

## **Session V: IMPLEMENTING AND MEASURING IMPACT – Concrete results of Human Rights Work**

### **Graz- the First Human Rights City of Europe, Ingrid Nicoletti**

Yesterday the city of Graz started a whole year of celebrations for the 15<sup>th</sup> anniversary of being a Human Rights City. So I think it is a good moment to talk about its implications on the implementation of human rights at the local level.

#### **The local level –**

We discussed national human rights structures, bodies and action plans. National states are the first level to be addressed by international human rights law.

But let me take this 10 minutes to shift the focus a little bit:

Human rights are first of all rights of individuals against public authorities. And the closest relation of a person to authorities is at the local level. That means that local governments play a very important role in guaranteeing the fulfillment of human rights in the daily life of people.

There is a famous citation that very well expresses the core idea of human rights at the local. It is by Eleanor Roosevelt, she said:

“Where, after all, do universal human rights begin? In small places, close to home – so close and so small that they cannot be seen on any maps of the world. Yet they are the world of the individual person; the neighborhood he lives in; the school or college he attends; the factory, farm or office where he works. Such are the places of where every man, women, and child seeks equal justice, equal opportunity, equal dignity without discrimination. Unless these rights have meaning there, they have little meaning anywhere. Without concerted citizen action to uphold them close to home, we shall look in vain for progress in the larger world.” (Eleanor Roosevelt, 10.12.1948)

This why it is important to pay attention to the local level when looking at human rights implementation, which is now commonly acknowledged, and promoted especially by the Council of Europe’s Congress of Local and Regional Authorities.

There are estimations that by the year 2050, 75% of the world’s population will be living in cities. And city authorities do have powers as democratic institutions, as rule-makers, as important employers, service providers and contractors.

So this is the introduction, why we are talking about human rights and the city.

#### **What is a human rights city? and how did the city of Graz become one?**

To give you the context: this is Graz. It is located in the South-East of Austria, it is the 2<sup>nd</sup> largest city of Austria, with 280,000 inhabitants.

The idea of a human rights city was initially developed by an American NGO, named „The People’s Movement for Human Rights Education“(PDHRE). That was during the United Nations Decade for Human Rights Education.

This idea of the Human Rights city found its way to Graz in the late 90s, also thanks to a very active international law professor at the University of Graz. At that time we had a mayor named Alfred Stingl, who did great efforts to make Graz a more world-open city and promote an open

society. So he was in favor of this idea. At the United Nations' Millennium Conference, the Austrian foreign minister announced that Graz is going to be the 1<sup>st</sup> Human Rights City in Europe.

The City Council unanimously passed the Declaration of Human Rights of the City of Graz in 2001. The declaration included the criteria developed by The People's Movement for Human Rights Education, stating that

- the city council and the city government shall be guided in their actions by the principles of international human rights.
- the residents of the city, especially the youth, shall be informed about their human rights (that is a call for human rights education)
- public institutions shall respect and fulfil the human rights in the daily life of the city (that is the criteria of structural embedding of human rights in all areas of everyday life), and that
- deficits in the field of human rights are to be detected at all levels of society to respond appropriately.

However in the years that followed, after the municipal elections in 2003, focus shifted away from the declaration, civil society actors kept it alive. The next milestone was in 2006, when the City of Graz became a member of the European Coalition of Cities against Racism (ECCAR). ECCAR membership requires implementing a 10-Point-Plan of Action. This framework allowed for the inclusion of a number of measures in the spirit of the Human Rights Declaration, for example the establishment of the Human Rights Council of the City of Graz, which I am representing today.

### **How being a Human Rights city has improved the local implementation of human rights:**

The Human Rights Council was mandated to monitor the human rights situation in the city and to publish a yearly report. The reports alternate, one year we do a broad information collection by asking the city departments, NGOs and other - in total more than 150 - institutions to report facts, problems, good practices and to give recommendations. The Human Rights Council then agrees on recommendations to the city council. The report of the following year evaluates if these recommendations are implemented, by talking to the responsible city officials or conducting focus groups on the topics.

The making of the human rights report over the years shows the process of the human rights city: In the first report in 2008, the department responsible for the sewer system replied "We cannot answer your request because we are the sewer department, we have nothing to do with human rights." They didn't know what to do with it. And this has changed. Nowadays the city departments know how to answer, they know how they are contributing to the implementation of human rights.

This means there is a dialogue about it. I think that is the main value of the monitoring report, not so much the publication, which is nice, but it serves as an instrument to stay in discussion with the city administration about the implementation of human rights.

Departments or individuals in departments incorporate the aspects of human rights in their work For example the city development concept, which is the strategy for city development for the next 15 years, underlines that Graz is a human rights city and also included demands like more diversity in staff, more district work in order to support equal chances etc. So there is growing awareness within the administration. This is a process that takes time, but I believe it is a very important one.

To give you one example of a recommendation that was implemented very successfully: the Election Campaign Monitoring.

As we all know, election campaigning is done sometimes at the expense of human rights. In Graz slogans against migrants, against Islam were used, and NGOs reported that prior to elections racist incidents in public spaces increased.

The City mandated the Human Rights Council to carry out election campaign monitoring. All campaign material, posters, speeches, interviews of all political parties were collected and analyzed if they violate or promote human rights. The results were published using a traffic-light system, green for promoting, red for violating human rights.

In the municipal elections in 2008, the collection of statements actually led to a court charge and a conviction of one politician because of incitement to hatred, and the city council introduced a fine for political parties in case of incitement to hatred. In the election campaign in 2012 we could see an improvement, so the monitoring had a preventive effect.

To sum up, **what are the benefits** of declaring a Human Rights City in Graz:

We do see an influence on the political discourse and speech, as the example of the election monitoring shows.

The declaration is an important argument for civil society, to demand improvements or to criticize a particular policy, by saying “you call yourself a human rights city, that is not worthy of a human rights city”.

We did see progress, especially regarding the local implementation of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.

It has shaped a culture of dialogue to prevent conflict. For example the mayor established an Interreligious Council; there is the Graz Peace Office.

And the city is interested in research and information on the topic. For example, the city conducts a regular survey on life quality of Graz residents and included questions on discrimination.

So we do see positive developments, but of course, it is not a magical instrument. There are examples of policies that are questionable from a human rights perspective, we do have an extreme right wing party that is getting more and more popular and their current discourse on the refugees does not really show the spirit of human rights.

Another critical point is that the city did not manage to make the Human Rights City very well known in the general population. At the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary in 2011, a survey showed that the majority did not even know that Graz was a Human Rights City.

And it is difficult to measure the concrete impact, the Declaration of Human Rights as such had on the life of city residents. These are complex developments and it is difficult to isolate the impact of the human rights declaration from other context factors. So I guess this can be a point of discussion. In my personal opinion it is one part of a bigger puzzle.

ECCAR membership was important, because firstly it was attractive to the mayor to be part in an international city network, and it required the adoption of a structured action plan, that also is to be evaluated and renewed every 4-5 years.

As a conclusion, I think it was important that the Declaration of Human Rights and the accession to ECCAR were both adopted by all parties. This gives an argument to those who wish to promote human rights. So being a Human Rights City in combination with the ECCAR action plan has led to more coordinated and continued effort by city politics and by civil society towards implementing human rights in Graz.

The question how to measure impact will also be a topic of the next speakers, so I will end here, and thank you all for the attention.