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## Human Rights from the Ground Up Contribution to GTI Forum [Think Globally, Act Locally?](#)

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### The Promise and Pitfalls of Localism

If we look at some of the earliest critiques of the global capitalist system, they call for a return to more small-scale, locally grounded economies and ways of life. This is true for indigenous peoples' centuries of struggle against dispossession and erasure, and it appears in various forms in many other movements throughout history. I think history suggests a collective, movement-generated knowledge that sees a connection to place as a radical response to the oppressions that come from the global extractive economy and its political apparatus.

Bottom-up action and local identities are not only viable as foundations for a global movement, but they are also essential if we are to mobilize the collective energies and creativity needed to address today's existential crises. Unless we find a way to define a social project that gives more people a sense of meaning and a real stake in supporting the radical changes in lifestyles and thinking that are needed to avert catastrophe, we're all doomed.

Although we live in a global era, we all must live in a place. We must be part of a social and ecological community that supports our livelihood. Globalization has uprooted us from our places, creating a world of migrants and uprooted communities. With capitalism's expansion, many living beings have been evicted from the homes of human ancestors and from our ecological home. Work to cultivate a sense of and a commitment to place, and to build what George Monbiot calls a "politics of belonging," can help us navigate out of the dangerous situation in which we find ourselves.

## Theories of Transformation

To achieve the goal expressed by the Zapatistas of “one world where many worlds fit,” we need to build unity around a shared vision or story about how our world could be organized. I think that story is present in our movements’ histories and especially in their expressions of ideas of human rights and democracy. What I mean by these terms, however, is not the conventional understandings of their manifestations in liberal institutions and discourse. Rather, it is expressed through the language of people’s movements throughout history, and what grassroots human rights organizers are calling [“people-centered human rights.”](#)

Although many radicals eschew human rights language, associating it with liberal and imperialist traditions, what I have found in my movement work is that such language is embraced by and has resonance with frontline communities who are most harmed by capitalism. I have therefore decided to engage in activism that uses human rights as a tool for local organizing. I have found that it is useful for helping build conversations across differences and generating shared ideas and actions for the kind of communities we need for our survival. Moreover, because human rights are global—both in their formal articulation in international law and in their focus on people as human beings rather than as holders of particular national identities—the human rights framework helps get local residents thinking about their connections with people outside their own country and seeing possibilities for solidarity. It also expands political imaginations to encompass global alliance structures and institutions as well as national ones.

What is particularly useful about the people-centered human rights framework is that it enables conversations among groups that have become dangerously polarized, as well as across movements that have tended to work in single-issue silos. Based on the ancient “golden rule,” we can start from a place that recognizes that all of us seek to be treated with dignity and respect, and if we want that, we have to treat others that way. The global human rights movement provides networks for solidarity-building that can foster cross-cultural empathy and create a culture that prioritizes our humanity over differences such as race, class, nationality, gender, etc.

A concept that has emerged from my work in movements is that of “political imagination.” As I work to engage local activists around human rights claims, I am frustrated by how the prevailing system entraps us by limiting our thinking about what it means to do politics. Even radical activists tend to become preoccupied with elections (local and national) and mainstream policy debates and processes, failing to see how these structures channel our political energies in a direction that can only lead to a very narrow set of possible outcomes—none of which can help stem our society’s ecological collapse or polarization and violence. We need to create spaces where new options become visible and viable. Inviting people to think about what our cities and towns would look like if they were truly organized in ways that prioritized human rights over material wealth opens up paths to new ways of thinking about alternatives to capitalism. Without a different collective vision of where we want our communities to go, and a commitment of people to work together to lead the way towards that vision, we cannot elect any candidate who can take us there.

### Scaling Sideways and Up

The initiative to which I have dedicated my energies is the growing global “human rights cities” movement. This movement is a response that has been building from cities around the world to address the growing urgency for protections of people’s basic needs such as housing, water, energy, and other rights. The “right to the city” has been a rallying cry for people in all parts of the world, and many activists are coming together around the strategy of building “human rights cities.” The exact means for pursuing this varies across locales, but it starts with grassroots leaders organizing popular pressure from an intersectional collection of activists and organizations demanding that city leaders prioritize human rights in public policy. Cities might, for instance, adopt human rights treaties that national governments have failed to ratify (such as US “Cities for CEDAW,” i.e., the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women) or pass local legislation that subjects policies to human rights assessments and supports human rights education. A major function of human rights city organizing is to promote human rights consciousness in local settings and to build diverse coalitions of community activists, residents, and public officials committed to advancing policies and practices that support human rights.

In a recent [article](#), I document some of the work being done by Pittsburgh's Human Rights City Alliance, which I believe can be (if scaled up beyond the now rather small group of activists upon whom the project now depends) a powerful antidote to the prevailing political tendencies. What is hopeful about this project is that it is gaining traction. In 2015, we hosted a small gathering of US human rights city leaders. Our initiative led the American Friends Service Committee to host a follow-up meeting in Washington, DC, the following year, which gave birth to the [US Human Rights Cities Alliance](#), on whose steering committee I now serve. Although we have few resources, we have hosted several other human rights city gatherings around the United States to share and develop movement strategies and organizing templates.

Knowing that there is international attention on local rights conditions may not move national governments to act, but mayors and other community leaders are more accountable to the people whose lives their decisions impact, and they can significantly impact national policies. By reminding image-sensitive local leaders that “the world is watching,” such initiatives can help keep human rights on local agendas and shift discourses in ways that prioritize human rights over the prevailing, uncritical acceptance of market logics.

The goal of the human rights cities movement is to support local work that builds a bottom-up movement for a world where human rights are truly universal and indivisible. This movement is locally grounded, but consciously translocal and global in orientation. Activists seek ideas and support from folks in other cities, and our national network draws a great deal of knowledge and energy from work with our counterparts outside the United States. A key strategy that orients actions is to build local human rights constituencies throughout the country—people who know their rights and are organized to defend them. While national governments ratify treaties and participate in UN processes, it is ultimately local officials who make and enforce decisions that relate most directly to international human rights laws and standards. Yet, many local officials are uninformed about international law. The human rights movement has learned through long years of struggle that it is up to organized communities, then, to become our own “human rights enforcers.”

In the words of World Social Forum (and other) activists, “another world is possible,” and “we are the ones we’ve been waiting for”!

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## About the Author



Jackie Smith is a professor of sociology at the University of Pittsburgh and the editor of the *Journal of World Systems Research*. Her research addresses the relationships between economic globalization, social conflicts, and popular struggles. She is involved locally with Pittsburgh's Human Rights City Alliance and coordinates the Pitt Human Rights Initiative, which engages in educational and research activities aimed at promoting and defending human rights locally and beyond. Her books include *Social Movements in the World System: The Politics of Crisis and Transformation* (with Dawn Wiest); *Social Movements for Global Democracy; Coalitions across Borders: Transnational Protest and the Neoliberal Order* (with Joe Bandy, ed.); and the *Handbook of World Social Forum Activism* (with Scott Byrd, Ellen Reese and Elizabeth Smythe, eds.).

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