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HUMAN RIGHTS CITIES

AND THE SDGs

Lund, Sweden, 2018

RAOUL WALLENBERG INSTITUTE
OF HUMAN RIGHTS AND HUMANITARIAN LAW

HUMAN RIGHTS AND THE SDGs

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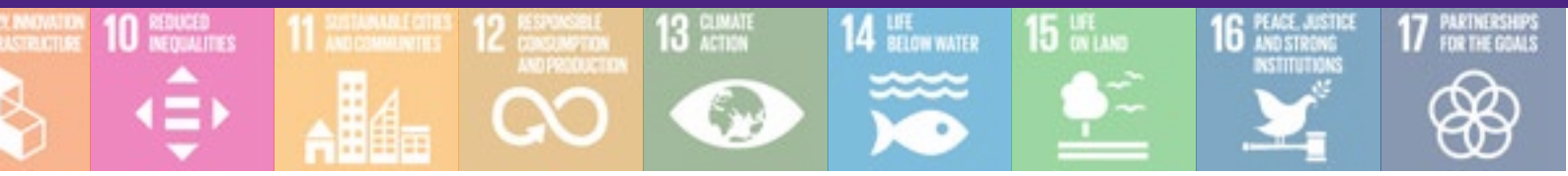

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INTRODUCTION

Cities are well-positioned to realize both sustainable development goals and human rights. Policy implementation, delivery of public services, and the reproduction of inclusive societies take place in cities, where 80 per cent of global GDP is generated (SDSN 2016: 11). Cities are also home to extreme poverty, socio-economic disparities, unsustainable patterns of consumption and production, and human rights violations. Recognizing the linkages between human rights cities and the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) will help cities achieve their important milestones in both arenas. To support this work, this paper sets out specific ways in which the SDGs intersect and reinforce the efforts of human rights cities – and how human rights cities can operationalize the SDGs in ways that enhance their success in furthering the human rights of urban residents. The process is threefold: analytical, participatory, and transformative.

Human rights cities exist around the world – and they put cities in the spotlight, just like the concepts of sustainable cities, smart cities, green cities, rainbow cities, and social cities. While there is no single definition of a human rights city, generally they are local or regional governments, or even national associations horizontally connecting cities (for example, the Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions), that have adopted the principles of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights as guiding norms of governance. Beginning with the first human rights city in Rosario, Argentina in 1997, the human rights city movement has grown to include scores of small, medium and large cities in Europe, North America, Africa and Asia. Notably, the human rights city movement is part of a larger trend toward the localization of human rights norms, pushed forward by the growth of cities in terms of population and power.

The 2030 Agenda acknowledges the essential role of cities as a transformative force for development, yet some local administration leaders and activists may feel torn between the imperatives of the SDGs and the importance of prioritizing local human rights obligations. Such tension emerges from the perceived gap between development and human rights. As described in more details below, this is a false dichotomy. Though the Sustainable Development Goals and targets have already been defined, indicators, implementation tools and monitoring frameworks are still being developed (Winkler and Williams 2017: 1027). This offers a unique opportunity to enlist human rights principles to guide priority-setting, decision-making, and implementation – particularly in the cities – creating a powerful alliance between human rights norms and development goals at the local level.

In this paper, we aim to show the linkages and complementarities between human rights cities and the 2030 Agenda. To that end, we take into account the existence of the various international frameworks on human rights cities, the academic debate, and the practical local examples from across the globe. The underlying argument is that a human rights city can be better at achieving the SDGs than cities that ignore a human rights framework in their pursuit of sustainable development.

"[...] we aim to show the linkages and complementarities between human rights cities and the 2030 Agenda"

Photo: Andreas Ljungholm

2030 AGENDA AND THE SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development is the United Nations plan of action to guide changes and decisions in areas of critical importance for humanity and the planet. It establishes 17 goals and 169 targets. These goals and targets center on the pledge to leave no one behind, meaning the path to sustainable development is to be taken as a collective journey. Everyone should be included in the process of building a world free of poverty and hunger, with reduced inequality, that respects the environment, and that is safe for everyone.

Since its adoption in 2015, the Agenda figures as the guiding light of policy-making and development initiatives at both the international and national levels until 2030, when the goals should be achieved. The Agenda's and the SDGs' holistic take on global issues associated with its detailed targets and indicators is at the same time a strength and a challenge. Because of its large scope, the SDGs are challenging to implement, measure, and evaluate. But as we argue in this paper, human rights, and specifically human rights cities, are a most effective and ready-to-use tool to achieve the SDGs.

Unequivocally anchored in human rights

The Agenda clearly states that it is "grounded in the UN Charter, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, international human rights treaties" (2030 Agenda, para 10). According to an OHCHR (2015) key message, "the SDG targets are closely aligned with human rights standards", even if "the SDGs themselves are not framed explicitly in the language of human rights" (ibid). That alignment stems from the fact that targets address availability, accessibility, quality of education, health, water and other services, and also access to safe, nutritious and sufficient food for all, universal health coverage, sanitation, housing, and so on (OHCHR 2015; 2030 Agenda).

Because the linkage is explicitly referenced in the 2030 Agenda, there is much room for advocating for the use of human rights standards and norms to achieve the SDGs – in other words, to use the SDGs as a tool to oppose social injustices and realize human rights (Winkler and Williams 2017: 1024; MacNaughton 2017: 1056). While the SDGs are indisputably informed by human rights, "a **focus** on human rights can open spaces to keep the SDGs on task" (Winkler and Williams 2017: 1024) (emphasis added). The city is a critical space where human rights can keep the SDGs on task."

Cities are strategically placed to localize the SDGs

The overarching goal of leaving no one behind might seem quite overwhelming on a global scale. How could we include everyone in the world in developing sustainably? That is where the cities come in as crucial actors, bringing the SDGs closer to people and vice-versa.

The essential role of cities is acknowledged in the stand-alone goal for cities, SDG 11. Numerous reports by think-tanks, global alliances of relevant stakeholders, and the UN point

to the indisputable fact that "local governments are the level of government best placed to link the global goals with local communities" (UCLG 2015). The Sustainable Development Solutions Network argued that "concentrating sustainable development efforts in cities is not only a practical imperative, it is also a strategic choice" (SDSN 2016: 12). The High-Level Panel of Eminent Persons on the Post-2015 Development Agenda affirmed that "cities are where the battle for sustainable development will be won or lost" (United Nations 2013: 17). That is why it is important to localize the SDGs. Or, in other words, implement them at the city level.

Cities are strategically placed to localize human rights

Despite the SDGs' grounding in human rights principles, human rights norms often seem to be missing as cities approach the implementation of the 2030 Agenda. But if a local government embraces a human rights based approach (HRBA) in designing sustainability policies, it will better address the needs and priorities of its residents. How is that? Basically, when a local government makes a commitment to bringing human rights to the city and consults individuals, groups, or communities to know what residents need, the local government can more easily find out where to act and come up with solutions that will actually make a change. Thinking of individuals as rights-holders helps identify where the problems are. This encapsulates the analytical stage of the process, where priorities are set within a HRBA.

By localizing human rights, local administrations can have a much more direct channel to understand the needs of their residents. Then, in the participatory part of the process, local governments can design better policies, which are priority- and rights-driven, by giving individuals a voice and space for participation in the policy-making, bringing them to the discussion table. That can highlight the need to target not only civil and political rights, but also the right to development, right to work, right to a fair wage, and the right to enjoy scientific progress, to mention a few examples.

Finally, when human rights are localized, people are empowered and included, and policies are consequently better, implementation takes place in the form of better public services leading to more inclusive and sustainable societies. This is the transformative part of the process, which envisions a long-term change in how we deal with human rights and development at the city level. That means improvements in sustainability, transparency, accountability, equality, and all goals included in the 2030 Agenda.

In contrast, if cities were to act solely with a sustainable development paradigm in mind, they might depart from the needs and priorities of residents. Such an approach could lead to deficient policies and it might risk leaving parcels of the population behind, which means not properly addressing the needs of specific groups and individuals.

But what is a human rights city?

While the concept of a human rights city has existed for decades, the "Gwangju Declaration on the Human Rights City" in 2011 provides a concrete working definition: a human rights city is "both a local community and a social-political process in a local context where human rights play a key role as fundamental values and guiding principles" (para. 3). A human rights city observes the right of all citizens to fully participate in decision-making and policy-implementation processes (Gwangju Declaration, para. 4-5). A human rights city also places the individual in the center, respecting the agency

of the individual actor. In practice, that means giving space for all voices to be heard in setting priorities. It also means acknowledging the rights of every individual and empowering them to stand up for their rights by taking part in the decision-making. It is an integral aspect of a human rights city to identify who is being left out (or behind), and to identify which voices are not being heard. Then we can bring them along in the process of building better cities.

Both the concept and the guidelines for human rights cities are evolving with practice. The flexibility of the concept is perhaps an advantage, given that "actors and mechanisms needed to transform local culture and move toward a human rights orientation may be different" in each city, region and country (Davis et al 2017: 4). Regarding implementation, some authors stress the need for the formal declarations of local commitment to human rights, while others put emphasis on concrete actions (Davis et al 2017). The box below outlines the different international frameworks that exist on human rights cities and an implementation oriented initiative: the Swedish Platform for human rights at the local and regional level.

European Charter for the Safeguarding of Human Rights in the City: founded on the principle that cities' administrations have a responsibility to respect and guarantee human rights for all their inhabitants without exclusion. Outlines commitments to be upheld by signatories on topics such as civil and political rights of local citizenship; economic, social and cultural rights of accessibility; rights relative to the local democratic administration; and mechanisms of guarantee of the human rights of accessibility.

Global Charter-Agenda for Human Rights in the City: created as a tool for local governments to build more inclusive, democratic and solidarity-based societies in dialogue with urban dwellers. Consists of an agenda of rights and obligations to be followed by signatories. Each right is accompanied of a suggested action plan for short or mid-term implementation.

Gwangju Guiding Principles on Human Rights City: adopted as a living document to guide policy formulation at the city level. It identifies key components of a human rights city in terms of values, principles, institutions, and policy implementation. It highlights the specific responsibility of a human rights city to implement a HRBA to municipal governance.

Swedish Platform for policy and operational development of human rights at the local and regional level: provides a set of characteristics of a human rights city or region. It is based on the principles of non-discrimination and equality, participation and inclusion, and transparency and responsibility – such principles are outlined by the UN as being part of a HRBA. The platform focuses on the actions of local administrations, explaining the different roles they play in ensuring democracy, welfare, employment, and social inclusion both in the short and long term (Kjaerum et al).

HUMAN RIGHTS CITIES: WHERE HUMAN RIGHTS AND THE SDGs CONVERGE

Inclusive, equality-driven, participatory, accountable, non-discriminatory – these are all elements present in the principles of human rights cities. These are also underlying principles of the 2030 Agenda, explicitly present in many of the SDGs. If we combine the framework of human rights cities with that of the 2030 Agenda, we can draw on mutual strengths and use the former to achieve the latter. The targeted approach that a human rights city entails could reach lengths that the SDGs might have more difficulty in reaching, due to its broad scope.

Take for instance the example of the Human Rights Committee of the Västra Götaland region in Sweden. It runs a project with *Angered's* local hospital and Psykovårdkedja Nordost psychiatric services to change the hospital's work based on human rights principles. First of all, the hospital was built in an area where residents used hospital services less frequently than other parts of the region. Then, the design of the hospital building was based on human rights principles. A central piece of the work at the hospital involved acknowledging that rights-holders need to voice their own thoughts and get engaged in a respectful and dignified dialogue about their treatments (Västra Götalandsregionen 2016). The result was the reduction in the use of restraint straps from several times per months to twice a year, better communication with the patients, and a participatory and more humane approach to treatments. This project contributes directly to the achievement of SDG 3 (Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages). The participatory decision-making process is a concrete example of how a HRBA applied at local level can have a substantial impact in fulfilling the right to health, ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all, as stated in goal 3.

If we look more closely, features of a human rights city that resonate with the SDGs are non-discrimination, inclusion, sustainability, gender equality, accessibility to public services, accountable and effective institutions. But the human rights city goes beyond because it adopts a HRBA to incorporate human rights into all aspects of action and interaction of local authorities. Thus, human rights cities have not created parallel systems of administration but they have changed the way they work with their ordinary tasks. To see it more clearly, we can take education as an example.

Education has a goal to itself, SDG 4 (Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all). Education is also a human right contained in both the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (Article 13) and the Convention on the Rights of the Child (Article 28 (e)). This is how a human rights city could go about addressing the human right to education:

- **Analyse:** A human rights city would look at its education system in a way to first investigate and analyse whether the right is fulfilled equally to everyone no matter who that child is, what legal status the child has etc. That means checking if schools in peripheral areas are accessible (both in terms of available transportation and facilities designed to the needs of everyone), if the quality of education is even across private and public schools, and so on. To do so, a human rights city would closely interact with schools, teachers, students, families, residents, and civil society organisations – to enquire what is lacking, what needs to be improved.

- **Build participatory decision-making processes:** Then, the decision-making and policy design begins. A human rights city would guarantee that the discussion table has representatives of the key groups to keep rights and priorities in place. Most certainly, it would also draw insights and guidance from international and national legal frameworks.

- **Empower and transform for the long-run:** With this approach, the resulting outcome would not only fulfil the right to education in particular and a human rights agenda in general, but would also fulfil the international standards set in the conventions and SDG 4. In fact, should the process successfully apply a HRBA from the start, there would be a spillover to other SDGs too.

The whole process would be transformative in itself. It would empower individuals to enjoy and exercise their rights and would help cities build an environment to fit individuals' real needs. The result: better public services, better infrastructure, rights guaranteed, and greater sustainability.

HUMAN RIGHTS CITIES PLATFORMS AND THE SDG

Table 1 indicates that a human rights city is up to the task of integrating human rights into the SDGs. In fact, the analysis shows that the existent human rights cities platforms in many aspects expand and complement the scope of the SDGs. The table highlights where similarities are clearly spelled out in the texts related to human rights cities but also where the connection is not clearly indicated.

Table 1. Linking existent human rights cities platforms with the SDGs

Human rights city frameworks								
SALAR Platform	X			X	X	X	X	X
Gwangju Principles	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Global Charter	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
European Charter	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X

X	X	X	X	X			X	
	X	X	X	X			X	X
	X	X	X				X	
	X	X	X	X			X	X

For instance, the Swedish platform clearly indicates the importance of long-term political commitments that transcend political party and bloc boundaries, which is extremely valuable to build trust and confidence between politicians and individuals. These are examples of good governance that strengthen the implementation of the SDGs, because they are tied to a HRBA and its intrinsic values of non-discrimination and equality, participation and inclusion, and transparency and responsibility. The background logic is that the failure of many good projects, be they regarding environment, climate change, or human rights, is due to the absence of long-term political commitment. In response to that, a HRBA to local governance contributes to better public services, better governance, lower levels of corruption, and consequently a higher level of trust.

The European Charter adds to the SDGs by emphasizing civil and political rights of local citizenship. This is a relevant contribution, because the SDGs makes only two references to political participation (targets 5.5 and 10.2), and one to fundamental freedoms (target 16.10). Working with those rights at the local level empowers rights-holders and creates more inclusive and equal societies.

The Global Charter also provides relevant complementarities to the SDGs. Its targeted and focused approach raises, for instance, the need to support and promote diversity of expressions in venues for the dissemination of culture, like local public libraries. The advantage

here is that human rights cities would offer concrete means and plans of action to implement the principles shared by human rights and the global goals.

The Gwangju principles include human rights mainstreaming and human rights education into their scope. These are key elements to develop sound municipal policies and to foster a culture of human rights and peace in the cities. But these are also crucial to "ensure that all learners acquire the knowledge and skills needed to promote sustainable development" (target 4.7) and "develop effective, accountable and transparent institutions at all levels" (target 16.6).

Remarkably, all four of these human rights cities platforms integrate elements of SDG16, which aims to "promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels". Reducing corruption, which is often the root cause for the failure of projects undertaken by municipalities, is a key component of SDG 16. By ensuring that their anti-corruption policies are framed in human rights, cities are more likely to reach the targets of SDG 16 in a way that benefits citizens as they access and use municipal services, and in way that ensures municipal resources are spent delivering services rather than enriching people illegally through corruption.

Cities are vulnerable to all forms of corruption: housing, health and education provision can be prone to petty corruption, bribery in particular, municipal public procurement can be badly affected by embezzlement, and elections to city-level institutions can be rife with political corruption. Because participatory decision making process, accessibility to public services, and accountable and effective institutions are core features of human rights cities, these cities are more likely to tackle the corrupt practices that may affect them, and therefore they are particularly well equipped to reach SDG targets 16,5 (substantially reduce corruption and bribery in all their forms), 16.7 (ensure responsive, inclusive, participatory and representative decision making at all levels) and 16,10 (ensure public access to information and protect fundamental freedoms, in accordance with national legislation and international agreements).

Some of the main elements of a human rights city that expand on and contribute to the SDGs

- Principles of good governance integrate human rights into municipal policies
- Human rights education and training
- Emphasis on engagement of citizens as rights-holders as an integral part of the policy-making process, and right to information
- Freedom of religion and conscience, opinion and information and freedom of speech Strive to reduce residential segregation
- Ensure that all public (municipal) services are accessible
- Create meeting places for people with different backgrounds

HUMAN RIGHTS CITIES IN PRACTICE: EXAMPLES FROM AROUND THE WORLD

YORK – UNITED KINGDOM

The city of York was declared the first human rights city in the UK in early 2017. In the process of becoming one, the city adopted a HRBA.

What is the process?

York conducted surveys with people who live, study and work in the city to find out what the main human rights priorities for York residents are. It then produced a comprehensive report on how it would go about improving the enjoyment of the selected rights, namely: the right to equality and non-discrimination, education, a decent standard of living, housing, and health and social care. The report describes the indicators that were agreed upon in consultation with local experts and is meant to follow progress, encourage local debate, and inspire action.

What has been achieved so far?

The city is now on its second report, and the indicators' analysis shows how the enjoyment of rights is being affected, positively or negatively, and why. For instance, the data shows that gender pay gaps for York is £20 larger than that across the UK and has risen in both pounds and percent (rate) over the past three years. The report highlights possible reasons for this and signals that from 2018, companies and public sector organizations employing more than 250 people will have to report the differences in men's and women's pay. This increase in wage gaps is obviously not in the goal, but by having indicators measuring the development and analyzing the results, there is also a greater possibility to take measures to change the trend.

Link to the SDGs

York's practices as a human rights city are the example of how human rights and the SDGs can intertwine and be localized. By generating data, analyzing it, and making policies to address the human rights priorities of its residents, York is also working towards the achievement of SDGs 1 (poverty), 3 (health), 4 (education), 5 (gender), 10 (inequality), 11 (housing), and 16 (inclusion).

LUND – SWEDEN

The city of Lund has been prominently working on human rights and is bound to become the first human rights city in Sweden.

What is the process?

Departing from the human rights city criteria established in the Swedish platform developed by the Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions and the Raoul Wallenberg Institute, the city of Lund has begun to investigate and review Lund's strategies, programs and plans. The aim is to establish a framework and action plan for the city's work with human rights, which includes working more systematically and comprehensively with human rights, training in human rights of staff and it also includes the cooperation with other stakeholders, such as universities, research institutions, other municipalities, authorities, and importantly, with Lund's citizens.

What has been done before?

One of the city's goals is to create a sustainable and open society where all people can live and feel free to express themselves. For that purpose, Lund has been working since the 1990s with the rights of the child, so that children can grow up in a good city, where their rights are safeguarded and they are listened to. The City Council has decided that the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), together with a regard to the consequences for children, should be applied and considered in all municipal decisions. They have put in place routines to take the perspectives of children when planning for roads, buildings, parks, water supply, sewage, waste management, culture, care for the elderly and infirm, business development, and investments. The decision accompanies a milestone in the national context: the CRC is expected to be fully implemented in Swedish law in 2020.

Link to the SDGs

The initiatives carried out by the city of Lund could also be linked to the SDGs, showing the spill-over effect of a human rights-based approach into the sustainable goals. For instance, Lund's projects would be beneficial to SDGs 4 (education), 5 (gender), 8 (sustainable growth), 10 (inequality), and 16 (inclusion).

THE BODY SHOP
KILROY

GWANGJU - SOUTH KOREA

The city of Gwangju is at the heart of the human rights city movement and has consistently focused on improving citizen participation and good governance.

What is the process?

Gwangju is working to strengthen direct democracy in policy-making and decision-making processes. In 2017, it held a Citizens Assembly, where citizens gathered and discussed more than 100 policies proposed by citizens meetings. Then, representatives of the city hall, the city council, the board of education, and the five district offices signed agreements to implement the policies adopted in the Citizens Assembly. Out of the 100 proposals, the authorities decided to implement 53. The Assembly, which is an example of inclusive governance, is going to be held annually.

What has been done so far?

An online platform for citizens to propose policies has become operative in 2016. The idea is that combining offline and online democratic channels will develop the city's own model of direct democracy with a push for more inclusive engagement from citizens. Gwangju also has a human rights impact assessment system. The system requires officials to examine if there is discrimination or human rights violations against marginalized groups before implementing major policies.

Link to the SDGs

The processes established by Gwangju are an interesting case because of the heavy focus on citizens' engagement. That means policy-making can be tailored according to priorities spelled out by the citizens, which could range from sustainable energy to improvement of gender equality. Several, if not all, SDGs can be achieved by the active participation from citizens, with the advantage of focusing on the most pressing issues first.

CONCLUSION

The post-World War II human rights journey has gone through three phases from the period (1) adopting the international legal and institutional framework, (2) moving into the post-Cold War period where a window opened globally for deeper implementation at the national level of the agreed norms and standards, on to (3) the current phase of implementation where people live locally. It has been a productive journey that today offers a rich tool box for local actors in municipalities and regions to turn human rights into reality at the hospital, in the class room, in delivering social services, in the public space etc.

On top of that, in 2015 the SDG's were adopted by the UN and were rapidly communicated to all parts of the world efficiently and effectively. As illustrated here, the SDG's and human rights go hand in hand with a great potential of being mutually reinforcing. The SDG's offer a unique possibility to make real the interrelatedness and interconnectedness of economic, social, cultural, political and civil rights as pronounced in the Vienna Declaration and Plan of Action from 1993. The practical work at the very local level demonstrates daily the relevance of the link between the two: SDG's without human rights run the risk of leaving someone behind although they declare the opposite and human rights without the SDG's can be difficult to comprehend.

In the end it all boils down to having a strong focus on citizens, ensuring that their rights are protected, and that they can live a life where they can cater for themselves, getting a chance to contribute to the society, and having their voices heard.

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1 NO POVERTY
2 ZERO HUNGER
3 GOOD HEALTH AND WELL-BEING
4 QUALITY EDUCATION
5 GENDER EQUALITY
6 CLEAN WATER AND SANITATION
7 AFFORDABLE AND CLEAN ENERGY
8 DECENT WORK AND ECONOMIC GROWTH

10 REDUCED INEQUALITIES
11 SUSTAINABLE CITIES AND COMMUNITIES
12 RESPONSIBLE CONSUMPTION AND PRODUCTION
13 CLIMATE ACTION
14 LIFE BELOW WATER
15 LIFE ON LAND
16 PEACE, JUSTICE AND STRONG INSTITUTIONS
17 PARTNERSHIPS FOR THE GOALS