Jackie Smith and Michael Goodhart

This special issue considers how human rights practitioners are impacting the global institutionalization of human rights cultures and practices in ways often overlooked in existing scholarship and policy analysis. The disproportionate attention to formal law and to the actions of states and their agents obscures important developments that are unfolding incrementally and across scales. Over time, these developments are strengthening global human rights in numerous ways, including by expanding institutional mechanisms for monitoring human rights, promoting government attention and accountability, and strengthening networks of advocates and government officials working in the human rights political ecosystem (see, e.g., Garavito, 2014).

Although many analysts recognize the political significance of global trade laws and related neoliberal economic globalization, far fewer have noticed or grappled with what is effectively a parallel and competing process of "human rights globalization" reflected in the long-term work of advocates to expand global human rights mechanisms and, most importantly, improve actual enjoyment of these rights, especially through local implementation. Movements have played a central role in achieving some of the familiar breakthroughs in the evolution of international human rights, from the abolition of chattel slavery to the realization of the Geneva Conventions, the struggle for women's rights, and the expansion and transformation of the United Nations (UN) human rights architecture. Placing and keeping human rights on the international and global agendas, despite indifference and

opposition from states (Gaer, 1996), remains a key function and contribution of social movements. Without this ongoing provocation, pressure, and input, it seems unlikely that states would have acceded to many of the crucial reforms that are helping, slowly, to help to make the global human rights regime an effective tool for local implementation and global change. It is the movements, both in their local advocacy and their translocal and transnational organizing, that infuse new ways of thinking into global human rights discourse and promote alternative approaches to policy and implementation.

The end of the Cold War initiated a surge in the development of global human rights institutions, with contradictory implications. On the one hand, international human rights were deeply integrated with and instrumental to the regime of neoliberal global governance constructed by the U.S. and its allies. On the other hand, this surge brought with it—mostly critical—new attention to economic, social, and cultural rights (Nelson and Dorsey, 2008; Otto, 1996) and triggered activist demands for a more responsive and engaged approach to human rights at all levels. The creation of the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights in 1993 and the replacement of the Human Rights Commission with a stronger Human Rights Council were crucial steps in the gradual but steady development of mechanisms that allow for grassroots input to shape human rights norms and governance capacities (Alston, 1992). In addition to new human rights treaties, this expanded human rights architecture includes the special procedures under the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights and the Universal Periodic Review, which subjects every UN member state to routine human rights assessments. As the global structures became more elaborate, activists and practitioners began to reimagine and utilize it in ways that exceed and sometimes subvert what the architects of

those structures had envisioned, including through the translation and implementation of global human rights in sometimes radical new ways in local contexts (van den Berg and Oömen, 2014; Oömen & Baumgartel, 2012; Merry, 2005; Kaufman and Ward, 2017).

These developments reflect concerted action by social movement advocates to build strategic alliances that advance and transform the institutionalization of human rights *both globally and locally.* Contributors to this special issue demonstrate how this work has (re)shaped the global human rights regime in ways that promote transparency and expand tremendously the opportunities for popular participation in human rights monitoring, reporting, advocacy, and education at multiple scales between global and local (see, e.g., Morgan, 2007). This kind of engagement, we contend, helps to socialize both civil society *and* government actors in new norms and practices of rights-based governance and to cultivate a global human rights constituency whose identity transcends states and inter-state competitive logics (see, e.g., Falcón, 2016). Such engagement thus creates new possibilities and pathways for innovation that further advance human rights globalization, as newly mobilized and engaged publics help to redefine human rights and swell the ranks of "human rights enforcers"

Human Rights Globalization as System-Transforming Project

As human rights advocates engage locally in projects to claim rights and defend and protect people's basic needs, they help build democratic power that gives voice to historically oppressed and excluded groups, supports community autonomy, and provides a unifying framework for movement-building. The universalism and intersectionality of human rights require careful attention to the relational work of coalition building. Our research and

experience indicate that the human rights city model, in particular, fosters commonality around shared commitments to human rights linked to place. The model cultivates community identities and values that can ground resistance to the hegemonic extractive, competitive, and individualistic identity promoted by neoliberalism. Thus human rights globalization works as a counterweight and potential antidote to processes of economic globalization insofar as it builds support for shared norms, institutions, and practices that forge cohesion and enable democratic and human rights-based governance.

"Human rights globalization" is the term we use to describe a long historical struggle against the domination and exploitation of people and lands and for a social order that supports life and community. Its origins predate "human rights" in the strict sense, tracing to early resistance to land enclosures, militarization, colonization, and displacement by emerging national states. By countering various forms of domination, oppression, and exploitation, these struggles advanced alternative values of dignity, community, solidarity, and justice. Contestation between powerful and relatively powerless groups has shaped the institutions and structures we have inherited today, and it accounts for what limited and partial democracy we find in today's inter-state system (Tilly, 1978; Markoff, 1996). Human rights have always been a terrain of contestation, and the process of human rights globalization we analyze here represents a counter-hegemonic or emancipatory tendency that exists alongside and in struggle with more dominant ideas and practices of rights (see Baxi, 2008; Goodhart, 2013).

The following chart outlines the elements of the dominant, neoliberal "operating system" that structures international politics and shapes the practices of governments from

local to global levels, comparing it with the human rights-centered, counter-hegemonic model that inspires movements promoting alternatives to the prevailing system.

Competing Global Operating Systems

	Neoliberal globalization	**Counterhegemonic human rights globalization**
Orienting goal	Economic growth/accumulation	Life, community well-being, *buen vivir*
Social relations	Individualized, hierarchical, competitive, gendered, racialized	Collective, cooperative, constructive, equitable
Ecological relations	Extractive, anthropocentric, exploitative	Bio-centric, symbiotic
Primary scale	Global (centralized authority)	Local, place-based (subsidiarity) and translocal
Source of authority	Expertise, technocratic	Democratic
Key proponents/ institutions	States, transnational corporations, International Financial Institutions, some international agencies	Civil society/communities, some states, many translocal social movements, some international agencies

With its focus perpetual growth and wealth accumulation, global capitalism has imposed a hierarchical, extractive logic on all social relations. Today's multiple crises stem from the fact that this system devalues communities and care work, thus denying the possibility of social and ecological reproduction and making it unsustainable. We experience this unsustainability as multiple, interdependent crises—what world-systems scholars call systemic crisis—which are evident even to those in privileged positions. These crises are systemic insofar as they no longer seem tractable within the existing world-system (Wallerstein, 2004).[1] Those interested in preserving life, community, and human well-being seek a system that prioritizes these values and supports their preservation.

Human rights globalization reveals an alternative vision and highlights some of the cultural and institutional innovations that might advance it. *Human rights globalization* is at once a process and a normative heuristic informed by the ideas, values, and practices that animate that process. The dialectic of norm globalization and localization that is human rights globalization models an alternative vision of governance, indicating through praxis the kinds of cultural and institutional change that such a vision requires. We regard human rights globalization as an instance of *people-centered human rights* "grounded in the experiences of the people, the source of its legitimacy. It is, therefore, a historical product born out of oppression, 'intersectional' and committed to global societal transformation" (Baraka, 2013).

Various indigenous, anticolonial, and rights-oriented movements have long been expressing and enacting models for how we might organize our world and its social/ecological relations. These movements have often been relegated to the margins of scholarship and policy debates (e.g., Bhambra and Shilliam, 2009)—although this is changing (see Salleh, 2012; Smith, 2014). Popular struggles over rights and dignity have both shaped and responded to the evolving contests over recognition, resources, power, and land. Amid systemic crisis, we see growing unity, coherence, and visibility in the movements advancing human rights globalization; our hope is that documenting aspects of this process and articulating its normativity will make it legible as part of an emergent, shared, desirable, and urgently necessary *global project.* The contributors seek to name and codify this work, clarify its values, rally proponents, and suggest strategies for its realization.

Human rights globalization re-orders basic relations among people and between people and ecosystems; this makes it counter-hegemonic. The contributors illustrate various aspects of

that reordering as it is being enacted and contested today, elucidating from them a logic of cooperation and mutual support that stands in sharp contrast with practices and institutions upholding the neoliberal system. For us, broadening support for this alternative and to realizing new, non-exploitative types of social relations is the core challenge for human rights advocates today and key to human survival and flourishing—as it long has been. The idea that the world can and should be organized to protect and support human dignity and provide for basic needs has motivated activists working explicitly within and parallel to the human rights tradition.[2] What makes human rights globalization distinctive are the shared framework of rights, which serves as a kind of focal point in the ongoing dialectical process of transforming the meaning of rights and the mechanisms available for their realization. This process is apparent, again, in the growing contestation within and over the increasingly elaborate human rights regime itself and in its transformation into a domain of innovation and experimentation where alternative visions can find expression and where resistance against dominant conceptions and practices global governance can take hold.

One such space is the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), created in 1994, which has centralized and coordinated human rights work within the UN. OHCHR has amplified the voices of civil society actors in many ways, authorizing them as legitimate partners and drivers of human rights globalization. This recognition has strengthened and institutionalized connections between global human rights institutions and local movements and governments and channeled movement energies into more effective monitoring and enforcement processes.[3] The proliferation of "special procedures" for documenting human rights violations and omissions expands participation in human rights

governance; Special Rapporteurs and Expert Working Groups on specific rights such as housing, health, anti-discrimination, and climate change help clarify how existing state obligations apply--or could be applied--in novel ways and contexts. All of these mechanisms fortify connections between and among global human rights institutions and grassroots communities through country visits, reports, and other forms of outreach and education.[4]

Human rights globalization is a dynamic process that involves learning and adaptation. Thus, the special procedures are important not just in their engagement of human rights experts from around the world but in fostering dialogue and learning between those experts and people in diverse communities. This interchange makes these procedures fertile sources of innovative analysis and positions experts to serve as disseminators of co-produced knowledge rather than sources of authoritative dictates. Many of those working in these capacities come from and return to local and global movements, further facilitating the creation and sharing of knowledge. For instance, former Special Rapporteur on the Human Right to Adequate Housing, Leilani Farha, followed her term with the OHCHR by creating a global NGO called *The Shift* to help local governments and movements better apply international human rights regarding the right to housing in municipal policies and advocacy. Current and former rapporteursare frequent guests on webinars and trainings aimed at public, governmental, and professional audiences to help deepen understandings of global human rights and governance challenges.[5] These examples are meant to illustrate how even official UN spaces facilitate human rights globalization as they devise new methods and practices.

Realizing a people-centered system: the "sandwich strategy"

Today, human rights globalization advances through the engagement of social movements with states and global institutions in defining and contesting global human rights norms and implementing them through various mechanisms, including importantly through state governments. Central to this process is a growing grassroots human rights movement that mobilizes people locally and regionally to target sub-national governments, whose human rights-related interests often diverge from those of national governments. This pressure from below provides unique leverage to drive change in national policies and institutions. Alliances and coordination between trans-local social movements and various sub-national governments and international bodies (such as the OHCHR and its various offices) aid the flow of information and strategic pressures that can improve national governments' compliance with human rights. Human rights globalization thus builds from above and from below and involves state as well as nonstate actors. Proponents of "people-centered human rights" shape global norms and their influence on states and other powerful actors while also building capacities of local people and communities to both claim their rights and to hold violators of those rights accountable (see Baraka, n.d.). Analysts and activists have used the sandwich metaphor to describe this strategy for global and local change.

[Insert Figure 1 About Here]

The sandwich strategy incorporates what Keck and Sikkink (Keck and Sikkink, 1998) refer to as the "boomerang strategy" and extends it to local activism that looks to global human rights norms in its efforts to shape local government actions. The model also complicates the

boomerang idea, since relations between levels of government may align in overlapping and unpredictable ways. For instance, local governments might band together across cities and ally with local movements to bring pressure on national governments for more financial and legal support to allow them to uphold their human rights obligations. Or local activists may work across cities or higher levels of government to advance change in particular locales. At times, movement campaigns may throw multiple boomerangs at once to amplify pressures on public officials at different scales simultaneously (Garavito, 2014; 2021).[6] The divergent interests of national governments in global versus national contexts and the tensions between national and sub-national governments create opportunities for movements to gain allies and leverage. In addition, the growing constellation of international agencies and officials with expertise and capacities to shape institutional processes and the socialization of states and other actors lends further support for this kind of movement strategy.

Content overview: Research and praxis in the "borderlands"

Contributors to this special issue are scholars and practitioners in the growing movement for human rights globalization we describe above. Each contribution illustrates how human rights advocates are working to strengthen global human rights architecture and use it as a tool for changing the practices of powerful actors at multiple scales of governance. We have been closely involved in this praxis for well over a decade, and this volume reflects an effort to put words to the theory of global-local change we see emerging through this growing translocal movement for human rights. Like other transformative movement projects, this one is like building a ship as it sails.

We pay special attention to developments involving cities: as Henri Lefebvre (1968) recognized, the realization of rights in cities today requires efforts to "make the impossible possible." In other words, human rights advocates must imagine and implement alternatives to the ideas and structures that define existing conditions and appear immutable (Purcell, 2013). This requires thought that transcends the confines of what is considered "realistic" within existing conditions and that considers what steps are needed to move from existing circumstances to an imagined alternative. The general direction of this alternative—i.e., people-centered human rights—may be clear, but the specific content gets defined as people work together to realize the vision in practice.

Most of our contributors write about movements in which they have some involvement, offering insights into what is effectively work-in-progress, or possible change-in-the-making. Each of our contributors brings both an intersectional and multi-disciplinary lens to their work, going against the grain of political and academic structures whose incentive structures reinforce issue-based and disciplinary silos. Human rights work defies borders, and practitioners of human rights therefore often find themselves in political and scholarly borderlands where they must forge new frameworks and practices and challenge established thinking and structures. Thus, the ideas presented in this special issue transcend familiar language and modes of work as we seek to understand emergent and transformative processes that remain obscured or invisible within mainstream thinking and research techniques. Davis's and Smith's contributions help to deepen our understanding of human rights globalization by tracing how local and global interests, movements, and institutions interact in unexpected ways to promote change.

Martha Davis's essay examines U.S. intransigence in the face of global calls for the creation of a national institution to help coordinate and monitor human rights compliance within its national borders. Whereas virtually all other Western governments have adopted some type of national human rights institution (NHRI), the United States continues to resist.

Davis maps the diverse and changing coalitions pushing for an NHRI, including a more unified movement of U.S. activists and sub-national governments, and explores why these coalitions think an NHRI would be possible, and valuable, now. Waning U.S. hegemony and increasing local pressure create the possibility, she argues, while growing understanding of the need for an NHRI to bolster local protections for human rights provides the motivation. The result may be that we will see an NHRI in the U.S. sooner than many would have predicted.

Jackie Smith's contribution deepens explores how the development of global human rights institutions since the creation of the UN shapes possibilities for transforming global race relations. She notes how the murder of George Floyd in 2020 created a "global George Floyd effect," which has inspired renewed attention by U.S. activists to the global human rights tools and alliances that can enhance long-standing demands for an end to discriminatory police violence and the systemic racism that enables and perpetuates it. Smith shows how, over time, human rights advocates have first helped to articulate international norms and law against racial discrimination and then to build and strengthen institutional monitoring processes, enhancing participation, transparency, and accountability in global and local governance.

Manisha Desai discusses a growing movement by people in U.S. cities to advance protections for women by calling on local governments to adopt the Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). Given that the U.S. remains

one of just four countries (with Iran, Somalia, and Sudan) that have not ratified CEDAW,

activists have decided not need to wait for Washington to start implementing the treaty; they

are passing legislation to adopt and adapt CEDAW locally. Desai explores how activists engage

in "*legalism from below*" to promote gender equity by integrating CEDAW principles into local

legislation and governments. She shows how the Cities for CEDAW movement contributes to

the development of a "trans*local, intersectional human rights infrastructure*" that helps

educate and socialize grassroots movements and local elected officials around gender justice

ideals.

Gaea Patrice Morales explores a seemingly similar process of localizing the Sustainable

Development Goals (SDGs) in Los Angeles-- "seemingly," because in LA the effort originated in

the Mayor's Office rather than with local activists. Through partnerships with universities and

with local community groups and advocates, LA worked to adapt and implement the SDGs in

innovative ways. Morales shows both how municipal government can be an important leader

and partner in localizing human rights norms and also how government's involvement

complicates and in some ways undercuts community ownership and the development of more

radical alternative practices and visions.

These four articles help to deepen our understanding of human rights globalization by

tracing how local and global interests, movements, and institutions interact in unexpected ways

to promote (and inhibit) change. While the trajectories mapped in these cases vary, all

demonstrate how local actors work with or against local and sometimes national resistance to

redefine human rights norms and achieve greater accountability. Anthony Tirado Chase focuses

on similar of dynamics in a very different setting: Colombia, where activists seeking new models

for peace and reconciliation draw on global human rights norms to transform community relations. Chase shows how activists are engaging in "memory work," a kind of truth-telling and memory (re)construction that seeks to imagine pluralist alternatives to prevailing ethno-nationalist identities and to counter a politics of domination and exclusion. These efforts are understood locally as constitutive of transitional justice. Chase argues that, given the similarities between polarized, conflict-ridden, and highly unequal societies like Colombia and the U.S. these seemingly quite local lessons might nonetheless be suggestive of possibilities for fashioning inclusive modalities of identity in the U.S. and in the many other places where the authoritarian, if not fascistic, tendencies of ethno-nationalist rhetoric and politics operate. Colombian activism is, in this sense, potentially generative of new norms of community for highly conflictual societies. He also reminds us that innovation and knowledge creation from the Global South are key drivers of human rights globalization.

In the final piece, Michael Goodhart, Tina Kempin-Reuter, and Jackie Smith focus on the complex and contradictory part that universities play in human rights globalization. Universities have an outsized impact on the realization of human rights in the communities where they operate, including through the prominent role that academic workers often play in efforts to realize human rights locally—whether the SDG process in LA or the many human rights city initiatives springing up around North America. Through a critical political economic analysis, the authors map some of the many ways that universities promote and undermine human rights locally, even as they seek to resist repressive measures from sometimes hostile state governments. They also show how and why universities have emerged as important nodes in

sites of contestation in processes of human rights globalization and consider the tensions and possibilities of their important role as key nodes in transnational networks of activism.

Our collaborative exploration of contemporary translocal activism for human rights demonstrates a vibrancy of local activism around human rights claims that can serve as an antidote to the alarming anti-democratic tendencies of our times. Today's human rights movement build upon the substantial legacies of past advocacy, which include a strong foundation of international law and a thickening institutional infrastructure capable of monitoring compliance with and enhancing accountability for human rights violations. Yet they have also pushed beyond past ideas and practices, claiming rights in new ways, through new institutions, and in so doing bridging gaps in global human rights governance between the international human rights machinery and the local level governments most directly responsible for ensuring that human rights are applied and respected in actual practice. Through efforts to engage local communities in conversations about human rights, assess local conditions through a human rights lens, and develop new models and practices for human rights-based local government, activists are helping "translate" human rights ideals into local practice and to adapt them for local use. In doing this work, they also enhance monitoring, transparency, and accountability and socialize governments and residents in ways that deepen and expand an emergent global human rights culture and repertoire of practices. This work, in turn, reshapes the very norms and institutions on which these activists draw. This is the dialectic of human rights globalization.

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End notes

[1] This means, for instance, that debates over whether China or some other world power will overtake U.S. hegemony are irrelevant, since a change in the hegemonic regime does not necessarily change the capitalist world-system that shapes this competition for dominance.

[2] We often describe "the alternative" in the singular, but in doing so we refer to the animating values and logic, not to specific interpretations of rights, institutional arrangements, etc. Those vary locally as communities shape communities that meet their needs.

[3] In 2013, the Human Rights Council created the Advisory Group on Local Government (https://www.ohchr.org/en/hr-bodies/hrc/advisory-committee/local-government-and-hr) which has been engaged in ongoing research and reporting on the needs and strategies for improving local government engagement with global human rights work, issuing annual reports on this work (A/HRC/38/22 (2018); A/HRC/42/22 (2019); and A/HRC/51/10 (2022)). In addition, the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights began participating in the annual World Human Rights Cities Forum in Gwangju, Korea in 2019 (See website: *Cities, Local and Regional Governments and Human Rights Partnerships,* At: https://www.ohchr.org/en/about-us/what-we-do/partnership/local-governments).

[4] For instance, in addition to country-level reports based on their investigations, the annual thematic reports each Special Rapporteur produces for the Human Rights Council address emergent and growing problems faced by all the world's governments, such as Leilani Farha's 2017 report on the financialization of housing (At: https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/861179) and the 2023 report by the newly established Special Rapporteur on Climate Change addressing the rights of climate migrants (At: https://www.ohchr.org/en/documents/thematic-reports/ahrc5334-providing-legal-options-protect-human-rights-persons-displaced).

[5] For instance, the European Network on Debt and Development hosted a webinar on human rights dimensions of privatization policies featuring UN rapporteurs entitled, "Enough is

[enough: Privatisation & public services, a conversation with current and former UN Special Rapporteurs](#) (October 2020).

[6] For instance, advocates have long used shadow reporting processes and global level lobbying to urge the U.S. government to establish a national human rights institution. And as Davis's contribution to this volume shows, they are also working to target the U.S. government directly through a national campaign that includes local governments.