Global Parliament of Mayors Annual Summit 2025
"DeCiDE: Boost Democratic Participation in Cities to Recharge Democracy in Europe"

Monitoring Human Rights in Cities: About the DeCIDE project

Democracy is globally under pressure. In many countries it is even under deconstruction. That means that the so called "primacy of politics", understood as de democratic right of a majority to change the constitutional structure of the state of law, leads authoritarian leaders to institutionalize and prolong their leadership. The neutrality of the state is replaced by ideological dominance.

One of the stakes is a debate on human rights. Human rights are a product of post-revolution or post-war (international) agreements on individual and collective rights to be maintained beyond electoral shifts. The idea is a product of the French and American revolutions putting an end to the arbitrariness of ancient regimes. They resulted in the *Déclaration des droits de l'homme et du citoyen* of 1789, the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* of 1948, or the *European Convention on Human Rights* of 1950.

The basic idea behind these agreements is that to maintain democracy politics should be kept contained within some institutional frames like a separation between legislative, executive and judicial powers, free elections, free association in diverse political parties, etc. Moreover, politics and the state should respect the sovereignty of the individual bodies. Habeas corpus means that you cannot be detained without a trial and legal defence mechanisms. These individual rights beyond politics are extensively listed in these declarations or conventions. Every form of authoritarian government or dictatorship does not in one way or another respect this fundamental separation between politics and the state and the individual. That is why they are called totalitarian.

Human rights are even more important for urban life. Because the city is a place of arrival and of utmost diversity. Urban conviviality needs even more that the nation, a respect for difference and individual rights. The city makes free (*Stadtsluft macht frei:* https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stadtluft_macht_frei) in as much as it allows for multiple communities, religions and lifestyles to share spaces and activities. That is why authoritarian tendencies in countries increase the tension between the nation and urban life. As we see in Hungary, or Turkey, or the US, or elsewhere totalitarian moves are mostly resisted in and by cities, their mayors and their civil society.

As the European Union is built on adherence to these democratic principles, we can observe that both the EU institutions and many cities are resisting evolutions towards totalitarian regimes in countries. These tensions are an essential part of actual geopolitics and the changes in international relations. That is even more pregnant with a war on European ground and with a collapse of international alliances.

GPM is mainly focused on giving cities and the urban a voice in planetary challenges and global politics, the struggle for deepening local democracy is essential. That is why deepening democracy, both in enhancing multilateral governance and developing local participatory democracy, is essential in our work. Maintaining and developing human rights is a fundamental part of that. But to put these principles in practice we need to help local governments to exactly determine what is at stake, what happens when national laws change, what is the effect of newcomers, how to cater for new needs, what are the possibilities of compensating social regressive politics, etc.

Towards a monitoring device

That is the reason why GPM has taken up an opportunity within Europe to develop a monitoring system for human rights in cities. In that project we are associated with the Human Rights Cities Network (HRCN). The aim of the DeCIDE-project is to co-create a unique set of indicators and monitoring tools integrating people and their rights at the centre of public policies and practices. This system will allow cities to regularly evaluate their achievements and analyse the influence of their work in making human rights a reality for the people. The process is conceived to constantly track gaps and areas of progress. It will also assess the most important outcomes of implementing human rights-based policies, in view of transforming participating cities into Human Rights Cities (HRCs) or strengthening the good practices of the ones that already are.

The aim is to develop a specific Standardized Monitoring System (SMS) in 10 pilot cities participating in the "Boost Democratic Participation in Cities to Recharge Democracy in Europe" - DeCiDE project. This initiative contributes to the operationalisation of the EU Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA) new Framework for locally-based Human Rights Action and therefore, to the development of the human rights cities movement in Europe. Ten pilot cities will co-develop and implement a road map through several steps, in cooperation with local civil society. As a result, the tailormade SMS will respond to the specific needs of both the cities and the people.

The action thus involves a group of 10 cities to design, implement and refine a monitoring system of human rights in service delivery. The pilot cities will adopt a participatory approach to involve civil society representatives in the process. Together, they will regularly evaluate the success of the integration of a human rights-based approach in public services delivery. The indicators will be designed to apply to projects, programmes, and services run by the municipality alone or in collaboration with CSOs.

The project aims at diverse deliverables. At the _inter-city level_, through the coordination among the 10 pilot cities to harmonise a set of core HR indicators and to standardise the M&E tools used for data collection, aggregation, analysis and dissemination. At the _city level_, through the creation of an M&E working group composed of two city officials and two civil society representatives. Participating municipalities are responsible for appointing two city officials and issuing an open call to identify participating CSOs, assisting them in selecting two civil society representatives. This group will jointly assume responsibility for attending M&E training, collaborating with the HRCN in developing and validating the SMS tools, and coordinating the local implementation of the SMS. At the _services delivery level_, through the decentralisation of the data collection to public and third-sector entities responsible for the selected key thematic areas. The structures and information flows already in place at the municipal level will be used by the M&E working group to coordinate and implement the SMS's data collection, aggregation and analysis among relevant actors and services.

Today the DeCIDE project is still in its upstart phase. The project has been launched at the large Smart Cities Conference in Barcelona, beginning November 2024. Two work packages have still to be finalised. We are in a selection of the ten pilot cities, trying to represent different regions of Europe, east-west-north-south, and different sizes and types of cities. It is not an easy process as many interested cities have budget and time restrictions and are hesitant to engage in an active and collaborative process. And then we must operationalise the human rights that will be integrated in the monitor.

The European Convention on Human Rights contains a very long list of articles describing rights and regulations. In a first phase we have reduced them in ten thematic clusters: Digital Rights, Freedoms (of thought, conscience and religion, of expression and information), Right to education and culture, Access to the labour market and workers' rights, Right to asylum & hospitality (protection in the event of removal, expulsion or extradition), Right to non-discrimination (based on

race, gender, religion, etc.), Rights of the child, Rights to access social and cultural services, Civic rights (democratic participation, right to vote), Access to justice.

In a workshop with experts and city representatives these have been reduced to three categories to be monitored in developing a prototype of an observatory of local human rights policies. They regroup several human rights at different scales and with different main actors involved. A first category are the *liberties*: Freedom of thought, conscience and religion, of expression and information. Both at the individual and collective level. In fact, that category allows us to measure the actual situation compared to the agreed conventions. The second category is the Rights to *access social, educational, and cultural services*. This is about monitoring the accessibility and inclusivity of existing social, educational, and cultural services, considering factors such as age, gender, disability, culture, language, religion, etc. It is an assessment of the match between local services at large and the demands of newcomers and urban diversities. And finally, we want to measure *civil and political rights*, monitoring the access to and effectiveness of formal political rights (right to vote and to run as a candidate), as well as other forms of democratic participation (e.g., participatory processes in neighbourhoods, municipalities, local citizen councils, etc.) That is mainly measuring the legal rights of people, human rights as universal rights, monitoring the main aspects of discrimination, both by state or by societal mechanisms and actors (e.g., the people, the market, etc.)

An open process

The foundations for an exciting trajectory are lead. A lot has still to be done. Next steps are completing our list of pilot cities. We will also develop a list of non-participant observing cities, that will be kept informed and will participate at different public webinars. After the summer the cities, with a delegation from both local government and concerned NGO's, will participate in a one-week training of the methodology. Then, the real observation work can start locally and be compared with work in the other cities. If all goes well at the end of the project, DeCIDE will deliver a prototype of a monitoring device that can then be tested more widely with other cities and in other contexts.

The project is of course a coproduction of a monitoring device to be used to improve diagnosis and objectivate the situation in a city. But it will also help mobilize and instruct the necessary struggle for deepening democracy and defending basic rights. They are under threat.

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"Empowering, Engaging, and Caring Cities: Delivering Democracy and Development with the Next Generations"

The Democratic Challenge: Reclaiming the City

Democracy is still in the making in most parts of the world. The Democracy Index[1] states that only 6,4% of the world population lives in full democracies, 39,3% in flawed democracies, 17,2% in hybrid regimes and 37,1% in authoritarian regimes. There remains a lot to do in countries as a whole, but democracy is a vital challenge for urban governance democracy.

The complexity and urgency of the challenges in the urban system, such as climate collapse, biodiversity, social inequality, poverty, housing, migration, cultural and ethnic diversity, and so on cannot be tackled without consent, support and collaboration of the population. Urban democracy is about institutions, but also about practices.

To make the transition urban democracy is key to creating sustainable and livable cities.

1.   Democratizing Institutions
a.   Cities' scale, diversity, density, and dynamism make the practice of urban democracy foundational in strengthening democracy at the regional, national, and global scales. Urban democracy entails engaging with elected officials over everyday needs, such as transportation, sanitation, and public safety. It can foster alternative perspectives and coalitions from those that define national politics and can generate democratic pluralism reflective of the population. It can serve as a check on corruption and disenfranchisement, and a bulwark against authoritarianism.

b.   Governance and its related institutions should express *the will of the people*. This results from public debate, providing options and choices and designating leaders who are accepted. Organizing *representative democracy* implies *free elections* where political parties are guaranteed *free expression* and where the composition of the city council as the legislative body is representative. The executive body should be led by an elected mayor and be supported by a majority of councilors. The city institutions and public administration represents both continuity and reflects the priorities chosen.

Urban politics and governance have differing formats, some are hybrid forms that adapt to local traditions, the national context and the organization of civil society as a whole. Nowhere is there a fully representative urban democracy with elected officers in all positions, for instance, mayors are sometimes not elected. International comparative research and global benchmarking could improve models. An *Urban Democracy Index* would be a good indicator.

c.   *Local governance* is mostly considered as part of the regional or national state. It is subject to national law or customs and has more or less autonomous competences, it is largely dependent on the central state financially. Urban governance is different from national governance, as a city is not a country. The country has the authority to develop the overarching regulatory framework whereas a city has greater legitimacy as it is closer to citizens and to the local complexity. Often there is a *tension between the local and the national*. That tension is part of the democratic challenge.

d.   Democratic rule is bounded within a specific territory, such as the organization of the local state or that of the municipality or the city. Yet urbanity *always cuts across borders*. Every city has

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[1] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Democracy_Index;

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an intensive interaction with its immediate hinterland which is part of its local ecosystem - the metropolitan area. The urban region must be integrated in democratic governance. Every city is also part of a much larger urban network, a cross-border space of flows and interactions. These require agreements or even treaties that are essential to urban development and have to be integrated into the overall framework of democratic control.

e.   Urban democracy cannot be seriously developed without *empowering cities* at the national, continental and global level of governance. This is why giving cities and their mayors a decisive voice in international governing bodies and in international decision-making processes is central to the endeavors of GPM as the majority of the world population live in urban contexts. Most planetary challenges, such as the climate, the pandemic or even war, need cities to leverage solutions. There is a dramatic democratic deficit given that global regulation is only a matter for nation-states, interstate bodies and global institutions.

2.   Democratizing Society
a.   Urban society is complex and their communities mostly superdiverse and so the idea that representative democracy is good enough with elections every four, five or six years is completely inadequate. It cannot represent and express the consent of the population or the often volatile and changing views of their citizens. Everywhere and especially in cities urban government is under increasing pressure by civil society groupings, inhabitants or neighborhood councils, thematic action groups or organized oppositions.

For this reason across the world forms of *participation*, deliberative forms of *consultation*, *citizens' assemblies* or *direct democracy* are emerging as a complement to regular governance. These take on different forms whether people are selected, elected, drawn or self-appointed, whether they advise or make decisions or proposals or are involved in participatory budgeting. They rely on transparency and accountability from elected officials and local government agencies.

Because of its local scale, complexity, and diversity, urban society is uniquely positioned to foster these forms of democratic engagement. In any case well prepared processes of co-shaping and creating tend to help deliver better solutions to complex interrelated problems. These temporary forms of participation also allow places to integrate wider audiences such as the visions of users, visitors or commuters in choices rather than being based solely on those of inhabitants/citizens.

b.   To respond to the urgent transitions required, good governance needs more *cross-cutting policies* in order to overcome administrative silos. To be successful they need the support and collaboration of the population. Livable cities imply good public services, a redistributive economy, active citizenship and solidarity. That is why good urban governance implies integrated territorial planning that is adapted to its districts or neighborhoods and with special attention to the rights of women, minorities and marginalized groups. It is here that participatory democracy can be most effective.

3.   Democratizing the urban spirit
a.   Living together in a city requires a special *urban mentality*: a spirit of freedom, tolerance and respect of diversity and individual freedom, with the needs of inhabitants, users and visitors all in mind, as well as to the environment and to resource needs. In that sense city air sets you free. It can emancipate you from tradition and communities that close you in, it allows for there to be diversity of identity and freedom of expression. That spirit of urbanity needs to be cultivated.

b.   Public life is central to the urban project. The *arts, culture and education* are the underlay that can especially express the immaterial spirit of urban democracy. The creation of real public

spaces, both material and digital, is vital to maintaining democracy. Thus, artistic or cultural policies cannot be placed at the margin of governance. They should take a central place in uniting and mobilizing the population in forming its collective identities.

c.   *Democracy needs active citizens*, willing to engage in the public good and common interest as distinct from only their individual or group interests. The 'polis' has to place special attention to forming a 'demos'. This is a form of political solidarity so all citizens can live the life of their choice. It is not only a mission for education or social work, but also for the media and press. An additional mission for governments is to realize that the force of democracy lies in how it handles minorities and protest. The spirit of democracy is not only a form of government, but above all a project for human rights, freedom, equality and solidarity.

The challenge of Urban Democracy is not merely a formal question. It is a quest for places to have a chance to self-govern appropriate to our conditions where the majority of humanity is living. The challenge is even more vital given globalizing processes where cities are competing nodes in global markets and where the pandemic and geopolitical effects of war are causing deep stress. Cities will have to develop new economic models based on more circular and foundational economy ideas which highlight the centrality of local resources or local ecosystem services. To do that they will need new competences and new forms of governance. This is a global agenda, with mayors and cities at the forefront and focusing on movements like the New Municipalism [2].

A) No democracy can exist without effective institutions and transparent government. Designing progress in urban democracy is not only about strengthening local governance and its institutions, but also negotiating a new relationship between the regional, the central state and the global.

B) Cities have unique capabilities to engage residents and foster transparency and accountability in government. No democracy can flourish without an active civil society. Without a better mobilization and inclusion of citizens and local inhabitants, particularly marginalized groups, effective and pluralistic democracy cannot be deepened, but also solutions to complex problems will not be adequately addressed.

C) No democracy can be nurtured without educated citizens. Democratizing is a practice. It nurtures and is nurtured by public life. It involves special attention to education, modernization, arts and culture and to the immaterial conditions of living together.

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[2] https://democracycollaborative.org/learn/publication/whats-so-new-about-new-municipalism, https://scholar.google.be/scholar?q=New+municipalism+definition&hl=nl&as_sdt=0&as_vis=1&oi=scholart,