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Human Rights Based Approach for Local Governments – Why, What and How?

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HUMAN RIGHTS-BASED APPROACH FOR LOCAL GOVERNMENTS

Why, What and How?



Introduction

The purpose of this introduction to Human Rights-Based Approach (HRBA) is to give you, as a local government employee or elected local government politician, an understanding of **why** local governments should apply HRBA, **what** HRBA is, and **how** HRBA is used by local governments in everyday policy and practice.

This introduction to HRBA continues the work of the Raoul Wallenberg Institute for Human Rights and Humanitarian Law (RWI) to build user-friendly human rights knowledge and tools for cities and regions, in Sweden and abroad.¹ It was developed as part of a collaboration between Swedish International Centre for Local Democracy (ICLD) and RWI 2022-2023, involving cities in Sweden and Southern Africa.²

To complement this introduction, we have prepared a **short film** that is a brief visualization of HRBA. If you have not watched it already, we recommend you start there!

This introduction to HRBA is structured around three cornerstones of HRBA: **The relationship between duty bearers and rights holders, key human rights principles, and HRBA as a mindset and a local government work process.**

Sections 1-5 are knowledge oriented and describe the foundations of HRBA. Section 6 is action oriented and guides you to apply HRBA at the particular stage of a specific local policy, programme, project or activity you find yourself at this moment.

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¹ This includes [Human Rights in Action: Localizing Human Rights for Sustainable Development](#) (2023), [Localising Human Rights in the Context of SDGs: a Handbook for Cities](#) (2022), [Human Rights City Indicators](#) (2021), authored by Gülay Günlük-Şenesen, Özgür Arun, Aslıhan Aykara, Ulaş Sunata, Adem Arkadaş Thibert and Yelda Yüceland [Human Rights Cities and Regions: Swedish and International Perspectives](#) (2017), edited by Martha F. Davis, Thomas Gammeltoft Hansen and Emily Hanna.

² The Research project: <https://icld.se/en/researchproject/human-rights-perceptions-and-practices-at-the-local-level-cases-from-southern-africa-and-sweden/>



Film:
Human Rights-Based Approach
for Local Governments



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Human Rights Based Approach

2. Local governments as duty bearers and inhabitants as rightsholders

Human rights standards cover all areas of life, from the right to life and health to the right to education and cultural and political participation. These human rights are defined in international legal instruments. Some of these conventions address the equal rights of every human being (e.g. the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights).³ Some target specific groups who have been marginalised in society as well as in the realisation of their human rights (e.g. the Convention on the Rights of the Child).⁴

These conventions are legally **binding** for the states who choose to ratify them. They require states to take action to protect and fulfill the enjoyment of human rights. They also prohibit states from taking certain actions that can negatively affect the enjoyment of human rights.



³ Other such conventions include the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (1966) and the Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (1984).

⁴ Other such conventions include the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (1965), the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (1979), and the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2006).

All levels of the state are **duty bearers** under human rights conventions, including local governments. Being a duty bearer means having the obligation to use all available tools of governance to realise human rights for all inhabitants. As duty bearers, local governments must apply all their regulatory, administrative and executive processes to translate human rights into tangible policies, programmes, projects, activities and working methods, responsive to the local context and local priorities. This obligation covers **all areas of life** where local governments affect the enjoyment by inhabitants of human rights through the exercise of power and delivery of services. Common areas of life where local governments have mandate and influence include education, health, housing, urban planning, local democratic processes and labour rights as an employer.

As a **duty bearer**, a local government is required to:

1. Build its knowledge and capacity to fulfill its role as a duty bearer under human rights conventions,
2. Actively apply all its regulatory, administrative and executive processes in a way that ensures the enjoyment of human rights by all inhabitants,
3. Develop and apply policies, routines, processes and mechanisms capable of ensuring the enjoyment of human rights by all inhabitants,
4. Through this, ensure that all inhabitants enjoy the human rights that the local government has influence over.



All inhabitants are **rights holders** under human rights conventions. Being a rights holder means having **legitimate claims** to enjoy the human rights in these conventions. Rights holders also have the right to **hold dutybearers accountable** if and when human rights are not enjoyed. The position of a rights holder has different layers. At the core, a rights holder has a right to know about their human rights and to be involved in the processes that localise and realise these rights. A rights holder also needs to know how to claim these rights. Being a rights holder means that one's claims are adjudicated and redressed, and to have decisions about one's human rights effectively enforced.

As a rights holder, an inhabitant must be able to:

1. Effectively enjoy the rights protected in human rights conventions on a basis of equality,
2. Know about their human rights and have access to information about the local realisation of human rights, generally and as concerns themselves,
3. Be involved in the local understanding and realisation of human rights,
4. Use mechanisms to claim their rights and to have them adjudicated,
5. Have decisions about their human rights actively enforced.

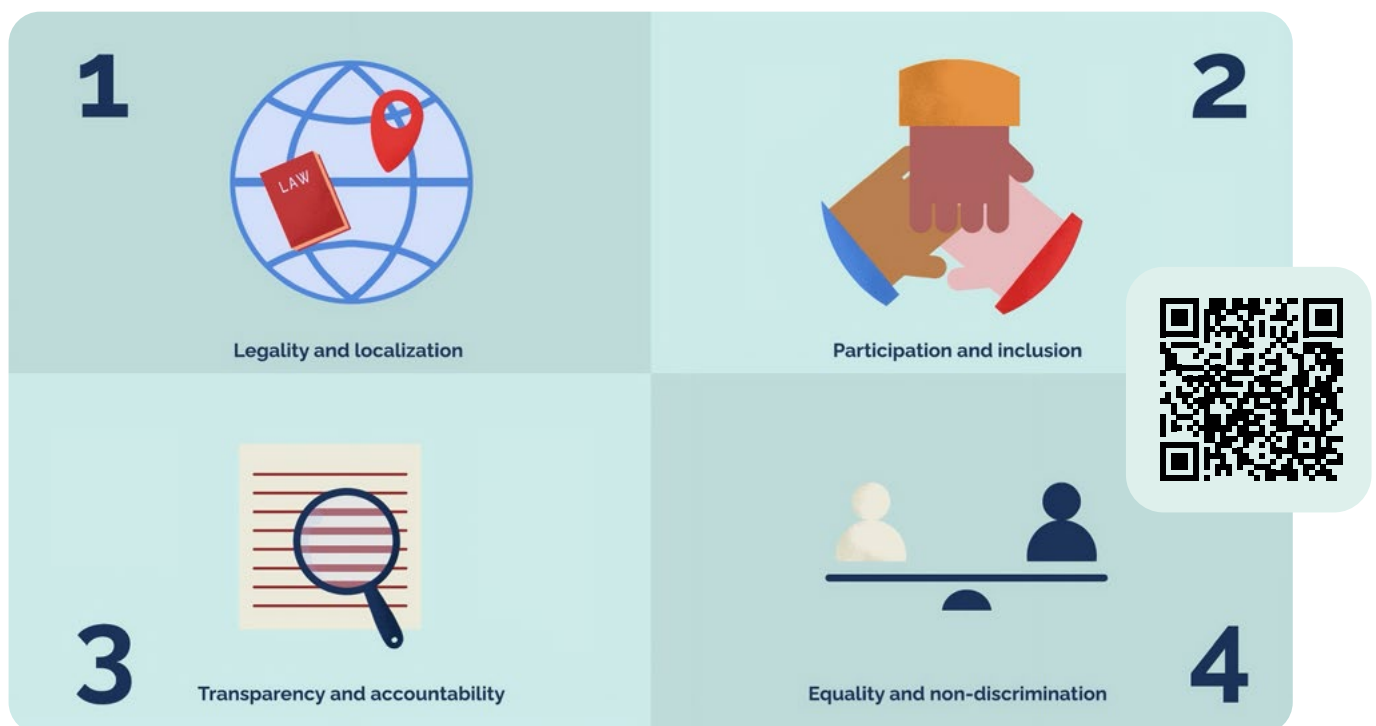
The **relationship between duty bearers and rights holders** is what distinguishes a Human Rights-Based Approach (HRBA) from other approaches, such as a needs-based approach. HRBA places inhabitants in the center of identifying their own needs. As opposed to a needs-based approach, HRBA frames the fulfillment of these needs as a matter of **rights, to be claimed, adjudicated, enforced and fulfilled**. This relationship operationalises the fundamental idea that the enjoyment of human rights by rights holders is ultimately what makes the power executed by local, regional and national government as duty bearers **legitimate**.

Through ensuring human rights compliance, HRBA is a tool for **quality assurance**. HRBA makes policies, programmes, projects and activities more **efficient, effective, innovative, fair and sustainable**. It helps to build trust and legitimacy in public institutions, improves efficiency and use of public funds, reduces risk of corruption and maladministration, enhances staff capacity, resilience, and ethical decision-making, and helps prevent exclusion, conflict, and social unrest.

3. Key human rights principles

Common to all human rights, irrespective whether it is the right to life, education or political participation, is that they all encapsulate the **same key principles**. These principles, along with the relationship between rights holders and duty bearers, must **shape all local policies, programmes, projects, activities and working methods** that affect the human rights of inhabitants.

Human rights as a legal concept is deeply principled. This means that principles need to guide the implementation of every right. The following principles are the bedrock of HRBA: **legality and localisation, participation and inclusion, transparency and accountability and equality and non-discrimination**.⁵



Legality and localisation

Together, the principles of legality and localisation ensure the meaningful and effective realisation of human rights through carefully chosen instruments of governance. The implementation of these principles requires the combination of knowledge of the content of human rights conventions with evidence-based knowledge of how the rights and obligations therein are best realised in a specific local context, taken its particular conditions and circumstances.

⁵ The exact terminology differs between different conceptualizations of HRBA. See for example the PLANET framework, [Human Rights-Based Approach to Development Programming: HRBA Toolkit](#), United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), (2025), p. 32. All the principles included above, except that of localization are, as a rule, included in versions of HRBA. We have included the principle of localisation to capture the requirement in human rights conventions to effectively realise human rights locally, close to the individual's everyday life.

Knowledge is a precondition for achieving **legality** by translating the rights, principles and obligations in human rights conventions into local policies, programmes, projects, activities and working methods that realise specific human rights. Consequently, each person within local governance must be **educated** about the parts of human rights conventions that regulate the areas of life they work with, including specific rights and obligations as well as general principles.

Importantly, knowledge of human rights conventions ensures that local governments are aware that their obligations as a duty bearer exceed operating in accordance with national law. Instead, local governments must **actively use all their instruments of governance**, including regulatory powers, policy development, budgeting, procurement, decision making and awareness raising, to secure the enjoyment of human rights by all rights holders.

The principle of **localisation** recognises that human rights often can be implemented in different ways, and through the use of different instruments of governance. It obligates the local government to ground each policy, programme, project, activity and working method in the **evidence-based knowledge of local conditions and circumstances**. Each local context requires a unique combination of use of regulatory powers, policy development, budgeting, procurement, decision making and awareness raising. In the end, the legitimacy of the choice of instruments of governance is determined by its results: the enjoyment of human rights by rights holders.



Participation and inclusion

Together, **the principles of participation and inclusion** require the local government to meaningfully and effectively involve inhabitants in all aspects and stages of its work. HRBA places inhabitants as rights holders in the center of defining their needs and of quality-assuring local efforts to fulfill these needs. Consequently, all who are affected by local policies, programmes, projects, activities and working methods must have the opportunity to **influence** the content of these, as well as how they are carried out.

The duty to **create opportunities for participation and inclusion** contains both broad processes for involving inhabitants generally, as well as specific efforts **targeting rights holders who are particularly affected by an issue and/or have traditionally been excluded from policy making** and have had their needs defined by others. Here, the forms of participation offered need to be calibrated to suit the circumstances and requirement of the rights-holders.

Importantly, the duty to create opportunities for participation and inclusion must be intrinsic to the entire process of local governance. It must be **built into every step**, from the initial analysis of human rights, issues and local conditions, through the design and implementation of local policies, programmes, projects, activities and working methods to the monitoring and evaluation of this process and its results, as well as the drawing of conclusion, identifying lessons learned and deciding on next steps.

Participation and inclusion are both rights in themselves, and a **precondition for finding effective and innovative solutions** to challenges that the local government is mandated to meet. **Good governance** requires the local government to inform itself about the needs and preferences of inhabitants, as well as harnessing their knowledge of which solutions can meet these needs and preferences. Without jointly identifying barriers, opportunities, and solutions, human rights will not be successfully realised, and neither will local mandates such as education, health or political participation.

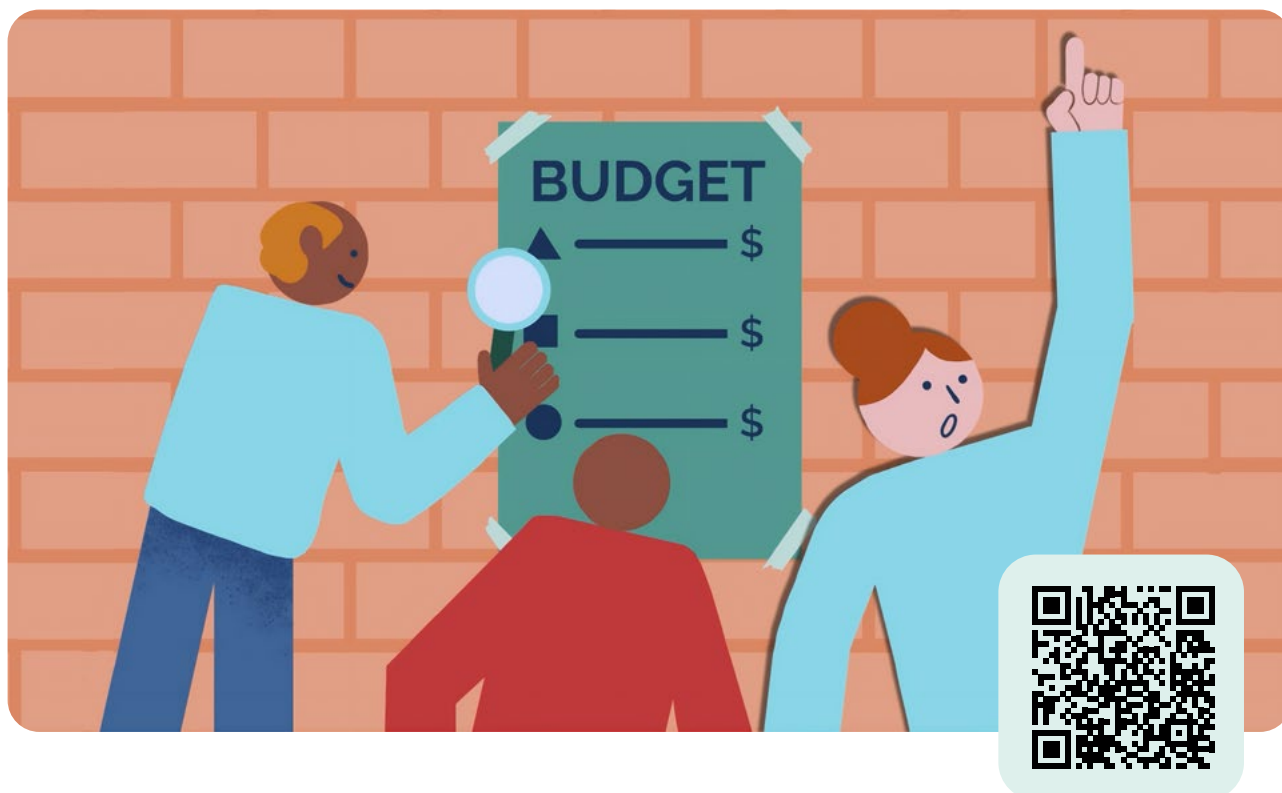
Transparency and accountability

Together, **the principles of transparency and accountability** require the local government to grant inhabitants **insight** into how it exercises its mandate and implements human rights, as well as to provide **mechanism to be held responsible** when rights are not respected, protected and fulfilled. Transparency ensures that rights holders are informed and can identify violations, while accountability ensures that there are mechanisms in place to address violations by duty-bearers and provide access to justice.

The duty of transparency requires that **information** about all local activities and decisions is easily obtainable for rights holders. This means that as much information as possible about local operations should be available without request. In addition, **processes to obtain information** upon request must be well known, timely, accessible, affordable (if not free), and easy to use. The principle of transparency applies both to the public interest of insight into all aspects of local governance, as well as to the interest of each rights holder to have insight into circumstances and decisions in their individual case.

The duty of accountability requires that mechanisms are established to ensure that local policies, programmes, projects, activities and working methods are in line with human rights as well as with national and local regulations and decisions. The local government must have **institutionalised oversight mechanisms** that effectively identify and address violations and shortcomings in a transparent manner. The local government must also provide individual rights holders with **effective avenues to claim their rights**. Such avenues must be well known, timely, accessible, affordable (if not free), and easy to use.

The implementation of the principles of transparency and accountability is central to the relationship between duty bearers and rights holders, as they operationalise inhabitants as legitimate claim makers and local government as answerable to those claims.



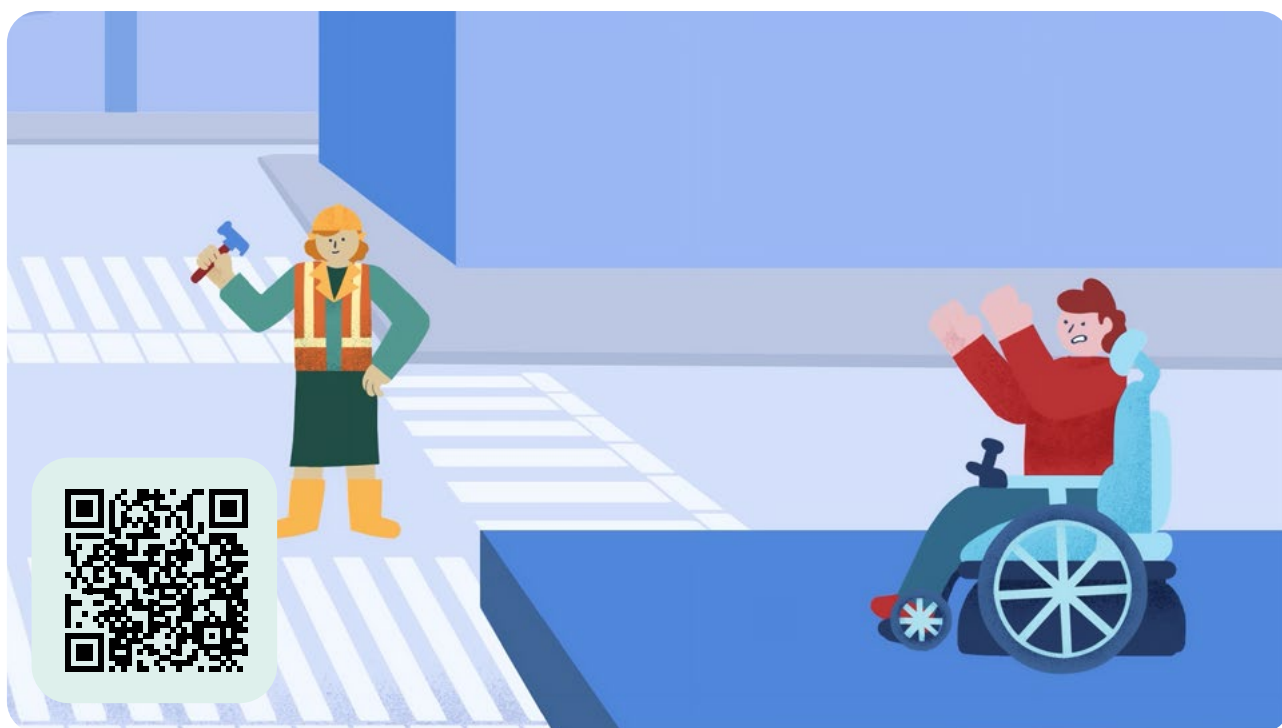
Equality and non-discrimination

The fact that human rights apply to everyone makes equality and non-discrimination part of its very essence. Together, **the principles of equality and non-discrimination** require the local government to recognize the **same worth and dignity** of each inhabitant and therefore requires it to accord everyone consideration and concern.

Crucially, the principles of equality and non-discrimination in international conventions are **asymmetrical and context sensitive**: they do not mean that all inhabitants should be treated the same. Instead, they mean that the local government must treat everyone in a way that secures the equal enjoyment of human rights by all.

The principles of equality and non-discrimination require that the local government makes itself aware of how every process, policy, programme, project, activity or working method impact those who are currently the furthest away from enjoying their human rights. **No solution or decision is ever neutral**. Depending on one's life situation, the same local policy can be life-changing for one inhabitant or totally irrelevant, or even negative, for another. The duty of equality and non-discrimination requires that seemingly neutral solutions be questioned based on whether they truly meet the needs and preferences of **systematically disadvantaged rights holders**.

Societies and communities around the world are **deeply unequal**. We have, for a long time, actively privileged the needs of some at the expense of the needs of others. The principles of equality and non-discrimination, like the principles of participation and inclusion, require local governance to focus on the requirements of those who are currently the furthest away from enjoying their human rights. The end goal of human rights, as well as the mandate of local governments, is to create opportunities for everyone. However, faced with existing inequalities, the principles of equality and non-discrimination in human rights conventions require local governments to center all local processes, policies, programmes, projects, activities and working methods firmly on **those living with the consequences of centuries of discrimination**.



The principles above are the core principles of HRBA. Human rights conventions also contain **additional principles** with important implications for local governance. For example, the principles of **indivisibility and interdependence of rights** mean that work in areas such as education, democracy and health is not conducted in silos, as the enjoyment of one right depend on the enjoyment of another and as their realisation will require efforts from different departments and levels of local governance. Such additional principles are discovered through the application of **the principle of legality**, which is operationalised through knowledge and application of all the rights, principles and obligations contained in human rights conventions.

4. Human Rights-Based Approach as a mindset and a work process

HRBA ensures that everyday tasks and work processes of local governance are systematically harnessed as **instruments to realise human rights** in the lives of the inhabitants. HRBA is not an add-on meant to run parallel to existing local government work. Instead, it is a **mindset to be always switched on** in order to be integrated in all existing regulatory, administrative and executive processes of local governance.

HRBA means that human rights shape the **intention** of local governance, that the **work process** is in line with human rights and that the **result** of local governance is measured in terms of progress towards enjoyment of human rights by inhabitants.



As illustrated by the figure on page 15, with this mindset, the core principles and the relationship between the local government as a duty bearer and all inhabitants as rights holders will become **a natural part of everyday work processes**.

Below, we describe **how to apply HRBA to the everyday local governance work process**. The work process described below is **generic** and applicable to local governance concerning any human right or area of life. The principle of localisation means that any generic work process for local governance, such as the one described below, must **be adjustable to the local context and conditions**. At the same time, human rights conventions and HRBA requires an **effective** local governance work process, technically capable of ensuring that human rights are **de facto enjoyed** by all inhabitants in their daily lives. In order to be effective to this end, the local government work process requires the following **four stages of action**:

1. Data gathering, Analysis and Prioritisation

2. Design and Implementation

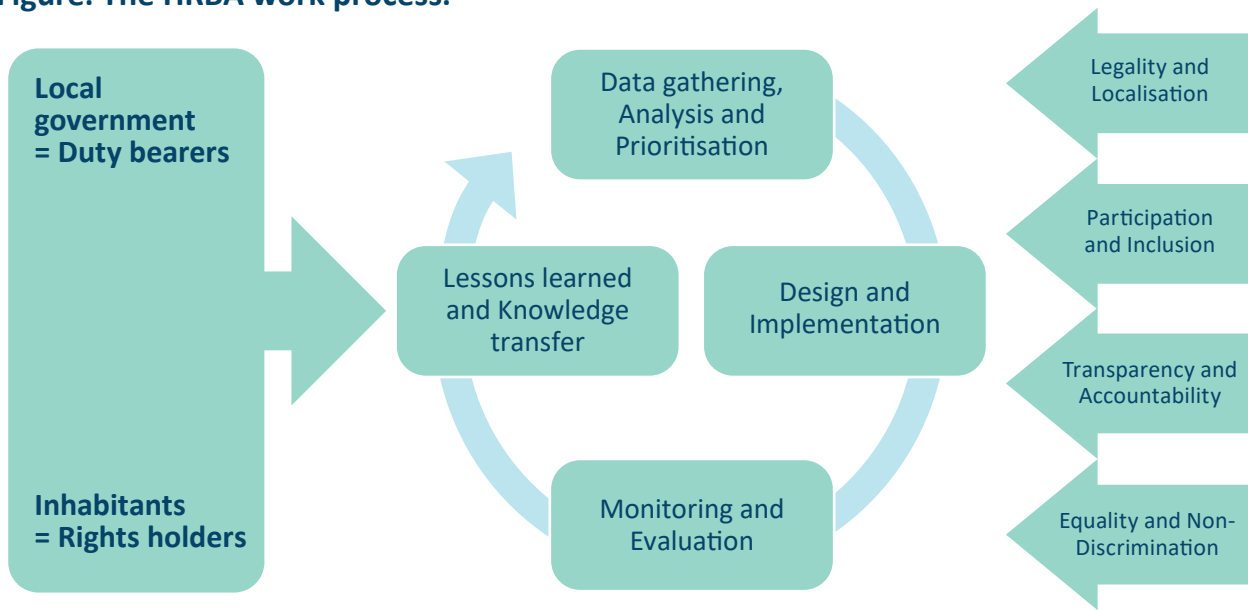
3. Monitoring and Evaluation

4. Lessons learned and Knowledge transfer

All stages in an HRBA local governance work process are guided by the **core principles** and the **relationship between duty bearers and rights holders** described above. Although the stages in the HRBA work process follow a logic flow, it is not a linear exercise with an end. Instead, it is a **cyclical process** where the conclusions and lessons learned from one policy, programme, project, activity or work method enriches the next.

Now, we introduce in brief what each stage in the local governance work process may look like, when **infused by HRBA**. Under section 6, we provide additional guidance through a list of questions for you to pose at each stage, prompting answers to lead the way for action.

Figure: The HRBA work process:



Data gathering, Analysis and Prioritisation

To know what change is needed, **in-depth knowledge of the current situation**, and its causes and drivers, is required. HRBA data gathering, analysis and prioritisation is grounded in the key principles elaborated above, as well as in the relationship between the local government as a duty bearer and the inhabitants as rights holders. With this mindset, **the problems and change needed** will be understood through the filter of HRBA.

The stage of data gathering, analysis and prioritisation is crucial to the success of any programme, project or activity. To fully understand conditions, context and the requirements of inhabitants; problems, causes and drivers; and challenges and opportunities is a milestone critical to effective results. The proximity of local governance to the daily life of inhabitants gives local governments a unique opportunity for in depth knowledge. This in turn facilitates creating **a robust process for change**, with greater possibilities to be successful and reach the desired results, as well as to be resilient to unexpected changes and challenges. It diminishes risks of not making the most efficient use of resources, and of processes having to be postponed or prolonged.

HRBA places the rights holder in the centre of work and ensures that any solutions are carefully calibrated to effectively achieve the end result – increased enjoyment of human rights by inhabitants and consequently, increased success by the local government in fulfilling its mandate. HRBA data gathering and analysis **finds the data that corresponds to human rights requirements**. This has implications both for which data is sought and **how** it is sought and analysed.



The principles of participation and inclusion mean that inhabitants, particularly disprivileged inhabitants, contribute to data on conditions, context and the requirements of inhabitants; problems, causes and drivers; and challenges and opportunities, as well as to the analysis of these.

The principles of equality and non-discrimination mean that all data is disaggregated so that it is possible to identify inequality as well as power structures and mechanisms upholding inequality.

The principles of transparency and accountability mean that the process of data gathering, analysis and prioritization is transparent and that there are mechanisms to complain of irregularities, as well as to have these amended and redressed.

The principles of legality and localisation mean that the details provided on each area of life in human rights conventions and through their monitoring, shape which data about the local context is collected and analysed, as well as how this is conducted.

The quantitative and qualitative disaggregated data needed to calibrate the accuracy of a programme, project or activities is often lacking at the local level. This means that data gathering often present itself as **a development area to prioritise** for any HRBA work.

At the end of this stage, **an overarching intention and commitment** of the programme, project or activity is formulated. In addition to the guidance provided through the key principles of HRBA and the relationship between the local government as a duty bearer and the inhabitants as rights holders, such an overarching intention and commitment must include strengthening the capacity of duty-bearers to realise human rights and empowering rights-holders to claim their rights.

Any policy, programme, project, activity or working method is the result of conscious and unconscious **prioritisation** of what areas of life, problems, opportunities and inhabitants that require and deserve the attention of local governance. Based on the data gathered and analysed at this stage, **hard choices** must be made and justified. Any local governance HRBA work process operates within the national mandate of local governance as well as within the given systems and conditions of a specific local government. This means that some prioritisation may already be set. The task then becomes to make the most of the room available to steer prioritisation towards the fulfilment of human rights.

The core HRBA principles provide guidance here.

The principles of transparency and accountability mean that prioritisations made, including difficult decisions, are shared, explained, and can be subject to questioning.

The principles of participation and inclusion mean that inhabitants' have weighed in when prioritisations were decided upon.

The principles of legality and localisation mean that problems and solutions prioritised are understood in line with the content of human rights conventions.

Finally, **the principles of equality and non-discrimination** mean that the situation of those inhabitants who are the furthest away from having their human rights realized must be a priority in all action. The prioritization should be carried out in a way that ensures the programme, project or activity achieves the greatest possible equalizing effect among inhabitants enjoyment of human rights.

Design and Implementation

At this stage, the overarching commitment is translated into **concrete and detailed long- and short-term goals**. The thorough analysis at the previous stage is fundamental to defining adequate goals and strategies during the design and implementation step. The goals should be grounded in human rights conventions and formulated so that they can be evaluated and followed up. Any local governance HRBA work process, irrespective of if it is ongoing work or a new initiative, operates within the national mandate of local governance as well as within the given systems and conditions of a specific local government. This means that some goals and strategies may already be set. The task then becomes to make the most of the remaining room available to set goals and strategies, as well as carry these out, in line with HRBA.

To enable follow up of results and the added value of HRBA, it is always advisable to set goals and objectives that are measurable. In project management terms they are called SMART goals, Specific, Measurable, Accepted, Realistic, and Time-bound.⁶ This means that each goal must be coupled with explicit strategies, roles, responsibilities, activities and resource allocations, ensuring that the preconditions for success are in place. It is also advisable to start to focus on areas where you and/or your department or council has powers and capacity to have a concrete impact, without being dependent on structures and systems that are not under the local government's jurisdiction. Goals should be anchored in local government policies as well as in the executive and political sector and shared among inhabitants. For even greater impact, it is important to also connect the work and work plan to initiatives beyond the local government, including those taken at the national government level, as well as by academic institutions, national human rights institutions and civil society.

The initiation of a policy, programme, project or activity rarely has the luxury of HRBA already being systematically incorporated into local governance. In addition, each policy, programme, project or activity actualises different aspects of human rights. Novel solutions are required, which means that HRBA requires **an innovative approach to designing and implementing solutions**.

⁶ SMART goals were first introduced by George T. Doran in 1981, in an article titled "There's a S.M.A.R.T. Way to Write Management's Goals and Objectives" published in Management Review. Many accessible sources in different languages explaining and exemplifying SMART goals are available online.

An innovative approach entails an **iterative process** in which solutions designed are continuously analysed, adjusted, and updated throughout the design and implementation stage.⁷ Since HRBA harnesses the capacity and experiences of many different actors (including different departments of local governance and inhabitants) and local governance is close to the lives of inhabitants, HRBA local governance has the preconditions for finding innovative solutions in an everchanging world. HRBA also requires a process that is transparent, where power differences and discriminatory practices between internal and external actors, as well as among those employed by the local government, are equalised to ensure that **all voices are included and carry weight**.

HRBA is as much about **how to achieve goals** as it is about the content of goals. Local governance coupled with focus on the intention, process and results inherent to HRBA and the inclusion of numerous voices and perspectives puts a local government using HRBA in a unique position to produce **innovative and human centred solutions** to contemporary local problems.



⁷ Innovation and a reiterative work process are conceptualised and operationalised in standardisations by [International Organization for Standardization \(ISO\)](https://www.iso.org/). These sources are not free. Many accessible sources in different languages explaining and exemplifying innovative and reiterative processes are available online.

Monitoring and Evaluation

The goal of HRBA is to realise human rights. This is achieved both through the HRBA **process** in itself (ensuring ongoing participation, equal opportunities, insight in public affairs and access to justice) and through the **results** of policies, programmes, projects, activities and work methods in terms of enjoyment of human rights (education, health, cultural and political participation) by rights holders. Even the most skilful and participatory design and implementation process, based on the most ambitious and rigorous data gathering, analysis and prioritisation, runs the risk of missing the mark when it is implemented. This is where monitoring and evaluation comes in, allowing you to calibrate solutions when unexpected challenges arise or the implementation of activities according to plan does not lead to the desired results.

Monitoring and evaluation are key processes for successful local governance, with distinct roles. **Monitoring** is an ongoing activity that regularly tracks the implementation of HRBA policies, programmes, projects, activities, and work methods, focusing on inputs, activities, and outputs. Monitoring answers the question: ***Is the work proceeding according to plan?*** It helps local governments ensure that plans are being followed, resources are used properly, and problems are identified early for timely correction. Monitoring overlaps with every step of the local governance work process and is an ongoing part of innovation, from the initial data gathering to the drawing of conclusions and bringing these to bear on future policies, programmes, projects, activities and working methods.

Evaluation is conducted at specific times, such as mid-term or at the end of HRBA policies, programmes, projects, activities and working methods to assess overall performance. It examines **outcomes and impact on the enjoyment of human rights**, the capacity improvement of duty bearers and the empowerment of rights holders, to determine whether goals were achieved and to guide future planning, policy, and decision-making.

Monitoring and evaluation require **indicators**, measurable pieces of information used to assess how well the work is going and if desired results are attained. HRBA requires the development and use of human rights indicators. **Human rights indicators** is a tool that allows local governments to measure and improve the implementation and impact of HRBA by tracking progress, identifying gaps, promoting accountability and making informed decisions to improve policies, programmes, projects, activities and work methods. UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) organises human rights indicators on **three levels for assessment**, mirroring the levels of governance tools that need to be engaged in ensuring human rights.⁸

⁸ [Human Rights Indicators: A Guide for Measurement and Implementation](#), OHCHR, 2012.

- **Structural indicators** are used to assess whether the local government has in place or is developing the regulations, policies, or institutions necessary for creating human rights enjoyment.
- **Process indicators** are used to assess what action the local government is taking and what efforts are made to implement commitments and goals through programmes, projects, activities and work methods.
- **Outcome indicators** are used to assess the real effects on human rights enjoyment in inhabitants' lives to analyse to what extent the enjoyment of the rights to health, education, life and culture is improving.

While outcome indicators measure the **end goal**, structural indicators and process indicators provide crucial information on the **necessary preconditions** for goal attainment.⁹ All steps of the HRBA work process rely on indicators and overlap with monitoring and evaluation.

The initial **Data gathering**, analysis and prioritisation concern taking stock of and evaluating existing institutions, processes and the actual equal enjoyment of human rights in one or more areas of life.

The **Design and implementation** stage of programmes, projects and activities require ongoing monitoring of processes – is work proceeding according to plan? What institutions facilitate/hinder the work? It may also require evaluation – can any effects on the enjoyment of human rights be identified already at this stage?

Similarly, the stage of establishing **Conclusions and lessons learned** is essentially a form of evaluation with a focus on the post policy, programme, project or activity stage. This stage traces the effects of structures and the implementation and effects of processes on the human rights goals and commitments set by the local government.

Monitoring and evaluation are complex as they are after the whole picture, spanning multiple sectors of society and tools of governance searching for cause-and-effect relationships in institutional change, individual behavioural changes and increased human rights enjoyment in the lives of inhabitants. In addition, there are often gaps in the data needed. Here, it is necessary to, in the meantime, **find innovative ways to measure improvement through less complex results**, such as increased knowledge of and importance attached to human rights by local governance, changed rules and regulations, changed organisation structures, mechanisms for participation by disprivileged inhabitants, transparency of operations, accountability procedures or allocated resources.

⁹ See for example [OHCHR Guidance framework for creating a Human Rights City](#), OHCHR (2022);



Lessons learned and Knowledge transfer

At the end of any HRBA effort, be it a programme spanning over many years or a shorter activity, it is time to ensure that experiences and knowledge gained through the hard work is **transferred to future, as well as parallel, processes**. The purpose of this is to understand to what extent the work has been **effective from a HRBA perspective**. This way, successes can be amplified, pit falls can be avoided, and good solution do not have to be invented again, thereby saving time and resources.

This stage is inextricably linked to monitoring and evaluation. Ongoing monitoring allows the programme, project or activity to be agile, adjusting efforts to navigate unforeseen obstacles as well as opportunities. The evaluation taking place at key moments of a policy, programme or project, or at the end of any activity, allows the local government to draw conclusion about contributions to actual enjoyment of rights by rights holders, impacts on unequal power relations, capacity increase in the local government and increased knowledge about human rights and how to claim them by rightsholders.

At this stage, the point is to harness conclusions drawn, experiences and knowledge gained, and lessons learned in the programme, project or activity for the benefit of future or parallel efforts by the local government or other actors. The possibilities of transferring **knowledge and insights from navigating pitfalls, analysing lessons learned and identifying best practices**, is key to a HRBA work process.

At this stage, effects of broader internal factors as well as external structures and processes on the project can be highlighted. **Internal factors include organisational preconditions** such as knowledge of human rights among staff, importance attached to human rights by politicians and management, as well as patterns of resource and time allocation. **External structures and policies** include the national human rights infrastructure as well as national law and policy on human rights generally and the on the specific area of life this policy, programme, project or activity affects. The ability of the local government to respect, protect and fulfill the rights in human rights conventions depends on national law, policy and priorities. These laws, policies and priorities are not always in line with the obligations in human rights conventions. HRBA requires that **the local government informs the national government** of what the national government needs to do differently to enable local governments to ensure the enjoyment of human rights for inhabitants.

A crucial part of this step is to communicate conclusions, lessons learned and best practices so that these can benefit future and parallel processes. This includes both **internal communication** in the local government as well as **external communication** to reach rights holders, including Civil Society Organisations (CSOs), as well as duty bearers, such as other local governments.

General guiding questions for HRBA work at any stage:

1. How can the situation of those furthest away from enjoying their human rights be at the centre throughout the process?
2. How can all relevant duty bearers and affected rights holders be involved in an inclusive and non-discriminatory manner?
3. How can the process and the results be communicated in a transparent manner – internally and externally?
4. How can concerns and complaints from rights holders about the process and its results be received and addressed for accountability?

5. Key takeaways for local government staff and elected politicians

In the box below, we have distilled the most important points about HRBA from the text above. This is for your overview, as well as to facilitate for you when explaining the why, what and how of HRBA to others:

WHY

- Local government are **duty bearers** under human rights conventions. Human rights are **legal obligations** that must guide decisions, budgeting, policies, action and services. This requires much more than acting in accordance with national law and policy. Legitimacy of local power depends on whether people can actually enjoy their human rights in daily life.
- Inhabitants are **rights holders** who have a legitimate claim on the local government to have their human rights respected, protected and fulfilled. Rights holder must have **access to justice** when the local government falls short of its obligations as a duty bearer under human rights conventions.
- In addition for being a tool for human rights compliance, HRBA is a tool for **quality assurance** that make policies, programmes, projects and activities more efficient, effective, innovative, fair and sustainable. When applied well, it **strengthens governance, trust, results and resilience**.

WHAT

- All local governance must be actively shaped by key **human rights principles** which must be known by all. These provide a road map to understand and realise each human rights and must guide all work. **Legality & localisation** means to know and actively use human rights conventions and create solutions based on evidence and local knowledge. **Participation & inclusion** means that inhabitants must be meaningfully involved at all stages, especially those most affected or historically excluded. **Transparency & accountability** means that decisions, data, and processes must be open and understandable and that clear, accessible complaint and redress mechanisms must exist. **Equality & non-discrimination** means to focus on those furthest from enjoying their rights to achieve de facto equality. Treating everyone the same is not equality. Always ask: Who benefits from what we are doing, who is left out, and why?

HOW

- HRBA must be **integrated into existing governance systems, routines, and procedures**, ensuring that these are effective and innovative and have the **capacity** to realise human rights in the lives of the inhabitants. It is a **mindset and a process** which operationalises the relationship between the local government as a duty bearer and inhabitants as rightsholders. This is achieved through the integration of key principles and rights in human rights conventions into every step of the policy or project cycle of local governance, shaping intention, process, and results: **Data gathering, Analysis and prioritisation; Design and implementation; Monitoring and evaluation; and Lessons learned and Knowledge transfer.**



6. Where to go from here?

No matter what your position and role in a local government is, or at what stage of a work process you currently find yourself, it is our hope that you found inspiration to start using HRBA there! Remember, you do not have to do everything straight away in order for HRBA to make a positive difference to your work.

Below, we provide action-oriented tools to move your work forward: **A list of guiding questions** for applying HRBA at each stage of the local governance work process and **a list of resources** to continue your search for information about why, what and how of HRBA.

Guiding questions for applying HRBA in local governance

The overarching question for the local government to ask on the organisational level is:

How can all stages in the local governance process (Data gathering, Analysis and Prioritisation; Design and Implementation; Monitoring and Evaluation; and Lessons learned and Knowledge transfer) be grounded in and shaped by specific human rights to promote and ensure rights for all inhabitants?

Below, this overarching question is developed into **concrete questions** to guide HRBA work at the particular stage of a local policy, programme, project or activity you find yourself at this moment. Use these questions to prompt action that will move your HRBA work forward!

Data gathering, Analysis and Prioritisation

Identify and analyze the human rights issue and required data

1. Which is the area of life/issue in focus for your work?
2. How is it linked to human rights? What rights are affected?
3. What are the patterns of inequality? Who do not enjoy an equal level of human rights in this area of life or relating to this issue?
4. What are the causes of human rights problems in this area of life/issue?
5. What relevant disaggregated data is available? Can it be used for intersectional analysis?
6. How can lacking data be collected and/or how can identified gaps be handled?
7. What is the overall desired human rights related change, grounded in human rights conventions, in this area of life/issue?
8. How is efficient and inclusive participation ensured throughout the process?
9. How can, in particular, lived experiences be at the centre in this process?
10. What internal and external mechanisms need to be in place to deal with concerns and complaints related to the process?

Data gathering, Analysis and Prioritisation

Identify who needs to be involved and how

The duty bearers

1. Who are the most relevant duty-bearers (at different departments) that need to be involved at different stages or throughout? Who will "own" the process and take main responsibility?
2. Who has the knowledge and information needed for analysis of the current situation and how can their knowledge and expertise be harnessed?
3. Do the identified duty-bearers have knowledge about the duties related to the human rights in focus? If not, how can this be addressed?
4. Are there any important limitations to what you in your capacity and role or the local government can do to contribute to the desired change? If so, how can such limitations be managed?

The rights holders

1. Who are the affected rights-holders and how will they be involved at different stages or throughout?
2. How can efficient participation for those furthest away from enjoying their human rights be ensured?
3. Do affected rights-holders have knowledge about their rights/the human rights in focus? If not, how can this be addressed?
4. How can rights holders express concerns and/or complaints related to this process?

Design and Implementation

Identify the needed resources, goals and strategies

1. What human and economic resources are needed to design the goals, strategies and solutions?
2. What resources are needed to implement the strategies for goal fulfilment?
3. Are scarce resources an obstacle to work for the desired change? If so, what can be done?
4. Are the goals, strategies and solutions anchored in human rights conventions?
5. Are the goals SMART and coupled with strategies, roles, responsibilities, activities and resource allocations for implementation?
6. How can preparedness to handle risks, possible delays and changes in strategies be ensured?
7. Are there other initiatives at the national or local levels of relevance that can contribute to the desired change? How can these be harnessed to support your work?
8. How can knowledge from academic institutions, civil society and the national human rights institution be harnessed to optimize your work?
9. How will the general public be informed about this work?
10. How is efficient and inclusive participation ensured throughout this process?

Identify who needs to be involved and how

The duty bearers

1. Which staff (non-management/management) /departments need to be involved in the design and implementation process?
2. How will they be involved?
3. What is required to ensure a work environment that is open to innovation and a trial-and-error mindset? What are the limitations and opportunities for innovative solutions and collaborations?

The rights holders

1. How are the identified rights holders enabled and empowered to participate actively and meaningfully throughout this process?
2. How can those furthest away from enjoying their human rights be centre-stage in the design and implementation process? How can imbalances related to capacity and resources needed to participate in the process be addressed?
3. What general mechanisms are in place for rights holders to express their concerns and/or present complaints related to the work process?

Monitoring and Evaluation

Identify indicators and methods to follow up and measure the progress

1. How can indicators be anchored in and cover specific rights in human rights conventions?
2. Which indicators can be used to measure structural change in areas that have been identified as obstacles to enjoyment of the human rights in focus?
3. Which indicators can assess the work processes?
4. Which indicators can assess desired outcome and impact?
5. How can indicators be used to detect and address differences in human rights enjoyment?
6. How can indicators be used to put those furthest away from enjoying their human rights at the centre?
7. How can transparency related to internal and external information about the process and results be measured?
8. In case of irregularities, how can it be measured that these have been addressed efficiently and the local government been held accountable?

Identify who needs to be involved and how

The duty bearers

1. How is it ensured that both the monitoring and evaluation processes have been shaped by the core principles of legality and localisation, participation and inclusion, transparency and accountability and equality and non-discrimination?
2. What relevant outcomes and impacts might not/could not be assessed and why? How can this be addressed and who can address this?
3. Who owns the results of the process in the local government?
4. Who is responsible for taking the results for further analysis and action?

The rights holders

1. How do rights holders weigh in on the development of indicators and deciding what to measure and how to measure progress?
2. How are rights holders involved in the monitoring and evaluation of results?
3. How are results at different levels communicated to affected rightsholders and the general public?
4. What mechanisms are in place for rightsholders to evaluate participation and inclusion throughout all stages – from data gathering and implementation to the monitoring and evaluation process?

Lessons learned and Knowledge transfer

Identify and share new knowledge

1. How is it ensured that the process of identifying and formulating new knowledge, drawing conclusions, identifying pitfalls, lessons learned and best practices is transparent, inclusive and non-discriminatory/non-biased?
2. What new knowledge did the process yield about the situation of human rights enjoyment by inhabitants?
3. What was learnt about inhabitants knowledge of human rights and their possibility of claiming these rights?
4. What new knowledge was gained about the capacity of the local government to ensure human rights enjoyment?
5. What made the process and the solutions innovative?
6. What makes the best practices stand out and how can they be shared and scaled up for future initiatives?
7. What were the pitfalls and lessons learned from the work-process, including from methods and tools used?
8. How were the pitfalls and obstacles navigated? How can similar pitfalls and obstacles be avoided in future initiatives?
9. What should/could be done differently next time?
10. What did you learn from the HRBA process on an individual, group and organisational level? What are the main gains?

Lessons learned and Knowledge transfer

Identify who needs to be involved and how

The duty bearers

1. What internal and external platforms, channels and networks can be used to transfer knowledge gained, lessons learned and best practices (local, national and international levels)?
2. Who is responsible for communicating with relevant management levels about identified weaknesses and limitations in organisational preconditions and suggestions about how to address them? (F.ex.related to lack of time and resources, knowledge of/ importance given to human rights among staff/ management)
3. Who is responsible for addressing identified obstacles related to national institutional infrastructure, laws, policy and budgeting at the government level?
4. How and when can this be done?

The rights holders

1. How are rights holders involved in this process?
2. How is it ensured that the expression of different views, particularly between the local government and rightsholders, is encouraged, facilitated and brought to bear on conclusions? How are different views reflected and communicated?
3. How can rights holders express concerns/complaints in relation to the process of identifying and formulating new knowledge, drawing conclusions and identifying pitfalls, lessons learned and best practices?
4. How are rights holders informed about what the local government will do with the results and lessons learned?

Additional resources for applying a Human Rights-Based Approach at the local level

Below is a compilation of resources you can use to find more information on the why, what and how of HRBA. Each resource has a brief introduction, so that you can identify those most useful to you at this moment.

GLOBAL RESOURCES

[Guidance framework for creating a Human Rights City.](#)
OHCHR and UCLG (2025)

In this resource you will find a guiding framework for implementing human rights at the local level, as a roadmap to become a “Human Rights City”. By adopting the term “Human Rights Cities”, local governments recognize their responsibilities under international human rights law and develop their own agendas to promote the rights of their constituents. The framework is co-developed by the UN Office of the High Commissioner of Human Rights (OHCHR) and by regional and local governments through the World Organization of United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG), in broad consultation with civil society and independent experts.

[“Human Rights Cities”: Human rights solutions at local level](#)
OHCHR (2025)

In this resource you will find testimonies on how involved mayors and local governments from cities across the world including Barcelona, Banjul, Gdansk, Gwangju, Winnipeg and Vienna view the development of the abovementioned guiding framework. The article was published by OHCHR in connection with the launch of the Guidance Framework for creating a Human Rights City.

[Human Rights Approach to Data.](#)
OHCHR (2018)

In this resource you will find practical human rights guidance to data collection and disaggregation aimed at ensuring the leave no-one behind principle in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. The report was developed by OHCHR.

GLOBAL RESOURCES

[Human Rights Indicators - A Guide to Measurement and Implementation](#)
OHCHR (2012)

In this resource you will find guidance for developing quantitative and qualitative indicators to measure progress in the implementation of international human rights norms and principles. While not specifically developed for the local level, it provides concrete examples of human rights indicators, and other practical tools and illustrations, to support the realisation of human rights at all levels. The guide was developed by OHCHR.

[Human Rights-Based Approach: From Principles to Practice](#),
DIHR (2024)

In this resource you will find a free e-course on Human Rights-Based Approach. While not being specifically designed for the local level, the course shows why human rights matter for sustainable development and how they should be used to inform our approach in the work with projects, plans and programmes. The course consists of two modules: Part 1 is described to suit beginners or anyone who wants a refresher while Part 2 is for hands-on application. The course was developed by the Danish Institute for Human Rights (DIHR).

[Indicators and data for human rights and sustainable development](#),
DIHR (2019)

In this resource you will find guidance to explore the added value of having a Human Rights-Based Approach to Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) data and indicators. The guidance was developed by the DIHR.

HUMAN RIGHTS TOPICAL RESOURCES

Older age

[The WHO Age-friendly Cities Framework](#), WHO (2020)

In this resource you will find a description of the World Health Organisation (WHO) Age-friendly Cities framework developed in the [Global Age-friendly Cities Guide](#) which proposes eight interconnected domains that can help to identify and address barriers to the well-being and participation of older persons. The framework was developed by WHO.

Disability

[Delivering disability inclusive climate action: Resource pack for cities](#), C40 knowledge hub (2023)

In this resource you will find a resource pack designed to help cities understand the need for disability mainstreaming in climate action and to outline first steps of action. The resource pack was developed by the C40 knowledge hub, an open-source hub designed for city practitioners, policymakers and anyone interested in climate solutions.

[Participatory data collection for disability-inclusive cities, Guideline Methodology for Participatory Disability Data Collection](#), UNESCO (2018)

In this resource you will find an educational tool that can be used to create a more inclusive city through provision of reliable data. The manual was developed by United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) based on experiences of applying the Disability-Inclusive City Profile in Solo, Indonesia.

Displacement

[Human Rights and Gender Equality in Climate and Disaster Displacement: A Municipality-Level Integrated Response in African Cities](#), RWI (2022-2023)

In this resource you will find the results of a project which brought together public sector professionals working in municipalities in Kenya, Uganda and Sierra Leone where climate-related displacement is already a reality. The project was inspired by the [Global Mayors Action Agenda on Climate and Migration](#) and builds on earlier work by project partners relating to disaster displacement. The report was developed by the Raoul Wallenberg Institute of Human Rights and Humanitarian Law (RWI).

HUMAN RIGHTS TOPICAL RESOURCES

Equality and anti-racism

[The ECCAR Toolkit for Equality](#),
ECCAR (2023)

In this resource you will find a toolkit that supports the implementation of the European Coalition of Cities Against Racism (ECCAR) 10 point action plan at the local level, based on the Human Rights-Based Approach for the protection against discrimination and promotion of greater equality. The ECCAR toolkit was developed in cooperation with a range of local politicians, civil servants, consultants, civil society organizations, lawyers and inhabitants.

Regional and national resources

EUROPE

[Human Rights Cities in the EU: a framework for reinforcing rights locally](#), FRA (2021)

In this resource you will find a framework for becoming, and functioning as, a “human rights city” in the EU. It includes foundations, structures and tools for mayors, local administrations and grassroots organisations to implement human rights locally. The framework was developed by the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA), based on gathered good practice and expert input by representatives of human rights cities in the EU, academic experts, international organisations and city networks.

[Human Rights Cities in the European Union - Practical guidance](#), FRA (2022)

In this resource you will find a practical guide for local authorities in the EU to implement human rights. It draws on promising practices and experiences of cities, regions, experts, international organisations and networks and builds on the FRA framework above. The guide was developed by FRA together with a group of human rights cities and various practitioners in the EU.

EUROPE

[Human Rights at local and regional levels](#), Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the CoE

In this resource you will find the website of the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe (CoE) focused on human rights at the local and regional levels. It contains links to a series of topical “Human rights handbooks for local and regional authorities” to highlight the practical implementation of human rights at local and regional levels, including the right to housing, freedom of expression, children’s rights, social rights and human rights and the environment. The website is run by the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the CoE.

[Human Rights City Indicators](#), RWI (2021)

In this resource you will find the results of a project developing human rights city indicators in Turkey, initiated by RWI, the Union of Turkish World Municipalities and seven pilot municipalities in Turkey. The work was carried out in cooperation with the CoE. The report was published by RWI.

AFRICA

[Foregrounding a Human Rights-Based Approach - A guide to prioritising people in urban African sustainable development projects](#), ICLEI Africa (2023)

In this resource you will find a guide on how to place people at the centre of development policies and programmes for effective sustainable development in cities across Africa. The guide was developed by Local Governments for Sustainability (ICLEI)/ICLEI Africa.

[Nature-Based Solutions for African Cities: The Human Rights-Based Approach](#), ICLEI Africa

In this resource you will find a video about the Urban Natural Assets (UNA) Programme, funded by SwedBio, which championed Human Rights-Based Approach in African cities to enhance the uptake of nature-based solutions (NbS). It was published by ICLEI/ICLEI Africa.

ASIA PACIFIC

[Localising Human Rights in the Context of SDGs: a Handbook for Cities](#), RWI (2022)

In this resource you will find a theoretical framework on human rights standards with practical tools and case studies drawn from city-level experiences to implement the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The handbook was developed by RWI in collaboration with the SDGs Center at the University of Lampung (Indonesia), the Parahyangan Catholic University (Indonesia), and RTM Nagpur University (India).

[Rights in Action: Localizing Human Rights for Sustainable Development](#), RWI (2023)

In this resource you will find experiences of initiatives focused on human rights and Human Rights-Based Approach at the local level across the Asia-Pacific region. It contains examples of how the integration of human rights into local governance translates into tangible results, positively impacting the lives of individuals and communities. It was developed by the RWI Asia Pacific Office.

[Discussion Brief: Localising Human Rights: Challenges and Opportunities in the Asia-Pacific Region](#), RWI, (2024)

In this resource you will find a discussion brief focusing on identified challenges and opportunities in the application of Human Rights-Based Approach in local governments in the Asia-Pacific Region. It was developed by the RWI Asia Pacific Office.

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