

Expert meeting on human rights cities

27–28 November 2019, Brussels – Final conclusions

This expert meeting on human rights cities discussed ways to strengthen human rights cities in the EU, through the development of a 'framework of commitments'. Such a framework would offer details on what it means to be a human rights city – creating minimum standards or quality guarantee that provides for a stronger incentive to become such a city. The meeting also included an exchange of views on an accreditation mechanism or label to assess compliance of cities with a framework of commitments. Participants included local government representatives, city networks, academic experts, and representatives of international organisations and EU institutions.

These conclusions were finalised on 23 January 2020, after input received from participants on a draft.

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The need for human rights instruments to 'go local'

Cities as well as local and regional level governments have a key role to play in fundamental rights. International human rights obligations apply to states and that includes sub-levels of governments. Also, local governments' activities have a direct impact on rights holders on a daily basis, hence they are best placed to apply human rights. While several municipal competences and activities closely relate to human rights, these are far from always being dealt with in those terms. Participants emphasized the need of human rights standards and principles to connect more closely to local governments' work. Discussions highlighted the importance of institutional actors such as FRA, United Nations and Council of Europe, to raise awareness among local governments on human rights, including, the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights. Activities such as developing a **"localised" version of the EU Charter** and the provision of **Charter training to local actors** could be considered.

Shaping a framework of commitments for human rights cities in the EU

Human rights cities have shown that human rights can help to solve concrete problems for the population. A framework of commitments for human rights cities can showcase benefits of human rights for local authorities, promote human rights standards, and help 'tell a story' of what human rights mean at the local level. The framework should include the following three elements:

1. Substantive commitments (e.g. international, European/EU instruments, treaties, law and policies);
2. Process commitments (e.g. participation of local populations and civil society, transparency, accountability); and
3. Institutional commitments (e.g. human rights office, public declaration and action plan, local ombuds institutions, monitoring, reporting to local councils, etc.).

Participants indicated the need for a framework of commitments to:

- highlight that human rights standards are by essence all obligatory (no 'pick and choose' possible), even if cities in practice might progress at different speeds;
- be closely linked to municipal work;
- be applicable to different types of local governments (e.g. regions) and rural areas;
- be flexible to adapt to local contexts;
- build upon a positive narrative;
- be usable independently from the financial capacities and resources;
- highlight the benefits of becoming a human rights city;
- illustrate how human rights and local governments are interconnected;
- give examples of tools that can be used for human rights (e.g. budget, urban planning etc.)

Recognizing human rights cities contribution through accreditation or label

Participants indicated the need for local governments to assess if their activities are complying with human rights standards and norms, and going 'in the right direction'. A 'friendly-assessment' by recognized human rights actors such as FRA would be useful. This would not only provide concrete feedback on design and implementation of better policies locally, but it would also greatly contribute to support a human rights agenda at leadership level. Such assessments could take the form of an accreditation, label or even a prize or a 'human rights capital-scheme'; some more detailed suggestions were made in relation to these options:

- To draw lessons from similar initiatives such as the Global Alliance of National Human Rights Institutions (GANHRI), the Child-friendly cities from UNICEF, the Intercultural Cities Programme of the Council of Europe or the peer review of the UN convention against corruption (UNCAC) will be considered.

- To ensure that reporting on the work of local governments is manageable and connected to existing reporting as far as possible (e.g. on Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)).
- To focus assessment not only on outcome but also on processes such as participation, and on institutional tools (such as human rights office, action plans, data collection, budget allocation etc.). A process based approach would help cities to move towards benchmarks and set up their own priorities within the competences of the cities.
- To ensure an assessment or review builds on peer-to-peer activities, complemented with the engagement of recognised human rights actors. The participation of civil society and local populations, including marginalised groups, should also be considered.
- To ensure that mainstreaming human rights is addressed in the framework.
- To ensure assessment is done cross-nationally.
- To ensure assessment acknowledges the importance of promoting rights and celebrates efforts through a recognised and 'protected' label or European prize.
- To ensure the recognition of efforts does not lead to a 'one-size-fit-all approach'.
- To provide for different levels of compliance similarly as GANHRI (A or B could be considered, or something that could 'dynamically grow') and different types (including capacity, resources) and sizes of local authorities should be recognised.
- To consider a two-stage monitoring process: one at city level to assess progress and one on some form of accreditation or recognition. For the latter, an interface and a structure should be considered to support the process, with the involvement of institutional actors such as the United Nations to ensure global coherence between regional initiatives and FRA at EU level. Other key actors, such as the Human Rights Cities Network, could also contribute to bring in more cities and help bridging different cities networks and initiatives.

Discussions made clear that for any model, some form of **institutionalisation and funding** is needed. The project proposal "10 > 100 > 1000 Human Rights Cities", being developed by the City of Utrecht, could create opportunities for supporting this, in cooperation with key actors. The project aims to support the expansion of the human rights cities through the development of an international framework.

Participants highlighted the importance on drawing such assessments on existing guides, tools or practices on human rights at local level, for instance:

- The "Methodology guide- City of human rights, the Barcelona model",¹
- The FRA toolkit "Joining up fundamental rights"² on how to implement fundamental rights across all levels and sectors of government;
- Knowledge and promising practices from the Human Rights Cities Network;³

¹ https://ajuntament.barcelona.cat/dretsidiversitat/sites/default/files/WEB_Manual_DDHH_A5_ENG.pdf

² <https://fra.europa.eu/en/joinedup/home>

³ <https://humanrightscities.net/>

- A prize for human rights cities developed in Asia.

Participation and engagement at the heart of the human rights cities model

The EU faces challenges on issues such as fundamental rights and the rule of law. The role of civil society is essential to continue raising awareness about fundamental rights. At EU level, a two-year process, the Conference on the Future of Europe will provide opportunities for engagement with the public and civil society. Moreover, dedicated interactions between human rights cities and the European Economic and Social Committee's Group on Fundamental Rights and the Rule of Law ("FRRL Group") could be explored, as well as consulting the FRRL Group on the framework of commitments and the provision by the FRRL group of "going local trainings" with local governments.

Continue expanding knowledge and visibility of human rights cities in Europe

The practice of the human rights cities in the EU and Europe remains rather limited. To date, less than ten cities in the EU have declared themselves human rights cities in only six countries.⁴ Most of these initiatives come from the city level in close cooperation with local grassroots and civil society organisations. In Sweden, an initiative of the Swedish Association of Municipalities and Regions (SALAR),⁵ in cooperation with the Raoul Wallenberg Institute, support a process for analysis and defining what it would mean to become a human rights city in Sweden. This 'Swedish model' could be a transferable to other countries and contexts.

Several **benefits** for becoming a human rights city were highlighted in the discussion. Practice showed that the 'label' helped cities to:

- Mobilise and engage all actors in relation to human rights (municipal departments and related services such as police, schools, grassroots organisations, etc.);
- Develop a culture of rights within municipal administrations and local councils;
- Broaden cities' perspective and ideas by linking cities to EU/international initiatives (e.g. the EU Urban Agenda or the global Sustainable Developments Goals (SDGs);
- Strengthen the position of cities in the national context;
- Learn from the exchange of practice and know-how between peers;
- Benefit from recognised human rights methods such as the human rights-based approach.

⁴ Countries include: Austria (Vienna, Graz, and Salzburg), the Netherlands (Utrecht, Middelburg), Germany (Nuremberg), United Kingdom (York), Spain (Barcelona) and Sweden (Lund).

⁵ This process in Sweden, with the engagement of local actors, resulted in the production of a guide on how to become a human rights city in Sweden, a platform for networking and capacity building activities to support interested Swedish cities to become a human rights city.

Despite the benefits listed here, participants recommended more research and funding, with the support of founders, foundations and academia, to increase the understanding of what it means to be a human rights city. It was also suggested to explore cooperation with the Global Campus for human rights and its networks of 200 universities (for instance through a subnetwork on human rights cities within the Global Campus); and more broadly to foster cooperation and exchange of information between actors at all levels (international and European/EU) to build on specific competences, identify cooperation activities and create synergies. It is important to share information between regional initiatives on accreditation/label, with global ones, such as that of the United Nations, to ensure coherence.

The contribution of the EU and FRA

Participants made suggestions concerning the possible contribution of the EU to strengthening the human rights cities' initiative. These included:

- Supporting the transferability of the 'Swedish model' involving associations of municipalities;
- Promoting and building capacities of cities on human rights standards, including the EU Charter of fundamental rights;
- Supporting the set-up of a human rights training programme for local governments;
- Highlighting the importance for Member States to engage their local governments and build their capacities in fundamental rights, and encouraging Member States to involve local actors in national processes such as human rights action plans.

FRA indicated its intention to support the development of human rights cities by:

- Preparing a framework of commitments for EU human rights cities;
- Exploring a model of accreditation and/or label for human rights cities. This process will be developed in close cooperation with relevant actors. Additional actors will be invited to build on their practice and expertise (e.g. GANHRI, UNICEF etc.);
- Continuing to promote the contribution of human rights cities to fundamental rights in the EU. For instance, FRA will convey its **third Fundamental Rights Forum (22–23 April 2021)** bringing together around 600 human rights experts from international and European levels in Vienna. The event will be organised in close cooperation with the City of Vienna.
- Cooperating with all relevant actors, at local level such as the United Cities and Local Governments, the Human Rights Cities Network, and institutional partners such as the United Nations Human Rights Office (OHCHR) and its European Office, the Council of Europe, and EU Institutions such as the Committee of the Regions and the European Economic and Social Committee to ensure synergies.
- Supporting the exchange of information by setting-up a mailing list. A review will be done after a few months to see whether useful.

Key follow up actions

- FRA will circulate a draft of framework of commitments in March 2020 for feedback.
- FRA will schedule a first online meeting on designing an accreditation/label model (20 January 2020 (14.30–16.30) or 21 January 2020 (10.00–12.00 or 14.30–16.30). Interested participants are invited to contact Geraldine.Guille@fra.europa.eu. *This meeting took place on 21 January.*
- FRA will facilitate contacts between the EEA/Norway grants and Swedish actors for possible expanding the 'model' to other countries.
- Participants interested in joining the mailing list shall inform Geraldine.Guille@fra.europa.eu by 15 January. *Thanks to those who responded.*

Annex: agenda of the expert meeting on human rights cities, 27–28 November 2019

AGENDA

Wednesday 27 November 2019

19.00 – 21.00 INTRODUCTORY DINNER

*Restaurant Leopold Hotel, Room France, Rue du Luxembourg 35, 1050
Brussels, Belgium (+32 2 546 18 16), <https://www.brasserie-leopold.be/en/>*

Thursday 28 November 2019

08.30 – 09.00 REGISTRATION AND WELCOME COFFEE

*European Economic and Social Committee (EESC), Treves building, Rue de
Trèves 74, B-1000 Brussels (Room: TRE7701, 7th floor)*

09.00 – 09.10 WELCOMING REMARKS

Conny Reuter, Co-Chair of Liaison Group at the EESC

09.10 – 09.30 OBJECTIVES OF THE MEETING AND INTRODUCTION TO THE AGENDA

Jonas Grimheden, FRA, Chair of the meeting

Geraldine Guille, FRA

Background information Expert meeting 28 November 2019.pdf

09.30 – 10.00 HUMAN RIGHTS CITIES: THEORETICAL AND PRACTICAL OVERVIEW

*Birgit Van Hout, Regional Representative for Europe, Office of the
United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR)*

10.00 – 11.30 WHAT COULD A FRAMEWORK OF COMMITMENTS FOR EUROPEAN HUMAN RIGHTS CITIES ENTAIL?

Working groups

Group 1: Human Rights Experts discussion

- What are key fundamental rights issues which the human rights city initiative can contribute to?
- What key fundamental rights principles and core rights are most relevant to address these issues?
- Which human rights instruments should be considered for the framework of commitments? What can the contribution of EU legal instruments such as the Charter of Fundamental Rights be?

Group 2: Cities practitioners' discussion

- What are key fundamental rights issues which the human rights city initiative can contribute to?
- What are successful way(s) of linking local governments' work to fundamental rights and how can this impact the framework of commitments?
- Which promising initiatives, tools or activities from human rights cities can contribute to address key fundamental rights issues identified, hence should be included in the framework of commitments. Are there specific links to the European Union that could be highlighted?

11.30– 12.30 REPORTING BACK INCL. Q&A

12.30 – 13.50 LUNCH

13.50– 14.15 OUTLINING A FRAMEWORK OF COMMITMENTS

- What are key components of the framework of commitments emerging from the discussions?
- What are key issues to explore further?
- How to move forward?

14.15– 14.40 THE EESC’S GROUP ON FUNDAMENTAL RIGHTS AND THE RULE OF LAW

José Antonio Moreno Díaz, President of the EESC Group on Fundamental rights and the Rule of Law (FRRL)

The EESC FRRL Group is a forum for European civil society organisations on fundamental rights, democracy and rule of law in the Member States. The session aims to inform on the work of the Group and key findings on local authorities and civil society.

14.40 – 15.30 FRAMEWORK OF COMMITMENTS AND STAKEHOLDER CONSULTATION

Frederique Hanotier, Human Rights Cities Network (moderator)

- Who should be consulted in developing the framework of commitments?
- How to effectively consult with these stakeholders?
- What are upcoming opportunities for consultation in 2020?

15.30-15.50 Coffee break

15.50 – 16.50 STRENGTHENING HUMAN RIGHTS CITIES THROUGH RECOGNITION OF EFFORTS AND PEER LEARNING

Introduction and context (10 min)

- Objective of the session, *Geraldine Guille, FRA*
- ‘10>100>1000 Human Rights Cities’, *Hans Sakkers, Utrecht*

Group discussion (35 min)

- **Group 1: Recognition of efforts and accreditation process for human rights cities**
Moderator: Jonas Grimheden, FRA
- **Group 2: Connecting and supporting peer learning between cities**
Moderator: Shams Asadi, Vienna

16.50-17.10 CONCLUDING REMARKS AND KEY FOLLOW UP