



Call for Papers

Urban politics of human rights

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Introduction

In recent years, attention for the emerging relationship between cities and global human rights norms has grown rapidly. Local governments profile themselves at the global stage as important actors when it comes to formulating and realizing human rights, they are part of city networks that centre around human rights and uphold direct relations with international organizations. Concurrently, human rights norms are invoked, contested and negotiated on the ground, in urban affairs. Local governments, both in the Global North and South, explicitly (or implicitly) base their policies on human rights standards. They provide local interpretations and modifications when they apply these global norms in their cities, and propose specific urban human rights to be applicable in their localities, such as a right to public transport or a right to tranquillity. Civil society actors call on local governments when human rights norms are believed to be violated by municipal policies, they invoke human rights for moral guidance in public and/or policy discussions and use them as a basis for strategic public interest litigation. As such, one can speak of a two-way interaction between the urban and the notion of human rights. Human rights influence, and become relevant, for urban life, while the dynamics of the city urbanize human rights.

These activities hold great potential for a better realisation of human rights, as well as for creating safe, resilient and just cities, in accordance with the aspirations of SDG11. The urban level is often presented as the ideal level for realizing human rights. Local governments, provided that they are democratically elected, are assumed to operate in rather close interaction with their residents. Therefore, local governments are perceived to be able to deliver context-specific

understandings of human rights and to best balance human rights and other interests in the urban space. Furthermore, local governments are seen as pragmatic and able to undertake swift action if needed, contrary to their national counterparts. Yet, urban actors may mobilize human rights as an instrument for good and ill, and there are always politics involved, which calls for scrutiny. While we subscribe to the potential of human rights at the urban level, we are also interested to learn about the *limits of the urban mobilization of human rights*.

When actors mobilize the norms of human rights, they inevitably make choices on why and how to do so. A local government may make different choices than a human rights NGO or a city-network, but what happens behind the scenes, and how can we assess how these choices are made? Human rights norms do not subscribe a clear course of action, they are indeterminate and can be made to fit a range of interests. Therefore, the choices actors make, with regard to human rights mobilization, reflect urban and national political dynamics, prioritisations based on the needs of the locality, financial means, constitutional arrangements, moral points of departure, access to expertise, material differences, different positions within the global economy, and possibly even more. With this volume we strive to gain insight into these politics: why and how do urban actors mobilize human rights? Are human rights mobilized as non-partisan guidance or as a discourse of adversarial rights-claiming, and what considerations lie behind such decision? How do politics, power dynamics and administrative considerations play a role behind the scenes when urban actors mobilize human rights norms?

A second line of enquiry offers some reflection on the *urban impact of human rights*. If human rights are mobilized by urban actors, and if the process of mobilization is intrinsically political, do urban politics support or compromise the promise of human rights? To what extent is the impact influenced by the choices urban actors make? We aim to move beyond describing the practices of cities on the terrain of human rights, and provide a critical examination on how we could understand and assess these activities. Hence, this second line of enquiry aims to explore in what way the urban mobilization of human rights is reshaping the city. For what urban cause have human rights been mobilized and how impactful was such mobilization? Are there discernible factors that contribute to the success or failure of human rights mobilizations? Do human rights make a tangible difference in the urban public space, social relations and urban governance?

To grasp these two sets of questions, approaches from different disciplines are essential, as well as inter- and multidisciplinary approaches. Where the legal scholar might strive to understand how successful an incorporation of human rights in local legislation is, the human geographer and urban planner might question how human rights contribute to (urban)

redistribution or the inclusion and/or exclusion of certain resident groups. The constitutional law scholar might evaluate how (urban) human rights are claimed domestically by individuals, civil society or local governments and what this means for the constitutional competences of the local government, while the historian might explore the reasons behind a city's choice of a particular human rights discourse or the origins of the a city's position within a particular (human rights focused) city network.

The scope of this Call for Papers is focused on the urban rather than rural or suburban contexts or regional governments. The reasoning behind this is to understand the two-way interaction between the relevance of human rights for the city and the contributions of the urban for human rights. We are interested in cities of various sizes around the world and therewith in actors - such as local governments, city networks, private actors and civil society organizations - operating in different urban contexts. The city is sometimes misrepresented as a unitary actor, but the distinct differences between the locally operating actors, as well as their interactions, relations, and the role of different power distributions play an important role in the mobilization and impact of human rights. In urban reality, the lines drawn by human rights lawyers between human rights duty bearers and rights holders, and between state and civil society, are blurry. Individuals, for instance, often move from working for an NGO to working for the local government, or in politics, and back. In addition, the role of other (semi-public and private) actors in mobilizing as well as realizing rights often goes unrecognized. This whilst housing corporations, school associations, hospitals and private employers can often play a key role in local service provision. Making visible these dynamics, contradictions and ambiguities helps to understand the urban potential and the limits of human rights. While in practice the activities of different actors overlap and intersect, scrutinising them closely will allow for an opportunity to distil how the interpretative approaches and political efforts of actors diverge.

Timeline

All interested contributors are invited to submit their abstracts of 500 – 1000 words to uphr@asser.nl before the **1st of April, 2020**.

We will then inform the authors of the selected proposals by early May, 2020.

Full drafts of 6000-8000 words will be expected by the 1st of October, 2020.

An authors' seminar is foreseen to take place in Fall 2020, in which a first draft of the chapters will be presented and discussed.