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## Concept Note

World Human Rights Cities Forum 2019

### Local Governments and Human Rights: Reimagining Human Rights Cities

#### Background and Overview of the Forum

1. The World Human Rights Cities Forum (Forum or WHRCF hereafter) is held as an annual event in Gwangju, South Korea to realize the vision of becoming a human rights city as articulated by the [Gwangju Declaration on Human Rights City](#) adopted at the first WHRCF in May 2011. The Forum has become a gathering place to share the spirit of justice and community, the same values under which the citizens of Gwangju resisted against the ruthless oppression of the then military regime in May 1980.
2. Within the WHRCF, a tradition that started in 2011, participants exchange experiences on challenges and achieved successes on human rights especially at local level while expanding their own scope of understanding. Now, the Forum has become a major human rights event and distinctive platform for sharing and networking amongst human rights cities, human rights organizations, activists, and miscellaneous stakeholders in the area of human rights.
3. The 2018 Forum served as an important international venue to look back on the achievements of the last 70 years since the formation of the Universal Declaration of the Human Rights and was done so in the presence of more than 1,800 participants and 164 presenters from 57 cities in 44 countries throughout 38 unique sessions. The 2018 Forum emphasized the value of human rights solidarity and the importance of professionalism of the human rights movement with the help of the National Human Rights Commission of Korea, UN OHCHR, and the Raoul Wallenberg Institute among others.

4. The collaboration of the WHRCF and the international human rights community contributed to the 2015 report on the 'Role of Local Government in the Promotion and Protection of Human Rights' by the UN Human Rights Advisory Council (A/HRC/30/49), which specifies the responsibilities of both local and central governments as protectors of human rights. In particular, the Human Rights Council Advisory Committee sets out to emphasize the fact that the local governments along with the central governments need to play a key role in enhancing and protecting human rights of citizens. We will continue to work fastidiously to contribute to the development and enforcement of the UN Human Rights Council guidelines by accordingly incorporating the results of our discussions.

5. The 2019 Forum will be held in the Kimdaejung Convention Center from September 30 to October 3. The Forum will consist of roughly 40 sessions in eight separate areas designed to handle a diverse range of human rights issues with the backdrop of 2,000 participants from around the world including local government officials, local council representatives, UN human rights experts, UCLG members, NGO activists, scholars, and other various stakeholders representing the likes of youth, women, and migrants.

## Themes in the International Context

1. The 2019 Forum will delve into the issue surrounding its theme: "Local Governments and Human Rights: Reimagining the Human Rights Cities". Since its inception in 2011, each version of the Forum has emphasized the role of local governments in the protection and promotion of human rights of citizens at the local level. The 2011 Forum adopted the "Gwangju Declaration on Human Rights Cities" upon which participating cities defined a human rights city as a local community where human rights is given the highest value in the realm of city governance. The participants also promised to lead the effort to establish a human rights city in each of the participating cities.

2. The UN Human Rights Council accepted the agenda of '[Local Governments and Human Rights](#)' and adopted [resolution 39/7](#), requesting the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights to prepare the Local Governments and Human Rights report before the 42nd session. The 9th WHRCF will among other aims feed into this UN process re-examining the concept of 'Local Governments and Human Rights' and its practical achievement. A human rights city considers 'human rights' as the most important aspect of the city government. In this way, the theme, 'Local

Governments and Human Rights: Reimagining the Human Rights Cities', will help us find a new role and realistic approach for local governments to better search for and find practical solutions to human rights issues as they move forward towards becoming human rights cities.

3. The WHRCF has continued building a practical human rights system to protect and promote human rights in all areas comprising both urban and rural areas. Every corner of the world seems to occupy a space where people live. Each edition of the Forum has accepted the importance of human rights governance not only by local governments but also by various actors for the purpose of promoting human rights at a local level. While reimagining a human rights city, all main actors will re-affirm not only their responsibilities but the importance of global partnership in strengthening each of the human rights cities. Consequently, we will firmly accept transformation to a human rights city as the prime goal of the human rights movement at the local level.

4. The Forum helped the paradigm shift in recognizing the significance of the local level as the place where many problems of human rights arise but also where the solutions to those problems begin. The reality of the forefront of human rights is not favorable: The numerous conflicts between the different regions are threatening the lives and safety of people. Frequent occurrences of terrorism and violence have been threatening the basis of people's lives. Some national and local governments are not functioning properly to protect basic rights of their people such as education, health, housing, labor, and environment. The spread of hatred and discrimination against marginalized groups is witnessed across all continents. Such a daunting reality is an urgent reason to reimagine a human rights city so as to respond to these circumstances.

## **Purpose and Objectives**

1. The theme of Local Governments and Human Rights: Reimagining Human Rights Cities was established for the purpose of examining the challenges to human rights and looking for a positive and responsible role for local governments to find solutions to them. Re-defining a human rights city of the 2011 Gwangju Declaration on a Human Rights City in a new and modern context will help solidify the foundation of our knowledge and policies toward human rights cities. Reimagining human rights cities in 2019 will make it possible to have an objective reflection on the previous paths towards establishing human rights cities that we had once walked, as well as to establish a detailed plan for future human rights cities.

2. A human rights city is a human-rights-based local level community and it also represents a process of establishing political and social solidarity among citizens on a local level. The 2019 Forum seeks to answer the following three questions in order to realize the value of human rights, communities, and solidarity in an integrated manner. First, how can we strengthen an effective and practical human rights protection system at the local level? Second, how can we re-organize human rights issues and practices so as to improve the quality of life of local people? Third, how can we establish multi-layered human rights solidarity on a global level? Asking and answering these questions will help redesign human rights systems and mechanisms of which can substantially enhance the individual human rights of citizens and additionally find methods to provide human rights and a sense of solidarity that international organizations, local governments, NGOs, and citizens can all practice together.

3. The WHRCF has served as the base for the Human Rights Cities Network in Asian Region first while helping expand the network and in facilitating collaboration with international organizations and cities in Europe. The 2019 Forum will work together with human rights cities as well as human rights institutions such as UN OHCHR, UCLG-CISDP, and RWI amongst others in order to examine human rights issues at a local level. It will also share the issues and experiences of local governments for the purpose of finding measures and solutions to the outstanding issues.

4. The Forum will cover other relevant human rights topics such as Right to the City, Inclusive City, New Urban Agenda, SDGs, human rights consequences of climate change at local level and strategies against hatred and discrimination in order to enhance the sustainability of the human rights cities through diverse policy development. Such efforts will help integrate human rights policies into the urban planning of local governments, which will in turn help further develop and find strategies for the Gwangju Human Rights Agenda 2030, created during the 2018 Forum.

5. The 2019 Forum will provide a fertile ground to actively share and communicate in diverse areas, to produce creative and innovative human rights policies, and practical discourse. It will also promote the imagination of human rights cities through exchanges with NGOs, networking with activists and experts, discussion with young people, exchanges between local government officials, and human rights field tours.

## **Agenda and Program Structure**

1. The 2019 Forum will have more than 40 sessions and events including plenary sessions, which will handle human rights city policies and practical implementation with the participation of UN OHCHR, UCLG-CISDP, and local governments officials, while reviewing 'the Local Governments and Human Rights Reports' to reimagine the future of human rights cities. The forum will create its own declaration and adopt it based on the presentations and discussions of the participants.
2. Thematic sessions will be comprised of sub-sessions on women, the elderly, the disabled, immigrants/refugees, social economy, the youth and children, environment, climate change and state-sponsored violence, all of which deal with human rights issues and ways to promote human rights around disadvantaged groups and major human rights area. The thematic sessions, most of which are organized by civil society organizations in Gwangju, will address the human rights issues linked directly to the citizens life while reimaging the systems and procedures of human rights cities with the purpose of practical enhancement of human rights of residents.
3. Network workshops are organized by the City of Gwangju, UCLG-CISDP, and the National Human Rights Commission of the Republic of Korea to facilitate exchange and cooperation among human rights actors. The workshops include the Council of Local Governments Human Rights Commissions, the UCLG-CISDP Annual Meeting, the Network of Korean Human Rights Activists, and the Human Rights Local Government Officials Workshop. All the sessions will serve as an opportunity to expand and strengthen the network of human rights cities and organizations that the Forum is promoting.
4. A Special Session has been organized to design the future of a sustainable human rights city by identifying both local and global issues and policy trends. It will explore the possibility of connecting and integrating diverse policies such as SDGs, Right to the City, and measures on hate and discrimination. The Gwangju Human Rights City 2030 Workshop is organized as a venue for planning the future of human rights cities by sharing research results, experiences, and long-term visions of collaborating organizations and experts.
5. There will be a wide range of other sessions available for those who are interested in promoting human rights both on local and global levels. For example, two training sessions will be held: a course on Local Government and Human Rights and a course on the Right to the City. Furthermore,

two research paper sessions will be conducted: one for senior researchers and experienced human rights activists and another for young researchers and activists. There will also be a human rights discussion group for both university and high school students. All participants will be invited to join the tour to the Gwangju Design Biennale 2019 and the May 18 Democratization Movement sites including the May 18th National Cemetery. Other opportunities will be provided to the participants such as screenings of human rights films and tours to human rights sites.

## Hosts, Organizers, and Sponsors

1. The 2019 Forum is co-hosted by the Gwangju Metropolitan City, the National Human Rights Commission of Korea, Gwangju Metropolitan Office of Education and the Korea International Cooperation Agency (KOICA). The forum is co-organized by the Gwangju International Center (GIC) and UCLG Committee on Human Rights (UCLG-CISDP). This forum is sponsored by the following Korean government departments and international organizations: The Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Justice, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Korean National Commission for UNESCO, and the Asia-Pacific Center of Education for International Understanding, and the Korea Tourism Organization.

2. More 20 local organizations are actively participating in the 2019 Forum by organizing various events in addition to thematic sessions. The Forum is also a product of close collaboration with the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (UN OHCHR), human rights institutions such as the Raoul Wallenberg Institute, city networks such as the UCLG-ASPAC, and international civil society organizations such as International NGO Forum on Indonesian Development (INFID), Habitat International Coalition (HIC), and the Polis Institute.

### Hosts



### Organizers

