

# « LOCAL GOVERNMENTS FOR HUMAN RIGHTS: A DEBATE WITH THE UN »

Report of the UN-local government meeting  
held at Geneva's OHCHR seat

[ 17 June 2019 ]



**UCLG**  
Committee

Social Inclusion  
Participatory Democracy  
and Human Rights

# CONTEXT

The meeting “**Local Governments for Human Rights: Addressing Social and Economic Inequalities at the Local Level**” was organized by the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) and the UCLG Committee on Social Inclusion, Participatory Democracy and Human Rights (UCLG-CSIPDHR). It was held as a result of the increasing engagement of UN human rights mechanisms with local governments through local and international initiatives, acknowledging the prominent role of cities in protecting and promoting human rights.

As a follow-up to several previous collaborations between the OHCHR and UCLG, this meeting offered an unprecedented opportunity for holding an initial discussion between local governments from Africa, Asia, the Americas and Europe, the UN Office on Human Rights, human rights experts and civil society organizations. The main goals of the meeting were:

- **To recognize, highlight and showcase** local government initiatives related to the promotion and protection of human rights;
- **To strengthen** dialogue between local governments and the UN human rights system, focusing on challenges, initiatives and good practices;
- **To explore** areas for strategic collaboration between the OHCHR, local governments and other stakeholders, with a view to support the realization of human rights at local level.

## FIRST BLOCK

### What role for local governments in the protection and promotion of human rights

In her introduction, Kate Gilmore (Deputy High Commissioner for Human Rights, OHCHR) praised local authorities’ commitment towards human rights at a time when these are under strain around the world:

*« Many of you have used your leadership positions, your authority and your responsibility to advance human rights. In recent years, it has truly been the city and local governments that have taken the most prominent and exciting role in the promotion and protection of human rights »*

**Kate Gilmore, OHCHR**

Local government representatives from Gwangju, Atlanta, Barcelona, Plaine Commune, Rome, Vienna and Utrecht recalled the important role local governments played for the promotion and protection of human rights, even in challenging environments. It is a matter of influencing and inspiring different stakeholders to work together to protect fundamental rights.

*« Local governments are not stand-alone entities. We need help from national and international institutions and to work together to make human rights part of our local ecosystem »*

**Linda Voortman, Utrecht**

*« Standing up for the human rights of migrants and fighting discrimination are crucial topics that city leaders must take on »*

**Michelle Maziar, Atlanta**



The Secretary General of UCLG, Emilia Sáiz, as well as the cities of Gwangju, Vienna and Kathmandu, emphasized how, beyond the existing diversity of “development models” across the world, the values of freedom, democracy, conviviality and peace remain essential to build more just societies and to guarantee the quality of life of all inhabitants.

*« Human rights are a fundamental standard for us. People will flourish in an environment where human rights are protected »*

**Lee Yong-Sup, Gwangju**

*« Our city pays particular attention to the integration of most vulnerable groups. We now wish to build a shared narrative in order to transform Kathmandu into a city of humanity »*

**Basanta Acharya, Kathmandu**

Participants also recalled that their local commitment to human rights is intrinsically linked to their desire to better understand and be sensitive to the needs of their constituencies.

*« People expectations at the local level are not mere principles, but visible and tangible solutions. Our daily work is based on trying to turn concrete our commitment to respect human rights which, beyond international principles, are also realities that we face every day »*

**Fadhel Moussa, Ariana**

*« In Geneva, people expectations are directly related to our capacity to deliver concrete results. Through participatory democracy mechanisms, we explore innovative methodologies involving all inhabitants in the design and implementation of public policies »*

**Rémy Pagani, Geneva**



Embracing human rights allows local authorities to develop a cross-cutting and inclusive approach to several local issues and challenges. Therefore, there is a close connection between human rights and the right to the city. It allows local authorities to identify, analyse and respond to contemporary issues related to the processes of urbanization and globalization.

*« Human rights can give a new meaning to recent discussions on social and economic equality, regarding the climate emergency or how should we advance the protection of digital rights »*

**Linda Voortman, Utrecht**

*« Urbanization and metropolization pose unprecedented challenges: Increasing inequalities and social exclusion, urban violences, the place of women or minorities, the representation of poor people and marginalized... Embracing the right to the city fosters us to better respect human rights and to address emerging challenges such as gentrification, non-discrimination, the right to housing or citizen participation »*

**Patrick Braouezec, Plaine Commune**

Douala, Pikine, Plaine Commune, Ulaanbaatar and Ariana recalled the obstacles faced by many local governments when trying to uphold their human rights obligations, be it due to the lack of decentralization or available human and financial resources. Local governments such as the ones aforementioned include among its population many vulnerable groups, struggle to meet their needs and they are often forced to prioritize their budgets and areas of intervention.

Local authorities such as Plaine Commune and Pikine highlighted the existing territorial imbalances between local governments and within metropolitan areas. Furthermore, urban polarization phenomena – linked to the current patterns of globalization – accelerate the concentration of wealth and power in primary cities leaving the other ones behind:

*« We need to be heard as peripheral cities of large metropolitan areas. We must not be left behind. We need to find solutions for our inhabitants. We try to do our best by focusing on health and education but there are big challenges ahead for guaranteeing access to basic services for all »*

**Abdoulaye Thimbo, Pikine**

Despite these realities, local authorities are trying to be creative. Local government participants recalled the importance of engaging inhabitants in the policy process and explaining their choices to residents in light of a growing demand for transparency in decision-making:

*« We work to federate energies, resources and initiatives to improve our city. We have put in place concrete participatory democracy mechanisms, such as participatory budgeting. Through that, we aim at putting at the heart of local government citizen participation »*

**Job Théophile Kwapnang, Douala 3**

Plaine Commune and Barcelona also defended the innovative and transformative nature that local projects including human rights can have, as well as their potential impact for achieving transformations at a global scale. It is a way of showing how many local governments already see themselves as institutions that can take on their responsibilities in order to tackle global challenges, particularly those echoing the concerns raised by civil society:

*« We promote concrete policies that seek to transform the rules that are at the root of human rights violations and inequalities. The help of civil society in this quest is crucial, considering also that it is much easier to engage with civil society from the local level perspective »*

**Aida Guillen, Barcelona**



Finally, Paris and UCLG's SG shared the importance of including the protection of local democracy as one of the fundamental issues in overall human rights protection.

*« Cities are the main expression of local democracy. The type of democracy which is closest to inhabitants. Mayors and elected officials who are threatened or attacked because of their human rights commitments must be defended and protected »*

*Patrick Klugman, Paris*

## **SECOND BLOCK**

### How to build a “Human Rights City”?

The cities of Gwangju, Barcelona, Vienna, Utrecht and Montevideo shared their consolidated experiences in human rights protection and guarantee, their particular local story on this topic as well as how the process to becoming a human rights city was initiated.

*« Our approach to this topic is based on three ideas: A human rights-based approach, an intercultural perspective and a feminist perspective »*

**Aida Guillen, Barcelona**

*« The first idea about becoming a human rights city dates back to the Saint Denis conference, which I attended. Since then, the City of Vienna wished to develop human rights as basic standards for all inhabitants and has a Human Rights Office since 2015 »*

**Shams Asadi, Vienna**

In some context, local authorities embrace human rights as guiding principles of local action:

*« Mexico City is committed to human rights and its government has vowed to become a human rights city. To do so, it pays a particular attention to several priority groups, such as women, elderly, children, migrants, people with disabilities or LGBTQI+ »*

**Claudia Barri, Mexico City**

Many local authorities stressed how the implementation of human rights is both a process and a change in the way of looking at local government action. Different experiences presented show that these processes share several basic principles:

- First and foremost, the idea of “human rights cities” represent local governments’ willingness to use their responsibilities as a way to improve the living conditions of inhabitants on the basis of the respect and defence of fundamental rights. Through the implementation of human rights, they seek to achieve greater social and economic justice and a vision of inclusive urban development that works for all:

*« Including those who are socially or economically disadvantaged is one of the first criteria for a human rights city »*

**Lee Yong-Sup, Gwangju**

*« Faced to the growth of inequalities, intolerance and extremism, human rights cities represent a way to achieve more inclusion and pluralism »*

**HJ Faïda, Jember**

*« One of the first measures we took as human rights city was to provide social assistance to older persons and persons with disabilities in the form of a basic income »*

**Basanta Asharya, Kathmandu**



· Secondly, the idea of human rights city has very strong implications in terms of engaging with and promoting cooperation with inhabitants and other territorial actors:

*« The concept of human rights city refers to a cooperative process where we try to find ways to protect citizens' rights, taking a closer look at their needs, the urban environment and our own administrative system. It is important to count also with the involvement of economic stakeholders and organized civil society in the defence of human rights »*

**Lee Yong-Sup, Gwangju**

· Third, human rights must be understood as a cross-cutting approach to local action, including all existing public policies that work towards greater cohesion and social inclusion:

*« We consider essential having all our public policies and budgetary priorities adopt human rights values »*

**Ernesto Beltrame, Montevideo**

*« Mexico City now created a human rights Secretariat, charged with mainstreaming human rights across all municipal departments. The Human-Rights Based Approach is now a guiding principle in all municipal action, not only to protect human rights, but also to respect human rights from a government perspective »*

**Claudia Barri, Mexico City**

Vienna and Barcelona emphasised on the importance of introducing a cross-cutting approach in public policies. The City of Barcelona published a methodological guide to show how it developed its commitment to human rights further through a structured policymaking strategy.

· Finally, there is a need to better highlight human rights in the framework of the 2030 Agenda. The Sustainable Development Goals and human rights are interconnected and must nourish each other, as pointed out by Vienna, Utrecht, Gwangju and UCLG's Secretary General.

Various local authorities described how their work at global level and cooperation with other local governments, made it possible to connect initiatives and mutually reinforce common messages. For example, Montreal and Montevideo mentioned their shared commitment to the "Municipalist Declaration for the Right to Adequate Housing (Cities for Housing)" and the Declaration "Cities for Migration" launched in parallel to the UN Global Compact for Migration.

Participants emphasized that putting in common their local actions within the framework of local government networks such as UCLG helps to highlight the common points of their paths and to foster a dynamic of exchanges. This is a key element to consolidate the global movement of human rights cities. Several participants commended the organization of the meeting and called for greater collaboration with the OHCHR.

*« The relationship between local authorities and the OHCHR should be strengthened. This could mean to work together in defining what basic conditions [human rights cities] should meet. This would make it possible to go beyond a mere list of human rights cities »*

**Shams Asadi, Vienna**

*« It would be positive and encouraging that the OHCHR supported local authorities in developing their own local human rights policies »*

**Henri-Paul Normandin, Montreal**

Participating local governments expressed their willingness to consolidate and expand the human rights cities movement. They called to consolidate the existing dynamic and to

strengthen its messages, especially in connection to the 2030 Agenda and New Urban Agenda. The goal in this process is to better promote the respect and defence of human rights at the local level as a way to build safer, fairer, more inclusive and more sustainable cities for all.



## THIRD BLOCK

### Implementing human rights at the local level: Concrete experiences and practices

The second part of the meeting focused on the implementation of human rights at local level. It highlighted concrete examples of actions and projects around three themes.

#### **1) Local authorities as promoters and protectors of socio-economic rights** *Housing, informality, access to basic services and public spaces.*

Access to adequate housing for all is a major concern widely shared by many local authorities across the world. According to Leilani Farha, UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Housing, « the global human rights crisis is marked by growing difficulties in accessing housing. We are witnessing an unprecedented increase in homelessness, forced evictions and worsening or stagnant conditions of informal settlements. Many local authorities have already committed to finding new ways to tackle this situation through the Declaration “Cities for Adequate Housing” and The Shift Campaign. We still have a lot to do to ensure the realization of housing as a human right ».

The City of Montevideo presented its public land bank project and the various tax mechanisms on real estate transactions that help the city develop its social housing policy. More specifically, the “Fincas” project launched in 2019 is helping the city promotes the establishment of new housing cooperatives and the opening of new social housing in the city centre. This is a way to combat gentrification and forced evictions. The city also created a “Casa Trans” in this context; that is, a safe space for protecting the rights of the transgender community.

The cities of Gwangju, Jember and Mexico reported on their employment policy initiatives. These cities support access to employment for people with disabilities (Jember), promote local dialogues with businesses aimed at fostering the employment of young people (Gwangju); or introduce new regulations to protect the working conditions of domestic workers and guarantee access to medical assistance on a par with other workers (Mexico City). The city of Kathmandu has opened municipal welfare centres for vulnerable groups.



## ***2) Inequalities, Economic and Social Rights and Vulnerable Groups Migration, Non-Discrimination, Urban Security and Peace***

Migration was discussed in the context of human rights universality. This has been a crucial concern for local authorities that, for the most part, have developed many actions in the area despite the lack of capacities and resources (social inclusion, participation in community life...)

Atlanta shared the actions it is implementing despite the limitations imposed by other levels of government. Access to basic services (housing through the “Safe Housing” project, education, public safety through the “Victims of Crimes” project or certification of skills) is deployed closer to the migrant public through a strategy of Community outreach where municipal employees go door-to-door to meet the needs of migrant residents. In order to circumvent the ban on using public funds for migrants in an illegal situation, the city has launched a private fund to build affordable housing for migrants. The city also has a significant internship and apprenticeship program within its Immigration Department to engage Atlanta youth in the defence of migrant communities.

In Pikine, the city has created, in partnership with an Italian NGO, a “Rights Office” in three districts of the city which aims in particular to protect the rights of women. It guarantees a safe space for women who face situations of violence and exclusion by providing psychological and legal support. The local governments of Jember, Mexico City, Montreal and Plaine Commune also referred to several initiatives in the fields of Women’s Rights.

The city of Jember organizes intercultural and interreligious meetings to promote tolerance and peace between communities. Policies against racism, xenophobia and non-discrimination are numerous at the local level and were widely mentioned by representatives of Montevideo, Barcelona, Vienna and Atlanta.



### **3) *Guaranteeing the Right to the City*** *Participation, freedom of expression and cultural rights*

Participatory democracy was mentioned as an important expectation by inhabitants and a fundamental dimension that must be taken into account when thinking of human rights respect and implementation at the local level. The cities of Douala and Ariana reported on their participatory budgets experiences which allowed people to decide on the implementation of certain municipal projects (street lighting, roads, etc.). The mayor of Ariana, Fadhel Moussa, particularly emphasized the context of Tunisian cities, currently experiencing a democratic transition. In light of the many challenges related to this situation, Tunisian local authorities struggle to meet the needs of citizens following the first local democratic elections of 2018. Several local authorities reaffirmed the importance of participatory democracy mechanisms to ensure greater transparency, renew political confidence and fight against corruption.

The deputy mayor of Rome, Luca Bergamo, reiterated the importance of respect for cultural rights at the local level, which allows reinvigorating civic life and the reconstruction of social capital. The city of Rome has developed many projects particularly focused on tackling socio-spatial inequalities in accessing culture. The city is also experiencing a process of re-appropriation of public spaces in order to reaffirm cultural rights, particularly in the face of the commodification of creative and cultural industries.

The City of Geneva launched the Geneva Declaration “Human Rights and Cultural Heritage: committed cities working together” signed by twenty cities from across the world. According to Geneva’s Municipal Councillor Rémy Pagani, “cultural heritage is essential because it gives citizens a sense of urban, local and regional identity”.

Finally, Gwangju shared its program of “Local Rights Defenders” developed throughout different city neighbourhoods. Professor Gyonggu SHIN also stressed the importance of training municipal officials: “Gwangju City has developed human rights education programs to ensure that all municipal employees count with a basic human rights training”. In Vienna, human rights are integrated into the educational programs of city officials offered by the administrative academy of the city. For instance, since 2017, human rights have been included as a cross-cutting subject into the existing seminar on “Administrative Procedures” and special courses on human rights have been established for law officers. The city of Barcelona also has training programs on human rights especially targeting local associations, and had an experience with the OHCHR and UCLG on training local civil society on international mechanisms for human rights protection.

# ROADMAP: RECOMMENDATIONS AND POTENTIAL WAYS FORWARD

In the afternoon, the meeting focused on a discussion with experts, representatives of civil society and researchers: The **Raoul Wallenberg Institute**, the **CIDOB**, the **Global Platform for the Right to the City** and the **Habitat International Coalition**, **Human Rights Cities Network**, **INFID**, **US Human Rights Network**, **Fundamental Rights Agency**, **Asia Development Alliance** and **Cities of Refuge**. Many recommendations were formulated for strengthening the dialogue and partnership.

## *1. Establishing a place of dialogue among local governments, local government networks, OHCHR and civil society organizations*

There was a consensus among participants that the meeting they were attending was a wonderful opportunity and should not be a one-off exercise. It was suggested to establish an annual meeting (eventually facilitated and lead by the OHCHR and UCLG) aiming at promoting dialogue and partnership between local authorities, the human rights system and other stakeholders, highlighting public policies and innovative initiatives to share knowledge for the protection and promotion of human rights at local level. The World Congress of UCLG (Durban) could be a first opportunity to launch this space of dialogue, which could then become an annual meeting organized in conjunction with local governments (from 2020 onwards).



## *2. Building capacity on human rights for local governments', civil society organizations and communities*

OHCHR, UCLG-CSIPDHR and other stakeholders should join hand to support human rights capacity building for interested local authorities, based on exchanges and training sessions, as well as capitalizing on local authorities' know-how.

Many local governments expect peer-to-peer learning in events focus on precise topics. These events would allow to have more horizontal learning methodologies. The role of national associations of local governments would also be key in this context.

In this perspective, the Gwangju's International Training Center, aiming at training local government staff of the Asian region on human rights is a promising initiative that should be commended and also encourage its replication in other local contexts.

### ***3. Enhance the links between local governments and their networks and the UN Human Rights system***

Local governments would benefit from human rights mechanisms guidance. On the other hand, human rights mechanisms and the UN would benefit from experiences in localizing human rights and the SDGs. A number of proposals were made to increase these exchanges, including:

- **Promoting local government constituency representation** in UN human rights mechanisms;
- **Promoting local government participation in national delegations** to international human rights procedures, including Periodic Reviews of States (treaty bodies and UPR);
- **Looking at ways in which local governments can better provide information** to the work of human rights mechanisms and encourage UN mechanisms to provide recommendations on the implementation of human rights at local level;
- **Developing structural mechanisms for dissemination** of decisions, guidance and recommendations issued by the human rights mechanisms and the Human Rights Council to better work with local governments;
- **Developing Voluntary Local Reviews (VLR) that bring the human rights perspective** to 2030 Localization Agenda. The link between human rights and the 2030 Agenda has been identified as a mobilizing axis for local authorities. Nevertheless, the links between the SDGs and the implementation of human rights at local level needs to be clarified;
- **Launching a process within the framework of UCLG and its Committee on Social Inclusion, Participatory Democracy and Human Rights** which addresses how to attain the necessary conditions and tools for achieving a better recognition of the work of local authorities regarding human rights protection and promotion.

### ***4. Protecting Mayors and local government officials***

The City of Paris has initiated a project for an Observatory on the "protection of local elected officials", aiming at protecting local government representatives living under threat around the world. This initiative has been launched in the framework of UCLG as a comprehensive strategy seeking to understand and map the global state of local democracy. This initiative should be supported and aligned with the Declaration on Human Rights Defenders.

### ***5. Establishing criteria for the process to become a human rights city***

The suggestion was made by Utrecht and Vienna. The idea would be to define some criteria for defining a process to become a human rights city and monitoring the progress on human rights.

## **6. Establishing a structure for supporting and assessing human rights initiatives by local governments**

A structure could be put in place allowing the support by the UN and other stakeholders of local governments' human rights initiatives, supporting local governments that want to become human rights cities, evaluating progresses and publicizing local authorities' human rights commitments.

# **LIST OF PARTICIPANTS**

### **Local governments**

Ariana (Tunisia)  
Atlanta (United States)  
Barcelona (Spain)  
Douala 3 (Cameroon)  
Geneva (Switzerland)  
Gwangju (South Korea)  
Jember Regency (Indonesia)  
Kathmandu (Nepal)  
Mexico City (Mexico)  
Montevideo (Uruguay)  
Paris (France)  
Pikine (Senegal)  
Plaine Commune (France)  
Riga (Latvia)  
Rome (Italy)  
Seoul (South Korea)  
SKL / SALAR - Swedish Association of  
Local Authorities and Regions (Sweden)  
Ulaanbataar (Mongolia)  
Utrecht (The Netherlands)  
Vienna (Austria)

### **Civil society and other human rights stakeholders**

Asia Development Alliance  
CIDOB Global Cities program  
Cities of Refuge  
Fundamental Rights Agency  
Global Platform for the Right to the City  
Habitat International Coalition  
Human Rights Cities Network  
INFID  
Raoul Wallenberg Institute  
US Human Rights Network

### **Co-organizers**

Office of the UN High Commissioner for  
Human Rights - OHCHR  
UCLG Committee on Social Inclusion,  
Participatory Democracy and Human Rights  
- UCLG CSIPDHR

