



*Hosted by the
School for
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REPORT

Community Meeting Boston as a Human Rights City

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I. Introduction

On April 27, 2017, students, faculty, and community members gathered at the School for Global Inclusion and Social Development to discuss the potential of the [Boston Human Rights City resolution](#) that was adopted by the Boston City Council in April 2011. The event was organized by PhD student [Kostas Koutsoumpas](#) with the help of MA students Matthew Annunziato and Maggie Schneider.

The three students have been working for several months on a research project with [Assistant Professor Gillian MacNaughton](#) to determine whether academics and NGO leaders in Boston believe that international human rights frameworks, strategies, and tools could be helpful to them in their work to advance social justice. The Boston Human Rights City workshop brought together many of the people who participated in the study to examine this issue in more depth.

II. The Workshop

A. Opening

Maggie Schneider and Matthew Annunziato hosted the event. Following introductions of all participants, Matt and Maggie explained the background to the workshop, which was to explore the potential of leveraging the Boston Human Rights City resolution of 2011. They also provided the participants with short introductions to the [Universal Declaration of Human Rights](#) and the [international](#) as well as [national](#) Human Rights Cities movement.

Matt provided the overview of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, one of the foundational documents of the international human rights movement. The Universal Declaration was adopted by the UN General Assembly in 1948, and broadly addresses the principles of freedom, equality, and dignity. In the United States, we are already familiar with the part of the document that addresses civil and political rights, as these rights are also found in the [US Constitution](#). These rights include, for example, nondiscrimination, freedom of speech, freedom of religion, and the right to vote.

In addition to civil rights, however, the Universal Declaration also contains economic, social, and cultural rights, which are not often recognized in the United States. Although people in this country are less familiar with these rights, many social justice workers already perform work that aligns with them. Some examples of economic, social, and cultural rights are the rights to decent work, equal education, nutritious food, potable water, safe housing, universal healthcare, social security, and an adequate standard of living.

Although these rights are not explicitly recognized in the US Constitution, many community-based organizations in Boston advocate for these important social justice issues. In this way, the work of these organizations aligns closely with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

Subsequently, Maggie discussed the international human rights cities movement. A human rights

city “is one whose residents and local authorities, through on-going discussions and creative exchanges of ideas, come to understand that human rights, when widely known as a way of life, can influence meaningful, positive economic and social change” ([Human Rights Cities Book](#), p. 39, 2008). Human Rights Cities is a global movement that was started in the 1990s, led by the People’s Decade for Human Rights Education ([PDHRE](#)). In 1997, Rosario, Argentina became the first Human Rights City. The movement now includes dozens of cities around the world. It aims to mainstream human rights into the aims and processes of cities to progressively realize human rights at the city level. The overarching goal is to initiate dialog about human rights and to think through the ways we are already using them in our work and how we can expand enjoyment of human rights.

The [National Human Rights Cities Alliance](#) is made up of Human Rights Cities in the US, including, Pittsburgh PA, Seattle WA, Washington DC, Jackson MI, Eugene OR, Mountainview CA, Chapel Hill and Carrboro NC, and Boston MA. The Boston City Council declared Boston a [Human Rights City on April 13, 2011](#), seeking to become a model for cities around the world to witness practical ways that the human rights framework, when widely known as a way of life, can influence meaningful, positive economic and social change. The Boston Human Rights City initiative was supported by Dottie Stevens, Diane Dujon, and Debbie Feretti, all with strong ties to UMass Boston’s College of Public and Community Service.

The April 2017 workshop at UMass Boston was intended to explore how we could use this resolution in our social justice work. It was about the work that we are already doing, and how we can connect it to human rights and in this way build bridges with other social justice causes.

B. Panelists

Following the introduction by Maggie and Matt, there was a panel of four speakers, who spoke first about the national context for Human Rights Cities and then about Boston Human Rights Cities more specifically.

1. [Noel Didla](#) serves on the Steering Committee of the [National Human Rights Cities Alliance](#), and is the cofounder of Cooperation Jackson and the Jackson Human Rights Institute, Jackson, Mississippi. Noel spoke to the group about the national context for Human Rights Cities and the work of the various community organizations engaged in making [Jackson a Human Rights City](#).

Noel began by declaring, “This is the time to work on human rights!” She introduced the work of the [US Human Rights Network](#), a national organization that hosts the National Human Rights Cities Alliance and coordinates many human rights efforts. She also argued that understanding the people-centered framework of human rights within local contexts during the [Decade for the People of African Descent](#) is necessary to build communities, effectively respond to systemic and structural inequalities, and address human rights violations within communities.

Noel pointed out that the US Human Rights Cities movement is important because it provides a national platform for communities across the regions to generate resources, receive and give

support, exchange in learning, and build a cohesive voice that represents all local initiatives.

Noel then spoke about the efforts to make Jackson, Mississippi a Human Rights City. She explained that Jackson is 85% Black, but the power is still held by white power structures. In Jackson, the water is undrinkable, the infrastructure is crumbling, and Black neighborhoods are suffering due to gentrification, blight, underemployment, mental health issues, crime, poor public education, and a severe lack of cultural engagement and economic mobility pathways.

Noel said that Jackson deserves a people-centered approach to municipal leadership, a people- and place-based human rights charter, economic mobility, and a strategically and sustainably restorative undoing of all human rights violations. The first initiative of the Jackson Human Rights Institute was the training of trainers on Human Rights 101 that included unpacking of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights to build “local to global understanding.” The institute has held intergenerational train-the-trainers sessions for a year, and is trying to engage people in this conversation. It has started working on a Charter of Human Rights.

Noel further explained the organizing needs, massive community investment, and place-based ownership in the process. She emphasized the need to create a K-12 model, as well as a consortium model linking public schools, colleges, and the municipal government to corporate, cultural, and faith-based entities. This model will help motivate and organize communities to fully invest in a charter that respects, fulfills, and protects the human rights of all Jacksonians, and that will serve as an inspiring model.

Finally, she called for a people’s mayor for Jackson in the upcoming election. She shared information about the [Lumumba Campaign](#), its grassroots strategy, and the electoral work the community has been engaged in through the leadership of the [Malcolm X Grassroots Movement](#).

2. [Diane Dujon](#) is a welfare activist and former student and administrator at UMass Boston’s College of Public and Community Service (CPCS), where she started a welfare activist group with [Dottie Stevens](#). This group was active in the community, and interacted with city and state government often. Later, the group took a more specific focus on human rights, and subsequently began the Boston as a Human Rights City movement, with Dottie Stevens at the head.

At the workshop, Diane advocated for the Human Rights Cities movement, and argued that human rights are the best way to stand up to the unjust presidency and political situation in the country today. Diane expressed the need for human rights to be realized through activism. People need to be out in the streets organizing for human rights in every realm, including in Boston’s local context. With rights-based community action, she said, community members will be empowered to demand their entitlements.

3. [Suren Moodliar](#), the founder and coordinator of [Encuentro 5](#), a “movement-building space” in Boston, provided an overview of the challenges of the Human Rights City Boston and Beyond coalition that was formed after the adoption of the Human Rights City resolution by the Boston

City Council. It began as a coalition of Boston-based NGOs, and originally it focused on a campaign for drinking water as a human right, called [The Color of Water](#). Although the coalition was engaged with the idea of human rights, Suren emphasized that it did not engage human rights methodologies. Additionally, one of the problems in turning the resolution into action was the absence of community organizations willing to take the lead, largely due to insufficient resources.

Suren then stressed the need for scrupulously documenting the truth about the places and the history of the organizations existing in the city, including recognizing the human rights pioneers from the city of Boston, such as the writer and anti-slavery activist David Walker and the African American journalist and civil rights activist Williams Worthy. Finally, Suren expressed the immense need to create sustainable coalitions to translate the resolution into meaningful action.

4. Dorotea Manuela works at [Massachusetts Global Action](#) and is a co-coordinator of the [Color of Water](#) Project. She spoke about her work with the project, and the dangers of the privatization of water. In her words, “Water is something that is going to bring us together or divide us.”

Dorotea spoke of the ways we can give life to the Boston as a Human Rights City movement, stating that “in real practice you can pass a resolution, but that by itself is empty. What really makes it move is the people.” She noted that community involvement is the most important aspect of the Human Rights City movement, and emphasized the necessity of engaging professionals, academics, children, and many other groups as a way to start.

C. Brainstorming Session

Following the panel, Assistant Professor [Sindiso Mnisi Weeks](#) from SGISD and [Diane F. Frey](#), Lecturer in Labor Studies at San Francisco State University led a brainstorming session on ideas for taking the Boston Human Rights City movement forward. Below is a summary of the ideas we generated:

(1) How could we work together to revive the Boston Human Rights City movement?

- Engage the Boston City Council to provide financing
- Engage city councilors as constituents and attend existing engagement meetings to bring the issue into their frame of attention
- Attend meetings of NGOs working in multiple areas and raise the profile of human rights
- Use human rights as a social justice umbrella
- “Create justice and love-driven pathways to regeneration”
- Stand on the shoulders of the previous and current grassroots movements and acknowledge their history as we move forward
- Engage the pro-immigrant movement and right-to-the-city groups
- Partner with activists on diverse social justice issues
- Push for municipal leaders who care about the movement through mayoral and

city council campaigns for social justice-oriented people. It is an election year in Boston!

- Push for education on Boston's history with human rights
- Push for human rights education in public schools
- Take stock of existing human rights programs in schools
- Build **trust** with other organizations and the community

(2) Do social justice workers know their work aligns with human rights? How can we open up our work to include social justice practitioners?

- We need to connect human rights with social justice, and show social justice practitioners that their work is in alignment with our goals to advance human rights.
- To do this, we need to shape and foster dialogue:
 - Develop a webpage or Facebook group
 - Hold engagement events
 - Hold a conference (potentially online) to break academic and practice silos and to bring the old network together (which, some insist, is still alive)
 - Host webinars
 - Provide community trainings on human rights frameworks as a means to ensure people-centered policy

(3) What could some best practices be as we move forward?

- Centralize and institutionalize coordination
- Use UMass Boston as a support for the movement
- Organize students
- Create an organizational committee to foster focus and root the movement in an institution
 - Emphasize UMass Boston's community focus as an urban research university
 - Ask a specific community-based organization to take on the task
 - Ensure that action is primarily rooted in the oppressed communities we would like the city to include
 - Take an assessment of resources we currently have and address potential capacity builders in the community
 - Rebuild the movement first and engage the community second
 - Choose two or three human rights issues to focus on

D. Next Steps

The brainstorming session culminated in the formation of a new steering committee of students, faculty, and community members who will be working together to raise funds and organize events for Boston Human Rights City, including David Barry, Suren Moodliar, Dorotea Manuela, [Kostas Koutsioumpas](#), Maggie Schneider, Matt Annunziato, [Sindiso Mnisi Weeks](#), [Sarah Hamblin](#), Gillian MacNaughton, and [Diane F. Frey](#). They held their first meeting May 24, 2017 at UMass Boston.

III. Biographies of Workshop Organizers and Panelists

Matt Annunziato is a master's student at UMass Boston's School for Global Inclusion and

Social Development (SGISD). At SGISD, Matt has discovered his passion for economic and social human rights, and thinks they are the perfect solution to the world's many social problems. Prior to starting at SGISD, Matt received his BA in international relations from the University of Delaware. He grew up outside Boston and currently lives in Roxbury, where he hopes the Boston Human Rights City movement will make a tangible difference for residents of the city he loves. In addition to working on the Boston Human Rights City movement, he has worked for Arts Connect International, a movement to use art as a tool for social inclusion; Strong Women Strong Girls, a female-female mentoring organization; and the Center for Economic and Social Rights in New York City.

Noel Didla taught English at Jackson State University for 11 years. She believes in humanizing learning spaces and processes. Her philosophy of life is informed by Paulo Freire's pedagogical approach and Ella Baker's vision. Noel is from Guntur, South India. As a Dalit woman, she believes in honest sharing of herself and her cultural complexities to contribute to the building of the beloved community. Her values are rooted in her dalitness. Noel is the cofounder of [Cooperation Jackson](#) and the Jackson Human Rights Institute. She serves on the core committee of the [Coalition for Economic Justice](#) and is a task force member of the Jackson People's Assembly. Noel is a founding member of the Matti Collective, a group of South Asian women in the Deep South that engage in anti-caste and racial justice work through their cultural engagement with black and brown women. Noel serves on the committee to elect [Chokwe Antar Lumumba](#) as mayor of Jackson. She is the e-learning liaison at Tougaloo College.

Diane Dujon is an anti-poverty organizer and co-editor of "For Crying Out Loud: Women's Poverty in the United States," a 1999 book that collects the voices of welfare moms, activists, and advocates, as well as scholars, in a powerful challenge to the attack on the poor. Diane moves the emphasis of debate away from eliminating welfare to eliminating poverty. She is a longtime welfare rights organizer, writer, and former welfare recipient. She has been involved with National Up and Out of Poverty campaigns, Boston Jobs for Peace, the Women's Institute for New Growth and Support, the National Welfare Rights Union, and Survival News. She was an administrator at the College of Public and Community Service, UMass Boston.

Diane F. Frey is a lecturer in labor studies at San Francisco State University and an adjunct faculty member at Harvard University Extension School. Her research examines worker rights in comparative perspective and appears in human rights and labor journals, including the *Global Labour Journal* and the *Journal of Workplace Rights*, as well as in edited volumes published by the International Labour Organization and UNESCO. Prior to her academic career, Diane was a labor organizer with SEIU, NEA, and AFT. She received her PhD in international comparative employment relations from the London School of Economics, and her BA in economics from the University of Massachusetts Amherst.

Kostas Koutsoumpas is pursuing a PhD with a concentration in human rights at the School for Global Inclusion and Social Development at UMass Boston. Kostas was born and raised in Greece, and is a first-generation college student. He has worked on a project funded by the World Health Organization with a focus on the impact of human rights-based approaches to

universalizing healthcare in Vermont, and co-authored with Professor Gillian MacNaughton the chapter “Universal Human Rights Education for the Post-2015 Development Agenda” in *Globalization, Human Rights Education and Reforms* (2017). Since 2014 he has lived in Jamaica Plain, in what is known as Boston’s Latin Quarter. His scholastic activism focuses on the creation and sustainability of spaces for human rights dialogue and action, collective empowerment, and self-determination and democratic participation in the most volatile communities, which are in the process of dynamic change.

[Gillian MacNaughton](#) is an assistant professor in the School for Global Inclusion and Social Development at UMass Boston, and an international human rights lawyer who works on economic and social rights, as well as human rights-based approaches to social justice. She has consulted on human rights for Greater Boston Legal Services, the Vermont Workers’ Center, the National Health Service Scotland, the World Health Organization, the United Nations Development Program, and UNICEF, among other organizations. She received her doctorate from the University of Oxford in the UK.

Dorotea Manuela is an Afro-Boricua (African Descent Puerto Rican) from Santurce, Puerto Rico. She grew up partly in Puerto Rico and partly in Brooklyn, New York. Her background includes positions as a pediatric registered nurse practitioner, a labor union organizer, and the first African-descent Latina to hold the highest elected office in a labor union in New England (Community, Education and Social Agencies Employees District 40). Dorotea has been a warrior for human rights most of her life. In her view, human rights are necessary for the dignity of all human beings, and these include the rights to livable wages, affordable and decent housing, high-quality and equal education, and high-quality health care services. Above all, Dorotea is a lifelong committed anti-racism and anti-racist practices activist. Her mantra is that “all people have the human right to move freely regardless of ‘race, religion or creed’ etc. throughout the world without barriers.” She is a co-coordinator with Suren Moodliar of the [Color of Water Project](#). Access to clean affordable water and sanitation as human rights for all people is both a personal as well as a project goal.

[Sindiso Mnisi Weeks](#) is an assistant professor in the School for Global Inclusion and Social Development at UMass Boston. She was formerly a senior lecturer in the Department of Private Law and a senior researcher at the Centre for Law and Society at the University of Cape Town, where she worked on the Rural Women’s Action Research Programme combining research, advocacy, and policy work on women, property, and governance/authority under customary law and the South African Constitution. She received her doctorate in socio-legal studies from the University of Oxford, before which she clerked for then-Deputy Chief Justice of the Constitutional Court of South Africa, Dikgang Moseneke.

Suren Moodliar founded and helps coordinate [Encuentro 5](#), a movement-building space in Boston. He is also a coordinator of the Color of Water Project with Dorotea Manuela. Previously, Suren was a coordinator of the North American Alliance for Fair Employment, and served as the program coordinator of the Boston Social Forum. He has a background in union and immigrant organizing. He is an editor of the journal *Socialism and Democracy*. Presently, he

is working on "A People's Guide to Greater Boston" with co-author Joseph Nevins for publication in 2019.

Maggie Schneider is a master's student at UMass Boston's School for Global Inclusion and Social Development (SGISD). Maggie has a passion for the intersection of human rights and storytelling as a form of self-advocacy. Recently, she interned for the Media and Public Relations department at Oxfam America. Prior to starting school at SGISD, Maggie received her BA in Afro-American studies at Smith College. She grew up in Dorchester, MA, where she currently lives. Maggie is excited about the potential of Boston as a Human Rights City, and hopes to give back to the community that has given her so much.