



United Nations  
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Cultural Organization

ZENTRUM ZUR FÖRDERUNG DER PROMOTION OF  
MENSCHENRECHTE HUMAN RIGHTS  
IN GEMEINDEN AT THE LOCAL AND  
UND REGIONEN REGIONAL LEVELS

Under the auspices of UNESCO

## Human Rights Go Local: What Works

Academy and Conference on Human Rights at the Local and Regional  
Levels 2022

***“From Intentions to Commitments: Towards the Effective and  
Sustainable Implementation of Human Rights”***

7 February 2022

***Speech by HARALD BERGMANN, Human rights Spokesperson of the  
Congress of the Council of Europe***

Dear members of the Academy  
Ladies and gentlemen,

First of all, I wish to thank the organisers of this conference for giving me the opportunity to present to you the position, and activities, of the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe with regard to the protection, fulfilment and promotion of human rights.

I am mayor of the city of Middelburg in the Netherlands and I represent the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe in my capacity as Human rights spokesperson.

The Congress is a political body within the Council of Europe, responsible for strengthening local and regional democracy in its member states. It brings

together 648 elected officials representing more than 150 000 municipalities, cities and regions.

My presentation today aims at describing the legal and political framework for human rights activities at the Congress, our approaches, methods and tools.

The exercise by citizens of their rights begins and is felt most in our communities, which is why we say that local authorities are the first line of defence of human rights but also the launching pad for their application.

As competences of local authorities for policy fields and service delivery grow, so do their responsibilities in terms of human rights promotion and protection.

In Europe, the last years were marked by a rapidly increasing arrival of people, seeking refuge from violence and terror. We have witnessed the rise of radicalization amounting to violent extremism, as well as the strengthening of populism and hateful political discourse in Europe and beyond. Looking at both, democracy and human rights, there is an ever-growing tendency of recentralization and repression.

More than ever is there a need to focus on human rights.

More than ever do we need local and regional authorities that are aware of human rights ...

...and more than ever should human rights be a fundamental cornerstone of our political agenda.

We, local or regional politicians and our administrations, have a key role to play. We are not “agents” of central government: we have our very own responsibilities to actively protect and promote human rights.

Municipalities, cities and regions have *de facto* a significant share of the countries’ responsibility for implementing human rights principles and standards set out in international treaties.

Talking about human rights, we do not simply refer to philosophical concepts or principles. There is an actual legal obligation, coming down to local and regional authorities, which is being enforced by judicial mechanisms, such as the European Court.

The right to housing, the right not to be discriminated against, the rights to have access to public services, employment, education and health care, all imply the direct involvement of local authorities.

Drawing on its pan-European dimension, the Congress serves as a forum for an exchange of ideas and proposals, for sharing experiences and good practices, and for recommending them to other communities.

To wrap it up, there can obviously be many different reasons behind the perpetration of human rights violations at local level. But in many instances, violations originate from the local authorities' lack of understanding of human rights and their implementation, even where domestic law complies with the European Convention on Human Rights.

It is a concept that may even frighten local politicians who are – quite understandably - often unsure about the scope of this issue and their actual responsibilities. Raising awareness has thus always been one of the fundamental pillars of our human rights work at the Congress.

The Congress is the only institution legally tasked with monitoring the application of the European Charter of Local Self-Government – and thus of the development of local and regional democracy on our continent. This makes it best placed to also have an eye on the situation of human rights in our communities, to make local and regional politicians and administrations aware of their responsibilities, and to ensure that our communities are providing the same protection to all their residents, without discrimination.

The Congress decided to have a concrete and practical approach, working on a set of Human Rights Handbooks for local and regional authorities which go beyond the methodology of an informative document.

These manuals aim at raising awareness on human rights aspects in local elected representatives' daily work, by putting the spotlight on the best practices conducted by other local authorities and giving incentives to come up with locally adapted responses.

The first handbook, published in 2017, is dedicated to non-discrimination. It sets the basis for exchanging initiatives among local authorities and furthermore

guide them in the implementation of a human rights approach to local policy making. The paper-version of the manual is accompanied by an online platform, allowing local authorities to directly access best practice examples and get in contact with other authorities.

Today, we have evidence that the COVID-19 pandemic has worsened the situation in many respects, including growing discrimination on the internet towards minority and vulnerable groups, increasing domestic violence and attacks on women's rights.

We, as local and regional elected officials, have gone through very tough times, battling with rising number of cases and many lockdowns. We now face the long-term consequences of the pandemic on human rights and democratic values.

As public authorities closest to the citizens, we can lead mobilisation for more resilient, and more inclusive communities. But for this, we need to fight on the same front.

In the Congress, we have set our priorities for the next five years on the reduction of inequalities, the effective regional and local responses to public health crises, environmental issues and climate action.

In this context, maybe should I refer to the second volume of our Human Rights Handbooks published in February 2021. It highlights the importance of social rights in the activities of local and regional authorities, and present a wide range of good, simple and low-cost best practice implemented by municipalities and regions across Europe.

I invite you to have a look at it. You may find relevant projects that are very useful in particular during these times of major crisis to support social rights.

Especially in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic, it is crucial to ensure that everyone has equal access to their social rights. Even during a global health emergency, we cannot accept discrimination or inequalities when it comes to access to housing, education, decent jobs or healthcare.

Today, we are currently working on the third volume of our Human Rights Handbook, focusing on the environment and some good practices at the local and regional level.

In parallel, we are also preparing a report on the environment and human rights. We see that climate change deepens existing inequalities and we intend to address this as a threat to human rights. Here again, it is indisputable that in this regard, local and regional elected representatives have a key role to play.

To conclude, I should like to stress that the Congress of the Council of Europe intends to remain vigilant of setbacks and will keep working to combat, at local and regional level, current challenges such as racism, intolerance and discrimination on any basis. It will keep working towards a continuous implementation of human rights at local and regional levels. It will keep working to raise awareness and prevent violation of people's rights in Europe and beyond.

I should like to finish by referring to the leading motto of this conference which says *"From Intentions to Commitments: Towards the Effective and Sustainable Implementation of Human Rights"*.

Indeed, we, at the Congress, can convert intentions to commitments with a broader scope by joining forces with you: the UNESCO, the HRCHR, the FRA, the UCLG, the EU Committee of the Regions, to quote a few, to ensure a joined-up approach to the human rights implementation across our continent and "to leave no one behind".

Thank you for your attention.