of city networks risks dispersing city efforts for human rights into particularism, hindering the capacities for joint actions for the respect, promotion and protection of human rights at the level of the city. Therefore, the added value reside in the cross-fertilizing of different networks' knowledge and approaches to form a network of networks coming together around the common denominator of human rights.

5. HRCN main recommendations

a) We propose the UN system to revisit its institutional architecture in order to ensure a fluid exchange of information between local governments and the UN institutions, thus allowing a fluid exchange of information in both ways: reinforcing the meaningful contribution of the local authorities to the UN Treaty bodies reporting and in return, strengthening local authorities awareness on their role in specific consultation mechanisms. The Global Alliance of the National Human Rights Institutions (GANHRI) could be an inspiring model in this perspective.

b) We invite the UN Council of Human Rights to task the OHCHR:
   - to initiate an inclusive process to formulate *Guidelines on the effective implementation of human rights at local level* based on the same process used to define the *Guidelines on the effective implementation on the right to participate in public affairs,*
   - to provide an annual report on good practices of human rights cities and challenges faced by local authorities in effectively implementing human rights at local level,
   - to convey twice a year workshop or expert meeting on specific thematic enhancing capacity-building for local governments to entrench a human rights-based approach at the core of their work. The outcomes should guide the co-development of guiding or monitoring tools and methodology on human rights practices and policies for local governments and civil society, thus facilitating their common understanding on how human rights can be translated into public services delivery.

c) We request OHCHR to encourage National Human Rights Institutions (NHRIs) to support local governments in protecting and promoting human rights. Enhanced cooperation with association of local governments should contribute to the development of guidance and specific tools to empower local government's responsibilities in implementing human rights at local level in close cooperation with civil society.

d) We urge the OHCHR to explores ways of supporting networks of human rights cities at a regional and global level, as well as cross-fertilise different networks' knowledge and approaches to form network of networks supporting the development and the promotion of human rights at a local government level.