

THE HUMAN RIGHTS PLATFORM



UN HABITAT
FOR A BETTER URBAN FUTURE

RAOUL
WALLENBERG
INSTITUTE
OF HUMAN RIGHTS AND HUMANITARIAN LAW

2021 Annual Conference

CONCEPT NOTE THEMATIC SESSION 3

Cities as critical actors in the national and international human rights systems

Maison de la Paix (Pétale 5) and online event (Zoom),
Tuesday 12 October 2021, 14:00 – 15:30 (CET)

A project of the: **GENEVA ACADEMY**
Académie de droit international
humanitaire et de droits humains
Academy of International
Humanitarian Law and Human Rights

The Geneva Academy, a Joint Centre of



TOPIC

When talking about National Human Rights Systems, one rarely thinks about cities or local authorities as domestic actors who have a key role in the implementation of international human rights law. Yet, they clearly do address human rights concerns because of their key role in public service delivery and of their proximity to their residents.

The human rights engagement of cities is not new. It dates back to the late 1990s, when several cities started to explicitly refer to international human rights law in their municipal policies, eventually even calling themselves “human rights cities”. Today, many cities have followed the trend and have committed to human rights. What lessons can be drawn from these experiences at national level? To what extent have these cities relied on international human rights law as a framework to guide their urban policies? How have they cooperated with other national human rights actors, in particular State institutions?

At the international level, cities or local authorities have to date remained at a certain distance from the UN human rights system, which is firmly based on the premise of State sovereignty. Several non-State actors, such as NGOs, NHRIs, academia, have however made their way into the system and are now major contributors to its functioning. Given the role of cities in the implementation of human rights at local level, better including them in the international system certainly brings added value. It is not about the dilution of States’ primary responsibility to respect, protect and fulfil human rights on their territory. Rather, it is about recognizing that local authorities have a complementary role to play and shared responsibilities when it comes to making human rights real on the ground. So, how can cities strengthen their links with the international human rights system? And how can international human rights debates and decisions better trickle down to the local level?

Key questions to be addressed during the event:

- What lessons can be drawn from cities which have committed to human rights, in terms of concrete added value for urban dwellers (enhanced public services, inclusive municipal governance, authorities’ accountability, etc.)?
- What connections have human rights cities developed with the international human rights framework and system?
- To what extent do human rights cities cooperate with national actors, incl. the State’s institutions on human rights issues?
- How can the international human rights system better integrate local authorities? Pros and cons and for what impact on the ground?

OPENING REMARKS

- **Sami Kanaan**, Vice-Mayor of Geneva (Switzerland), President of the Geneva Cities Hub
- Video message from the **Permanent Mission of the Republic of Korea**

PANELISTS

- **Silvana Pissano**, Mayor of Municipio B, Montevideo (Uruguay)
- **Stephen Pittam**, Chair, York Human Rights City Network (UK)
- **Jackie Smith**, Co-coordinator, Pittsburgh Human Rights City Alliance and Professor of Sociology, University of Pittsburgh (USA)
- **Leilani Farha**, former Special Rapporteur on the Right to Adequate Housing (2014 – 2020) and Global Director, The Shift
- **Barbara Oomen**, Board Member, Human Rights Cities Network

CO-MODERATORS

- **Virginia Bras Gomes**, Senior Social Policy Adviser and Former Chair of the UN CESCR and GHRP Advisory Board Member
- **Anh Thu Duong**, Co-Director, Geneva Cities Hub

PARTNERS

[Geneva Cities Hub](#), [Human Rights Cities Network](#), [UN Habitat](#), [Raoul Wallenberg Institute of Human Rights and Humanitarian Law](#)