



Global Platform for the Right to the City
Plataforma Global por el Derecho a la Ciudad
Plataforma Global pelo Direito à Cidade

Right Where You Live: A Glossary of Right-to-the-city Terms

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– **Habitat International Coalition**



The following glossary of terms reflects the various iterations of the concept commonly known as the right to the city. The evolution of that concept spans decades and a variety of approaches that culminate in a common global movement toward good government in the best sense of democracy and effective participation. The movement also seeks to transform cities and human settlements along a human rights model that engages all inhabitants in the full exercise of local “citizenship.” The process involves a rich diversity of approaches and terms that, first, stimulate the mind through language that then seeks expression through civic action. This compilation does not suggest a hierarchy or preference among these terms, but follows a chronological order in the development of this related vocabulary.

Urban Rights is a term and concept arising from The European Declaration of Urban Rights (1982). The regional initiative to adopt a European Urban Charter constructed “urban rights” through the work of the Council of Europe on urban policies, inspired by the Council of Europe-organized “European Campaign for Urban Renaissance” (1980 to 1982). It identifies a bundle of “rights” that apply to inhabitants of both the city and “its surrounding region,” including rights to:

1. Security; i.e., a secure and safe town, as free as possible from crime, delinquency and aggression;
2. An unpolluted and healthy environment free from air, noise, water and ground pollution and protective of nature and natural resources;
3. Adequate employment possibilities through a fair share in economic development toward achieving personal financial autonomy;
4. An adequate supply and choice of affordable, salubrious housing, guaranteeing privacy and tranquility;
5. Unhampered mobility and freedom of movement that pursues a harmonious balance among all street users; e.g., public transport, the private car, the pedestrian and cyclists;

6. Health in an environment and a range of facilities conducive to physical and psychological health;
7. Sport and leisure, with access to a wide range of facilities for all persons, without discrimination;
8. Access to, and participation in a wide range of cultural and creative activities and pursuits;
9. Multicultural integration, where communities of different cultural ethnic and religious backgrounds coexist peaceably;
10. Good quality architecture and physical surroundings through contemporary construction, as well as retention and sensitive restoration of built heritage;
11. Harmonization of urban functions and activities as closely interrelated as possible;
12. Participation in pluralistic democratic structures and in urban management through cooperation among all of the various partners, practicing the principle of subsidiarity, with corresponding rights to information and freedom from over-regulation;
13. Economic development, where the local authority assumes responsibility for creating—directly or indirectly—economic growth, in a [locally] determined and enlightened manner;
14. Sustained development, whereby local authorities attempt to reconcile economic development and environmental protection;
15. A wide range of accessible and adequate services and goods provided by the local authority, the private sector or by partnerships between both;
16. Natural wealth and resources and assets by a local authority in a rational, careful, efficient and equitable manner to benefit all citizens;
17. Personal fulfilment through urban conditions conducive to realizing personal well-being and individual social, cultural, moral and spiritual development;
18. Intermunicipal collaboration in which citizens are free and encouraged to participate directly in the international relations of their community;
19. Financial mechanisms and structures enabling local authorities to find the financial resources necessary for the exercise of the rights as defined in this declaration; and
20. Equality.

According to the Declaration, these “urban rights” require practical actions that involve:

- Improvement of the physical urban environment;
- Rehabilitation of existing housing stock;
- The creation of social and cultural opportunities in towns;
- Community development and public participation.

Human Rights City/community: Cities, municipalities and/or their constituent quarters declaring themselves “human rights communities” or “human rights cities” constitutes a practice whereby citizens promote human rights principles at the policy level within a municipality, or as part of a municipality. It is also a practice that has sought programmatic definition through such organizations as the People Human Movement for Human Rights Learning (PDHRE), which organization has promoted human rights cities since the late 1990s and defined a human right city broadly as:

“a society where all citizens have made a pledge to build a community based on equality and nondiscrimination; [where] all women and men are actively participating in the decisions that affect their daily lives, guided by the human rights framework; where people have consciously internalized the holistic vision of human rights to overcome fear and impoverishment, a society that provides human security, access to food, clean water, housing, education, healthcare and work at livable wages, sharing these resources with all citizens—not as a gift, but as a realization of human rights. A Human Rights City is a practical, viable model that demonstrates that living in such a society is possible!”

While this description is abstract, its implementation in practice has produced some operational principles to guide policy and replication of experience. The literature on the “human rights cities” program explains further that that approach especially addresses “both a broader and a narrower dimension of urban poverty.” For [example](#), it:

“is not directed toward securing legal title as a means of protecting the urban poor from market eviction and gentrification, or to catalyze investment in low-income housing. It is rather a broader strategy of empowering inhabitants of communities to find collectively the ways and means of ensuring respect for their human rights, including the right to adequate housing, component elements of which are security of tenure, access to basic urban services, transport and mobility, financial services and credit, women’s empowerment, urban citizenship, income and livelihoods. It is thus a broader strategy than securing legal tenure.”

“One whose residents and local authorities, through learning about the relevance of human rights to their daily lives (guided by a steering committee), join in ongoing learning, discussions, systematic analysis and critical thinking at the community level, to pursue a creative exchange of ideas and the joint planning of actions to realize their economic, social, political, civil and cultural human rights.”¹

A recent initiative to link Korean and international human rights cities has created the [World Human Rights Cities Forum](#) (WHRCF), hosted by Gwangju, South Korea, to expand discussions on human rights cities following the adoption of the “Local Governments and Human Rights” [resolution](#) at the 24th session of the UN Human Rights Council (HRC) in 2013. These developments coincided with the development and adoption of the [Gwangju Guiding Principles for a Human Rights City](#) at the WHRCF in May 2014. In 2015, the HRC’s Advisory Committee completed a study on “[The role of local government in the promotion and protection of human rights](#),” which focused particularly on the human-rights-city experience.

Human Rights Habitat is the most general and, thus, inclusive operative term that embraces the gamut of human rights in any kind of human settlement, social context or living space. Its components include the interaction among the natural environment, vital resources such as land, water and food for human livelihood, as well as the built environment at any scale. The quintessential values of the human rights habitat concept are at once biological and social, material and ethical. The protection and preservation of environmental values and measures to sustain social justice are core operational

¹ Peoples Movement for Human Rights Learning, “Human Rights Learning and Human Rights Cities: Achievements Report” (2007), at: <http://www.pdhre.org/achievements-HR-cities-mar-07.pdf>; Karen Dolan, *Human Rights City Toolkit* (Washington: Institute for Policy Studies, March 2009), at: http://www.ips-dc.org/human_rights_city_toolkit/.

principles to a human rights habitat, whether in a forest dwelling, a pastoral setting, an informal settlement, or across a megacity.

The inclusivity and versatility of this general concept distinguishes it as generally applicable and devoid of any discrimination on the basis of geography, decent, work or livelihood, or any point on the rural-urban continuum. Therefore, the human rights habitat concept and its application, as in Nairobi, Kenya (2002)² also overarch other approaches to encompass diverse kinds of communities within a common and inclusive human rights frame.

Human Rights *in the City* is an application of these kindred principles in the social and physical context of the urban space defined as “city,” a human settlement agglomeration that UN-Habitat claims to hold at least half the world’s population. This more-specific context and application does claim set out to establish new human rights. However, as such, the human-rights-*in-the-city* construct expresses both the rights and responsibilities of citizenship at the level of the city, but also explicitly recognizes local governments’ role in guaranteeing the human rights of “all their inhabitants.”

“Human rights in the city” is exemplified in the “Charter-Agenda for Human Rights in the City” (2011) developed by the Committee on Social Inclusion, Participatory Democracy and Human Rights of the United Cities and Local Authorities (UCLG). It is the result of an initiative that emerged from the Local Authorities Forum for Social Inclusion and Participatory Democracy (FAL) that took place in Caracas in 2006. Its preamble recognizes the legal sources of human rights and corresponding state obligations in the International Covenants (1966) and other state-level commitments as applying to local authorities, along with the exercise of the following values and principles:

- The dignity of every human being as a supreme value;
- Freedom, equality particularly between men and women, nondiscrimination, recognition of differences, justice and social inclusion;
- Democracy and citizen participation as the policy of cities;
- Universality, indivisibility and interdependence of human rights;
- Social and environmental sustainability;
- Cooperation and solidarity among all members of each city, as well as among all cities throughout the world;
- Shared and differentiated responsibility of the cities and their inhabitants, in accordance with abilities and means.

Right to the City is the most-assertive concept among these expressions. It constitutes a clear claim to a specific “right” that is not enshrined in any international multilateral instrument to date. Strategically, the Right to the City (R2C) movement seeks to contribute to the standard-setting processes by defining the normative content of R2C

² See Settlements Information Network Africa, *SINA Newsletter*, No. 53 (2002), at: <http://www.mazinst.org/files/mazpub/53.pdf>.

as claimed, before it becomes law. Latin American social movements—self-styled as popular mass actors with a common cause—favor R2C as part of a long, historical phenomenon of generating global standards and norms through coordinated mass actions.

Proponents of a right to the city trace the origins of their movement to the French sociologist [Henri Lefebvre](#)'s 1967 [essay](#) and later [book](#) *Le Droit à la ville* (1968), which coincided with student unrest and protests against material, social and spatial discrimination against urban migrants and the poor in France and elsewhere in Europe.

In its current application, in particular against a backdrop of governments rejecting the codification of new human rights, R2C proponents have equivocated as to whether or not the right to the city constitutes such a new right. However, the preface to the [Global Charter on the Right to the City](#) does claim set out to a “new human right” that is collective in nature. The Charter also claims other new human rights, specifically, to land, energy and transport.

However, R2C also has assumed a quasi-judicial character. It forms the subject of the above-mentioned first regional UCLG Charter-Agenda. That instrument's first operative section reflects the recognition that:

- (a) All city inhabitants have the right to a city constituted as a local political community that ensures adequate living conditions for all the people, and provides good coexistence among all its inhabitants, and between them and the local authority.
 - (b) Every man and woman benefit from all rights enunciated in the present Charter-Agenda and are full-fledged actors of the life of the city.
 - (c) All city inhabitants have the right to participate in the configuration and coordination of territory as a basic space and foundation for peaceful life and coexistence.
 - (d) All city inhabitants have the right to available spaces and resources allowing them to be active citizens. The working and common spaces shall be respectful of everyone else's values and of the value of pluralism.
2. The city offers its inhabitants all available means to exercise their rights. The signatories of the Charter are encouraged to develop contact with neighboring cities and territories with the aim of building caring communities and regional capitals.
As a framework and summary of all rights provided for in this Charter-Agenda, the above right [to the City] will be satisfied to the degree in which each and every one of the rights described therein is fully effective and guaranteed domestically.
 3. City inhabitants have the duty to respect the rights and dignity of others.

This iteration of the concept of R2C respects local inhabitants' collective right to local decision making. (See **Rights of the City** below.)

In 2015, the Global Platform for the Right to the City published a concise definition of R2C as:

The right of all inhabitants, present and future, permanent and temporary to use, occupy and produce just, inclusive and sustainable cities, defined as a common good essential to a full and decent life.

Parallel to seeking formal, municipal-level recognition, “the right to the city” is also a slogan and claim of urban social movements to guide urban policies to be more equitable and inclusive, as an alternative to current policies and planning practices that lead to segregation, privatization and inequitable distribution of public goods and services. The R2C term and concept also became the subject of formal input to the global Habitat III process and a much-debated feature of the draft outcome document.

The popular civil-society and social-movement approach to the **right to the city** arose in response to the marginalization and stigmatization of low-income areas of cities—in particular, [slums](#)—that have sprung up in the latter half of the previous century’s intense [rural-to-urban displacement and migration](#). In that context, the urban social movements, especially in countries of former military regimes in Latin America, enjoined and applied the vocabulary of Henri Lefebvre and enshrined the principles of the **right to the city** in a [Global Charter on the Right to the City](#) (latest version 2005). This popular source and claim of the **right to the city** emerged through several [successive iterations](#) vetted among urban social movements in Latin America and diffused through the World Social Forum.

Currently, the “**right to the city**” claim and argument enshrined in the 2005 Global Charter rest on a bundle of codified human rights and corresponding obligations of authorities at all levels. In setting out the claims relative to the exercise of citizenship and of participation in planning, production and management of the city, the Charter outlines numerous rights and freedoms, including those already enshrined in the Human Rights Covenants (1966): Participation, peaceful assembly, freedom of association, freedom of expression, Freedom of movement, adequate housing, information, political participation, security of person, health, food, water and decent work.

The Charter also claims as rights and corresponding obligations certain values not yet enshrined explicitly in international treaty law. These include the social production of housing/habitat and the rights to “sustainable and equitable urban development” (whereas, the right to development is subject of [1986 Declaration](#), but not yet enshrined in treaty law). The Global Charter also asserts a right to transport and public mobility, as well as a right to the environment in the city context. It establishes the popular claim at the level of rights related to (1) the human rights dimensions of land and the human right to equitable administration of land, public goods and natural resources, and (2) urban planning as a technical service and public good to which all citizens are equally entitled.

Through its serial iterations since 2001, the Global Charter has emphasized consistently that the essential elements of the **right to the city** involve:

- Full exercise of citizenship
- Democratic management
- The social function of urban property and the city.

The “strategic foundations” of the **right to the city**, thus, pursue:

1. Full exercise of human rights in the urban context;

2. Operationalizing the social function of land, property and the city;
3. Democratic management of the city; Social production of habitat and the right to a productive habitat (social economy);
4. Responsible and sustainable management and use of the commons (including natural resources and cultural heritage);
5. Democratic enjoyment of the city (especially linked with the use of public spaces and community facilities).

While recognizing the imperative of coexistence based on peace, solidarity and multiculturalism, the Charter also celebrates the diversity of most cities. Thus, the Charter gives practical meaning to the over-riding human rights principle of nondiscrimination as pivotal to the institutionalization and enjoyment of the **right to the city**.

The **right to the city** concept emerged from a parochial urban context; however, it is not to be construed that that relegates the constituent claims to the benefit of urban inhabitants only. Nor does it mean that any person has to be “urban,” as a condition for eligibility to enjoy these rights. Furthermore, the habitat discourse has evolved significantly since the Charter’s 2005 version’s ultimate inclusion of wider and more-diverse territorial regions, referring also to rural areas as city “surroundings.”

Right to the Built Environment (*al-haq fi al-`umrān*, الحق في العمران)

One of the most significant and articulate examples of the use of the **right to the city** in CSO discourse and advocacy has come in the context of the 2013 deliberations toward the new Egyptian Constitution. A convergence of organizations, self-identified as the Urban Reform Coalition, cooperated in the preparation of a formal submission to the drafters of the new Constitution. Their document, “[A Constitutional Approach to Urban Egypt](#),” localizes the principles of the right to the city as a guidance note for future efforts to improve living conditions, urban development and governance in Egypt through the transition.

The localization of the concepts begins with the title, which translates from the Arabic literally as “Constitution of the Built Environment.” It incorporates the Arabic term “*al-`umrān*” (العمران, the built environment) to convey a more inclusive concept, embracing also human settlements beyond the city. The term also resonates in Arab traditions as a term used by the 14th Century scholar Ibn Khaldūn, who instructed that, in statecraft, “*al-`adl asās al-`umrān*” (العدل أساس العمران), or “justice is the foundation of the built environment (i.e., the state/civilization).”

This articulation of the right to the city establishes a set of basic principles such that:

The state recognizes the “right to the city” for all inhabitants of Egyptian cities, and the people have the full right to enjoy the city and public spaces on the basis of the principles of sustainability, social justice, respect for different cultures, and the balance between the urban and rural sectors. The exercise of the right to the city rests on the foundations of democratic governance of the city, with respect for the social and environmental functions of the various properties and the city as a whole, with full exercise of the right of citizenship.

The collective document proceeds to explain the meaning of the Right to the Built Environment (*haq al-`umrān*, حق العمران):

The state recognizes the "right to the human settlement (*al-`umrān*)," for the entire population on the basis of the principles of social justice and sustainability, and respect for different cultures, and the balance between urban and rural areas. The exercise of this right rests on the basis of democratic management of urbanization, with respect for the social and environmental functions of various types of tenure within the following considerations:

- Provision of quality public services and utilities, while ensuring their quality and equitable provision and distribution; seeking to achieve welfare for all inhabitants, particularly those most in need; and continuously improving the quality of their lives and satisfying their basic needs and corresponding human rights, all of which are an essential part of the social purpose of the state, as social justice should be the basis of the urban environment, human settlements and governance. To this end, the state should prioritize social spending in the allocation of funds in public budgeting and planning.
- The government should help realize the social function of urban areas so that all inhabitants benefit from available resources to ensure the constant improvement of their living conditions. The state must direct public projects and investment to improve the public wellbeing, giving priority to the neediest members of society. The State of Egypt must formulate and enforce urban policies that require that land be used in accordance with the principles of social justice, equality and respect for the environment, as already defined in the minimal standards of international human rights instruments. In order to realize the social function of property, laws must guarantee the optimal usage of under-utilized, unused, or vacant public and private property for public benefit.
- The decentralization of local governance must strengthen the practice of citizenship and corresponding human rights, encouraging the democratic management of human settlements, and increasing local government's responsiveness to local needs, the collective wellbeing of inhabitants, and the social production and management of their habitat.
- The state commits to materially and politically supporting all local municipal districts to build their technical, administrative, and financial capabilities to respect, protect and fulfill all human rights of citizens and residents. The state also shall authorize elected representatives of local districts to adopt local ordinances consistent with the Constitution and national legislation and to levy local taxes and fees needed to augment the national budget allotments and provide, improve, and efficiently manage local public services and utilities.
- The people own the state's natural resources, including land, water, mineral wealth and environmental assets and endowments, and have the equal right to benefit from the natural wealth, dividends, and revenues derived from these national resources. The state commits itself to safeguarding these assets and their equitable use, and to respect, protect and fulfill the rights of future generations dependent upon them. The disposition of state resources and properties shall be prohibited, except through their use toward the benefit and fulfillment of codified rights of inhabitants of the State of Egypt. The law shall regulate the Egyptian government's obligation to regulate and dispose of state property, according to the principles enshrined above and in the following Constitutional proposal.

The "A Constitutional Approach to Urban Egypt" takes the opportunity to explain the meaning and value of social production of habitat (SPH) where it proposes:

The state is committed to providing the institutional environment and resources needed to process the social production of housing in the form of legal tools and financing, administrative, and technical support, land and raw materials at a reasonable price consistent with the [needs of persons with] low-income. The State recognizes the efforts of self-construction and supports housing initiatives and cooperatives, whether of individuals or families or organized and collective efforts in this area. Moreover, the State is committed to the fight against abuse and exploitation in rental relations in the context of ensuring the right to adequate housing for marginalized and most vulnerable.

Clearly this CSO initiative and articulation of the right to the city, human rights in the city, even more broadly as the human rights habitat, speaks to the state context that the city inhabits. However, this exercise also follows in the tradition of city-based human rights charters, while taking a page from the World Charter on the Right to the City and indigenizes its tenets.

Rights of the City: Local authorities and local governments, by definition, bear both authority and obligations to respect, protect and fulfill all human rights at the local level, as do other actors, as “organs of society” (UDHR preamble). The treaty-bound obligation arises from the territorial state’s ratification of ICESCR, among other international instruments. The UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (CESCR) has [observed](#) that violations of inhabitants’ human rights can occur through the direct action or failure to act (omission) by states, or through their institutions or agencies at the national and local levels.

It is not habitual to speak of the “human rights” of public bodies and authorities vis-à-vis citizens and other inhabitants in their jurisdiction. These public persons and entities primarily bear human economic, social and cultural rights (ESCR) *obligations*.

In general, the legal “rights” of states and state institutions apply more appropriately vis-à-vis other states. Amid the clearly emerging obligations that local authorities and institutions of human settlements generally bear toward their inhabitants, those same human rights treaty-bound actors bear certain rights as well. The above concepts advance particularly the collective sense and identity of the city within the treaty-bound state.

Rights derive from cities and other local administration and government functions as organic components of the territorial state in which they operate. In order for the city—or other human settlement institution and authority—to live up to its increasingly defined and codified duties, it bears a corresponding right to central government coordination and support, without discrimination on the basis of geography, political affiliation, demography or other arbitrary basis.

Within the over-riding human rights implementation principle of “maximum of available resources,” local authorities have rights to their fair share of the national budget and assets in the pursuit of ESCR. The rights extend to benefit from the central state’s implementation of the other [over-riding principles](#) for implementing the Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights: i.e., self-determination, gender equality, rule of law, progressive realization and international cooperation.

This calls on the state variously to enable representative local government to succeed in upholding shared-but-differentiated human rights treaty obligations. This may call for greater financial, technical, policy-coordination and capacity-building support to such local government. Otherwise, the city or other human settlement may fall to the mercy of

private and external financial markets, for example, and/or compelled to privatize public goods and services in order to fulfill inhabitants' **right to the city**.

Moreover, collectively self-expressing cities and other human settlements could assert a (human) right to local self-determination consistent with the **right to the city**. This can—and does—manifest in the moderation of local self-interest and global human rights principles to: ensure the adequate function of city-region food systems, apply procurement policies for sustainable local development, and/or determine the level of participation of noncitizens in [local decision making](#). The Covenant's over-riding "international cooperation" principle and its articulation in the European Charter's "[international relations](#)" reference above open a sea of debate. Some municipalities are adopting resolutions, commitments and [declarations](#) to apply general principles of international law in their contracting and procurement practices, in support of global human rights.

For the city or other human settlement to exercise its rights, an enabling constitutional, legal and institutional context is indispensable. Such is the organic relationship between the local and the national system, ensuring the balance among subsidiarity, local decision making and the "rights of the city" within the **human rights state** in its integrity.