

Corporate Influence Threatens Human Rights in Communities Nationwide

National network of cities files report to UN Human Rights body on corporate power and local human rights challenges

The [U.S. Human Rights Cities Alliance](#), a network of grassroots human rights leaders working in cooperation with the [US Human Rights Network](#) to promote community-based efforts to implement international human rights standards, filed its UPR Cities Stakeholder Report to the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights as part of the [Universal Periodic Review \(UPR\) of the United States' human rights record](#). The UN's UPR process solicits documentation from community stakeholders, which experts and other national leaders will use to evaluate the performance reports provided by the national government.

The report theme, “[the growth of corporate influence in sub-national political & legal institutions undermines U.S. compliance with international human rights obligations](#)” grew from more than a year of consultations among community-based organizers and municipal officials about local human rights challenges. The key areas where corporate influence affected human rights include local democracy, affordable housing, privatization and the right to water, militarism and gun violence, environment and health, and racial equity. All of these issues, the document argues, are related to routine operations of corporate entities in state and local politics and in their day-to-day business activities. The report offers recommendations for national policy changes that would improve local human rights conditions.

The UPR City Stakeholder Report cites the unprecedented case where Amazon launched a bidding war between cities vying to host the company's 2nd headquarters. Many cities offered billions of dollars of public subsidies to the world's richest company, and in most cases these bids were developed without meaningful public consultation and kept secret from the public. Such corporate-led development has also contributed to spiraling housing costs and undermined people's right to affordable and safe housing. The global housing crisis contributes to worldwide poverty and displacement that is especially harmful for low-income people, people of African descent, and those with disabilities.¹ Privatization of public utilities has also limited people's access to clean and affordable water, and restrictions on the right to water disproportionately impact African American residents. Other issues included environmental justice and the inequitable distribution of environmental hazards, racial discrimination and equity, and patterns of gun violence. Many of these issues arise from the lack of effective regulation on corporate practices, and many have worsened due to the Trump administrations rollbacks of regulations protecting civil and political rights, the environment, and consumers.

The experiences documented in a range of cities—including Washington, DC, Pittsburgh, New Orleans, Detroit, among others—reveal patterns of violations of a considerable body of national and international laws and standards that are detailed in the document. The report calls on the U.S. government to provide municipalities with the resources they need to reduce racial and other

¹ See [letter to the United States](#) and other selected heads of governments from Surya Deva, Chair-Rapporteur of the Working Group on the issue of human rights and transnational corporations and other business enterprises and Leilani Farha, UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Adequate Housing, 19 March 2019. ([Ref: OL/USA 10/2019](#)).

inequities and ensure that all residents' rights are protected. Citing the U.S. Conference of Mayors, it calls for moving tax dollars "from militarism to human and environmental needs."

It specifically calls on the U.S. government to support international efforts to hold corporations accountable to international human rights standards, including the [draft treaty to regulate, in international human rights law, the activities of transnational corporations and other business enterprises](#). The size and scale of today's multinational corporations make it impossible for most national governments—much less local ones—to monitor and enforce their compliance with human rights laws, and this problem must be addressed by the international community.

The [UPR Cities initiative](#) makes the following recommendations for changes in national policies that would improve the abilities of state and local officials to comply with international human rights laws and standards:

1. Take concerted action at the national level to counter racism and xenophobia and to promote a culture that supports human rights and democratic values;
2. Create a national human rights institution in conformity with the Paris Principles;
3. In accordance with the expectations outlined in Par. 94 of the [Report of the Working Group of Experts on People of African Descent - United States of America, \(2016\)](#), the United States must take concrete steps towards reparations for slavery;
4. Shift resource allocations to prioritize human rights and support national, state, and local government capacities to fulfill human rights obligations and remedy persistent poverty and inequality;
5. Strengthen regulation of corporate practices to bring them into compliance with national and international laws; and,
6. Work with the international community to advance international treaties that hold corporations legally accountable to all international human rights laws and standards.

Organizers are working to promote local and national work to raise consciousness about these issues and to advance the report's recommendations. Between October and the UN Human Rights Council's formal review of the United States record in May of 2020, there will be local and national consultations and convenings to develop strategies that can realize human rights in our communities and cities. The human rights city initiative envisions a society where people have equitable access to their basic needs, and it helps support movement-building around this vision. UN processes like the UPR provide opportunities for our movements to change the discourse to make human rights the overriding goal of public policy.