



# HUMAN RIGHTS CITY



## Vienna Human Rights Conference

From the Universal Declaration 1948 to the  
Human Rights Cities Today

December 10<sup>th</sup> to 11<sup>th</sup> 2023  
Vienna City Hall



# Report

On the Vienna Human Rights Conference on December 10<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> 2023 at Vienna City Hall

## Vienna Human Rights Conference

### From the Universal Declaration of 1948 to the human rights cities of today

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## The Conference at a glance

Three anniversaries mark the end of the International Year of Human Rights and characterize the year 2023:

- 75 years of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights
- 30 years of the World Conference on Human Rights in Vienna
- 10 years of the Vienna Human Rights City process

The **Universal Declaration of Human Rights** was adopted by the United Nations General Assembly on 10 December 1948. It represents an international consensus on the universal and inalienable rights and freedoms of all people - regardless of gender, ethnicity, religion or social background. The document serves as a fundamental reference point for the development of international human rights norms and agreements and plays a central role in promoting justice, peace and dignity for all.

The **World Conference on Human Rights in Vienna in 1993** was the second international conference on human rights organised by the United Nations and was a major event. Its main objective was to review and strengthen international human rights standards and to identify strategies for the promotion and protection of human rights worldwide. Key outcomes were the adoption of the Vienna Declaration and Programme of Action, which led to the establishment of the office of High Commissioner for Human Rights for the first time. The conference also resulted in the first international declaration addressing violence against women.

The City of Vienna can also look back on a process that began in 2013 to become a **human rights city**. With a declaration by the Vienna City Council in 2014, the city declared its intention to promote measures for human rights in all parts of society and sent a clear signal in favour of strengthening and promoting human rights at local level and ended up to "Vienna, the city of Human Rights".

The three anniversaries were taken as an opportunity to reflect on joint successes and highlight the challenges of the present and future at a **two-day international conference in Vienna**: To what extent have human rights been realised at local level? What role do politics, administration and civil society play in this? How important are human rights in the economic system or in climate and environmental policy?

Around 500 participants discussed these questions together with local and international experts. Additionally, international, national and municipal institutions and non-governmental organisations presented their work at a human rights fair.

## Day 1: December 10<sup>th</sup> 2023

The first day of the two-day human rights conference was dedicated to the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the World Conference on Human Rights in Vienna. Deputy Mayor **Christoph Wiederkehr** and City Councilor for Culture and Science **Veronica Kaup-Hasler** opened the event for the host city of Vienna, followed by a [video message](#) from the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, **Volker Türk**, and a keynote speech from the Under Secretary-General for Global Communications, **Melissa Fleming**.



Keynote speech from the Under Secretary-General for Global Communications, Melissa Fleming © PID Wien/Karin Gruber

As part of the panel "**Vienna Conference 1993: Civil Society as the Guardians of Success?**", the historical development from the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights to the 1993 World Conference on Human Rights in Vienna was discussed against the backdrop of current challenges. In addition, the significance of the Vienna film festival "This Human World" in the context of human rights was reflected upon in a discussion.

The event was rounded off with a musical interlude by the **Sagada Quartett** from the Music and Arts University of the City of Vienna (MUK) and a festive reception hosted by the Mayor of Vienna, Michael Ludwig.

The evening was hosted by **Corinna Milborn**.



From left to right: C. Strohal, M. Nowak, R. Logar, L. Wegenstein, V. Kaup-Hasler, S. Asadi, A. Facio, I. Sajor, C. Milborn, S. Zehetner-Hashemi, C. Wiederkehr © PID Wien/Karin Gruber

## Opening

The [opening speeches by Volker Türk](#) and Melissa Fleming emphasized the **urgency of global cooperation** and the obligation to tackle current challenges in the context of human rights.

A quarter of the world's population lives in armed conflict, and there are record levels of displacement, climate emergencies, disease and global inequality. The spread of disinformation and conspiracy ideologies makes it difficult to maintain peace and impairs the creation of a better world. There is an **urgent need for action** with regard to these and many other current global challenges. Human rights are experienced, violated, lost, fought and won at the local level. **City networks** are therefore also seen as important allies.

## Vienna Conference 1993: Civil Society as the Guardians of Success?

Panel discussion with:

**Alda Facio**, Women's Human Rights Education Institute

**Rosa Logar**, Activist for Women Rights and Peace

**Manfred Nowak**, Vienna Forum for Democracy and Human Rights

**Indai Sajor**, IASC Gender Humanitarianism Advisor

**Christian Strohal**, Ambassador and Special Envoy for the International Human Rights Year 2023, BMEIA

**Shoura Zehetner-Hashemi**, Director Amnesty International Austria



Panel "Vienna Conference 1993: Civil Society as the Guardians of Success?" © PID Wien/Karin Gruber

### Central points of discussion

On the occasion of the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Vienna World Conference on Human Rights, experts who were also present at the 1993 conference discussed with current representatives of important organizations such as Amnesty International. The discussion focussed on the importance of civil society in human rights work - then and now: What role does civil society play in human rights work? What developments can be observed since 1993? What challenges can be expected and how can they be met appropriately?

The Vienna Human Rights Conference in 1993 was a **milestone** in terms of the **involvement of civil society**: Not only was it attended by more than 1,500 non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and 3,000 national and international representatives in Vienna, but 400 parallel civil society events were held in addition to the general conference. On top of this, a separate floor for NGOs was set up in the same building, which meant that it was generally possible to exert a strong influence on the [content and results of the conference](#).

The panel discussion underlined the **complexity** of the current multiple challenges in respecting and implementing human rights at global and local levels and emphasized **the importance of activism, civil society participation and political will** for positive change. The importance of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) as a universally binding document was emphasized, but it was also pointed out that human rights have never been under as much attack as they are today. The following topics, among others, were highlighted as necessary fields of action:

- **Challenges and lack of awareness:**
  - In addition to current global challenges such as armed conflicts and the climate crisis, there is also an increasing lack of awareness of human rights.
  - Human rights documents need to be adapted to new challenges, even if a global consensus currently seems difficult to achieve.
- **Human rights activism and defence:**
  - Human rights activists are currently afraid to label themselves as such, as they are increasingly confronted with intimidation and criminalization measures, including death threats and murders.
- **Migration, women's rights and political will in Austria:**
  - Austria - like all countries - has a great responsibility for the consistent implementation of human rights, particularly in relation to migration, femicide and gender roles; e.g. in the form of violence protection packages.
  - Women's rights must be recognized as an integral part of human rights and "domestic violence" highlighted as a human rights violation. The fight for women's rights is still necessary; unfortunately, these are still not guaranteed worldwide.
- **Mobilization of political will:**
  - The engine for change is and remains civil society; the 1993 Vienna Human Rights Conference is an excellent example of the power of civil society engagement, which was essential for the success of the conference.

*"The magic potion was civil society"  
(Christian Strohal)*

- Advocacy work and lobbying are central to the implementation of human rights; governments must be held accountable by civil society.

*„We are underfunded and under attack,  
we had more room 30 years ago – as the guardians of success.“  
(Indai Sajor)*

- **An economic system based on human rights:**

- In order to meet the current challenges, a fundamental reform of the economic and financial system is required; organizations such as the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank and commercial banks can and must play a leading role in this.
- The Supply Chain Act is just one of many steps in this direction.

- **Experience and learn human rights**

- The need for human rights education was emphasized.

*„The more people learn about human rights,  
the more they are willing to fight for them“  
(Alda Facio).*



## Talk: This Human World – 16 Years of the Human Rights Film Festival in Vienna

In conversation with the festival initiator, Lisa Wegenstein, the establishment of the **Viennese human rights film festival** "This human world - international human rights film festival" and the **importance of art and culture** for the implementation and realization of human rights in general were discussed.

The festival focuses on films that show images and realities of life that would otherwise remain hidden. A wide range of topics is covered, including feminism, the climate crisis and the situation of people with disabilities.

According to city councilor Veronica Kaup-Hasler, culture can act as a "positive antidote" to hatred. **Empathic thinking and empathy are the decisive power of art and culture.** It is important to create spaces for social encounters, cultural exchange and cultural learning.



Closing musical performance by the Sagada Quartett of the Music and Arts University of the City of Vienna (MUK)  
POA © PID Vienna/Karin Gruber

## Day 2: December 11<sup>th</sup> 2023

The second day of the human rights conference opened with a speech by Deputy Mayor **Christoph Wiederkehr** and a [video message](#) from the Director of the EU Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA), **Michael O'Flaherty**.

Following the opening speeches, five panel discussions dealt with various topics related to the implementation of human rights, followed by a discussion in memory of the Austrian lawyer and human rights expert Felix Ermacora.

The day came to a successful conclusion with a musical interlude by the Viennese rap duo **Kid Pex** and **Der Kuseng** and a reception in the ballroom of Vienna City Hall.

On the second day, the human rights conference was hosted by **Shams Asadi** (Human Rights Commissioner, Head of the Vienna Human Rights Office) and **Johannes Lutter** (UIV Urban Innovation Vienna GmbH). The audience was actively involved in the discussion via the digital survey tool "Slido".



## Human Rights Cities – Political Commitment and Challenges

Panel discussion with:

**Morten Kjaerum (Moderation)**, Director, Raoul-Wallenberg-Institute of Human Rights and Humanitarian Law

**Gabriella De Francesco**, Alderwoman for Diversity and Equal Opportunities, Mechelen

**Sandra Frauenberger**, Director of the Association of Viennese Social Service Providers and Initiator of [the Human Rights City in Vienna](#)

**Ulrike Taberhofer**, Local Councilor and Member of the Human Rights Advisory Council of Graz

**Andreas Wolter**, Mayor, Cologne

**Karolina Zdrodowska**, Deputy Mayor, Warsaw

### Central points of discussion

Political representatives of human rights cities reflected on the challenges and concrete starting points for action by human rights cities: What significance does the title of human rights city have for political work in a city? Why do we need human rights cities today? What challenges do human rights cities face and how are they being addressed?

The panel reflected on the efforts and challenges at a local level in the context of human rights activism and inclusion. Specific measures and initiatives were highlighted, while existing challenges and necessary changes were also addressed. In particular, the need for a clear position on human rights through formal statements and the definition of projects as well as the importance of dialogue with non-governmental organizations (NGOs) was emphasized.

- **Principle of non-discrimination and equality as a priority:**
  - Cities must deal with inclusion and diversity in a profound and recurring manner and anchor this topic in all city departments in the sense of "mainstreaming".
  - People who are not entitled to benefits and do not have sufficient legal status in the social system pose a particular challenge - these people are often unable to take advantage of social services.
  - The provision of affordable housing is a central field of action for human rights cities.
  - The audience raised questions about the funding of human rights initiatives. A particular focus of the discussion were the rights of refugees and asylum seekers. Early granting of work permits for refugees, as well as language

and training opportunities and the general creation of helpful framework conditions (education, health, language) for successful integration were mentioned as starting points.

- **Need for change and monitoring:**

- Anchoring human rights issues in human rights cities requires interdisciplinary work, specific training for the administration and continuous monitoring of ongoing processes.

*"We have to do more than the law requires"*  
(Andreas Wolter)

*"Doing things as usual is not enough"*  
(Karolina Zdrodowska)

- Human rights must be integrated into all areas of politics and administration. The more independently human rights offices such as that of the City of Vienna can act, the greater their actual impact.
- Municipal human rights advisory boards, which include representatives from politics, administration and relevant organizations, have proven their worth in establishing a permanent dialogue on human rights issues.

- **Examples of initiatives in human rights cities:**

- Engagement in city partnerships with a focus on LGBTIQ+ rights and climate partnerships with indigenous peoples.
- After the city of Graz was declared a human rights city, the integration department was founded and in 2006 Graz joined the European Conference of Cities against Racism.
- Introduction of a scholarship for people who are under pressure with regard to their human rights due to their origin.
- The [Vienna Charter for Good Coexistence](#) is the first citizen participation process in Europe to focus on improving coexistence in the city. The participation process was intended to get city dwellers talking to each other and thus raise awareness for social issues and the success of constructive coexistence - the project culminated in the creation of the Vienna Charter after seven months.
- The Vienna Mobile Pass or Culture Pass, which gives eligible persons free access to various art, culture and leisure activities.
- Establishment of working groups, departments and advisory boards for the integration of human rights aspects in various areas.

## Human Rights in Practice – Implementing the Human Rights-Based Approach

Panel discussion with:

**Manfred Nowak (Moderation)**, Vienna Forum for Democracy and Human Rights

**Dietmar Griebler**, Chief Executive Director, City of Vienna

**Nicole Romain**, Head of Communication and Events Unit, EU Fundamental Rights Agency (FRA)

**Francoise Schein**, Artist of the Human Rights

**Martin Schenk**, Deputy Director Diakonie Austria



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### Central points of discussion

Respect for human rights begins in everyday life and thus in the practice of their implementation. Possibilities for the concrete implementation of human rights-based approaches were highlighted in the discussion: What is the significance of human rights in everyday life? What characterizes a human rights-based approach in professional practice? What examples are there?

The panel discussion emphasized the need not only to pursue a **human rights approach**, but also to communicate it in an **understandable way** at local level and in everyday life. Not only was the importance of reliable scientific data on fundamental rights, discrimination and violence in society emphasized, but the **role of art and culture** in establishing action- and impact-oriented human rights cities was also highlighted.

- **Fundamental rights, discrimination and violence in society:**

- The study "Being Black in the EU" shows that despite anti-discrimination legislation, racism has increased throughout the EU since 2000.
- Projects such as "[Civil Society and Fundamental Rights Platform](#)" promote a human rights approach at borders and cooperation with civil society.
- The implementation of human rights in everyday life requires a dialog between NGOs and the administration as well as an exchange of best practices.

- **Human rights work with a focus on poverty reduction:**

*„Fundamentally, the rights of people affected by poverty must be respected, affected by poverty must be ensured.“  
(Martin Schenk)*

- A strategic approach to improving the living conditions of people affected by poverty in Austria is the Poverty Conference, which was founded in 1995 to provide support for legal action. In a joint initiative with Amnesty International, the Poverty Conference has also submitted a draft for the inclusion of social human rights in the constitution.
  - Low-threshold services are also important, such as accompanying people to the authorities as "silent support"
- **The role of art and culture in the human rights city:**
    - Artistic interventions can be used to visualise the idea of human rights create tangible symbols. In Sao Paolo, Brazil, for example, a monument was designed with the involvement of children from the Favellas, and installed in a train station.

## Talk: Global Campaign: „10, 100, 1.000 Human Rights Cities and Territories by 2030“

**Amanda Fléty Martínéz (Moderation)**, Coordinator of the Committee on Social Inclusion, Participatory Democracy and Human Rights at United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG)



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Amanda Fléty Martínéz emphasized the **importance of the international space for local political engagement**. The main topics of the network "United Cities and Local Governments" (UCLG), which has its headquarters in Barcelona, are the growth of the urban population, changes in cities, decentralization and the examination and observation of the realities of life of the residents. A **global campaign** was launched to defend human rights at a local level. 140 cities have already joined.

The work focuses on the question of what **local governments** are doing to guarantee human rights at the city level. The aim is to make these activities visible and initiate a dialog between actors at different levels. One example is the examination of the past and present with regard to the rights and living conditions or day to day realities of women in cities.

In the discussion with the audience, the introduction of human rights officers and the **integration of human rights in various municipal functions** was recommended, and the importance of human rights education, including in compulsory education, was

emphasized. One example mentioned was a project in Lund in which bus drivers are sensitized to human rights. This makes them key players at local level.

## Human Rights & the Economy – A Complicated Affair?

Panel discussion with:

**Eric Frey (Moderation)**, derStandard

**Alpaslan Deliloglu**, CEO IKEA Austria

**Alexandra Strickner**, Competence Center for Infrastructure Economics,  
Public Services & Social Provisioning

**Pradeep Wagle**, UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights

### Central points of discussion

The discussion focused on the tension between human rights and prevailing economic and growth paradigms: Can the principle of "no one left behind" be put into practice by applying a human rights-based approach to the prevailing economic paradigms, especially in cities? How important are human rights in the current economic system? To what extent is it possible to enforce human rights along supply chains and economic cycles? And what role do politics and administration as well as actors from business and civil society play in this?

The panel reflected on the challenges of **economy-related human rights, particularly in relation to poverty, trade policy and the role of companies**. The need for fundamental **changes in economic organization** was highlighted in order to meet the needs of all people within planetary boundaries.

- **Neglected articles of the Declaration of Human Rights:**

- Articles 28<sup>1</sup> and 29<sup>2</sup> of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights are usually ignored in public debates; they emphasize the need for a just international order and the responsibility of governments to safeguard human rights.

- **Poverty and trade policy:**

- Current data on poverty in Austria is concerning: 1.5 million people are at risk of poverty (17% in Austria, 20% EU-wide).

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<sup>1</sup> Article 28 - Right to a Social Order: Everyone is entitled to a social and international order in which the rights and freedoms set forth in this Declaration can be fully realized.

<sup>2</sup> Article 29 - Duty to Your Community: Everyone has duties to the community in which alone the free and full development of his personality is possible. In the exercise of his rights and freedoms, everyone shall be subject only to such limitations as are determined by law solely for the purpose of securing due recognition and respect for the rights and freedoms of others and of meeting the just requirements of morality, public order and the general welfare in a democratic society. These rights and freedoms may in no case be exercised contrary to the purposes and principles of the United Nations.



- After the World Conference on Human Rights in Vienna in 1993, there was a wave of economic liberalization that caused problems in various sectors, for example in the housing sector, which is particularly affected by financialization.

*„The power of multinational companies is considerable; trade agreements should have human rights at their core.“  
(Alexandra Strickner)*

- Is an example for corporate responsibility, Ikea's efforts were highlighted. The company operates in 45 countries and has been striving for affordable products and consideration of human rights and the environment since the introduction of a code of conduct for production and operations 20 years ago.
- **Supply chains and economic human rights:**
  - The issue of economic human rights is currently more relevant than ever: the global standard of living is significantly higher with a simultaneous unequal distribution of resources.
  - Non-binding approaches are not enough to remedy fundamental weaknesses in the economic system with regard to human rights.
- **Radical changes in the economic organization:**
  - There is a need to fundamentally change the way goods production, trade and services are organized within planetary boundaries.
  - Community infrastructures for water, food and housing should not be seen as commodities, but as resources available to all.
  - The need to fundamentally change the economic philosophy is also emphasized in connection with unpaid care work, which is still mainly performed by women.



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## Human Rights & the Environment – A Growing Challenge

Panel discussion with:

**Camilla Haake (Moderation)**, Ludwig Boltzmann Institute of Human and Fundamental Rights

**Ernest Aigner**, Competence Center for Climate and Health, Austrian National Public Health Institut

**Michaela Krömer**, Lawyer for Climate, Environmental and Constitutional Law

**Sithara Pathirana**, Program Director, Klima Biennale Wien

**Hans Sakkers**, Program Manager „Localizing Human Rights“, City of Utrecht

**Lena Schilling**, Climate Activist and Author



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### Central points of discussion

Tackling the climate crisis and respecting human rights are becoming growing global challenges. Both topics must be considered in an interconnected way in order to be able to adequately address them: How important are human rights in current climate and environmental policy? How important is the consideration of gender and climate justice in this context? And how can the social engagement of civil society, education and culture contribute to promoting the interrelatedness of effective and efficient global and local climate and environmental protection?

The panel discussed the role of human rights with regard to the environment and climate. It emphasized the need to raise awareness of the **links between environmental exploitation and human exploitation** and to communicate the environment as a cross-cutting issue. In the course of this, the role and importance of the following areas of action were discussed:

- **System change for climate and biodiversity crises:**
  - The intersectional dimension of the climate crisis is emphasized; this requires not only an ecological, but also a comprehensive socio-ecological transformation at all political levels.
  - Climate and biodiversity crises are systemic crises and therefore also require systemic change.

- The need for stronger legislative intervention through climate protection laws, the abolition of climate-damaging subsidies, the adaptation of tax law and an eco-social tax reform is emphasized.

*"The cost of inaction is much higher than investing."  
(Ernest Aigner)*

- The progress of green technologies follows a growth paradigm in the existing economic system; against the backdrop of resource scarcity, it is necessary to recognize the current era as a post-growth era.
- **Art and climate communication:**
  - Art will not solve the climate crisis, it does, however, serve as a central means of changing the perception of social issues.
  - As soon as the complexity of the climate crisis is understood, a feeling of powerlessness quickly sets in. Effective climate communication should start here and point out perspectives for action, also to counteract disinformation.
- **Human rights and urban development:**
  - The climate crisis should be an integral human rights issue in human rights cities and the criminalization of climate activists in these cities should be prohibited. The Human Rights Cities Network (UCLG) could become a lever to decriminalize climate activists.
  - Human rights should be anchored as "design principles" in urban planning and development, e.g. by addressing the following questions: Who is planning and how? Where does the material come from? What will happen to the waste product in 100 years?

## In Memoriam Felix Ermacora

**Manfred Nowak (Moderation)**, Vienna Forum for Democracy and Human Rights

**Inez Bucher-Ermacora**, Daughter of Felix Ermacora, Federal Chancellery of Austria

**Christiane Druml**, UNESCO Chair of Bioethics, MedUni Vienna, Chair of the Bioethics Commission

**Christian Strohal**, Ambassador and Special Envoy for the International Human Rights Year 2023, BMEIA

**Hannes Tretter**, Vienna Forum for Democracy and Human Rights

To mark the **100th anniversary** of Felix Ermacora's birth, a table talk was held to reflect on his **life and work**. Felix Ermacora was presented as a committed human rights expert

with a wide range of interests and activities, who **not only exerted legal influence, but also political and social influence**. His achievements as a commissioner for disappeared persons in various countries, his research projects on children's rights and his work on minority rights were particularly highlighted.



Closing musical performance by Kid Pex and Der Kuseng © PID Vienna/Karin Gruber

## Human Rights Fair

On the second day of the conference, an accompanying human rights fair took place in the ballroom, in which representatives from city administration, politics, science & research, companies, organizations, NGOs and associations participated, including:

United Nations Information Service (UNIS)

Unicef Austria

United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG)

European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA)

Federal Ministry for European and International Affairs (BMEIA)

Federal Ombud for Equal Treatment

Amnesty International Österreich (ai)

Umbrella organisation of Viennese social institutions

Volkshilfe Wien

epicenter.works - Fundamental rights policy platform

Fridays for Future

SOS Balkanroute

SOS Mitmensch

Francoise Schein (Artist and designer of the Human Rights Square Vienna)

Victoria Coeln, Wiener Lichtblicke/Nomadic Institute for Political Arts and Sciences (NIPAS)

City of Vienna – Women's Services

City of Vienna – Integration und Diversity

City of Vienna - Ombud for Children and Youths of the City of Vienna

City of Vienna – Vienna Anti-Discrimination Centre for LGBTIQ Affairs

City of Vienna – Human Rights Office



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*The conference was organized by the Vienna Human Rights Office and supported by funds from the Federal Ministry for European and International Affairs (BMEIA).*

*UIV Urban Innovation Vienna GmbH, a company of Wien Holding, is the climate innovation agency of the City of Vienna and, together with the Human Rights Office of the City of Vienna, was responsible for the conception, organisation, moderation and documentation of the human rights conference.*

*The conference was organized as an Öko Event (eco-event).*

