



## HUMAN RIGHTS CITIES NETWORK WEBINARS

### The Human Rights Cities & COVID 19

#### The way forward

#### Participants

- **Middelburg**, Harald Bergman, Mayor of Middelburg, Middelburg City Council
- **Barcelona**, Aida Guillén Lanzarote, Director, Directorate of Citizen Rights and Diversity Services - Barcelona City Council
- **Utrecht**, Hans Sakker, Head of Department for European and International Affairs, Utrecht City Council
- **Lund**, Ulrika Dagård Social strategist social sustainability focus human rights Department of Sustainable Growth Municipal office, Lund City Council
- **York** Stephen Pittan, Chair of the York Human Rights Cities Network
- **Graz**, Wanda Tiefenbacher, Researcher and PR officer, European Training and Research Center for Human Rights and Democracy (ETC Graz)
- **Human Rights Cities Network (HRCN)**, Frédérique Hanotier, Graham Taylor, Nafisa Hasanova, and Léah Shchreiber

#### Background

The Human Rights Cities Network (HRCN) held two webinars to initiate a new dynamic with the cities and to establish regular contacts with the participants. More specifically, the two webinars aim to discuss on how being a human rights city helped to address the Covid19 crisis, to share good practices and to better understand the needs of the participants. Regular contacts would help to better support established and potential human rights cities in their initiatives.

Both webinars were informative and constructive. If the primary objective was to reconnect with participants within the Covid19 context, the discussion revealed also the importance of identifying the role and the added value of the HRCN.

#### Main Takeaways

Although the decisions and the steering of Covid19 measures were taking place at the national level, the responsibility for their implementation were endorsed at the city level by local authorities (mayors, police, municipality). If human rights were not systematically used as a framework in the Covid19 response, all participating cities implemented specific policies and initiatives in line with human rights standards. The crisis not only brings concrete aspects of human rights into people's lives, but also highlights the need of fundamental values in the way the "post Covid19 crisis" is managed by cities in Europe.



Learning experiences from the discussions:

### ***Health and Democracy***

Beyond making human rights a reality to people's daily lives, the Covid19 crisis also forces cities to make the link between human rights and public health, between democracy and health. The pandemic revealed that cities are the main implementors when it comes to applying new public health related measures and that they need the support and understanding of their inhabitants.

In York, an initiative was taken to ensure that Covid19 related legislation is implemented in a non-discriminatory fashion through the Parliament Committee with the scrutiny of the local Council. Human Rights briefings and online surveys were used by the city's network to activate the NGOs' community to find out what was happening on the ground. Interviews were conducted concerning specific categories, such as housing, youth, individuals suffering from mental health or impairment, as well as vulnerable segments of the population, like immigrants and asylum seekers. In Barcelona, undocumented migrants received a rent to access decent housing. Concerns associated with socio-economic rights as well as civic and political rights (freedom of association, freedom of movement) increased the challenges in implementing COVID-19 related safety regulations. In several cities, the impact of confining the public to their homes during the pandemic has generated tension between police and residents, and worsened social issues, such as domestic violence or mental health.

### ***Collaboration: City and civil society***

Approaches to the pandemic have naturally been different in each city. One factor that led to the differences in approaches has to do with the cities where civil society organisations are the driver of the human rights cities' movement rather than the city administration itself. In the cases of Graz or York, these organisations have filled in the gaps where the cities have struggle. As for example in Graz, the university conducted interviews with professors on various aspects of COVID and shared this broadly. The crisis also makes the public question exactly what they should expect from their city. What should the city be doing and what should the residents be doing themselves? A clear answer to this question can help build better resilience when the next crisis comes. It is important that all segments of the society are considered in formulating a sustainable response.

### ***Enabling environment***

The environment where people can tend to their own needs is very important. An advisory board (Graz) or a steering committee (York) which bring together all segments of the society are better able to identify potential problems and find solutions. Cities generally anticipate negative effects of social and political occurrences prior to the central state. Municipalities are better placed to respond to the immediate needs of the public by creating links with the existing structures, such as student unions, civil society groups, schools and local businesses. Middelburg built trust with its population by adopting a clear line of communication. Collaboration with academia and civil society also allows cities to better monitor social issues. In Lund the city's crisis departments have launched voluntary services allowing for members of the society to provide to the vulnerable people.



### ***How does being a Human Rights City impact on COVID19 crisis management?***

Does being a human-rights driven city mean that the city is better equipped to deal with crisis? Zooming at current pandemic, even if in most cities the human rights based approach is not followed explicitly in the COVID 19 reactions, there seems to be a fundamental *awareness* of human rights issues that has impacted the type and way in which activities have been conducted and partnerships have been forged on a city level. However, there is no directly observable causality between a human rights city and good COVID 19 reactions yet. However, it is noticeable that dealing with human rights on a regular basis has left a promising trace: the fact that the human rights-based approach has indeed taken root *implicitly*. Transparency and trust are best practices that are a part of this process, which contributes to an enabling environment, as is written and an openness to involve other players from society in the crisis management. De-politicising human rights helps provide tangible results in terms of activities and projects that have an impact on peoples' lives. As the pandemic is still ongoing it might be too soon to say definitively how being a human rights city may impact the final outcome.

### ***Role and added value of the network***

All participants are interested in sharing experiences concerning different or new models and to hear others' perspectives. There was a diversity of interest, in general expanding the knowledge on common conception of human rights cities in Europe and the need to be support with technical expertise was noted as the value added of the network. There is space to support cities who want to start and/or to launch human rights initiatives. Most participants adhere to the simple formalisation process to be part of the network; while some participants value the advocacy work at European level others value more the support of UN institutions.

### **The way forward**

Building up on the interest of the participants, the idea is to establish a forum of exchange between the participating cities, through regular webinars on specific thematic. Each session will include guest speaker(s) and respondent(s) sharing their practical experiences from different perspectives. The outcome will reflect on what it means concretely to entrench human rights at a local level and will show cases of inspiring human models of urban management in the current context. Webinars could also provide opportunities to reinforce creative alliances among cities and involve more interested partners. Ideally, the outcome will contribute to further advance the Fundamental Rights Agency Framework of Commitments through practices.

Together, we would like to initiate an inter-urban space to exchange on human rights cities models. The forum could also be further expanded with new participants from other cities in Europe.

**The HRCN Team**

Frédérique Hanotier, *Director*