

Social Movements and Human Rights

Jackie Smith, University of Pittsburgh

Adapted, pre-production version of chapter prepared for *Human Rights: Politics and Practice*, 3rd Edition. Forthcoming (2021), Oxford University Press. Michael E. Goodhart, Editor.

Without social movements, there would be no human rights. And indeed, without human rights and the institutions that enforce them, people's struggles for justice would have few outlets and would have trouble building support. Scholarship on the history of social movements shows the important relationship between the emergence of modern states and popular struggles to set limits to states' authority and on the legitimate uses of state coercion.

Social movement challenges to state authority shaped the very structure of today's democracies, as activists developed political repertoires designed to expand public voice and participation in political decisionmaking. The expansion of the franchise to include groups formerly denied political voice, the reduction of barriers to political participation, and the development of laws promoting public accountability and defending rights of minorities were all won through historic and ongoing pro-democracy struggles between social movement challengers and political authorities (Markoff 2015; Tilly 1978).

Not only have social movements shaped the institutions and practices that define contemporary national governments, but they have also played key roles in helping build the global architecture for human rights. Indeed, the earliest efforts to develop laws governing the behaviors of states came in response to popular outrage and resistance to slavery and the international slave trade and to the devastating impacts of wars on both soldiers and civilian populations (Charnovitz 1997, Finnemore 1996, Hunt 2007). **Social movements**—collections of actors, including both individuals and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) with varying degrees of formalization and resourcefulness, united in coordinated efforts to advance social change—have worked throughout history to help define what it means to be a legitimate state.

Social Movements and Human Rights

Scholars have long shown how social movement activism has helped institutionalize universal human rights principles into international organizations, declarations, and treaties, despite resistance from powerful states. The earliest struggles for rights were those opposing arbitrary state violence and torture and those opposing slavery and the slave trade (Hunt 2007). Human rights movements were key to making human rights a central component of the United Nations Charter at its founding in San Francisco in 1945. They also helped secure a place for civil society organizations in the ongoing work of the United Nations (Seary 1996; Gaer 1996).

Over time, activists have used their access to the United Nations to strengthen the organization, for instance by expanding its work to address gender inequality and rights (Ferree and Mueller 2004; Paxton et al. 2006; Prügl and Meyer 1999) and to improve institutional mechanisms for monitoring and enforcing rights (Smith 1995; Lasso 1994; Clark 2004). For instance, health and human rights advocates have also helped advance global treaties around toxic wastes, environmental justice, landmines, and reproductive health (e.g. Newell 2005; Taylor 1993; Petchesky 2003; Clapp 1994). Other movements have worked to build global norms around the right to food and culture, achieving recent advances by securing the 2018 UN Declaration on the rights of Peasants (see Edelman and Carwil 2011). More recently, social movements have helped strengthen international laws and institutions to hold corporations

accountable for their impacts on human rights (Smith 2008; Sikkink 1986). Such work fills a major lacuna in human rights law (e.g., Gibney 2008).

Nelson and Dorsey (2007) describe the emergence over recent decades of a “new human rights advocacy” that emphasizes the intersections of economic and social rights with civil and political rights. These movements are bringing a more diverse array of groups together using a wide variety of tactics and operating at different levels—from local to global. What is apparent when we examine these different struggles across place and time is how global institutions develop in response to contestation between states and social movements. As Kathryn Sikkink and her colleagues have shown, social movement advocates have made use of global norms to bring pressure on governments—what she calls the “boomerang strategy” (Keck and Sikkink 1998; Sikkink 2005). Considering the proliferation of local and national human rights activism, Rodríguez-Garavito (2014) describes a human rights “ecosystem,” involving “multiple boomerang” strategies synchronized across different contexts—all pressing governments in similar directions and reinforcing global human rights (see also Kaldor 2003). Hafner-Burton and Tsutsui (2005) describe a “paradox of empty promises,” whereby governments ratify human rights treaties without much intention to transform human rights practices, but as global human rights have been strengthened, we’re seeing improvements in actual human rights practices. This paradox has generated, over time, a dynamic referred to as the “spiral model” and the “justice cascade” (Risse, Ropp and Sikkink 1999; Sikkink 2011).

The Diffusion of Human Rights

In a process I refer to as **human rights globalization**, social movements have worked to build a global culture of human rights, supported by a growing array of international treaties and institutions designed to promote and protect human rights and dignity. While states have been organized to reinforce territorial boundaries and competitive interests, people have always worked across those divisions to promote shared interests and cooperation.

Although it is as old as the top-down, state-driven forms of globalization centered on international trade, military, and economic interests, human rights globalization has received far less attention from historians and scholars. This is largely because the proponents of human rights globalization have been groups typically denied a voice or any formal standing in most inter-state institutions and legal structures. In addition, human rights can pose a direct threat to the interests of elites promoting economic globalization and conventional power politics, and powerful groups have used their resources and influence over mass media and political institutions to marginalize movements and discredit their agendas. Nevertheless, in introducing the idea of human rights globalization, I aim to focus our attention on the *long-term* and *global* efforts of popular forces to articulate human rights norms and develop and build a system of treaties and organizational infrastructures designed to improve human rights protections.

Through this world-historical lens, we can link historic efforts of anti-slavery activists and proponents of the early Geneva Conventions on the laws of war to today’s struggles against discriminatory policing and for protection of sexual minorities. A common thread is that, as discussed above, activists and movements have used the inter-state arena to gain leverage against powerful states, holding them accountable to *global* human rights norms and laws by using what Keck and Sikkink (1998) refer to as a “boomerang” strategy. Over time, social movements have contributed to a “spiral model” involving the elaboration of new international treaties and organizations designed to better define international expectations around human rights and to

promote better monitoring and enforcement of those rights (Risse, Ropp and Sikkink 1999; Smith 1995). Thus, we cannot understand the global human rights architecture without attention to the contestation between human rights movements and states.

The 1990s saw an explosion of new levels of engagement by civil society actors in global spaces, and the United Nations hosted a series of international conferences that encouraged networking and learning across diverse groups and issues (Friedman, Clark and Hochstetler 2005; Willetts 2011). These conferences helped support more multi-issue global organizing and inspired new thinking about intersections of different human rights, including the effects of racism and patriarchy and links between economic and social rights and political/civil rights. Global conferences also helped connect concerns of women, indigenous peoples, immigrants, and other marginalized groups with broader human rights discourse and strategy (Falcón 2016). The opportunities for activists to work together in global spaces enabled them to develop new thinking about how to build broader human rights movements and improve local implementation of global human rights norms and laws.

Over time, many activists—particularly feminists—became frustrated by the failures of traditional approaches to building a human rights treaty system from the top down. States might be willing (with some prodding) to sign a convention, but they rarely took initiative to actually follow-through on their treaty obligations. Getting states to ratify treaties they signed and then to make requisite changes in national laws and practices required ongoing vigilance and pressure from activists and lawyers. Thus, human rights globalizers began to think more systematically about strategies for ensuring greater correspondence between global principles and local practices (Alvarez 2000, Desai 2009). At this same time, Nelson and Dorsey document what they call “new rights advocacy,” a “dramatic increase in the application of human rights standards and strategies to economic, social and development policy issues” (2007:189). Such advocacy has involved efforts by some groups to push for stronger monitoring processes and greater enforcement capacities at the international level. But it also involves grassroots mobilization and coalition-building that centers economic, social and cultural rights and that targets local officials and publics.

Localizing Human Rights

In 1993 at the World Conference of Human Rights in Vienna, as the end of the Cold War inspired hope for more united efforts to advance economic and social as well as political and civil rights, movement energies converged around strategies for localizing the movement (Oomen and Baumgärtel 2012; van den Berg and Oomen 2014). A key achievement was the creation of a UN High Commissioner for Human Rights—an office that would centralize international work around human rights and engage in more pro-active efforts to promote global compliance with international norms. The establishment of the High Commissioner achieved a long-standing goal of the global human rights movement, and it marked a critical advancement for human rights globalization. This office broadens and deepens the institutional foundations for global human rights by providing organization and staffing that helps monitor compliance with human rights across all international agencies, expands attention to the practices of member states, and supports the UN Human Rights Council. The High Commissioner’s Office hosts and supports numerous Special Rapporteurs and Working Groups focused on important human rights concerns and authorized to engage in fact-finding and analysis that builds support for human rights among states and civil society. The High Commissioner has become an important liaison

helping link human rights movements with the global system of states, bringing the knowledge and creativity of movements to the work of global human rights governance (See Box 17.X).

International attention to localizing human rights has been fueled in part by the rise of new governance challenges within member states caused by economic globalization and the related rapid growth of cities (Khanna 2010, Sassen 1991). Numerous Human Rights Council Resolutions passed since 2013 have furthered international efforts to promote “human rights mainstreaming in local administration and public services” (A/HRC/RES/24/2). This work from the inter-state arena has been complemented by efforts of municipal leaders themselves to come together across cities to address shared problems faced by local governments (Frug and David J. Barron 2006). What we’re seeing today is thus a “rescaling” of politics in response to what Hanna and Walton-Roberts see as a “spatial paradox where changes in governance aimed at enhancing global competitiveness have actually diminished the local qualities cities depend upon to sustain such advantage” (2004:37). A growing global human rights cities movement, emerging initially in the global South and largely in response to pressures brought about by economic globalization and its displacement of people and communities, has been working to link human rights movements with local officials concerned with addressing this spatial paradox and helping connect global and local politics (Marks et al, 2008. See Box 17.X).

Thus, we see how social movements have contributed to an important process of human rights globalization that both responds to and serves as an alternative to the top-down agendas of states focused on prioritizing global trade and financial exchanges and military/territorial sovereignty over human needs. Alongside this work to build a global infrastructure that supports human rights norms and that—over time—has become more effective as a tool for holding powerful actors accountable to these rights, movements have been deepening connections within and across national civil societies. This work of movement-building has benefitted from advances in technology that facilitate international communication and travel. Such developments have made it increasingly possible for activists to engage in “grassroots globalism” that links diverse people in varied and remote locales with a global movement that can coordinate action across space.

Evolving Global Rights Norms

But it is not only new organizing techniques that have been important to the localization of the global human rights movement. Also key have been the articulation of global human rights norms and their importance to shaping what Tsutsui (2018) refers to as “social movement actorhood.” Globalized human rights norms enable local communities and individuals to make claims against more powerful actors. The global legitimation of human rights both empowers local actors and invites them to understand their conditions differently. Many oppressed groups have, over time, internalized dominant narratives that marginalize their histories and experiences, discouraging them from even viewing their situations as unjust, much less subject to change. Opportunities to engage with other oppressed groups from different places, and to do so in a context where human rights discourses frame interactions, help reframe local struggles and inspire agency against long-term structural violence.

These global processes have generated a movement strategy that Tsutsui and Smith (2019) have called the **sandwich effect**, which combines the top-down “boomerang” strategy with coordinated action from below to increase pressure on local and national governments as well as other powerful actors to comply with global human rights norms (See Box 17.X).

Thus, human rights globalization has advanced local human rights advocacy and social movements by (1) creating political opportunities at the international level that enable local actors to exert external pressures on local authorities; (2) increasing flows of international support for political mobilization; (3) providing frames for social movements that appeal to and engage both global audiences and local publics; and (4) enabling and supporting new, translocal identities and movement actorhood that contributes to the rescaling of global politics and the re-valuing of place and community. In this global political context where city officials are also emerging as global actors, we see the rise of new global-local connections in the human rights movement. Below I provide an illustration of how activists are forging those connections while helping strengthen human rights globalization by advancing human rights institutions as well as local and trans-local movement-building.

Case Study: Human Rights Cities “Bringing Human Rights Home”

A significant institutional innovation in human rights globalization and human rights organizing has been the introduction of the **Universal Periodic Review (UPR) process** in 2006, as part of a larger UN reform process. The UPR involves a periodic (every 4 ½ years) review of the human rights record of every member government, and the Human Rights Council makes a set of recommendations to governments of actions that will improve their compliance with the entire body of international human rights laws and norms.¹ The UPR improves upon past mechanisms for human rights enforcement in a number of ways. First, it empowers civil society actors by inviting them to submit stakeholder reports as part of the formal review process. This happens *prior to* states’ submissions, so that governments are pressed to respond to civil society claims rather than vice-versa. The UPR also is an improvement in that it takes place on a routine basis. Thus, over time activist groups can expand their skill and knowledge of international human rights law and work to promote local learning about the United Nations and global human rights architecture as they work to hold their governments accountable to UPR recommendations.

Local Organizing and the Third US UPR

In spring 2019, the UN Human Rights Council launched the third Universal Periodic Review of the United States, creating an opportunity upon which a national network of human rights organizers was poised to act. The US Human Rights Cities Alliance, a network of organizations and activists representing the US component of the global human rights cities movement, launched the “UPR Cities Project,”² to encourage local activists to document local human rights conditions as part of the third US Universal Periodic Review.

The group organized a series of webinars hosted in the months leading up to the October deadline for submitting stakeholder reports to the United Nations, helping local groups better understand how international processes could be used to advance their local work around issues such as affordable housing, gun violence, gender and racial discrimination, and food insecurity. Webinars also provided guidance about relevant international laws and documentation that could support the concerns being raised by communities. Organizers helped provide logistical support for groups preparing to submit formal stakeholder reports. Such reports include not only

¹ Importantly, this includes not only formal treaties to which a country is a party, but also all international declarations such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, formal investigations and reviews by UN Special Rapporteurs and Working Groups, and past UPR recommendations.

²http://wiki.humanrightscities.mayfirst.org/index.php?title=UPR_Cities_Project

testimony about conditions in particular locales that require remedy but also identify recommendations for policy changes at the national level that would improve possibilities for regional and local officials to strengthen human rights protections. It is important to note that these movements don't limit their understanding of rights to the formal body of binding laws, but rather they advocate for "people-centered human rights" that uses people's needs as a guide for policy and law (Baraka, n.d.).

Producing stakeholder reports requires consultation among diverse community groups. The UPR submission process encourages groups to collaborate, and submissions that reflect diverse constituencies are encouraged. Thus, the UPR process itself encourages activists to engage in human rights-centered dialogues and learning—all forms of human rights movement-building. In addition, the task of generating recommendations for the UPR process requires dialogue and reflection on the work of governance. This is not something citizens are typically asked to do in conventional politics. Instead, they're offered solutions by politicians and policy experts, but they're not invited to come up with solutions of their own. By inviting residents to consider not only what is wrong but also how to make things better, the UPR process strengthens people's agency, or actorhood, and engages them in the work of active citizenship. Such engagement, moreover, provides positive reinforcement for elements of city government that support equity and human rights—agencies and officials who are often marginalized and overshadowed by the usually more powerful government entities focused on economic development and growth.

Human Rights Movement-Building

Bringing international attention to the US human rights record is not the only aim of the UPR Cities project. The ultimate goal is to build a human rights constituency throughout the country—people who know their rights and are organized and empowered to defend them. An online UPR Cities organizing toolkit supports efforts to mobilize local residents and equip them with resources to shape local human rights practices. While national governments ratify treaties and participate in UN processes, it is ultimately local officials who make and enforce decisions that relate most directly to international human rights laws and standards. Yet, many local officials are uninformed about international law. It's up to organized communities, then, to be what human rights cities organizer Rob Robinson calls "human rights enforcers."

Organizers outline three main steps for participants in the UPR Cities project, called the "3 Cs." First, residents **collect** testimonies and documentation about local human rights conditions. These can be both examples of good or best practices, as well as illustrations of where improvements are needed. Next, activists **compile** these accounts into a report that can be submitted to the official UPR review of the United States. This report becomes the basis for further organizing aimed at educating local communities and inviting them to discuss and reflect on the report's analysis and strategies for local action. Such conversations can lead groups to produce their own local UPR report that targets city/community officials as well as other local targets, such as corporations, universities, or large nonprofit entities. Finally, the UPR Cities project calls for local efforts to **clamor** for human rights. Reflecting on the recommendations generated in their reports and identifying the ones they wish to champion can generate local enthusiasm and support for the long-term organizing work needed to help realize the recommendations in the UPR and any international review process. This last step is the most critical for achieving concrete changes in human rights practices, and it reflects the wisdom of

early human rights campaigner Frederick Douglass, who said “Power concedes nothing without a demand.”

Without local knowledge of international reviews or appreciation of how international pressure could benefit communities, the UPR would be—like one critic dubbed the early Human Rights Commission—“the most elaborate waste paper basket ever invented.”³ Organizers of the UPR Cities initiative hope that involving local residents in work to generate shared understandings of the systemic issues that prevent better local level compliance with, for instance, expectations in regard to the right to housing, education, political participation, and freedom from arbitrary arrest and torture, the project will build skills and commitment needed to support ongoing movement action to advance UPR recommendations at both national and local levels. Because local activists are involved in work to build stakeholder reports, they are more likely to remain active in this essential step of clamoring for government action to follow up on the UPR recommendations.

Many people criticize the UN because its reports and declarations are often ignored by governments. What they don’t realize is that democratic governance requires both laws to protect people and vigilant and active citizens to hold public officials accountable. Local actors have long been a critical missing link in the UN human rights architecture, and they are the ones necessary to “guard the guardians.” That is, they help ensure that governments follow through on their promises and that global human rights expectations get “translated” into national and local polities. It is in local contexts where rights advocates can frame issues and mobilize supporters and collective action that builds both political will and public capacity to effectively implement the full range of human rights (i.e., including economic, social and cultural rights).

The recent history of human rights movements shows that activists have learned that it is not enough to merely promote good treaties and document rights violations, it is up to local populations to demand that officials use human rights principles to guide policy decisions.⁴ The UPR Cities project and related initiatives are helping build communities of activists who can identify key treaties and documentation from prior reviews and develop cross-city analyses of the key human rights priorities and recommended changes. What is more, the initiative will be working to sustain and support local advocacy far beyond the third UPR by building campaigns to promote key UPR recommendations in local as well as national advocacy. For instance, planners are discussing ideas for highlighting “20 UPR Recommendations for 2020,” in the follow-up to the UPR. And in another four and a half years, there will be an opportunity to assess progress in advancing these recommendations in the 4th UPR round. The organized movement of activists working to help local communities understand and use this important UN process is critical to its success as a tool for human rights protection. When communities see changes in local practices that grow from this work, this illustrates progress on the path of human rights globalization.

Knowing there is international attention on local rights conditions may not move national governments to act, but mayors and other community leaders are more accountable to the people

³ Quote is from John Humphrey, Director of the Division of Human Rights during the UN’s first two decades (quoted in Soohoo et al. 2009).

⁴ Human rights city advocates met with officials from the U.S. State Department assigned to help with state and local treaty implementation in Washington DC in 2016, where they heard directly from these officials about the few and limited efforts to ensure that sub-national authorities are informed about their obligations under international human rights law. This corresponds with experiences of activists working to inform local officials on human rights (See:

http://wiki.pghrights.mayfirst.org/index.php?title=Washington_DC_2016_Human_Rights_Cities_Convergence).

whose lives their decisions impact, and they can significantly impact national policies (Barber 2014, Meyer 2009). By reminding image-sensitive local leaders that “the world is watching,” initiatives like UPR Cities can help keep human rights on local agendas and shift discourses in ways that prioritize human rights over the prevailing, uncritical acceptance of market logics. In sum, the UPR process has been an important innovation in the UN human rights architecture. But without an active, informed, and engaged local constituency, its value is quite limited. Its reports will go to national governments who may have little intention to heed their recommendations. When human rights advocates are mobilized into this process, they build and expand local human rights constituencies. This can change local conversations, agendas, and priorities and strengthen accountability to human rights standards at local levels where this matters most.

Human Rights Globalization & Cities

Human rights cities and projects like the UPR Cities initiative described above are reflections of the recent trend of localization of the global human rights movement. Human rights defenders are using the sandwich strategy to bring pressure on both national and local officials to conform with global human rights norms. This process has required work to build and strengthen international human rights laws, norms and institutional mechanisms. But more importantly, it requires far more effort to build human rights constituencies and movements of activists ready to vote, speak, and take action for human rights. Movement-building is difficult work, but it is necessary for improving the most critical dimensions of human rights, which are related to broader systemic forces, power relations, and inequities in the distribution of resources. Henri Lefebvre, whose book, *Le Droit à la Ville* (The Right to the City), has been a major inspiration to this movement, observed that “In order to extend the possible, it is necessary to proclaim and desire the impossible. Action and strategy consist in making possible tomorrow what is impossible today.”

Human rights cities ask residents to consider what their city or community could become if political leaders prioritized human rights over the common political emphasis on economic development and growth. What if human rights metrics were centered in policy evaluations, rather than the numbers of new business start-ups or amount of outside financial investment in the community? What if measures of residential longevity and stability were prioritized over the expansion of luxury housing and retail developments? What if the funds used to provide subsidies to attract corporate development in the community were used instead to provide low-interest loans for local small businesses, support training and apprenticeships for low-income residents, and improve transit? Could the work of placemaking—that is, encouraging residents to become more active and engaged citizens and leaders making communities places that are attractive and that promote the well-being of all residents—help cities fare better despite limited budgets? These are all questions that emerge from efforts of people in communities to build human rights cities.

Economic globalization has detached people from place and community while shifting major policy decisions to technical experts and remote decision-makers who are unaccountable to the people affected by these policies. Countering this form of globalization, human rights defenders continue the long historic struggles of people to defend their right to have a voice in the decisions that affect their lives and livelihoods. Today as more political power is

concentrated at the global level, we're seeing more threats to local livelihood that are inspiring greater grassroots mobilization. The human rights globalization that has taken place over centuries has provided both normative and institutional structures that can be resources for these struggles. Human rights cities movements help connect these global and local processes and reveal important lessons about how human rights are made real for real people in actual communities.

Below I summarize some of the key practices we see in many different human rights cities. These suggest some broader lessons that are emerging from the work of human rights advocates about how we can advance human rights in a world that has become increasingly oriented around the logic of global markets.

- Convening & supporting spaces for bridging differences—Much of the work human rights cities activists do involves bringing diverse residents together to learn from one another and develop inter-personal relationships and a sense of shared interest and community to counter the detached and dehumanizing narratives in mainstream discourses.
- Promoting human rights learning & consciousness—Popular education about international human rights is critical. In the United States, very few residents—even those with advanced formal education—know much about the Universal Declaration of Human Rights or the system of international human rights treaties and reviews. Inviting residents to think about things like housing and health care as human rights instead of privileges reserved for those with adequate incomes can transform thinking about everyday politics and life in the community. Inviting residents to consider how well their community leaders protect human rights inspires a sense of place, belonging, and responsibility for the well-being of neighbors and the environment.
- Building human rights constituencies— To influence political processes, we need organized blocs of voters to make human rights the driving consideration in their electoral choices. We also need candidates who articulate human rights priorities in their platforms. Human rights are not single-issues but intersecting concerns that address underlying structures of power. They also transcend conventional left-right political divides as well as national boundaries.⁵
- Cultivating political and legal imagination— The institutions in place in our communities were designed to advance the interests of business and the goal of economic growth. They were not designed to prioritize people's well-being and basic needs. Thus, building communities where human rights are routinely respected and enjoyed requires us to invent new forms of politics and new kinds of institutions that center human rights norms. Getting from where we are to that vision requires creative political and legal strategies. Human rights city initiatives create spaces and opportunities for the cultivation of such creativity, and they help build the networks of connections needed to carry out strategies to achieve community visions and help “[*make*] *the impossible possible*,” in the words of Lefebvre.
- Creative institution-building/work with government allies—Finally, the human rights city initiatives we've seen so far have been led and driven by social movements, but they

⁵ Most people agree that they like the idea that they have the rights outlined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Thus it is essential to consider the idea that everyone else is also entitled to those same rights. Also, even the most xenophobic person will agree that if they wish to travel to a foreign country they want to be sure they have protections from, for instance, arbitrary arrest or other human rights violations.

involve connections and partnerships with local public officials. Knowledge of how cities work and what strategies can help advance human rights in a locale is developed by people who serve in local leadership positions and who have relationships with existing government officials. And sometimes human rights leaders get into government positions and can make important changes that can substantially improve local human rights conditions. Transforming cities requires innovations in local policies and practices that is most likely where there is cooperation between movements and some elements of local government.

Conclusion

In this essay I've adopted a world-historical perspective to show what we can learn by considering the global human rights movement's work over time. Often it is difficult to see the tremendous progress that activists have made in defending human rights in the face of resistance from powerful actors seeking to defend their own wealth, privilege, and power. And most accounts of international law and global politics focus on powerful entities like states and corporations, overlooking the important role civil society actors play. In response to the increased concentration of power and wealth in the world, the localization of human rights struggles provides an important counter-force that can help remedy some of the urgent crises in our world today.

Appendix/ Supplements to text

BOX:

Examples of Human Rights City Initiatives

Global

- [Global Charter-Agenda for Human Rights in the City](https://www.uclg-cisd.org/en/right-to-the-city/world-charter-agenda) (Local Government & Civil Society initiative led by United Cities and Local Governments, 2011) <https://www.uclg-cisd.org/en/right-to-the-city/world-charter-agenda>
- [World Forum of Human Rights Cities](http://whrcf.org/E_p1100.php) (Gwangju, South Korea, since 2011) http://whrcf.org/E_p1100.php

Regional

- [European Charter for the Safeguarding of Human Rights in the City](https://www.uclg-cisd.org/en/right-to-the-city/european-charter) (Over 400 Municipalities, 2000) <https://www.uclg-cisd.org/en/right-to-the-city/european-charter>
- [Asia Human Rights Charter](https://www.refworld.org/pdfid/452678304.pdf) (A People's Charter, 1998) <https://www.refworld.org/pdfid/452678304.pdf>
- [Human Rights Cities Network](https://humanrightscities.net) (Online resource platform, Europe and beyond) <https://humanrightscities.net>

Municipal

- [Mexico City Charter for the Right to the City](http://www.hic-gs.org/content/Mexico_Charter_R2C_2010.pdf) (2010) http://www.hic-gs.org/content/Mexico_Charter_R2C_2010.pdf
- [Montreal Charter of Rights and Responsibilities](#) (2006)

- San Francisco Ordinance, *Local Implementation of the United Nations Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW)* (1999) <https://sfgov.org/dosw/cedaw-ordinance>

BOX: Sandwich effect example (Tsutsui and Smith)

Human Rights Activists

- Working from above → Boomerang from local/national to UN:
 - “*naming and shaming*” offenders of human rights on the global stage
 - Promoting and using international human rights laws and monitoring bodies
- Working from below → Pressing local and national governments to follow global rights expectations and obligations
 - “*framing and claiming*” –Framing people’s needs and concerns in global human rights terms and demanding local governments address community needs and priorities.
 - Organizing and movement-building to demand human rights implementation in communities.
 - Supporting local human rights constituencies to make human rights matter at the ballot box.

BOX: People-Centered Human Rights Principles

Statement of Human Rights City Principles

US Human Rights Network Human Rights Cities Alliance (2017)

The US National Human Rights Cities Alliance supports and promotes human rights city projects in communities around the United States. We embrace a **people-centered human rights** approach, which has been a core feature of the work of the US Human Rights Network. People-centered human rights cities are “political project[s] that [identify] all forms of oppressive relations, including capitalism, neoliberalism, white supremacy, patriarchy, colonialism and imperialism, as structural and ideological constraints on the ability to realize the full range of human rights” (A. Baraka, n.d.)

The following principles aim to help human rights cities advocates advance human rights and dignity for all residents of their communities.

- Human rights are universal, indivisible, interdependent and interrelated.
- Human rights are continually being developed through the engagement and struggles of people whose voices have been marginalized from dominant institutions.

The meaning and content of what are recognized as human rights are to be determined by the people—not state elites. Formal international human rights law is not an end in itself, but a beginning of the work to define the meaning of human rights for people and communities. Human rights cities aim to flip the script of human rights by both “translating” internationally recognized human rights into local contexts and by injecting new, locally defined meanings and possibilities into “human rights.”

- Human rights cities grow from the understanding that actualizing human rights requires vigilant, organized, empowered, and engaged communities whose members monitor, defend, and support individual and collective rights;
- Human rights cities work is intentional about centering the needs, voices, and leadership of historically oppressed groups. It seeks actively to undo the silencing of marginalized groups and of future generations and Mother Earth;

Human rights cities must be consistently anti-oppression and employ a human rights based lens to all social policy.

- Human rights cities are projects that aim to *decolonize*² our communities and our consciousness.

We recognize how the history of oppression has shaped dominant institutions and how it reproduces violence and discrimination. Building human rights cities requires historical truth-telling, reconciliation, and healing for individuals and communities. Human rights learning is critical to achieving this.

- Human rights cities require a social and international order that allows every individual to enjoy the full range of human rights. Thus, the human rights cities project requires active cooperation, collaboration, and mutual support across cities and communities around the world.

Human rights cities are globalist, recognizing the interconnections and interrelationships of local and global issues and processes.

We believe that neocolonialism- a major form of the current state of group oppression- is maintained when states define themselves as nations and not multinational states. Therefore denying groups rights and muting discussions of self-determination and self-development for oppressed nations. This practice denies collective political standing, in so doing denies group rights to national minorities, as recognized by Article 27 of the Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. It also denies people their social and cultural rights, rendering underdeveloped.

- Human rights cities projects are transformative and work to move societies toward the establishment of social institutions, structures and social relationships that reflect a real commitment to human dignity and social justice.
- Human rights learning is a critical component of and foundation for building human rights cities and communities.
- The US Human Rights Cities Alliance recognizes and supports the [Gwangju Principles](#) as a foundation and guide for our work, as it reflects the collective knowledge and experiences of human rights advocates at the 2014 World Human Rights Cities Forum (WHRCF) held in Gwangju, Korea

Links and Further Reading

- Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights: the UN headquarters for human rights, including the Human Rights Council and Special Rapporteurs on various human rights. This site provides information and documentations relevant to all treaties, country reports, monitoring bodies, and guidelines for governments and civil society actors: <https://www.ohchr.org>
- US Human Rights Cities Alliance <http://humanrightscities.us>
- UPR-Info: a database of UPR background documents, statistics, and searchable index of UPR reports: <https://www.upr-info.org/en>
- UPR Cities organizing toolkit http://wiki.humanrightscities.mayfirst.org/index.php?title=UPR_Cities_Project
- “[Responding to Globalization and Urban Conflict: Human Rights City Initiatives](#)” Jackie Smith (2017) *Studies in Social Justice* 11(2):347-368.
- [Human Rights, Not Corporate Rights](#), by Jackie Smith. Forum contribution: [Corporations in the Crosshairs: From Reform to Redesign](#), *Great Transition Initiative* (December 2019)
- “[The Growth of Corporate Influence in Sub-National Political & Legal Institutions Undermines U.S. Compliance with International Human Rights Obligations](#)” Submission to the United Nations Universal Periodic Review of United States of America Third Cycle-36th Session of the UPR Human Rights Council by the U.S. Human Rights City Alliance
- [Racial inequity at the core of human rights challenges in Pittsburgh \(Executive summary and key recommendations\)](#) Submission to the United Nations Universal Periodic Review of United States of America Third Cycle-36th Session of the UPR Human Rights Council by the Pittsburgh UPR Coalition for Human Rights

References

- Alvarez, Sonia E. 2000. "Translating the Global: Local Effects of Transnational Organizing on Local Feminist Discourses and Practices in Latin America." *Meridians: Feminism, Race, Transnationalism* 1(1):29-67.
- Baraka, Ajamu. n.d. "'People-Centered' Human Rights as a Framework for Social Transformation." At: <https://www.ajamubaraka.com/peoplecentered-human-rights-as-a-framework-for-social-transformation>. Retrieved: May 4, 2020.
- 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: Amnesty International -Netherlands.

- Charnovitz, Steve. 1997. "Two Centuries of Participation: Ngos and International Governance." *Michigan Journal of International Law* 18(Winter):183-286.
- Clapp, Jennifer. 1994. "The Toxic Waste Trade with Less-Industrialised Countries: Economic Linkages and Political Alliances." *Third World Quarterly* 15(3):505-18.
- Clark, Ann Marie. 2003. *Diplomacy of Conscience: Amnesty International and Changing Human Rights Norms*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Desai, Manisha. 2009. *Gender and the Politics of Possibilities: Rethinking Globalization*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.
- Edelman, Marc and James Carwil. 2011. "Peasants' Rights and the UN System: Quixotic Struggle? Or Emancipatory Idea Whose Time Has Come?". *Journal of Peasant Studies* 38(1):81-108.
- Evans, Peter B. and César Rodríguez-Garavito. 2018. "Introduction: Building and Sustaining the Ecosystem of Transnational Advocacy." Pp. 8-25 in *Transnational Advocacy Networks: Twenty Years of Evolving Theory and Practice*, edited by P. B. Evans and C. Rodríguez-Garavito. Bogota, Colombia: Dejusticia. At: <https://cdn.dejusticia.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/Transnational-Advocacy-Networks.pdf>
- Falcón, Sylvana. 2016. *Power Interrupted: Antiracist and Feminist Activists inside the United Nations*. Seattle: University of Washington Press.
- Ferree, Myra Marx and Carol Mueller. 2004. "Feminism and the Women's Movement: A Global Perspective." Pp. 576-607 in *The Blackwell Companion to Social Movements*, edited by D. A. Snow, S. A. Soule and H. Kriesi. New York: Blackwell.
- Finnemore, Martha. 1996. *National Interests in International Society*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Friedman, Elisabeth Jay, Ann Marie Clark and Kathryn Hochstetler. 2005. *Sovereignty, Democracy, and Global Civil Society: State-Society Relations at the Un World Conferences*. New York: State University of New York Press.
- Frug, Gerald E. and David J. Barron. 2006. "International Local Government Law." *Urban Lawyer* 38(1):1-62.
- Gaer, Felice D. 1996. "Reality Check: Human Rights NGOs Confront Governments at the UN." Pp. 51-66 in *NGOs, the UN, and Global Governance*, edited by T. G. Weiss and L. Gordenker. Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner.
- Hafner-Burton, Emilie M. and Kiyotero Tsutsui. 2005. "Human Rights in a Globalizing World: The Paradox of Empty Promises." *American Journal of Sociology* 110:1373-411.
- Hanna, Kevin S. and Margaret Walton-Roberts. 2004. "Quality of Place and the Rescaling of Urban Governance: The Case of Toronto." *Journal of Canadian Studies* 38(3):37-65.
- Hunt, Lynn. 2007. *Inventing Human Rights: A History*. New York: Norton.
- Kaldor, Mary. 2003. *Global Civil Society: An Answer to War*. Cambridge: Polity.
- Keck, Margaret and Kathryn Sikkink. 1998. *Activists Beyond Borders*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Khanna, Parag. 2010. "Beyond City Limits: The Age of Nations Is Over. The New Urban Age Has Begun. ." *Foreign Policy*.
- Lasso, Jose Ayala. 1994. "Defining the Mandate: New UN Efforts to Protect Human Rights." *Harvard International Review* 78:38-41.
- Markoff, John. 2015. *Waves of Democracy: Social Movements and Political Change, Second Edition*. Boulder, CO: Paradigm Publishers.

- Marks, Stephen P., Kathleen A. Modrowski and Walther Lichem. 2008. *Human Rights Cities: Civic Engagement for Societal Development*.
http://www.pdhre.org/Human_Rights_Cities_Book.pdf: People's Movement for Human Rights Learning & UN Habitat.
- Meyer, Antoine. 2009. "Local Governments & Human Rights Implementation: Taking Stock and a Closer Strategic Look." *Pace diritti umani* (3):7-25.
- Nelson, Paul and Ellen Dorsey. 2008. *New Rights Advocacy: Changing Strategies of Development and Human Rights Ngos*. Washington DC: Georgetown University Press.
- Newell, Peter. 2005. "Race, Class and the Global Politics of Environmental Inequality." *Global Environmental Politics* 5(3):70-95.
- Oomen, Barbara and M. Baumgärtel. 2012. "Human Rights Cities." Pp. 709-29 in *The Sage Handbook of Human Rights*, edited by A. Mihr and M. Gibney.
http://www.researchgate.net/publication/277775662_Human_Rights_Cities: Sage.
- Oömen, Barbara, Martha F. Davis and Michele Grigolo, eds. 2016. *Global Urban Justice: The Rise of Human Rights Cities*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Paulose, Regina Menachery. 2020. "Can You Hear the People Sing? Victim/Survivor Rights in People's Tribunals." Pp. 2-21 in *People's Tribunals, Human Rights and the Law* edited by R. M. Paulose. New York: Routledge.
- Paxton, Pamela, Melanie M. Hughes and Jennifer L. Green. 2006. "The International Women's Movement and Women's Political Representation, 1893-2003." *American Sociological Review* 79(2):898-920.
- Petchesky, Rosalind Pollack. 2003. *Global Prescriptions: Gendering Health and Human Rights*. New York: Zed Books.
- Prügl, Elisabeth and Mary K. Meyer. 1999. "Gender Politics in Global Governance." Pp. 3-16 in *Gender Politics in Global Governance*, edited by M. K. Meyer and E. Prügl. Boulder, CO: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc.
- Risse, Thomas, Stephen C. Ropp and Kathryn Sikkink, eds. 1999. *The Power of Human Rights: International Norms and Domestic Change*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Rodríguez-Garavito, César. 2014. "The Future of Human Rights: From Gatekeeping to Symbiosis." *SUR - International Journal on Human Rights* 20:499-509.
- Sassen, Saskia. 1991. *The Global City: New York, London, Tokyo*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Seary, Bill. 1996. "The Early History: From the Congress of Vienna to the San Francisco Conference." Pp. 15-30 in *The Conscience of the World: The Influence of Non-Governmental Organisations in the UN System*, edited by P. Willetts. Washington, D.C.: The Brookings Institution.
- Sikkink, Kathryn. 1986. "Codes of Conduct for Transnational Corporations: The Case of the WHO/Unicef Code." *International Organization* 40:815-40.
- Sikkink, Kathryn. 2005. "Patterns of Dynamic Multilevel Governance and the Insider-Outsider Coalition." Pp. 151-73 in *Transnational Protest and Global Activism*, edited by D. della Porta and S. Tarrow. Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Sikkink, Kathryn. 2011. *The Justice Cascade: How Human Rights Prosecutions Are Changing World Politics*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company.
- Smith, Jackie. 1995. "Transnational Political Processes and the Human Rights Movement." Pp. 185-220 in *Research in Social Movements, Conflict and Change*, Vol. 18, edited by L. Kriesberg, M. Dobkowski and I. Walliman. Greenwood CT: JAI.

- Smith, Jackie. 2008. *Social Movements for Global Democracy*. Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Soohoo, Cynthia, Catherine Albisa, and Martha F. Davis, ed. 2009. *Bringing Human Rights Home: A History of Human Rights in the United States*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Taylor, Dorceta. 1993. "Environmentalism and the Politics of Inclusion." Pp. 53-61 in *Confronting Environmental Racism: Voices from the Grassroots*, edited by R. D. Bullard. Boston, MA: South End Press.
- Tilly, Charles. 1978. *From Mobilization to Revolution*. Reading, MA: Addison Wesley.
- Tsutsui, Kiyoteru. 2018. *Rights Make Might: Global Human Rights and Minority Social Movements in Japan*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Tsutsui, Kiyoteru and Jackie Smith. 2019. "Human Rights and Social Movements: From the Boomerang Pattern to a Sandwich Effect." Pp. 586-601 in *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to Social Movements*, edited by D. A. Snow, S. A. Soule, H. Kriesi and H. McCammon. New York: Wiley Blackwell.
- van den Berg, Esther and Barbara Oomen. 2014. "Towards a Decentralization of Human Rights: The Rise of Human Rights Cities." Pp. 11-16 in *The Future of Human Rights in an Urban World: Exploring Opportunities, Threats and Challenges*, edited by T. van Lindert and D. Lettinga. <https://www.amnesty.nl/actueel/future-human-rights-urban-world>: Amnesty International -Netherlands.
- Willetts, Peter. 2011. *Non-Governmental Organizations in World Politics: The Construction of Global Governance*. New York: Routledge.