DeCiDE
Recharge Democracy and Human Rights in Cities

Global Parliament of Mayors

HRCN HUMAN RIGHTS CITIES NETWORK

**Project Name:** *"Boost Democratic Participation in Cities to Recharge Democracy in Europe" (DeCiDE)*
**Implementing Organisations:** *Global Parliament of Mayors and Human Rights Cities Network*
**Duration:** *2 Years - Starting October 2024*

## Project Summary

The **Global Parliament of Mayors (GPM)** and the **Human Rights Cities Network (HRCN)** invite cities to embark on the "Boost democratic participation in cities to recharge democracy in Europe" (DeCiDE) project. This EU funded project aims to strengthen local democracy and to reinforce citizens' rights in the delivery of public policies.

The DeCiDE project envisages the development of a monitoring system for human rights in cities, in respect of each city's political priorities and challenges. This unique system foresees the co-production, between local administration and civil society representatives, of a set of indicators and monitoring tools integrating people and their rights at the center of the public policies and practices. With this, local authorities will enhance a human rights-based approach in their public services and will be able to regularly assess the impact of their work on people's life through a democratic and inclusive approach.

### Scope

The project will involve **10 pilot cities** from 10 European cities selected based on criteria related to geographical balance, size of the city, its diversity, and the level of commitment to human rights. The main participants in the project will be representatives of the local administration and local civil society.

### Objective

The overall objective of the project is to **enhance urban democracy** and **human rights practices** in European cities, through community participation in human rights monitoring and knowledge sharing between cities' networks.

The aim is to enhance urban equality, diversity and democratic participation. By doing so, participating cities will also become part of a wider network promoting human rights and democracy. While fostering **solutions to make human rights a reality in cities based on expertise and exchanges among peers**, the DeCiDE project will also reinforce the development of the human rights cities' movement at the local, regional and global level.

Funded by the European Union

The project will contribute to achieving the following Specific Objectives (SO) at the outcome level:

1. Support ten cities European cities to **improve monitoring capacities** of public service delivery with a participatory, inclusive and human rights-based approach;
2. **Strengthen** cities and local civil society's **capacity to guarantee democratic participation** and **access to human rights** through enhanced consultation mechanisms with Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) in the design of public services;
3. **Improve knowledge of the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights** through capacity building and exchange of experience to translate it into practices at local level, promoting solidarity among citizens and engaging transnational city networks in policy dialogue.

## Main Activities

The first year of the project will mainly focus on the training and the co-design of the monitoring system, with the support of a senior monitoring expert. During the second year, participating cities will implement the monitoring system while taking part in a wider capacity-building programme run by academics affiliated with the project. Regular exchanges of good practices and sharing of experience among participants will strengthen the network of cities.

While **most of the project activities will be online** to ensure costs and time efficiency for participating cities, key high level events in person will ensure bonding ties among participants. The costs for the in-person activities will be partially covered by the project. The project includes the following main activities:

- Official **launch of the project** (**in-person**, November 2024);
- **Developing of a participatory and inclusive methodology** for the monitoring system (**online**, first year);
- **Training on a participatory and inclusive monitoring system** (**in-person**, Fall 2025);
- **Implementation** of a participatory and inclusive monitoring system (**online**, between the first and the second year);
- **Standardisation and exchange of good practices** on a participatory and inclusive monitoring system (**online**, second year);

- **Consultations with civil society** on the shaping, implementation and evaluation of public policies (**online**, second year);
- **Raising awareness about the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights** (**online**, throughout the project);
- **High level policy dialogue** and consultation meetings with citizens, EU institutions and policy makers (**in-person**, second year);
- **High level panel discussion raising awareness about the monitoring system** (**in-person**, second year).

The in-person activities in which cities are expected to participate are the exchange of good practices and the high level policy dialogue, both taking place in the second year of the project.

## Expected Commitments

Each city will form a Monitoring & Evaluation Working Group (M&E WG) that will be the contact point between the municipality and the project. Each working group will include two municipal representatives and two representatives of local civil society that will coordinate the work for the co-design and implementation of the monitoring system locally. The M&E WG will activate the relevant technical expertise within the municipality and among civil society organisations to create a local dynamic to ensure the co- development and the adaptation of the monitoring system to the local context.

Participating municipalities are responsible to appoint two officers as focal points and members of the M&E WG. The time to be dedicated to the project is estimated at around 5% of their working time on average, depending on the period and the activities to implement. Focal points from the concerned departments are responsible to circulate the information and collect updates on the development of the monitoring system over time.

## Contact Information

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Funded by the European Union

## Participating Cities

Braga, Portugal

The Hague, Netherlands

Ghent, Belgium

Padova, Italy

Krakow, Poland

Jozsefvaros, Budapest

Chisinau, Moldova

Cluj-Napoca, România

Benalmádena, Spain

## Launch of the DeCiDE Project at the Smart City Expo in Barcelona


***On November 6, 2024***, the Global Parliament of Mayors (GPM) and the Human Rights Cities Network (HRCN) proudly launched the project "DeCiDE: Boost Democratic Participation in Cities to Recharge Democracy in Europe" at the Smart City Expo in Barcelona. This ambitious initiative aims to enhance democratic engagement and human rights-focused governance across European cities, fostering more inclusive and participatory urban environments.
The DeCiDE project will develop an innovative monitoring tool to assess and promote human rights in cities. This tool, created through collaboration with local governments, academic experts, and civil society organizations across ten cities, will support municipalities in adopting policies that promote urban equality, diversity, and democracy.

During the launch event, a distinguished panel discussed the importance of empowering cities to champion democracy and human rights. *Dr. Eric Corijn of GPM* highlighted the essential role cities play in advancing democracy, while *Tijn Kuyper, Digital Innovation Advisor for The Hague*, outlined the project's significance for urban governance. *Councillor Nina Abrahamczik of Vienna*, which has recently been named EU Capital of Democracy, shared insights on the city's commitment to human rights and democratic values. *HRCN Founder Frederique Hanotier* presented the scope pf the project, its aims and its importance for cities, while moderating the discussion between panelists.

The event was attended by around 60 representatives of cities, civil society and private enterprises representing at least 14 European countries.

## Human Rights Monitoring: Turn Theory into Practice

*"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."* Eleanor Roosevelt

Monitoring human rights at the local level is a fundamental step to becoming a human rights city and ensuring the rights of people are upheld. Local actors can face challenges in putting this into practice. To address this, the Human Rights Cities Network (HRCN) held the webinar "Human Rights Monitoring: Turn Theory into Practice", on 17 December 2024, as part of our "DeCiDE - Boost Democratic Participation in Cities to Recharge Democracy in Europe" project, in collaboration with the Global Parliament of Mayors.

The moderator Margarita Spasova, Acting Director of the HRCN, was joined by an exciting panel:

- Dr. Éva Tessza Udvarhelyi: Deputy Mayor of Józsefváros, who is one of the participants of the DeCiDe project, as opening speaker;
- Sirpa Rautio: Director of the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, as keynote speaker;
- Paul Maassen: Chief of Global Programmes at Open Government Partnership;
- Benedetto Zacchiroli: President of the European Coalition of Cities Against Racism;
- Fionn Toland: Researcher at the Centre for Applied Human Rights at the University of York.

All the panelists highlighted the power that local actors have to fulfill and protect the rights of people, but that they need to take a participatory approach to monitoring and data collection. On this, Mr. Masseen underscored the importance of adopting a bottom-up approach, where communities actively co-create and shape solutions to the challenges they face – a strategy closely aligned with the mission of our DeCiDE project. The participatory approach of co-creating monitoring indicators with the involved cities is a crucial aspect of our project.

*"Working for the people, with the people"*, emphasised Mr. Masseen.

### *The Importance of Monitoring and Data-Driven Policy*

Data is imperative to empowering local actors in making informed decisions and driving sustainable, community-driven solutions. The collection of good data is both essential and labour-intensive, as acknowledged by Ms. Rautio. She highlighted the importance of collecting data from many different sources, such as civil society organisations, local ombudsman, and academia. This was reiterated by Mr. Toland, who explained that the York Human Rights City Network uses case studies from local civil society organisations. The Fundamental Rights Agency carries out widespread surveys, collecting thousands of data points, such as on Roma populations and gender-based violence, that can help local actors understand the issues at hand and what types of services are required. Ms. Rautio suggested that looking at these resources is not only important for the data itself, but also to understand the methodology that can be adapted by local actors to fit their research needs.

Monitoring human rights in local policies and services is also imperative to ensuring accountability, promoting equity, and verifying that policies truly benefit the rights holders they are designed to protect. Mr. Zacchiroli shared that the European Coalition of Cities Against Racism has a data working group and a software where all cities can fill in yearly with their data and best practices, allowing them and the organisation to track their progress. He highlighted that this is also important for policymakers in the member cities because the findings are used to evaluate the efficiency of their policies.

There were queries amongst the attendees about how to collect data when one has limited manpower. Mr. Toland responded that, at the York Human Rights City Network, the data collection is done by external institutions. Then he alone gathers it, but involves civil society organisations and local political representatives in the analysis. This shows that it is possible to collect data in a small team with limited resources, and that engaging relevant stakeholders can facilitate the process.

### *Best City Practices from the Webinar*

The panelists shared many good practices, not only in terms of monitoring, but also what cities can do to improve human rights oriented services at the local level. Ms. Rautio shared an important framework, which the Human Rights Cities Network contributed to, with concrete examples on how to become a Human Rights City.

Cities play a big role in upholding the rights of people. Despite being one of the poorest districts in Budapest, Ms. Udvarhelyi stated that the municipality of Józsefváros has created a stronger safety net for its residents as that of the national level was deemed insufficient by the municipality. This demonstrates that using a human rights based approach is possible on a smaller budget. It also shows how municipalities can provide solutions for national problems and shortages. In a similar vein, Mr. Zacchiroli explained that to counter Italy's restrictive nationality laws, Bologna introduced an honorary citizenship 10 years ago to all newborns in Bologna with foreign parents. Although more symbolic than concrete action, it demonstrates how cities can change the narrative and make people feel more included— an essential step in addressing the divisions present in today's society.

Streamlining citizen participation is imperative to ensure reforms and better implementation of solutions. Józsefváros was the first district to open an office of community participation in the country, a practice that has now spread to other municipalities. Mr. Masseen gave the example of Decide Madrid that began in 2015 to promote participatory budgeting, which has since been used in over 100 places. Similarly, the York Human Rights City Network chose its five priority rights based on public surveys given to the local communities, and the indicators were chosen through focus groups which were held with local civil society organisations. This further highlights the need for a participatory approach– a running theme throughout the webinar.

This webinar was filled with insightful discussions and exchanges of best practices, offering participants valuable perspectives and actionable strategies. The collaborative environment fostered meaningful dialogue, inspiring innovative approaches to address shared challenges.

Learn more about our EU-funded DeCiDE project.

## Workshops - 20th & 27th February 2025

With the DeCiDE project well underway, the Human Rights Cities Network hosted a webinar on the 20th of February and an online workshop on the 27th of February for the participating cities. The engaging sessions helped the participants familiarise themselves with our *Standardized Monitoring System (SMS)*, which is the human rights monitoring methodology that will be used during the project. The workshop was dedicated to collectively choosing the three human rights topics that all the cities will monitor as part of the project, based on their priorities and capacity.

### *Insights from the Webinar*

Our SMS is the first standardized system for monitoring human rights in cities, making it an invaluable tool for the local actors to use. The system ensures accountability and systemic monitoring, while its participatory approach promotes cooperation and the sharing of best practices among cities. Designed specifically for municipal-level use, it serves as a more effective tool than pre-existing systems geared toward national or international levels.

The expected outcomes of using this monitoring system are to build a robust system for tracking human rights progress, strengthen collaboration between cities, increase accountability and transparency, with the aim to expand the use of the SMS to more cities.

The participants were given the space to start thinking about what resources and strengths they already have to help them implement this methodology. Some participants explained they already had strong datasets, which would give them a basis of what to monitor. Others have established monitoring tools, which can be integrated into the new system. Many said they have strong communication practices, not only within the municipality but also in inter-city collaborations with civil society organisations. All these valuable pre-existing resources will help the cities successfully implement and utilise the Standardized Monitoring System.

### *Choosing the Topics to Monitor*

All the participants agreed from the very beginning that the right to access social and cultural services is an essential right to monitor. Participants from Padova shared that the city has already been working on an important project to promote this right, providing a strong foundation for the future monitoring efforts. The choosing of this right brought on a discussion about how the increase in multiculturalism needs to be taken into account when providing such services. The only way to ensure everyone has the right to access these services is if they are provided without discrimination. Civic rights were also discussed as essential to ensure that all the other rights are also being upheld. With the current backslide in democracy, this area is becoming increasingly important to monitor.

After an engaging discussion the participants agreed on the following human rights topics that they will monitor:

1. Right to access social and cultural services
2. Right to non-discrimination
3. Civic rights to democratic participation and the right to vote

In the next step of this project, the participants will participate in an exciting training in Treviso, Italy to build indicators to monitor these three human rights topics.

## Delivering Democracy: DeCiDE – At the GPM Annual Summit 2025


On Friday, 6 June, the Global Parliament of Mayors Annual Summit 2025 in Braga, Portugal kicked off with a powerful session titled **"Delivering Democracy: DeCiDE"**, highlighting the growing role of cities in safeguarding democracy and human rights amid global challenges. The event was part of the ongoing **DeCiDE Project** (Boost Democratic Participation in Cities to Recharge Democracy in Europe), co-led by the GPM and the **Human Rights Cities Network (HRCN)**.

The session opened with high-level keynote speeches that underscored the urgency of the moment:

- Younous Omarjee, Vice-President of the European Parliament, called on cities to stand firm in defending democratic values across Europe.
- André Sobczak, Secretary General of EUROCITIES, emphasized the role of urban alliances in promoting inclusive governance.
- Mayor Ricardo Rio, GPM Chair and Mayor of Braga, reaffirmed his city's commitment to local democracy and the DeCiDE initiative.
- Rainer Kern, GPM Executive Director, stressed that democracy must be anchored where people live: in cities.

The session was introduced and moderated by **Professor Eric Corijn**, GPM Director of Policy & Research. In his framing remarks, Corijn highlighted how **cities are uniquely positioned as spaces of resistance to authoritarianism**, where democracy is practiced daily through local governance, public service delivery, and citizen engagement.

The core of the session featured a compelling discussion with leading city representatives:

- Mayor Ricardo Rio (Braga, Portugal)
- Mayor Mathias De Clercq (Gent, Belgium)
- Deputy Mayor Łukasz Sęk (Krakow, Poland)
- Frederique Hanotier (Human Rights Cities Network
- Eric Corijn (GPM, Moderator)

The local leaders on the panel, all representing cities participating in the DeCiDE project, addressed key questions on the state of democracy and human rights today, including:

- Democracy and human rights are under threat across the world: How do you evaluate the situation today? Why are cities places of resistance to authoritarian tendencies?
- Why is it important for your city to participate in the DeCiDE Project? How does this initiative support your broader vision for urban democracy?
- Which of the three DeCiDE monitoring areas—non-discrimination, access to services, or civil and political rights—resonates most with your city's priorities, and why?
- What practical steps have you taken to translate human rights principles into service delivery? Can you share an example of impact?

In response, the mayors shared their cities' efforts to integrate human rights into local governance—highlighting how inclusive service delivery, participatory mechanisms, and a focus on equity are being used to safeguard democracy at the local level. Each speaker provided concrete examples of how their cities are translating human rights principles into daily governance, from inclusive service design to participatory practices that empower residents and promote accountability.

Frédérique Hanotier, Founder of the Human Rights Cities Network and DeCiDE board member, reflected on the discussion and provided a broader project update. She outlined:

- The progress cities have made in implementing local human rights monitoring
- The specific topics cities will focus on—from discrimination to civic participation
- The roadmap ahead, including upcoming trainings and expanded collaboration among participating cities

During the open floor discussion, Mayor Emil Boc of Cluj-Napoca (Romania) raised an urgent and timely issue: the impact of artificial intelligence on democratic rights, particularly the right to vote and the right to access truthful information. Citing recent elections in Romania, he invited panelists to reflect on how AI-generated content is reshaping the democratic landscape and how cities can respond.

This session delved into the global challenge of democracy and human rights in urban governance, particularly in relation to the DeCiDE project. It highlighted the worldwide variation in democracy and underscores the need for urban democracy in addressing pressing urban challenges. The speakers also outlined the objectives and the progress of cities in the DeCiDE project, and outlined the importance of co-creating a monitoring tool for human rights in cities.

As democracy faces renewed pressures globally, this session reaffirmed that cities are not passive observers—they are active defenders of rights and inclusion. The DeCiDE project offers a concrete way for local governments to measure, strengthen, and share their efforts to protect the fundamental rights of their residents.

## Webinar: DeCiDE - 25 June 2025

On **25 June 2025**, the **Global Parliament of Mayors (GPM)**, in partnership with the **Human Rights Cities Network (HRCN)**, hosted a dynamic webinar highlighting how cities across Europe are stepping up to monitor and advance human rights at the local level. The event was held in the framework of the **DeCiDE project** (Boost Democratic Participation in Cities to Recharge Democracy in Europe), a joint initiative of the GPM and HRCN supported by the European Union.

The webinar brought together city representatives, civil society leaders, and human rights experts to explore how the **EU Charter of Fundamental Rights** can be translated into meaningful action at the city level. The focus was on three priority areas identified by participating cities: **non-discrimination**, **access to social and cultural services**, and **democratic participation**.

In his opening statement, **Rainer Kern**, Executive Director of the GPM, emphasized that human rights are not only national or international concerns; they are lived and contested every day in **cities**. Whether through access to housing, education, healthcare, or public space, it is local governments that play a frontline role in ensuring these rights are respected and fulfilled.

Kern stressed that the **EU Charter of Fundamental Rights** outlines vital protections such as dignity, freedom, equality, and justice but these must be **brought to life** at the municipal level through local policy, budgets, and citizen engagement. He underscored that the DeCiDE project empowers cities to co-create tools that allow them to **monitor rights-based progress**, learn from one another, and embed human rights more deeply into local governance.

Following Kern, **Julia Johnson** of the Human Rights Cities Network explained the **participatory process** used to select the three human rights areas that cities will monitor under the DeCiDE project. She highlighted that the selection was grounded in a **bottom-up approach**, reflecting the cities' priorities, capacities, and local relevance.

Cities were presented with a shortlist of ten topics based on the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights and selected the final three through deliberative discussions, ensuring both feasibility and impact. Johnson emphasized the need for practical, city-led monitoring frameworks, and underscored that while the DeCiDE project is a pilot, it is designed to have a long-term legacy by equipping cities with the skills to monitor a wider range of rights beyond the project's formal scope.

The session featured insightful contributions from city officials and civil society organizations actively shaping the DeCiDE project:

Carmen Van Puyenbroeck from the City of Ghent shared how her city is tackling issues of non-discrimination and inclusion in public services. She highlighted both areas of progress and challenges that remain in ensuring equal access for all.

Fanni Bíborka Kontró from Józsefváros District in Budapest described how the city encourages civic and political participation beyond elections, through participatory budgeting and inclusive democratic mechanisms—bringing the spirit of Articles 12 and 39 of the Charter to life in local governance.

Farkas Attila, Program Manager at Mira! Intercultural Community, spoke about unmonitored or under-reported human rights issues, particularly those affecting migrants and refugees. He emphasized the importance of community spaces that provide language learning, access to information, and a sense of belonging.

Peter Roosens, a youth worker and quality policy maker at LEJO (Belgium), discussed how civil society can play a key role in turning monitoring results into change. He provided concrete examples from LEJO's work using experiential learning to support vulnerable youth and influence policy.

**The webinar session can be viewed here.**

The webinar was moderated by Frédérique Hanotier, Board Member of the Human Rights Cities Network, who guided the discussion through key themes of democratic inclusion, local empowerment, and practical human rights implementation. Insights gathered during the webinar will inform the upcoming DeCiDE training session in Treviso in the fall, which will be tailored to the needs and priorities of participating cities. The session also reaffirmed the growing momentum behind local human rights monitoring as a powerful tool for strengthening democracy and inclusion in Europe.

Speakers:
Rainer Kern, Executive Director, GPM
Julia Johnson, HRCN
Councillor Francesca Benciolini from the City of Padova
Carmen Van Puyenbroeck from the City of Ghent
Fanni Bíborka Kontró from the district of Józsefváros in Budapest
Farkas Attila, Program Manager at Mira! Intercultural Community And
Peter Roosens, Youth Worker and Policy Maker at LEJO, Belgium

## Info Session - 10 September 2025

Following the successful sessions in February, the Human Rights Cities Network organised an additional info-session on the 10th of September for the newly joined cities. This session replicated the format and content of the February 20th webinar, providing an introduction to the Standardized Monitoring System (SMS) and its role within the DeCiDE project.

The aim was to ensure that the new participants were fully aligned with the project's methodology, objectives, and shared monitoring framework. Much like the original webinar, the session encouraged interactive discussion and exchange, allowing the new cities to explore how the SMS could be integrated into their local governance structures.

The participants expressed enthusiasm about joining the common monitoring effort and showed strong commitment to contributing to the collective goals of the DeCiDE network.

During the session, more details were also provided about the upcoming training in Treviso, which will focus on developing common indicators for the three selected human rights topics and strengthening the participants' practical understanding of the monitoring process.

## Webinar: DeCiDE to Celebrate Diversity
## Cities Taking Action Against Discrimination - 23 September 2025

As part of the DeCiDE project's continuing work to strengthen human rights at the local level, the Human Rights Cities Network (HRCN) and the Global Parliament of Mayors (GPM) co-hosted a high-level webinar titled "DeCiDE to Celebrate Diversity – Cities Taking Action Against Discrimination" on 23 September 2025. The session built upon previous project activities by focusing specifically on one of the three shared monitoring areas identified earlier in the year with the right to non-discrimination.

The event aimed to connect international frameworks with local realities, demonstrating how cities can translate global human rights commitments into concrete policies and actions that promote equality and inclusion. It brought together city officials, international organisations, and civil society partners to share tools, good practices, and lessons learned from the field.

The webinar opened with a presentation by Adrià Duarte, Coordinator of the UCLG Committee on Social Inclusion, Participatory Democracy and Human Rights, who introduced the Guidance Framework for Creating a Human Rights City, developed jointly by UCLG and OHCHR. His intervention underlined the critical role of cities as the closest level of government to citizens where human rights norms become tangible realities. He highlighted how urbanisation, digitalisation, and global crises often deepen inequalities, but also how municipalities, with the right structures and partnerships, can lead transformative change. The framework's structure, built on foundations, structures, tools, and participation offered cities a clear roadmap for embedding human rights in their governance systems.

Following this, the spotlight shifted to concrete municipal experiences showcasing how cities across Europe are confronting discrimination in diverse contexts.

- Barcelona presented its Observatory on Discrimination, coordinated by the Human Rights Resource Center in partnership with 26 civil society organisations. The observatory produces annual reports based on quantitative and qualitative data, revealing key trends such as the persistence of racism, gender-based discrimination, and discrimination linked to health status. Barcelona's intersectional approach and its emphasis on collaboration with civil society were highlighted as key success factors in improving trust, visibility, and accountability.

- Leuven shared insights from its Diversity and Equal Opportunities Department, which employs 28 staff and prioritises proactive inclusion and data-driven policy. By systematically documenting discrimination, Leuven has made inequalities more visible, creating a sense of political urgency that drives continuous improvement in policy responses.

- Utrecht presented the work of Discriminatie.nl, a provincial anti-discrimination office that provides legal advice, mediation, and policy input across 26 municipalities. With over 2,400 cases registered by mid-2025, Utrecht's use of real-time digital dashboards to connect municipal, police, and judicial data stood out as a model of innovation. The city's emphasis on outreach and community engagement was noted as essential to overcoming underreporting and fostering public trust.

- Graz shared the evolution of its Anti-Discrimination Office, which originated in early 2000s activism and has grown into a vital local institution. Despite facing political and financial challenges, the office continues to support residents affected by hate speech, racial profiling, and harassment through tools such as a mobile "Hate" reporting app.

Throughout these exchanges, a number of cross-cutting themes emerged: the persistent gap between experiences of discrimination and formal reporting; the need to address overlapping and intersecting forms of discrimination; and the crucial importance of trust-building and civil society participation for legitimacy and impact. Participants also discussed the influence of political environments, how supportive local leadership can accelerate progress, while hostile contexts risk undermining hard-won gains. The session concluded with a reaffirmation of cities' commitment to act as champions of equality and inclusion, demonstrating that municipal leadership, backed by data and community partnerships, can make tangible progress in combating discrimination at all levels.