

City-Based Movements Seek to Strengthen Local Human Rights Implementation

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The following is a brief I prepared as part of my work on the National Steering Committee of the US Human Rights Network's [National Human Rights Cities Alliance](#). We were invited to send a delegate to the 7th World Forum of Human Rights Cities in Gwangju, Korea, and we were asked in particular to discuss lessons and challenges related to local implementation of international human rights standards. The analysis and links below should be helpful to human rights scholars and practitioners working on this critical challenge of our day.

U.S. Context

The situation in the U.S. for national level human rights promotion is currently dire. Amid its more public actions and statements that are openly hostile to human rights, the Trump administration recently removed the humanrights.gov website, and State department staff working on human rights are leaving the agency

At the same time, since the Trump election we're seeing more local mobilization and popular recognition of the importance of local government/ local mobilization for change.¹

Importance of local organization and mobilization for human rights implementation

The second national gathering of human rights cities in Washington DC in May of 2016 included a panel where U.S. government officials shared perspectives on their work on local and state human rights implementation. (See summary report, [Panel 4: Federal Government Perspectives](#)). These officials working under the Obama administration indicated that there is little systematic effort in the U.S. federal government to push states and local governments to implement or to even help them learn about international human rights obligations. Few resources are provided, and staffing has been limited, even within a more favorable administration. Our conversations made it clear that organized local constituencies can be a great asset to help advance the work of translating international human rights obligations into local contexts.² However, to date few local

¹ See, for instance, Benjamin Barber, "Can Cities Counter the Power of President-Elect Donald Trump?" *The Nation*, November 14, 2016; Helena Norberg-Hodge and Rupert Read, "[After Brexit and Trump: don't Demonise; Localise!](#)" *The Ecologist*, November 28, 2016; "[De Blasio and Big City Mayors Try Pooling Their Power Against Trump](#)," *New York Times* December 29, 2016; Josh Hoxie, "[Reducing Inequality in the Trump Era](#)," *Otherwords*, December 29, 2016; Richard Heinberg, "[Localism in the Age of Trump](#)," *Commondreams.org*, December 8, 2016; Bruce Katz, "[Why cities and metros must lead in Trump's America](#)," Brookings Institution, November 21, 2016; Heather Gerken et al. "[All Resistance Is Local': A Plan of Progressive Action for the Trump Years](#)" *The Nation*. November 29, 2016. [The New Municipal Movements](#), Eleanor Finley, *Roar* (#6). [Remunicipalisation](#), Transnational Institute.

² The 2015 Report of the UN Human Rights Council to the UN General Assembly makes a similar point and makes a case for promoting more resources and support for the development of Human Rights Cities: "[The Role of local government in the promotion and protection of human rights](#)."

communities are organized to effectively perform this role. This is something our National Human Rights City Alliance hopes to address.

Emerging Guides to Local Human Rights Implementation

In carrying out this work, we're pleased to see that a number of groups have been producing some helpful resources to help guide local implementation work, including:

- [Human Rights at the Local and Regional Level: A Platform for Policy and Operational Development](#) Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions in collaboration with the [Raoul Wallenberg Institute of Human Rights and Humanitarian Law](#)
- [Focusing on Human Rights on the Local and Regional Level](#), a collection of essays addressing human rights awareness and planning, as well as regional developments in Bosnia, Austria, Sweden and elsewhere, European Training Center in Graz, Austria (a Human Rights City)
- Columbia Law School: [State and Local Human Rights Agencies: Recommendations for Advancing Opportunity and Equality through an International Human Rights Framework](#).

Other Practices in the US Human Rights Movement to Implement Human Rights

Connecting the U.S. Public with International Human Rights Machinery. The US Human Rights Network is a leading national human rights advocacy that connects local activist groups with international human rights machinery. Its work to compile shadow reports for international reviews of [US compliance with international treaties like the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination](#) and in the [Universal Periodic Review](#) is critical to bringing U.S. civil society into the UN human rights processes. Also, USHRN helps coordinate U.S. civil society participation in visits by UN Expert Working Groups and Special Rapporteurs, including the recent [Working Group on People of African Descent](#).

Organizers in Chicago have successfully worked to advance the claims of the Movement for Black Lives by appealing to U.S. obligations under the International Convention Against Torture to help settle the case against Chicago police commander John Burge, who was engaged in the [systematic torture of detainees](#) over several decades. Black People Against Torture and the National Conference of Black Lawyers [submitted their claim to the Committee Against Torture](#) fifth periodic review in Geneva in 2014.

A need for education and consciousness-raising: From this work we note that the U.S. population in general lacks human rights education & consciousness. Few U.S. residents have read the Universal Declaration of Human Rights as part of their formal schooling, for instance. And the mainstream media devotes little to no attention to international human rights procedures that relate to U.S. human rights obligations. Thus, there is little resonance of human rights language in popular debates.

Efforts by human rights advocates to engage people in the work of monitoring local government compliance with international treaty obligations have proved an effective tool for raising awareness of human rights and building a stronger human rights movement while also strengthening local compliance.

Related to this work connecting local movements with international human rights processes is the National U.S. Human Rights City Alliance's **working group on local implementation of human rights law**. Among other planned activities, this working group has been developing plans to host monthly webcasts/tele-town halls on the Universal Periodic Review process and other international instruments that pertain to U.S. policy and local human rights implementation. The goal of the working group is to help decentralize thinking about human rights law and to mobilize local partners in the work to realize human rights in local communities.

Bottom-up Treaty Ratification: [US Cities for CEDAW](#)

Given the U.S. long-term failure to ratify the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, human rights advocates around the country are building a national campaign to ratify the treaty from the ground up. They are working to craft and pass local ordinances to implement all or parts of the CEDAW, and so far seven cities have formally adopted such legislation. CEDAW cities activists are experimenting with models for local implementation and mainstreaming of a gendered analysis into policy planning and assessment. Human rights activists have been critical to the work of passing legislation and working with local entities to design effective strategies for implementation.

- [Gender Equity Through Human Rights: Local Efforts to Advance the Status of Women and Girls in the United States](#) (Columbia Law School January 2017 study)

Cultural Work: The National Human Rights City Alliance is a new formation (emerging in May 2016), and we have established a working group to advance national Human Rights Days of Action on key dates such as International Human Rights Day (December 10), Indigenous Peoples Day (October 12), and the International Day of Remembrance of Victims of Slavery and the Transatlantic Slave Trade (March 25), among other days that offer opportunities for human rights consciousness raising. In addition, they are helping raise public consciousness of the UN International Decade on People of African Descent. The Working Group plans to develop resources to support local action on these days and to encourage more media attention and communication about the ideas they raise.

Right to Housing- [National Law Center on Homelessness & Poverty](#)—Helped incorporate international legal standards into regulations that impact municipalities' applications for federal housing assistance.

Human rights scholars can help play a role in helping advance thinking and knowledge in this area of human rights implementation. The [National Human Rights Cities Alliance](#) is working to develop models to share across local contexts to help local human rights defenders learn from each other as they strengthen human rights in our country and world. If you're interested in learning more about this effort you can sign up for the national human rights cities email list at: <http://www.ushrnetwork.org/our-work/project/national-human-rights-cities-alliance>