

Human Rights Cities – A Framework for Localizing Human Rights

Name and site of research of the director of the project

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Abstract

The growing relevance of localization is a relatively recent phenomenon in international human rights law. Local authorities may not only have an obligation to abide by human rights but also themselves contribute to shaping human rights in interaction with local inhabitants. A prominent example of this local engagement with human rights is the establishment of so-called Human Rights Cities.

Turku has taken an active approach towards human rights. It has committed to achieving SDGs, safeguarding children and other vulnerable groups and promoting and fulfilling a wide set of human rights. There is, however, not yet a tool to address all these issues in a coherent manner. This is the key problem the research sets out to address. The hypothesis of this research is that the human rights-based approach adopted within the framework of the human rights city concept could be a useful method to systematise the work towards these human rights related goals. The project will provide a comprehensive knowledge base enabling Turku to decide whether it would benefit from becoming the first Human Rights City of Finland. The proposed project would tap into synergies with the Turku City Strategy in several respects. It offers a coherent approach to preventing exclusion and providing support for vulnerable inhabitants, and it strengthens resident participation as an important part of the city's core operations, planning and decision-making. The innovativeness of the project lies in testing the application of the human rights city concept to the Finnish context and in its co-creation approach. The project foresees collaboration with the Central Administration of the city of Turku and key stakeholders such as civil society organisations.

Justification for how the research project matches the Turku Urban Research Programme 2019-2023

The research is academically relevant and will also deliver policy advice. It has a multidisciplinary approach, exploring the issue of human rights in local governance from a legal as well as a social science perspective. The project further strengthens the partnership between Turku and the Turku-based universities, including the Institute for Human Rights.

The research offers insights into options and means to strengthen the human rights and democracy dimensions of local governance, thereby enhancing good governance and increasing the well-being of the city's inhabitants. The research also contributes to strengthening local capacities to address diversity and human dignity. Key issues arising in the research concern inclusion, participation and empowering inhabitants, which are strategically topical issues in Turku.¹

The research is designed to be directly applicable to Turku but will also benefit any other Finnish city contemplating becoming a Human Rights City. While the alternatives presented as an outcome of the project are future-oriented, they are anchored in the historical character and current context of the city of Turku.

¹ Inclusion and participation are central issues for example in Turku's Welfare plan for children and youth 2020-2023 (Turun kaupungin lasten ja nuorten hyvinvointisuunnitelma 2020–2023).

Background, relation to previous research, and objectives of the project

“We need to drill down to the town, to the village, to the street if we are to figure out what will really make a difference.”²

From the perspective of international law, a state is a single entity, regardless of its internal administrative structure. Consequently, it is the state that is obliged to respect, promote and fulfil the human rights obligations stemming from international treaties and it is also responsible for the acts and omissions of its agents and organs. Despite this inherent state-centrism, it is nevertheless a fact that most people’s lives are local, and the successes and failures of human rights work are often measured at the local level. Both the United Nations (UN) and regional human rights bodies such as the Council of Europe (CoE) stress the realisation of human rights at the local level. According to the UN: “Local authorities are close to citizens’ everyday needs and they deal with human right issues on an everyday basis. Therefore, there exists a clear and strong connection between human rights and local government. When performing their functions, local authorities take decisions relating in particular to education, housing, health, the environment, and law and order, which are directly connected with the implementation of human rights and which may enforce or weaken the possibilities of its inhabitants to enjoy their human rights.”³ The Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the CoE has similarly stressed its conviction that local and regional good governance entails full compliance with fundamental freedoms and human rights and that local governments, with a political leadership accountable to citizens, are key players in guaranteeing human rights.⁴ This has been amply demonstrated during the Covid-19 crisis, with municipalities for example having the task of balancing the Government guidelines on the protection of the elderly with the elderly’s right to move freely and socialize with others.

The growing relevance of local authorities is undoubtedly one of the most interesting recent phenomena in international human rights law.⁵ A significant example of this engagement is the establishment of so-called ‘Human Rights Cities.’ The concept generally refers to a city whose local government is morally and/or legally guided by human rights principles. It was launched in 1997 by the People’s Movement for Human Rights Education. The original idea was for human rights cities to increase the local capacity to address diversity and human dignity.⁶ The concept of human rights cities was further developed, particularly as a normative concept, by the World Human Rights Cities Forum.⁷ The concept is flexible, with the actors and mechanisms needed to move towards a human rights orientation varying from city to city, each choosing the priorities and approaches best tailored to its situation.⁸ In Human Rights Cities, mainstreaming human rights is usually guided by a human rights-based approach (HRBA). Applying a HRBA entails, at a minimum, integrating and implementing the human rights principles of equality, non-discrimination, participation and inclusion systematically in all chosen sectors of governance, policymaking and/or service delivery as well as in interaction between municipalities and citizens.⁹ Similarly to Turku’s policies, the HRBA places emphasis on the protection of vulnerable groups.

² Michael O’Flaherty, Director of the EU Fundamental Agency, Fundamental Rights Forum 2018

³ Human Rights Council 2015, para. 26

⁴ www.coe.int/en/web/congress/human-rights

⁵ Oomen and Baumgärtel 2018, pp. 608-609

⁶ Davis, Gammeltoft-Hansen, Hanna 2017, p. 3

⁷ Human Rights Council 2015, para. 42

⁸ Davis, Gammeltoft-Hansen, Hanna 2017, p. 4

⁹ Cf., e.g., Hanotier, Human Rights Cities Network, [Report to the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights](#)

The focus of human rights cities lies on the promotion, protection and fulfilment of human rights, but they also have broader democratic implications through human rights' inherent link to participation both as a human right and a key human rights principle. Research shows that human rights cities can enhance the power and capacity of local governments to govern urban challenges.¹⁰ Furthermore, human rights cities can improve their governance through mobilising human rights, which strengthens the efforts to achieve the goal of making cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable.¹¹

Drawing on human rights in municipal policies can provide several advantages: Strengthening social cohesion, stimulating active citizenship, offering a shared vocabulary, profiling the municipality, marking its autonomy, contributing to good governance, connecting policy fields, helping civil servants weight different interests and adding meaning to the work of civil servants and elected officials.¹² In addition, it can offer indicators for measuring development results. Furthermore, research shows that local engagement with human rights can provide an important response to critiques of human rights by, for example, localising human rights and making them directly relevant for everyone.¹³

The Turku City Strategy 2029 includes several human rights related goals and measures, such as actions preventing homelessness, right to education, immigrant integration and emergency food aid. Since 2018, Turku is also a Child Friendly City.¹⁴ In 2019, the city made a commitment to the European Pillar of Social Rights by signing a pledge in the framework of the Eurocities network's campaign to advance inclusion in the area of social rights.¹⁵ In addition, Turku has adopted strategic programmes with goals of direct relevance for the protection and promotion of human rights. The Turku City Strategy thus foresees action and priorities that would sit well with a Human Rights City. The proposed project would notably tap into synergies with the Turku City Strategy in these respects:

- Offering a coherent approach to preventing exclusion and providing support for vulnerable inhabitants
- Strengthening resident participation as an important part of the city's core operations, planning and decision-making

Importantly, the human rights city agenda provides a direct entry point and linkages to the city's sustainable development goals, since the 2030 Agenda is explicitly grounded in UN human rights instruments and the content of most SDGs themselves reflect corresponding human rights standards.¹⁶ Turku is among the first cities to participate in reporting local progress in achieving SDGs. The recently published Voluntary Local Review identifies several topics where synergies between SDGs and human rights are evident. These include, for example, solutions to solve the root causes of poverty, such as the homelessness plan, services supporting the health of elderly and models to prevent gender-based and sexual violence. In addition, the city's strong focus on equality would benefit from a HRBA.

To conclude, Turku is notably committed to achieving SDGs, safeguarding children and other vulnerable groups and promoting and fulfilling a wide set of human rights. There is, however, not yet a tool to address all these issues in a coherent manner. This is the key **problem** the research sets out

¹⁰ Grigolo 2017, p. 68

¹¹ [Human Rights Cities Network](#)

¹² Hardy and Steenberger 2012

¹³ Durmuş 2020, pp. 35-38

¹⁴ www.unicef.fi/unicef/tyomme-suomessa/lapsiystavallinen-kunta/kunnat/

¹⁵ Turku's pledge to the European Pillar of Social Rights, City of Turku, 30 January 2019

¹⁶ OHCHR, [Transforming our World, Human Rights in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development](#)

to address. The **hypothesis** of this research is that the HRBA adopted within the framework of the human rights city concept could be a useful method to systematise the work towards these human rights related goals. **The research sets out to explore whether becoming a human rights city could concretely promote Turku's development** in terms of the above issues and, if so, how.

The objectives of the research are:

1. To analyse **the human rights-based approach** as a means to ensure human rights locally, with a particular focus on Finland in general and Turku in particular
2. To analyse **the role of human rights cities as a path towards inclusive and sustainable local development**
3. To provide a **comprehensive knowledge base** enabling Turku to decide whether it would benefit from becoming the first Human Rights City of Finland

Description of the project, including data and methods

The project is composed of **two work packages** (WPs). The first WP builds the theoretical framework for the project and analyses the essence of the concept of Human Rights Cities. It explores municipalities' accountability for human rights from the perspective of international and national law, the linkages between SDGs and human rights and the modalities for taking human rights into account in local decision-making, notably the HRBA. To this end, it researches the different Human Rights City models chosen by cities such as York, Utrecht, Graz and Lund, analysing them from the perspective of whether they have chosen to approach human rights as law, moral issues or good governance.

WP 2 builds on the results of WP1. Its focus is to develop a knowledge base specifically for the city of Turku on what it could entail to become the first Human Rights City of Finland and how this would fit in with Turku's existing plans, strategies and priorities. This part of the project is conducted in close collaboration with key stakeholders such as civil society organisations and the Central Administration of the city of Turku. The aim of the interface meetings organised for this purpose is to discuss research results and solicit comments and feedback. The meetings take place in and are facilitated by the Living Lab approach. The Living Lab concept has been developed within the profiling areas of Åbo Akademi University, including the minority profile, to enhance the societal impact of research. It is based on collaboration, dialogue and co-creation with key stakeholders to develop innovative solutions to complex societal problems.

In terms of **methods**, the research within the project involves desk-study of publicly available doctrinal research material, academic literature, case-law, legislation and relevant policy documents. In addition to interface meetings, the project includes expert interviews conducted as semi-structured interviews. To ensure research integrity towards interviewees, sufficient and accurate information about the overall purpose and implications of the research will be given to the participants in order to ensure their voluntary and informed consent. Any information that might potentially identify the participants will not be used in published materials and third parties will not be allowed to access personal data of the participants.¹⁷

In comparing the key components of European models for human rights cities, the researchers will use publicly available materials, in particular evaluations, on selected human rights cities. The method consists of systematization and rights-based analysis of the chosen Human Rights City models and the key decision-making processes leading to the decision to become such a city. This will be

¹⁷ Guidelines of the Finnish Advisory Board on Research Integrity

complemented with semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders and experts from the selected cities to gain a fuller picture of how the different approaches have worked in practice. Based on the comparative analysis, a set of key elements for Human Rights Cities will be identified. In interaction with stakeholders, recommendations will be elaborated for the type of approach and Human Rights City elements that would best support the existing strategical objectives of the city of Turku, including the realization of the city's SDG goals.

Work Package 1. Human Rights Cities as vehicles for ensuring human rights locally
<p>This WP builds the theoretical framework for the project and researches what being a Human Rights City can entail. It will:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Analyse the legal basis for municipalities' human rights responsibilities 2) Analyse the relationship between SDGs and human rights with a particular emphasis on human rights cities 3) Map the state-of-the-art research related to the HRBA as a vehicle to ensure good governance at the local level 4) Identify and compare the key components of European models for human rights cities <p>Method: Desk studies, comparative analysis, expert and stakeholder interviews</p> <p>Deliverable: Two academic articles published in peer-reviewed journals, project web page</p>
Work Package 2. Turku as the first Human Rights City of Finland?
<p>This WP focuses on whether becoming a Human Rights City could benefit Turku. It will:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Analyse how the planning and decision-making processes of Turku could benefit from the HRBA 2) Conduct a thematic case study designed in consultation with the Central Administration of the city of Turku 3) Develop a policy brief demonstrating what it could potentially mean for Turku to become a Human Rights City, naming the key Human Rights City elements it could opt for 4) Identify relevant local stakeholders and facilitate their evaluation of the alternatives in a stakeholder seminar <p>Methods: Desk study, interface meetings with key stakeholders, Living Lab interaction</p> <p>Deliverables: Case study working paper, policy brief, stakeholder seminar</p>

Expected results, their scientific novelty, and applicability to developing Turku

The research contributes to the topical international discussion on the role of local authorities in promoting and protecting human rights. The research will result in a knowledge base on what it means for a city or municipality to be guided in its work by human rights. It identifies how selected Human Rights City models would work in the Finnish legal and administrative context, including the role a HRBA could play in local government. This has not been researched before. While focusing on the context of Turku, the research deliverables can provide guidance for any potential future Finnish

initiative to address human rights locally.

To this end, the project takes a co-creation approach, by incorporating mutual exchange of knowledge between the research team, the Turku city administration and other key stakeholders. These exchanges function as a policy-oriented source to information and as an external policy-oriented quality control of the research.

In terms of key benefits for Turku, the Human Rights City framework offers a coherent, systematic, participatory approach with the potential to support municipal authorities and decision-makers in the realization of human rights and SDGs in synergy with Turku's already existing strategies. Opting to become a Human Rights City would distinguish Turku as a forerunner for localization of human rights in Finland and increase the city's appeal as a place to live, work and conduct business.

Description of the research team

The research team is led by the principal investigator (PI) **Prof. Elina Pirjatanniemi** (LL.D., M.Pol.Sc.), Director of the Institute for Human Rights and Chair in Constitutional and International Law at ÅAU. Prof. Pirjatanniemi is in charge of the management of the project and she also contributes to the research on the theoretical framework in WP1. In addition, the research team consists of **two researchers**. **Dr. Lisa Grans** (D.Soc.Sc, M.Pol.Sc, LL.M.) works as a postdoc researcher at the site of research, presently doing research commissioned by the EU Fundamental Rights Agency (FRA) on guardianship systems for unaccompanied children. She has experience in working with civil society and taking part in policy preparation, which benefits the project's collaboration with stakeholders. Her expertise lies in gender-based violence, positive obligations, due diligence and particularly vulnerable groups. Within the project, her research notably explores **municipalities' human rights responsibilities from the perspective of national and international law and the HRBA as a means to implement human rights locally**. She also contributes towards the other research tasks. **Ms. Kristiina Vainio** (M.Pol.Sc.) works as a project researcher at the Institute for Human Rights in the FRA research projects (FRANET). She has previous experience in interlinkages between human rights and development and in facilitating and monitoring human rights-based interventions in developing countries contexts. She also has expertise in human rights education, protection of human rights defenders and corporate human rights responsibility. In the proposed project, she notably researches **the relationship between SDGs and human rights, with a particular emphasis on human rights cities**, participating also in other project tasks. The case study working paper and the policy brief will be drafted by the whole team.

The research team is based at the Institute for Human Rights and benefits from exchanges with other ongoing research projects at the Institute, in particular STN IDA¹⁸ and EU FRANET.¹⁹ The project is strongly linked to the Minority Research profile of ÅAU, which is engaged in interdisciplinary research on the complexities involved in the production and construction of minority positions, identities, and rights. Furthermore, the team utilises relevant results from previous research projects at the Institute. Particularly useful are the analyses on the role and relevance of human rights in policy work stemming from the EU FRAME project²⁰ and the research results of the Academy of Finland research project on persons in vulnerable positions.²¹

¹⁸ www.dataintimacy.fi/

¹⁹ www.abo.fi/en/institute-for-human-rights/franet/

²⁰ Fostering Human Rights Among European (External and Internal) Policies (FRAME), EU7th Framework project

²¹ Vulnerability as Particularity — Towards Relativizing the Universality of Human Rights? (RELAY)

Potential national and international cooperation within the research project

A key collaborator is the Law Faculty of the University of Turku, which would be available to support the research process. The project's other potential collaborators include selected Human Rights Cities, tentatively Graz, Utrecht, Vienna and Lund. Through its engagement in the Global Campus of Human Rights, the Institute for Human Rights has active contacts to universities in all these cities. The FRA has facilitated several human rights city initiatives and is therefore a potential collaborator that could provide insights into the comparative part of the research. The Institute for Human Rights and the Faculty of Law of the University of Turku together function as the national focal point for FRA. A further collaborator would be the Raoul Wallenberg Institute of Human Rights and Humanitarian Law, a long-term co-operation partner, which has supported Lund in becoming Sweden's first Human Rights City and has issued several publications on the concept of human rights cities.²² Cooperation is also foreseen with relevant ongoing projects of the city of Turku.

Budget

The project budget comprises salary costs of two researchers (118,560 €), travel and other costs (8,559 €) and administrative costs (22,881 €), in total 150,000 €. In terms of person-months (PM), the budget includes 5 PMs in 2021 and 19 PMs in 2022. The salary costs of the project director are estimated at 2 PMs and are covered by the site of research.

Budget	2021	2022	Total
<i>Salaries, incl. social costs</i>			
Lisa Grans	0	63,960	63,960
Kristiina Vainio	22,750	31,850	54,600
<i>Other costs</i>			
Travel	1,000	3,000	4,000
Open access	0	3,000	3,000
Proof reading	0	500	500
Transcription services	500	559	1,059
<i>Administrative costs 18 %</i>	4,365	18,516	22,881
TOTAL COSTS	28,615	121,315	150,000

Project schedule

The project will be implemented between 1 August 2021 and 31 December 2022 (17 months).

Deliverable	WP	Month
Project webpage	1-2	1
Two academic articles	1	12, 17
Case study (working paper)	2	14
Policy brief	2	16
Stakeholder seminar	2	17

²² E.g., Raoul Wallenberg Institute of Human Rights and Humanitarian Law, Human Rights of Cities and the SDGs (2018)

Key references

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