The Role of Local Governments and the Challenges they Face in promoting and Protecting Human Rights

**Preamble:**

Local governments play a key role in upgrading the human rights system in many regions of the world, due to their nature that constantly puts them in direct contact with citizens, receiving various demands and complaints from them. Therefore, local governments are well aware of the daily needs of citizens, which supports the strong link between the promotion of human rights and the good practices of local governments. In this regard, the COVID-19 pandemic has shed light on the critical role that local governments play in addressing challenges arising from the pandemic, particularly the social ones. **According to Maat for Peace, Development and Human Rights monitoring** of the efforts of local governments to promote human rights in the recent period, many of these governments have taken serious steps towards promoting the right to equality and non-discrimination as well as protecting vulnerable and marginalized people and providing safe accommodation for the displaced, especially during the spread of COVID-19.

Despite all promising efforts and practices monitored by Maat, analyzing the efforts of local governments revealed the major challenges faced by many local governments with regard to the protection and promotion of human rights, topped by the lack of capacity and resources as well as the lack of information available to local governments about the conditions of citizens, especially social conditions and other challenges. Based on the foregoing, Maat submitted this report to the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights to clarify the role played by local governments to address the various forms of discrimination in local communities, in addition to its support for marginalized groups and the poor, particularly during the exacerbation of the Covid-19 pandemic. This comes in conjunction with mentioning the various challenges faced by Maat during the performance of its work. In the end, Maat proposes a number of recommendations to improve the performance of local governments in responding and promoting human rights.

**Efforts of local governments to promote and protect human rights**

The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the important role that local governments play in protecting vulnerable and marginalized people as well as combating widespread discrimination and inequality, as well as protecting a wide range of citizens’ economic and social rights, especially the right to housing, by rescuing families at risk of falling into the clutches of homelessness. In the midst of this, many local governments began to support women and provide them with services in a manner that achieves gender equality and eliminates violence against women. In the Iztapalapa district of the Mexican capital, Mexico City, the local government established free and safe women’s paths in the streets to ensure the right of women to use and enjoy the city and its spaces in a safer way. The number of these routes reached 145, but it has developed a strategy called **"The Road Free of Violence against Women"**, which aims to prevent sexual violence on public transportation and raise awareness among drivers and passengers about harassment[[1]](#footnote-1).

On the other hand, many local governments have addressed the aspects and forms of discrimination that have arisen or exacerbated due to the spread of the Covid-19 pandemic. For example, the local government of Gwangju city in South Korea has adopted specific measures to ensure non-discrimination in access to e-learning and home education for children who suffer from some forms of discrimination. It has also cooperated with civil society organizations and active people in the local community, especially teachers, to achieve this[[2]](#footnote-2). In the same regard, the local government in the Korean city of Seoul ensured the provision of Covid-19 vaccines to all foreign citizens, in line with the local principles it set to promote equality among all citizens in the light of promoting human rights[[3]](#footnote-3).

In the American city of New York, the city’s Human Rights Committee conducted 30 human rights training courses from March 2020 to March 2021, with the aim of combating campaigns of racial discrimination and social stigma against Asians within the city’s local community, which began since the spread of the Covid 19 epidemic, these campaigns accuse Asians of being the main reason for the emergence of the Covid-19 epidemic, and this results in racial discrimination and a violation of their basic rights. It is worth noting that the New York City Human Rights Committee is constantly working to build the capacity of citizens to constantly respond to incidents of racial discrimination that they face, in cooperation with local civil society organizations[[4]](#footnote-4). In Barcelona, ​​Spain, the situation is not much different, as the Civil Rights Department in the city works in cooperation with many local human rights organizations to issue an annual report to monitor cases of racial discrimination against the residents of the city, in an attempt to identify the problem and confront the various challenges related to it[[5]](#footnote-5).

On the other hand, many local governments launched campaigns and appeal to confront racial discrimination associated with the spread of the Covid-19. In the Canadian city of Ottawa, the local government began taking more steps to raise awareness related to the spread of racial discrimination associated with the Covid 19 pandemic[[6]](#footnote-6). In the same context in Canada, the local government in Vancouver launched a public campaign to confront all manifestations of racial discrimination against Asians or those of Asian origin that are associated with the spread of the Covid 19[[7]](#footnote-7), these steps have also been followed by the local government in the Canadian city of Montreal[[8]](#footnote-8).

In the midst of this, the local government in the Tunisian city of Sfax has adopted exceptional measures to provide basic livelihoods for the population at high risk of vulnerability during the spread of the Covid-19 pandemic, those measures that guarantee their access to comprehensive health services, especially immigrants who are in an irregular situation, but it coordinated with the local civil society organizations to provide food to all these people on a large scale[[9]](#footnote-9).

On the other hand, many local governments have responded to the challenges arising as a result of the housing crisis related to the spread of the Covid-19 pandemic, as they have saved many families from the clutches of homelessness with various mechanisms, foremost of which is stopping the evictions of homes that will not pay the rent due to the lack of funds associated with unemployment arising from the pandemic. In Boston, USA, the local government announced the allocation of $3 million to support citizens at risk of losing their homes due to late rent[[10]](#footnote-10), however, the American city of New Orleans has taken similar measures to support citizens threatened with eviction from their homes[[11]](#footnote-11). The municipality of Montevideo in Uruguay has worked to support residents who are unable to housing expenses due to the Covid-19 pandemic [[12]](#footnote-12).

In Australia, the local government of Victoria announced the suspension of home evictions and the extension of the tax exemption for landlords during the spread of the Covid-19 pandemic [[13]](#footnote-13). In France, one million euros were invested respectively by local governments in Nantes Métropole and Loire Atlantique Department to help tenants who are having difficulty in paying rent[[14]](#footnote-14). In The Spanish city of Barcelona, ​​the situation will not be much different, as the local government announced the allocation of 2.5 million euros to support tenants at risk of homelessness due to the spread of the Covid 19 pandemic[[15]](#footnote-15). In another context, the local care system in the Colombian region of Bogota provided 26,187 services for women, children, the elderly, and people with disabilities or family members of care givers from October 2020 to September 2021[[16]](#footnote-16). Despite all the aforementioned efforts, the analysis conducted by Maat indicates major challenges still facing local governments to complete their work to the fullest.

**Challenges facing local governments in promoting and protecting human rights**

Analyzing the information conducted by Maat shows that local governments face very big challenges in the field of protecting and promoting human rights, on top of these challenges is the lack of information and restrictions in accessing the main social and economic data of citizens. Local governments, despite their direct interaction with citizens, still lack the ability to know the economic and social conditions of citizens more accurately. For that, they also lack a solid knowledge base that enables them to address human rights issues on a large scale. Perhaps the challenges that the local government in the Spanish city of Vaciamadrid has accepted in terms of collecting information is proof of this, as the government failed to accurately know the living conditions of the population, which means that its human rights response to some issues that require data has failed[[17]](#footnote-17).

The second challenge that hinders local governments from performing their role in promoting human rights is the lack of resources available to many local governments, as well as the weakness of the powers they enjoy, particularly in countries that depend on centralization in the performance of their government agency on a large scale. This is accompanied by a lack of political, administrative, and financial independence from the implementation of all activities, indicating that the lack of coordination between local and national government is a major challenge, particularly in light of the lack of a separation between the powers and authorities of the two parties in some cases, and finally the weakness of local civil society organizations increases weakness of local government institutions and the increase of burdens placed on them.

**Recommendations**

In summary, it can be said that local governments have an important role in promoting and protecting human rights, particularly for marginalized groups, because of their permanent and continuous dealing with the needs and demands of citizens. The local governments must be on the front lines and direct to promote human rights and ensure that no one is left behind. Despite the recent role played by local governments in the field of human rights, they still face a number of challenges. Therefore, Maat for Peace, Development and Human Rights recommends the following:

* Ensuring the full independence of local governments from the national authority, with coordination between the two parties regarding common issues in an approach that supports human rights.
* The need to strengthen the mechanisms that enable local governments to collect information on a large scale, as some local governments suffer from the inability to know the requirements of citizens due to lack of data.
* The need to provide resources and financial, technical, and economic support to local governments by national governments.
* The need to strengthen the local civil society and its organizations, while ensuring that these organizations participate in the local government to develop a comprehensive and human rights framework for the advancement of the local situation on a large scale.
* The need to benefit from the successful international experiences of local governments and work to disseminate them at the global level to ensure the achievement of benefits for all within the framework of the universality of human rights.
* The need to coordinate between all local governments with the national government to ensure equal advancement of the human rights situation in any region.

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3. COVID-19 vaccines for non-Koreans over 75. **SEOUL METROPOLITAN GOVERNMENT**. <https://bit.ly/37dkKRz> [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Bystander Intervention Training. **The New York City Commission on Human Rights**. <https://on.nyc.gov/3jwssZw> [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Barcelona Discrimination Observatory Report 2020. **The last report issued regarding discrimination in the city of Barcelona .** [**https://bit.ly/3jwhByM**](https://bit.ly/3jwhByM) [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Ottawa Board of Health recognizes racism as public health issue. Ottawa. <https://bit.ly/3uBBQkX> [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. COVID-19 in Vancouver: Anti-racism campaigns launch to counter anti-Asian assaults and vandalism. Straight. <https://bit.ly/3EaNs1r> [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Montreal city council unanimously denounces anti-Asian racism. Montrealgazette. <https://bit.ly/3xFfmSf> [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Challenges and responses to COVID-19: A local perspective from the cities of Sfax and Douala. UCLG Committee on Social Inclusion, Participatory Democracy and Human Rights (UCLG-CSIPDHR). <https://bit.ly/3LVv5jC> [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. $3 MILLION FUND TO HELP BOSTONIANS PAY THEIR RENT DURING COVID-19 PANDEMIC. Boston. <https://bit.ly/3vhnQfc> [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
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12. Plan de subsidio antidesalojo para pensiones. <https://bit.ly/3KxQL5f> [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
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14. Coronavirus : un dispositif d’aide au paiement des loyers pour les locataires en difficulté. Metropole. <https://bit.ly/3xlhu1a> [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Aportación extraordinaria de 2,5 millones de euros para el pago de alquileres. Habitatge. <https://bit.ly/3JDUCN1> [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. BOGOTÁ'S DISTRICT CARE SYSTEM (SISTEMA DISTRITAL DE CUIDADO). Citiesforglobalhealth. <https://bit.ly/3O8kCDy> [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Challenges and responses to COVID-19: Interview to Pedro del Cura, Mayor of Rivas Vaciamadrid. The UCLG Committee on Social Inclusion, Participatory Democracy and Human Rights (UCLG-CSIPDHR). <https://bit.ly/3xpKC7B> [↑](#footnote-ref-17)