

Cities for Rights

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Official Event Site

2018 is the 70th anniversary of the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), the main international instrument for the recognition of rights and an essential tool for the construction of global citizenship.

In recent decades the UDHR has been widely commented, discussed and complemented with other legal commitments that develop some of these rights and establish guarantee mechanisms. However, despite the ongoing task of social movements and citizen struggles, the scenario of regression of rights is, unfortunately, a reality everywhere.

Facing this scenario, cities appear as a space of freedom, development and reception of people who seek and want a better world. Today the city is a meeting point and, therefore, a space of possibilities. At the same time, it is also the space where contradictions and risks are expressed most harshly. In the urban area all inequalities are to be found, such as unemployment, poverty, violence and discrimination. It is in this context that the city reappears as a resource of a new political and social space of grassroots democracy.

We are talking about re-emergence because in December 1998, 20 years ago, the 1st European Conference of Cities for Human Rights was held in Barcelona. That conference brought together more than 70 cities from across the continent with the common goal of raising the voice of municipalism as the voice of the public administration closest to citizens, which defends, protects and guarantees the rights of everyone. At that time, the framework was one in which international human rights commitments were decided only between States and responsibilities and resources were not shared with other decentralized administrations. At the Barcelona Conference, the municipal movement decided to adopt the European Charter for the Safeguarding of Human Rights in the City, in which the obligations of local authorities were expressed as a political commitment and were made legally binding.

In these 20 years, this movement has been consolidated and municipal mechanisms for guaranteeing rights, such as local ombudsmen, have multiplied everywhere, and local human rights policies are also under development. Barcelona is a particularly relevant example. Among other milestones, it has been possible to establish a municipal service for victims of discrimination, the discourse of social service policies has been consolidated in the form of policies for the defence of social rights and not for the coverage of needs, and the associative network of rights-defending entities has been empowered with a clearly rooted and consolidated citizen culture, among other measures.

However, the rights of many people and especially of women and migrants continue to be violated on a daily basis and society and the local administrations are facing major challenges. Many of these violations are systematic and respond to the global political configuration in the form of nation-states and the prevailing patriarchal and neo-liberal system.

So 2018 is a year of commemoration but it is above all a year of demands. Because 70 and 20 years later, respectively, we are experiencing a regression of rights in which protected spaces and advances which have been achieved are now at risk and the achievement of global citizenship appears more distant than ever.

Human mobility, recognized as a right in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights 70 years ago, is seriously threatened by criminal and discriminatory migration policies. The so-called "refugee crisis" in Europe has led States to justify and to escalate a series of anti-rights practices, such as border control externalization and increasingly restrictive security and asylum policies. In the United States, Trump's coming to power has led to the imposition of arbitrary and discriminatory home country vetoes, and has jeopardized the position of thousands of "dreamers" – young migrants living under the permanent threat of deportation. In this context, cities have become fundamental actors of resistance to migration policies and a new global player of essential importance in ensuring social cohesion in an increasingly hostile environment.

Likewise, women – forming one half of the world's population – continue to suffer inequalities and violence for the mere fact of being women. Women continue to have more difficulties in accessing the labour market and decision-making positions, and in obtaining equal payment. They also continue to attend to unpaid care work, they are still under-represented in public and power spaces, and they continue to be assaulted and murdered at the hands of men. Even so, thanks to global mobilizations such as the one on March 8th, feminism has grown stronger as one of the priority issues on the political agenda, forcing a number of social, economic and institutional actors to reconfigure their practices and policies with gender mainstreaming.

In a world in which fear and insecurity are turning into hate, and inequalities, xenophobia and authoritarianism are on the rise, towns and cities are becoming global actors of hope. We propose, therefore, a global alliance to create a common front to defend full citizenship, feminisms, human rights and democracy