

## Background: Human Rights Cities

### What is the Human Rights City Initiative?

- The human rights city initiative is an **organizing model** that sketches out a process for public education/consciousness raising and political mobilization. It aims to center people's needs in policy debates that affect the distribution of resources and opportunities in cities and other communities.
  - While many human rights cities begin with formal proclamations or resolutions to establish human rights in local policy, such formal declarations are not the key elements of human rights cities.
  - The essence of human rights cities and communities is the commitment of a core group of residents to engaging and building an **ongoing process** of dialogue, consciousness-raising, and mobilization to advance new ways of thinking and acting in the larger society and to support policies that advance the realization of human rights for all residents.
  - Human rights city work involves conscious effort to create new institutions and transform existing ones in order to support human rights outcomes.
  - Because existing institutions have failed to ensure human rights and equity for all people, this initiative requires **political and legal imagination** to envision fundamentally different institutional and social arrangements. Human rights must be defined by people's experiences and needs, not by formal legal rights or by existing institutional capacities.
- Human rights cities initiatives must be led by civil society groups, although they are most effective when they involve some relationships with relevant public officials, such as representatives from local Human Rights Commissions, Gender Equity Commissions, and other public agencies. Some human rights city initiatives have been launched by public officials. But they can only be sustained if they have a grounding in community leadership and engagement.
- Human rights cities initiatives must center the needs, leadership, and perspectives of historically marginalized groups. While this should ideally involve active involvement of leaders from these communities in human rights city initiatives, at minimum it must involve dialogue with such leaders and a commitment to the Human Rights Cities Principles and the Jemez Principles.

### I don't live in a city, can we still use this organizing framework?

- The human rights city model can apply to any community. Central to the process is a commitment to the place where people live and to the social and ecological relationships of that place. Rural communities, indigenous peoples' reservations, and even counties and states can be locales to which the model can be applied.
- The aim of the human rights city initiative is to realize human rights from the places where people live and interact, upward. This challenges the traditional, top-down model of governance and recognizes that human rights are only realized through the struggles of oppressed groups. This means that leadership must come from and be intentionally directed to identify the priorities and needs of the most oppressed populations and communities.

- Building human rights cities requires changes in not just, and not primarily, public policies. It requires changes in institutions and culture—in the “common sense” thinking that orients communities currently towards valuing profits and growth over the commons and community.
- Lessons from Human Rights Cities suggest that the most successful projects involve:
  - **Organized communities are key leaders** that make human rights an explicit *political project* that prioritizes *people-centered human rights*. Leadership can come from government, but main/lead impetus must be in communities.
    - **Multi-level organizational networks and alliances** are needed to be politically successful-- community groups, movement groups, professional associations, parties/unions etc.
    - **Conscious work to develop *place based vs. work/ profession- based identities*** is key—Commitment to a place provides a basis for solidarity and broad coalitions: Linking work/professional and other identities with a broader vision of social goal of a City where all enjoy human rights and dignity.
  - **Translocal intermediaries**—such as ties to other human rights city leaders, the National Human Rights City Alliance and international human rights movement
  - **Ties to public institutions and engagement of some portion of local governments** in human rights work. Most often this will be with Human Rights Commissions, Gender/Racial Equity Commissions, and similar bodies, but the idea is to mobilize more of the state around human rights priorities.

## Resources

### **Human Rights Cities**

[US Human Rights Network Human Rights Cities Alliance](#)

Statement of Human Rights City Principles

### **Democracy**

Barber, Benjamin. 2014. "Cities as Glocal Defenders of Rights." Pp. 17-22 in *The Future of Human Rights in an Urban World: Exploring Opportunities, Threats and Challenges*, edited by T. van Lindert and D. Lettinga.

[http://www.amnesty.nl/sites/default/files/public/the\\_future\\_of\\_human\\_rights\\_in\\_an\\_urban\\_world\\_0.pdf](http://www.amnesty.nl/sites/default/files/public/the_future_of_human_rights_in_an_urban_world_0.pdf) : Amnesty International –Netherlands.

Roth, Kenneth. 2017. "The Dangerous Rise of Populism: Global Attacks on Human Rights Values." Pp. 1-15 in *World Report 2017: Demagogues Threaten Human Rights-Trump, European Populists Foster Bigotry, Discrimination*, edited by Human Rights Watch. New York: Human Rights Watch.