

Human Rights Cities and the Expanding Global Toolkit for Decolonization and Racial Justice¹

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Abstract

Amid a growing white backlash against racial progress that is rolling back voting rights and restraining public discourse and education about the history and legacies of slavery and colonialism, a global “George Floyd effect” has amplified efforts outside the United States to address systemic racism and engage growing numbers of U.S. activists in the UN human rights system. Global institutions provide opportunities for U.S. activists to expose U.S. human rights violations linked to systemic racism, expand support and legitimacy for their claims, and attract influential global allies. Today’s activism builds upon the earlier internationalism of U.S. advocates, which helped build international legal and institutional foundations for combating systemic racism. Within this globalized context of antiracism activism, local human rights city advocates in the U.S. have leveraged treaty reviews and mobilized around the newly created Permanent Forum on People of African Descent to heighten attention to systemic racism and broaden their analyses and alliances. These new global modes of engagement can help neutralize and roll back some of the threats to human rights that proliferate today.

On June 17, 2020, just weeks after the murder of his brother by Minneapolis police, Philonise Floyd became the first family member of a victim to ever open the United Nations Human Rights Council. He pointed out that it took massive protests before authorities took action against officers involved in his brother’s killing, and he appealed to world leaders to establish an independent commission of inquiry to investigate police killings of black people in the United States and the use of state violence against peaceful protesters.

The UN Human Rights Council’s “Urgent debate on current racially inspired human rights violations, systemic racism, police brutality and violence against peaceful protests” (hereafter “Urgent debate”) came at the request of family members of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Philando Castile and Michael Brown, who joined hundreds of human rights organizations in submitting a letter to the Human Rights Council documenting extensive and escalating rights abuses in U.S. policing practices, including policing of ongoing protests. The signatories formally requested a commission of inquiry into police violence against people of African descent in the United States and allegations of excessive use of force against peaceful protesters and journalists.²

Global advocates and international leaders have dubbed this renewed engagement by U.S. activists with global human rights movements and institutions the “George Floyd effect”.³ I argue that this new surge of activism expands the political leverage and influence of U.S. movements

for racial justice and human rights in promising ways. It builds upon prior work by U.S. Black internationalists and their global allies to broaden the struggle against what came to be understood by many, following W.E.B. Du Bois, as the global color line. Whereas Cold War politics suppressed this internationalist urge and channeled most U.S. advocacy into a narrow “civil rights” framework, the global system of human rights laws and institutions that evolved slowly over the late 20th and early 21st centuries opens new opportunities for political mobilization against systemic racism.

In what follows, I show how institutional changes in the UN human rights system have helped activists in the U.S. employ the “sandwich strategy” outlined in the introduction to this special issue to organize against renewed threats to human rights that proliferate today. As they’ve engaged with UN processes, U.S. activist groups have broadened connections with global movements and institutions, deepened understandings of institutionalized racism and its links to the global economic and political system, altered notions of belonging and identity, and expanded the tools for antiracism movements to win political leverage and influence. In addition, my experience with Pittsburgh and other human rights city organizers shows that such global engagement can expand and strengthen local movement coalitions while also helping strengthen the global human rights system by helping to socialize governments and the wider public in the human rights norms, values, and practices they reinforce with their work (Kaldor, 2003; Simmons, 2009).

I draw from my experience as a leader in the Pittsburgh and in the North American Human Rights City/ies Alliances over more than a decade. In order to better understand how human rights ideas travel, I began working in my local communities in the early 2000s to help “translate” ideas from global human rights movements into local activist spaces. Over this time, I’ve seen the proliferation of local, rights-based movements that constitute a growing global movement for the “right to the city.” Although Pittsburgh has a formal proclamation naming it a “human rights city,” such formal status matters less than the *organizing process* of bringing diverse coalitions together and mobilizing communities to demand human rights and improved government accountability. A key function of these movements is building consciousness and supporting a *human rights constituency* in support of local (and translocal) government action to advance human rights for all residents.

Globalizing Antiracism

The global nature of capitalism, racism, and colonialism require an understanding of U.S. struggles for racial justice that extends beyond the U.S. political context. Today’s global order is inextricably linked to the history of colonialism and to ongoing efforts by former colonizers to preserve their privileged geopolitical position amid the rise of newly independent post-colonial states. Today’s global human rights architecture grew out of the struggles and compromises among states and popular movements (Burke, 2010; Jensen, 2016). William Schabas’s detailed analysis of this time period concluded that the “campaign against racial discrimination has served as the beating heart of international human rights,” and that governments of the Global South, along with anticolonial and anti-racism advocates, have been indispensable to the progressive development of international law (Schabas, 2023:408).

After World War II, anticolonial advocacy movements and newly independent states in Africa and Asia worked to keep anti-racism efforts on the global human rights agenda and shaped important legal and institutional protections against racial discrimination (Schabas, 2023). But although U.S. advocates like W.E.B. Du Bois and Paul Robeson were highly visible and active participants in these efforts, Cold War politics led to the sidelining of internationalist strategies in the U.S., where a more limited demand for “civil rights” was deemed more politically expedient because it decoupled political rights from economic ones and confined claims to those allowed within the terms of the slavery-era U.S. Constitution. History has shown how the civil rights approach failed to achieve meaningful material gains for Black Americans and perpetuated ongoing institutionalized racism and deepened racial inequality.

Despite these limitations in the U.S. context, advances in human rights laws and institutions during this time furthered anti-racism work globally, even in the face of U.S. resistance. Table 1 summarizes key developments that have shaped the expanding opportunities and institutional avenues for global racial justice advocacy since the creation of the United Nations. The unshaded items reflect steps to articulate and legitimate international norms against racism. Lightly shaded entries are significant interventions by U.S. anti-racism activists. Darker shaded entries are formal institutions that enhance transparency and accountability for human rights. What is key here is that over time, international legal understandings of racial discrimination and formal mechanisms for holding governments accountable have become much stronger, providing more avenues for participation and political leverage for today’s social movement activists (e.g., Schabas, 2023; Jensen, 2016; Rajagopal, 2003).

The table shows a slow but steady progression of initiatives against racial discrimination over the early decades of the UN that began with work (led by newly independent states) to articulate and strengthen norms against racial discrimination, followed by the creation of mutually reinforcing bodies that helped increase transparency and accountability for racially motivated human rights violations. Significantly, they also created more mechanisms for civil society engagement in global political settings. Each development helped establish groundwork for an acceleration or “spiraling” of self-reinforcing human rights institution-building in more recent times (Risse et al., 1999–1999; Sikkink, 2011, 2017).⁴ Luis-Brown (2008) uses the metaphor of “waves of decolonization,” to capture the important role played by anticolonial and antiracism movements that linked domestic struggles for equality and democracy to the global struggles against white supremacy led by African and other states of the global South in the UN.

**Table 1: Key Developments in Global Legal Protections
Against Racial Discrimination^α**

Institutional development or initiative	Year
Post WWII-Cold War	
<i>United Negro Congress Submission to United Nations</i> [°]	1946
Sub-Commission on Prevention of Discrimination and Protection of Minorities	1947
<i>Appeal to the World (NAACP)</i>	1947
Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide	1948 (1951)*
Universal Declaration of Human Rights	1948
<i>We Charge Genocide</i>	1951
International Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Racial Discrimination	1965 (1969)*
International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (March 21)	1966
International Year to Combat Racism and Racial Discrimination	1971
Convention on the Suppression and Punishment of the Crime of Apartheid	1973 (1976)*
UNESCO Declaration on Race and Race Prejudice	1978
World Conferences Against Racism (1 st and 2 nd)	1978, 1983
Post-Cold War	
Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights	1993
Special Rapporteur on Contemporary forms of Racism	1994
3 rd World Conference Against Racism & Durban Declaration & Program of Action ¹	2001
Working Group of Experts on People of African Descent	2002
Special Rapporteur on Minority Issues	2005
International Decade of People of African Descent	2015-2024
<i>We Charge Genocide</i> ²	2016
Urgent Debate on the current racially inspired human rights violations, systemic racism, police brutality and the violence against peaceful protest	2020
Agenda towards transformative change for racial justice and equality	2021
Independent Expert Mechanism to Advance Racial Justice & Equality in Law Enforcement (a.k.a. “George Floyd Mechanism”)	2021
International Day for People of African Descent (August 31)	2021
Permanent Forum on People of African Descent	2022

^αThis chronology draws extensively from the historical analysis by William Schabas (2023).

*Indicates date Convention entered into force.

¹ The Durban Conference grew out of earlier World Conferences Against Racism in 1978, 1983 and generated follow-up conferences (Durban +10 and Durban +20) in 2009 and 2021. These conferences helped support the development of institutions to improve monitoring and implementation while also strengthening norms against racial discrimination, including reparations for slavery and colonialism.

² Inspired by the 1951 “We Charge Genocide” petition, a grassroots group in Chicago documented 153 racial killings and other human rights abuses mostly by police, filing a formal complaint as part of the review of U.S. compliance with its commitments under the Convention Against Torture (<http://wechargegenocide.org/>).

With two exceptions (the Sub-Commission on Prevention of Discrimination and Protection of Minorities and the International Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Racial Discrimination (CERD)), the first decades of the UN involved struggles to articulate international human rights law and bring attention to the problem of racial discrimination. The earliest actions in Table 1, efforts to define racial discrimination and to establish race-based discrimination as a

human rights violation, were part of this normative trend. The creation of more formal institutionalized bodies and procedures to monitor and improve government accountability to established norms mostly came later and became more frequent in the post-Cold War period, building upon these earlier normative struggles.

In 1946 and 1947, U.S. human rights activists in the National Negro Congress and NAACP brought petitions on racial discrimination to the UN, even before the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. These appeals were followed in 1951 by the “We Charge Genocide” petition, which described conditions in the United States using language reserved for the most serious human rights violations. Notably, this charge was leveled at a time when the world was still reckoning with the Nazi war crimes and genocide and decolonization struggles were integrating dozens of newly liberated countries into the United Nations. “We Charge Genocide” called out the hypocrisy of the United States, challenged the legitimacy of its leadership as it sought to expand its global dominance.⁵ However, formal mechanisms through which these movement claims could be processed had not been established, and much of the formerly colonized world had yet to achieve UN membership.

As newly independent, former colonial states joined the United Nations, they demanded attention to racial discrimination and supported movements for decolonization and racial inclusion. The UN’s evolving and uncertain political development opened opportunities for governments from Africa and Asia to amplify attention to racial discrimination and promote the passage of the 1965 Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Racial Discrimination, the first UN Human Rights treaty with a built-in process for ongoing monitoring. The U.S. and its allies consistently opposed the expansion of human rights in ways that would threaten white supremacy, limiting efforts to improve enforcement, but efforts to establish and reinforce norms surrounding race relations persisted (see Schabas, 2023; Jensen, 2016).

The 1990s brought the end of the Cold War, a series of global conferences on human rights and related themes, and a related expansion of both institutions and transnational advocacy networks that connected global human rights arenas with national and local communities and grassroots movements.⁶ This generated cross-national and cross-movement learning and deepened analyses of the intersections of human rights with global inequalities and racism, helping to shape intersectional understandings of human rights that developed through those conferences and subsequent movement-building work (Friedman et al., 2005; Smith, 2008). The 1993 World Conference on Human Rights was particularly noteworthy for helping localize human rights and connect global treaties to local government practices (Kaufman & Ward, 2017; Tsutsui & Smith, 2019). That meeting’s final declaration spurred the establishment of a long-sought movement goal, an Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) which, in turn, catalyzed new human rights treaties, monitoring bodies, and related special procedures that helped expand attention to human rights on the global agenda.

The 2001 World Conference Against Racism was also noteworthy for its extensive civil society participation, drawing over 3,000 activists from around the world. Building upon lessons from prior UN conferences, activists came prepared to help shape official debates while building

movement relationships to support follow-through (Schabas, 2023). Falcón (2016) has argued that transnational dialogues and cooperation radicalized perspectives of activist participants—particularly those from the African diaspora who were rethinking racial identities in new ways. The resulting Durban Declaration and Program of Action outlined specific government commitments and placed concerns of people of African descent squarely on the global human rights agenda. Two decades later, the Durban Conference continues to shape intergovernmental agendas and the demands of activists, even as the U.S. and its allies continue their resistance (see Schabas, 2023).

The Durban Declaration helped establish the Working Group of Experts on People of African Descent and the International Decade, which in turn led to the creation of the Permanent Forum on People of African Descent. Unlike earlier, norm-generating work, these later developments institutionalized pathways for global human rights experts to meet with national and local governments and with civil society activists. They also invited activists into global spaces and provided both cultural and political tools for civil society groups to expand public conversations and engage in local and national human rights advocacy. The global upsurge of resistance following the murder of George Floyd by Minneapolis police in 2020 would then build upon these global networks and lessons for how UN human rights “machinery” can be used, allowing the rapid mobilization of advocacy networks and political support to convince government leaders to insist on global dialogue on racialized police violence in a high-level and prominent forum.⁷ Despite substantial pressure and significant losses of official U.S. aid, African governments stood together to call for a Human Rights Council Urgent Debate aimed at bringing some measure of accountability to U.S. authorities.

The Urgent Debate led to the High Commissioner’s report *Agenda Towards Transformative Change*, which further legitimates activists claims and provides concrete guidance for governments and for movement advocacy. Where governments drag their feet on moving *Agenda* recommendations forward, concerted local advocacy will be essential to ensuring that national and local authorities know “the world is watching.” The Urgent Debate also initiated the Expert Mechanism on Law Enforcement and Racial Justice (EMLER)—referred to by many activists as the “George Floyd mechanism.” This monitoring body made its first official visit to the U.S. in spring 2023, where it met with victims and their families as well as advocates and authorities in six cities. Its report provides formal policy recommendations that amplify long-standing activist demands for accountability and for the re-allocation of public resources towards needed services and away from militarized policing.

Global human rights advocacy socializes participants around new norms, identities, and notions of global agency, thereby shaping the ongoing development of the human right system (Falcón, 2009; Simmons, 2009 2009; Tsutsui, 2018). The recognition and authorization of civil society actors in UN spaces like treaty reviews and the Permanent Forum on People of African Descent effectively challenges the primacy of state power and gives social movements the political leverage, legitimacy, and allies to impact the interests and practices of governments (Keck & Sikkink, 1998; Pallas & Bloodgood, 2022). Crucially, this dynamic also expands possibilities for social movement advocacy at local scales. The growing involvement of sub-national government

actors in global political arenas has also diluted the supremacy of powerful national governments while furthering the elaboration of institutions and procedures that strengthen human rights globalization, by shaping normative content and government accountability.

I highlight four noteworthy observations from this timeline. First, again, is the already-mentioned shift from global norm development towards processes and institutions for monitoring and implementation. Second, global politics has been democratized through expanded transparency and public participation. Third, the experiences of movements and government leaders advocating for human rights have advanced new strategies and tools for enforcing human rights claims. The struggles themselves generate new knowledge, skills, and social movement formations which are better prepared to defend and advance human rights, both globally *and locally*. Their work has expanded the global human rights architecture by helping create new entities like the PFPAD and formal monitoring bodies. Fourth, each development represented in this table enhances transparency and accountability for rights violations while also supporting steps towards improved human rights practices. Global agencies and procedures institutionalize practices that generate recommendations and promote improvements that, over time, build knowledge and *socialize* actors—including all levels of government as well as international officials and social movement/civil society actors—in human rights norms and their related practices (Finnemore, 1993, 1996).

Ending white supremacy requires both a radical shift in thinking and the restructuring of social relations across many scales; the processes outlined here show how this work has developed over decades. Below I describe how human rights city advocates have used these openings to advance racial justice locally by engaging U.S. movements and activists in the reviews of U.S. compliance with the CERD treaty and in the work of the PFPAD, helping translate global human rights norms into local spaces.

Local Advocacy & the Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Racial Discrimination (CERD)

The United States ratified the CERD in 1994, enabling U.S. activists to use its review process to expose systemic racism and bring international pressure on U.S. leaders. But U.S. activists made little use of the CERD reviews until 2014, just as the Black Lives Matter movement was emerging nationally. I present lessons from the work of the U.S.-based Human Rights Cities Alliance (HRCA; on whose steering committee I serve) in support of local activists' engagement with the 2022 CERD review of the United States to illustrate how the "sandwich strategy" works. As with other treaty reviews, the CERD commits the national government to filing routine reports on its responses to the prior CERD Committee recommendations,⁸ and civil society groups are also invited to submit their own "shadow reports." In addition to documenting violations, civil society groups are encouraged to offer specific recommendations for legal or policy changes that would improve compliance with the treaty. The Committee's final report draws on both government and civil society submissions in making its assessment and recommendations. These Committee reports can then be used by local activists to mobilize pressure on both local and national governments.

During the summer of 2022, HRCAs organizers in cities including Dayton, Ohio; Spartanburg, South Carolina; and Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania worked together to compile data and submit local shadow reports.⁹ Persistent discrimination, police violence, and inadequate protections of economic and social rights have long been ignored by local and national leaders, and we found that local residents appreciated the shadow reporting process for bringing global attention to these concerns. Activists organized community processes to compile reports and to share them with local authorities. The process put officials on notice that “the world is watching,” and showed that local constituents were organized to hold them accountable to global human rights law.¹⁰

The CERD helps local advocates in the United States pressure both national and local governments “from above,” by exposing local violations of human rights in a global setting. By entering the global arena, they tarnish the image that U.S. authorities seek to maintain in this inter-state arena.¹¹ Engaging in global spaces also gives U.S. activists opportunities to build alliances and otherwise garner support from other social movements, international officials and agencies, and national governments that support human rights or otherwise seek to influence U.S. practices. Since the 2014 killing of Mike Brown, many more U.S. activists are looking to UN human rights instruments (Pruce, 2023). The 2022 CERD review drew an unprecedented number of U.S. civil society participants to Geneva, far greater than any prior review. And more than 100 shadow reports were submitted in each of the latest CERD reviews (2022 and 2014), compared with just 3 shadow reports in 2008 and none in the first U.S. review in 2001.¹²

In addition to providing a written record of local conditions and demonstrating how they run afoul of global human rights laws or norms, civil society shadow reports help support coalition building among community organizations and promote new learning about UN human rights processes, international law, and how the law can be used to promote the local changes they seek. The shadow reporting process actively encourages groups to collaborate, thus supporting local coalition-building work. In Pittsburgh, for instance, this process demonstrated for local partners the added value to our local efforts of engaging with global human rights mechanisms helping to grow our local coalition.

The CERD process also encourages local advocates to offer specific recommendations for governments to improve compliance, in turn encouraging research and learning about specific laws and policies at all levels of government that affect the conditions advocates seek to change. It also encouraged our search for models we could adapt and adopt from other cities. Effectively, the UN shadow reporting process invites community groups to engage in “co-governance”—that is, to move beyond critique towards cooperative problem-solving that supports government action to address complex social conflicts.¹³

In Pittsburgh and other cities, this co-governance work generated lessons for how human rights apply locally and on how local and state government structures can be improved. It has supported our cooperation with local agencies charged with investigating and prosecuting discrimination claims. It also revealed a shared interest of Pittsburgh and other city human rights advocates and policy officials in the creation of a national human rights institution—something the global community has long called upon the United States to do (see Davis’s contribution).¹⁴

By engaging residents in learning and action related to the CERD implementation process, and by familiarizing local officials with the CERD treaty obligations and the Committee's recommendations, this global shadow reporting work democratizes local politics by supporting engaged citizenship while also furthering antiracism work in communities.

In developing recommendations for the Committee on how the U.S. government might improve compliance with the treaty, we had to think in very practical ways about both local and national governance. We had to consider what specific steps local authorities could take to prevent and remedy the problems we had documented. But since the CERD Committee would only be able to offer recommendations to national authorities, we had to consider what changes to *federal* policies and practices would improve our *local* conditions. Because we understood our shadow report as a local organizing tool as well as part of the national efforts to improve U.S. human rights compliance, we generated recommendations that pertained to local authorities as well as national ones. Once the CERD Committee issued its concluding report, we translated its recommendations into local recommendations and demands. This kind of governance and problem-solving work is not something many activists—much less ordinary residents—are typically asked to do. Thus, our engagement with the CERD helped cultivate and popularize citizenship skills and expertise that will support ongoing efforts to democratize our cities. Building upon this work, the HRCA has organized webinars and created toolkits to help other local groups produce shadow reports and utilize the CERD Committee's final recommendations in their advocacy work.¹⁵

The treaty review process thus encourages new kinds of advocacy in local communities. The formal reports of the CERD Committee and other bodies specify concrete policy changes the international community is seeking from U.S. government officials. Although they require adaptation to local contexts, the recommendations often speak directly to the obligations of all levels of government. As one activist, Eric Tars of the National Law Center for Homelessness & Poverty, observed at the 2008 CERD review, "The Concluding Observations are as meaningful as we as advocates make them... and when we make them part of our daily dialogue with the government, they will be forced to respond in kind!" (Falcón, 2009).

Our work shows that informing and reminding governments of their formal obligations under international treaties can advance local antiracism and coalition work while reinforcing human rights norms "from below." By involving residents in these global review processes, we help construct a U.S. human rights constituency that is politically engaged, attuned to global human rights discourses, and informed about international expectations of the U.S. (and all other) governments. This heightens activists' sense of efficacy and unity.

Significantly, the CERD process foregrounds demands for economic rights. The U.S. government insists that domestic discrimination law only covers discriminatory *intent*, but the CERD Committee has consistently argued that the U.S. position is inconsistent with the definition of discrimination under CERD, which obliges signatories to remedy persistent discriminatory *effects* of their policies, regardless of intent. Our research for our shadow report highlighted these tensions between the U.S. Constitution and U.S. international legal obligations, providing an outside, critical perspective on the narrow and exceptionalist interpretations of the law offered by the U.S. government. Participants were inspired to

engage in imaginative legal thinking to confront the discrepancies between U.S. and international law. In this way as well, engaging local activists and governments in international human rights processes furthers human rights globalization, transforming local thinking and practice from below should, in turn “trickle up” through the trans-local movement networks that have been expanded through our shadow reporting process.

Decolonizing identities and expanding political imagination: The Permanent Forum on People of African Descent

The PFPAD, created in 2022, and the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues (UNPFII, created in 2000) are both trans-state arenas that enable the emergence of new, decolonized identities and agendas, making visible the atrocities of colonialism and ongoing violence of systemic racism that hegemonic culture tries to erase. Both grew out of long struggles led by persistent, dedicated activists working to transform global institutions into tools of emancipation, rather than oppression. The very existence of these bodies challenges the fundamental authority and legitimacy of states that claim stolen land and that are built upon violent practices exposed by these bodies as “crimes against humanity.” By authorizing and empowering groups whose bodies and land were and continue to be sacrificed in the name of capitalist development, they stage an unfolding global reckoning with the contradictions between the legitimating values of modern states and the practices upon which they rely.

As spaces where oppressed groups can come together and meet their counterparts from around the world while having their shared experiences of oppression and violence acknowledged as violations of global norms, the Permanent Forums can help generate new thinking and action that can actively decolonize our institutions and politics.¹⁶ Falcón (2016) quotes a U.S. activist in the World Conference Against Racism (WCAR), who pointed out this transformative potential:

[T]o assert that you are African descendants, to use that word, well, the states were very resistant. There were problems in the second preparatory committee meeting in Geneva because you are talking about Africa, about the slave trade and trafficking, and you're talking about reparations.

The opportunities for Afro-descended people to convene with others from the diaspora, especially with the mandate to address legacies of colonialism and slavery and advance a UN declaration on the rights of people of African descent, enables what Daulatzai (speaking in reference to the Muslim International) calls a “respatialized Black identity.” Reflecting this, the delegation of U.S. activists at the WCAR shared the motto: “We went to Durban as Blacks and left Durban as African descendants” (Falcón 2016:143). Like the Nation of Islam of earlier times, the PFPAD provides “an alternative to and fundamental critique of the nation-state” (Daulatzai, 2012). Engagement with the Forums may provide for Indigenous and Afro-descended people, as well as other oppressed groups, a way of expressing “symbolic counter-citizenship” (Daulatzai, 2012). By confronting the violence of colonialism and its persistent legacies, it also challenges militarized, competitive national identities, prefiguring emergent global identities that can unify peoples around a shared vision for a preferred world order.

The global human rights networks within which our national HRCA works enabled us to build relationships with leaders in the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights and to connect with the experts and officials charged with implementing the UN’s human rights mandates. This, along with our national movement networks, led to our connection with Justin Hansford, a social movement lawyer and professor of law at Howard University, who had just

been elected to serve as regional delegate to the PFPAD. Hansford had been hosting a series of “listening sessions” with Black people across Europe, North America, and the Caribbean and took up our offer to host what became the first in-person session in Pittsburgh. This opportunity required our local team to work with Black-led community groups to develop a strategy for mobilizing Black residents around a UN process that seemed unrelated to their local work and concerns. We met over many weeks to build our leadership team, messaging, and vision for organizing after the listening session.

While limited resources and staffing made work difficult, we were able to engage a larger set of Black leaders in thinking about how the PFPAD and related UN human rights institutions could be an asset to local work. It helped that we could point to the CERD shadow report as an example of how these institutions operate, and we succeeded in developing some useful ideas for framing our outreach to local communities in the future. Our local network of leaders also learned more about the history of Black internationalism, and we came to frame our event as “Black Pittsburgh’s Appeal to the World.” The listening session drew well over 100 participants, and we’ve continued to keep this group informed and engaged in our work addressing the needs discussed at our forum with Hansford.¹⁷ Several leaders from our national HRCA also attended our Pittsburgh session as observers, later hosting similar sessions in their cities of Dayton and Atlanta. Following the inaugural PFPAD, our Alliance hosted a webinar featuring participants in that meeting who shared their analyses and reflections on the Forum and its significance.¹⁸ We’ve been able to share lessons and content from this work with Hansford and with other organizers, and we built a resource page on our website to provide supporters with ready access to recorded meetings of the PFPAD and related resources for education and mobilization for ongoing local engagement with the PFPAD.¹⁹

Like other UN human rights mechanisms, the PFPAD is constrained by limitations imposed by powerful states. Nevertheless, PFPAD and institutions like it elicit and reinforce connections among local, national, and global networks that in turn shape the work and evolution of those institutions and reinforce webs of communication and accountability. This is the process of human rights globalization at work. Deliberate efforts to learn from past experiences in the development of the UN human rights architecture are a vital part of this process and an important new tool for advancing struggles to end systemic racism and advance a decolonizing human rights globalization project.

Conclusion

Today’s antiracism struggles have become more globally connected and gained wider attention and influence through many decades of global human rights organizing and institution-building. Human rights globalization rising from activists’ engagement with global institutions has in turn advanced the political legitimacy, expertise, and leverage of these institutions (Carroll, 2016; Kaldor, 2003; Sikkink, 2017). Over time, this increasingly thick institutional arrangement reins in the ability of national governments to act without concern for their obligations to both other states and to an increasingly organized global civil society. As activists and movements utilize this proliferating set of accountability mechanisms, they increase the pool of human rights monitors operating in local contexts, enhance global citizenship skills and strategic analyses, and inspire

new legal experimentation and institutional growth (Clark, 2022; Pruce, 2023; Rajagopal, 2003). Within these increasingly dense institutional contexts, there are growing opportunities for advocates to mobilize ideas and allies that challenge the U.S. hegemony and the global capitalist system by spotlighting contradictions between existing practices and increasingly consolidated understandings of global human rights norms.

These examples from human rights city organizing demonstrate how human rights advocates are helping build alternative global institutional arrangements that expand people's political and legal imaginations by increasing avenues for racial justice advocacy. By globalizing understandings of racism and its connections with global economic histories and structures, and by popularizing understandings of global human rights laws and standards, human rights globalization is radicalizing U.S. advocacy and bringing new allies and legitimacy to struggles against white supremacy. Movements are key players advancing this emerging infrastructure that can make a different world possible by re-framing national policy and thinking and re-building social relationships in ways that alter fundamentally the exploitative and exclusionary economic and political order. As the expanding global human rights architecture creates new spaces for this work, it generates learning and socialization processes that support new thinking and practices that can improve human rights protections and expand our democratic imaginary. The interaction of movements and global institutions, in sum, helps build new constituencies supporting an essential project of human rights globalization.

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End Notes

- ¹ I'm grateful to my fellow human rights organizers for all they've contributed to this learning process. What's presented here reflects emergent collective wisdom about how people make social change. Thanks also to Michael Goodhart and Steven Jensen for their invaluable feedback on earlier versions of this paper.
- ² The coalition letter was sent by the American Civil Liberties Union on behalf of the larger coalition of human rights advocates, many linked through the US Human Rights Network (<https://www.aclu.org/letter/coalition-letter-request-un-independent-inquiry-escalating-situation-police-violence-and?redirect=letter/coalition-letter-request-un-investigation-escalating-situation-police-violence-and-repression>). Although U.S. influence deterred the Human Rights Council from authorizing a formal inquiry into U.S. police killings, activists conducted such an inquiry in order to assemble evidence and analysis for the High Commissioner's report, which the Council requested (See: <https://inquirycommission.org/>).
- ³ This phrase was used by Pastor Elías Murillo Martínez, a Colombian lawyer and member of the UN Permanent Forum on People of African Descent (PFPAD), during the opening session of the inaugural PFPAD meeting.
- ⁴ The expanded use of "cause lawyering" in the late 1990s certainly contributed to these global changes Simmons, B. A. (2009). *Mobilizing for Human Rights*. Cambridge University Press. while also expanding the skills and political repertoires of U.S. movements.
- ⁵ For more details on this history and how activists are interpreting and mobilizing it, see Anderson, C. (2003). *Eyes off the Prize: African-Americans and the Struggle for Human Rights 1948-1954*. Cambridge University Press. ; and Columbia Law School Human Rights Institute. (2019). *Advancing Racial Justice*

and Human Rights: Rights-Based Strategies for the Current Era [Conference Report]. https://hri.law.columbia.edu/sites/default/files/publications/advancing_racial_justice_and_human_rights_-_2018_hri_cle_conference_report.pdf. For a recent discussion of Malcolm X's internationalism and its impacts on Black and popular culture and its relevance to today's struggles, see Daulatzai, S. (2012). *Black Star Crescent Moon: The Muslim International and Black Freedom Beyond America*. University of Minnesota Press .

⁶ There was also a proliferation and expansion of national human rights institutions at this time, and these served to expand attention to human rights within UN member states, despite persistent refusal by the U.S. to establish such a body (see Davis's contribution to this special issue).

⁷ Prior movement work in UN spaces helped activists learn new strategies and skills that enabled this initiative to take shape, and Falcon's ethnographic work on U.S. advocacy at a CERD review meeting Falcón, S. M. (2009). Invoking Human Rights and Transnational Activism in Racial Justice Struggles at Home: US Antiracist Activists and the UN Committee to Eliminate Racial Discrimination. *Societies Without Borders*, 4, 295-316. and at the World Conference Against Racism Falcón, S. (2016). *Power Interrupted: Antiracist and Feminist Activists inside the United Nations*. University of Washington Press. detail this learning process.

⁸ The 2022 review was the 12th CERD periodic review of the United States, and this combined multiple reviews (10th-12th) due to the Trump administration's failure to participate.

⁹ These reports are available at <http://ushumanrightscities.org> .

¹⁰ Many local officials know little if anything about international human rights obligations, despite the fact that they are the primary duty-bearers charged with enforcing these laws and standards. This is compounded by the fact the U.S. government also does little to inform state and local governments of their treaty obligations, as is required in international law. In Pittsburgh and other cities, my fellow organizers and I have found that local officials were typically unaware of their obligations under the CERD or other international conventions. U.S. legal training and thus case law also provides few precedents to allow for the use of U.S. courts to protect human rights. But movement lawyering networks like the "Bringing Human Rights Home Lawyers Network," the Southern Poverty Law Center, and the Southern Center for Human Rights have been building awareness and skills to change this Columbia Law School Human Rights Institute. (2019). *Advancing Racial Justice and Human Rights: Rights-Based Strategies for the Current Era* [Conference Report]. https://hri.law.columbia.edu/sites/default/files/publications/advancing_racial_justice_and_human_rights_-_2018_hri_cle_conference_report.pdf, Kaufman, R. E., & Ward, J. K. (2017). The Local Turn in U.S. Human Rights: Introduction to the Special Symposium Issue. *Columbia Human Rights Law Review*, 49(1), 1-11. <https://doi.org/https://hrlr.law.columbia.edu/files/2018/01/RisaEKaufmanJoAnnKamufWar.pdf> .

¹¹ While resisting pressure to improve practices, the U.S. government has gone to extreme lengths to convey the image of domestic racial harmony to the world Daulatzai, S. (2012). *Black Star Crescent Moon: The Muslim International and Black Freedom Beyond America*. University of Minnesota Press .

¹² Documentation at: <https://www.ohchr.org/en/treaty-bodies/cerd> (See "State Party Reporting").

¹³ The concept of co-governance is being used to describe emergent practices in contemporary U.S. movements Engler, M., & Engler, P. (2022). Movements are vying for political power — is 'co-governance' the answer? *Waging Nonviolence*. <https://wagingnonviolence.org/2022/05/movements-are-vying-for-political-power-is-co-governance-the-answer/> (<https://www.resilience.org/stories/2022-05-27/movements-are-vying-for-political-power-is-co-governance-the-answer/>), Partners for Dignity and Rights, & Forward, R. (2023). *Co-Governing Toward Racial Democracy*. <https://dignityandrights.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/Co-Governing-Toward-Racial-Democracy.pdf>

Governing_Toward_Multiracial_Democracy.pdf. I extend the concept here to include similar kinds of work with foreign government and international officials.

- ¹⁴ Following the CERD review, U.S. advocates came together to petition U.S. Ambassador Susan Rice to follow the CERD Committee's and other global recommendations calling for a U.S. national human rights institution American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU). (2022). *Petition: On creating a federal commission to study establishing a national human rights institution*. https://www.aclu.org/sites/default/files/field_document/nhri_presidential_commission_letter_final_w_signatures.pdf: American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) Retrieved from https://www.aclu.org/sites/default/files/field_document/nhri_presidential_commission_letter_final_w_signatures.pdf. We have found in our local advocacy work that this position is supported by officials working in local human rights and anti-discrimination agencies, who see a need for more national support and coordination. (See, also, e.g., Open Society Justice Initiative. 2013. "From Rights to Remedies: Structures and Strategies for Implementing International Human Rights Decisions." New York: Open Society Foundation).
- ¹⁵ See website: [CERD Cities 2022: Using International Law to Advance Racial Justice in our Cities](https://humanrightscities.wixsite.com/hrca/cerd-cities), At: <https://humanrightscities.wixsite.com/hrca/cerd-cities>.
- ¹⁶ This sentiment was echoed in the webinar, *The African Diaspora Convenes on the World Stage & Calls for Reparatory Justice* (referenced above), and observed in my praxis in Pittsburgh, when our local human rights city alliance helped convene a coalition to host a visit by Justin Hansford, regional delegate to the PFPAD.
- ¹⁷ We created an online resource page to share documentation from our meeting and collect other resources available to participants and others: *Pittsburgh's Appeal to the World: Taking Back our Human Rights! Building a Black Regional Agenda for Justice* At: http://wiki.pghrights.mayfirst.org/index.php?title=Taking_Back_our_Human_Rights!_Building_a_Black_Regional_Agenda_for_Justice
- ¹⁸ The webinar was titled: "The African Diaspora Convenes on the World Stage & Calls For Reparatory Justice," At: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4iWMWVB9CX8>.
- ¹⁹ That resource page is linked to the Human Rights Cities Alliance website: [Cities Support the UN Permanent Forum on People of African Descent \(At: https://humanrightscities.wixsite.com/hrca/cities-unpfpad\)](https://humanrightscities.wixsite.com/hrca/cities-unpfpad)