

Responding to coronavirus pandemic: human rights movement-building to transform global capitalism

Jackie Smith (15th May)

Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic makes patently clear the limitations and vulnerabilities of the global capitalist system, portending significant changes in the world economy. Given the long history of divisions in the global Left, is there hope that we might forge the unity needed to transform the global economic order? In this essay I argue that global social movement practices and history reveal human rights as a unifying and transformative framework for organizing across issues and across local-global scales. More localized human rights movements are now well situated to help unite and guide transformative global activism in this moment of crisis, and I provide examples from current Pittsburgh and U.S. national human rights cities organizing.

The COVID-19 pandemic makes patently clear the systemic crisis of global capitalism, portending significant changes in the world economy. Now in focus are the fundamental contradictions between a system organized to prioritize wealth accumulation and one oriented to promote life and well-being. Should we accept an even more ruthless version of what Naomi Klein calls “[coronavirus capitalism](#)”? Or can we overcome our many divisions to transform global capitalism?

Neoliberal capitalism’s worldwide erosion of social and ecological foundations for health and well-being fuel this unfolding tragedy. The chaotic and slow response of the U.S. Government, the denial of health care for victims, and limited social supports for the most impacted residents will intensify the global suffering both within and outside the country’s borders. Rescue packages laden with corporate giveaways and thin on help for struggling people expose the dangerous incompatibilities between corporate power and human well-being, leaving unambiguous the question of which side political leaders are on. The disruption of prevailing, market-oriented “common sense” makes this crisis moment a unique opportunity to popularize a long-emergent vision of a world organized around human needs.

Globalizing struggles for well-being

In a recent essay, Valentine Moghadam has called on progressive forces to “[Planetize the Movement.](#)” calling for work to overcome a long history of fragmentation and lack of unity around a shared analysis and vision. She points out that the World Social Forum (WSF) process has, since 2001, enabled various elements of progressive/Left movements to develop thinking about global

problems, alternative visions, and strategies for social transformation. But she sees it as failing to generate a unified structure—like a [new socialist international](#)—to coordinate action and strategy in response to new threats or openings, such as those we see today. She points to local, municipalist movements as one source of hope.

I believe the WSF process has indeed provided a foundation for global and local action today, although its significance is in its decentralized and emergent nature, keeping it under the radar of most political analysts and public discourse. By creating spaces for global movement-building and anti-systemic learning, inspiring countless inter-linked regional and local social forums around the world, and supporting network connections across struggles, the WSFs have helped extend global analyses and organizing to diverse local contexts (See [Smith 2020](#)). Significantly, the forums have helped amplify voices of indigenous peoples, peasants, and feminists in the broader, global conversation. Because of the WSFs, local activists have new tools for confronting globalized capitalism and the global and local hierarchies upon which it relies. By disrupting old ways of thinking and inspiring new forms of agency as well as multi-scalar and cross-sectoral networks and organizing, the WSF process has been a catalyst for system-transformation.

While the networks generated by the WSFs remain highly decentralized, they are more interconnected as a result of the WSF process and the practices and platforms it helped generate. They also integrate local- and global-scale activism better than ever before. Global activist networks are now more unified around shared language and analyses—and this largely reflects the wisdom brought into global movement spaces by feminist and indigenous movements. Thus, they provide critical structural and ideological foundations for global justice movements going forward ([Smith 2014](#)).

The [intentionality of the WSF process](#) (Santos 2008), privileges voices of the global South and other marginalized and excluded groups, creating potential for new challenges to the Western development paradigm's global scale, anthropocentrism, and extractivism in Left politics (see, e.g., [Conway 2017](#)). In contrast, labor internationalism has reproduced extractive, capitalist logics and obscured this long history of humanity's struggles for life and well-being, confounding efforts at Left unity.

Thus, what we learn from the WSF and related movement processes is that feminist and indigenous praxis can unite progressive movements, especially at this moment when health and life are most visibly at stake. By centering the voices and experiences of marginalized groups (however imperfectly), the WSF process helped make more visible for the global Left the social reproductive work made invisible in the racialized, anthropocentric, patriarchal capitalist paradigm. This recognition is evolving through ongoing interactions and movement-building processes, shaping what [Goodman and Salleh](#) (2013) call another “class” of labor—one whose identity is grounded in the shared foundational needs and experiences of life and community, rather than in processes of work and capitalist production:

the global majority of meta-industrial workers—urban women carers, rural subsistence dwellers, and indigenes...share the experience of exclusion and diminishment by social stratification and cultural bias. That said, ...[they] are victims only to hegemonic eyes. In a time of multiple crises, there is an urgent need for political decisions informed by ecologically embedded modes of existence. Women and men with “holding skills” have a head start in constructing the parameters of a “bio-civilisation.” *This positive concept of labour and creative knowledge making at the humanity-nature interface challenges conventional sociological categories.* By the Eurocentric model, class is defined by “lack” in relation to the mode of production and reproductive labour is deemed non-productive. *As the focus of counter-hegemonic politics shifts from production to reproduction, “another labour class” comes forward with unique capacities for regenerative knowledge.* ...The next question is: under what conditions will this socially diverse labour grouping “in itself” become a class “for itself?”

Thus, through [intense struggle and debate](#) (Sen and Waterman 2007), the WSF process helped bring forward a new set of global protagonists—that is, progressive activists who have recast a shared, decolonized history to confront the violence of capitalism towards both people and the planet. It has helped authorize Goodman and Salleh’s “meta-industrial logic,” or an “[epistemology of the South](#)” (Santos 2004) obscured by prevailing Right- and Left-political narratives.

The coronavirus pandemic is a tragic reminder that the global economic system depletes our capacities for social reproduction and thus, survival ([Feminisms and Degrowth Alliance](#) 2020). Much labor internationalism has neglected the fact that a global economy focused on *economic growth* and *jobs* versus one that is designed to support and protect *livelihoods* undermines our [foundational economy](#). Thus, the COVID-19 crisis opens opportunities not only for transcending traditional Left-Right divisions but also for addressing long-standing contradictions in global Left organizing.

Localizing human rights in a pandemic

Global movement processes like the WSFs have supported the localization of global movements and nurtured global formations like the “right to the city” movement, which are now advancing different visions of Zapatismo’s “one world where many worlds fit.” As national governments have deprived localities of needed revenues, and as economic globalization and climate change intensifies local governance challenges, new unlikely alliances are forming to implement “[people-centered](#)” [human rights](#) “from below.” The political project of “human rights globalization” advances an emancipatory, biocentric, decolonized understanding of human rights (Baraka n.d.), or what Fregoso (2014) refers to as “alternative human rights imaginaries: a pluriversality of human rights not dependent on legalism or the state.”

COVID-19 is now drawing more attention to the fact that those left furthest behind by this system are now on the front lines doing essential work that sustains livelihoods. Their health and well-being is critical to the global effort to contain this pandemic. Yet, substantial lapses in governance have undermined, for these groups especially, the rights to health, housing, food, workplace protections, and environmental justice. All of these are human rights claims, and the enjoyment of each right requires all the others. Such interdependence supports movement-building, and inter-networked human rights city activists are connecting trans-local policy conversations to global human rights discourses, drawing legitimacy and leverage via global movement alliances.

While many see existing international human rights law as “toothless” due to weak enforcement, human rights activists have been working behind the scenes to build, slowly but steadily, an increasingly potent global framework for monitoring human rights practices and holding human rights offenders accountable (See [Sikkink 2018](#)). Most notable are the establishment of the [Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights](#) in 1994, the [Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues](#) in 2000, and the [Universal Periodic Review](#) (UPR) process in 2006.

In the midst of the unfolding pandemic, this global human rights infrastructure can be a resource for people and communities worldwide. Global human rights bodies are speaking out to remind governments of their legal obligations to respect and protect rights, reinforcing “from above” the demands activists are making “from below.” For instance, in response to the COVID-19 crisis, global human rights officials have issued the following reminders to national and local governments of the continued salience of international human rights obligations, including:

- [Draft Human Rights Council resolution](#) on the human rights implications of the COVID-19 crisis calls on national officials to center human rights in their responses to the pandemic.
- The UN Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights [warned](#) of the devastating effects of many states’ responses to COVID-19 on people living in poverty.
- [Chairpersons of ten U.N. Treaty Bodies called on states “to adopt measures to protect the rights to life and health](#), and to ensure access to health care to all who need it, “without discrimination.”
- [UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Adequate Housing](#), Leilani Farha has been especially vocal, issuing *COVID-19 Guidance Notes* with specific policy recommendations on evictions, homelessness, and financialization of housing markets. Farha states, “*Now is the time to address structural inequalities in our financial and housing systems and ensure that they are guided by, and responsive to, international human rights.*”

Thus, despite limited tools for enforcement, international laws and norms provide legitimacy that can, especially in times of crisis, help tip the scales in favor of those advocating for people’s rights and dignity against politicians and

business leaders favoring status quo policies. The growing human rights architecture provides more resources for local residents and activists to advance human rights, but its effectiveness requires active efforts of grassroots movements. As more people find themselves vulnerable, and as the pandemic forces people to see that the denial of rights to any vulnerable group undermines health everywhere, there is greater resonance for human rights demands in the wider public, and greater possibility for “human rights globalization from below.”

Drawing from my experience working with local human rights movements, I have seen in recent years greater potential for appeals to global human rights laws and institutions to impact local policies and practices. The public in the United States especially has limited knowledge of international human rights, and few local officials are aware of their human rights obligations. So when local activists reference UN human rights reports and related documentation, such reminders that local officials even have international legal obligations can elicit new attention and responsiveness. We found this in Pittsburgh when we shared documents from the UN Special Rapporteur on Housing with the local City Council and Planning Commissions,¹ and when we referenced our submission of a report on local human rights conditions to the United Nations at a City Council hearing.

Nationally, human rights organizers are uniting in response to COVID-19 to make human rights more a priority in public policy, and this work is aided by global human rights bodies. For instance, [a network of U.S. human rights activists](#) sent this [letter to the State Department Deputy Assistant Secretary for Human Rights](#) on his office’s obligations to “ensure that *all levels of government—from Executive branch through state and local levels* are informed of their human rights obligations under international law.” And they have [appealed to the President of the UN Human Rights Council](#) for the chance to provide supplemental documentation for the UPR Review of the United States, which was initially scheduled to take place in May 2020.

Recently, U.S. human rights city advocates have been using the UN’s UPR process to build human rights movements in the United States. They launched the “[UPR Cities](#)” initiative in 2019, as part of work to generate local human rights documentation for the formal UN review of the U.S. government. Webinars and online organizing toolkits provided guidance for local activists on the UN process and models for local actions. UPR City organizers are explicitly advancing a two-pronged, or “sandwich” strategy that brings evidence about local conditions to other national leaders while supporting movements bringing pressure on local, state and national governments “from below” ([Tsutsui and Smith 2019](#)). Other national leaders are now more likely to confront the U.S. for its human rights failures, since they are now so directly threatening to their own national interests.

¹ [UN to US Government: Do Better on Housing](#) Shelterforce June 3, 2019, Jackie Smith and Emily Cummins.

In Pittsburgh, I've been part of our UPR Cities work, helping coordinate a [local coalition](#) that submitted a report to the UN's UPR working group entitled [Racial Inequity at the Core of Human Rights Challenges in Pittsburgh](#). Pittsburghers' mobilization against the city's bid to host Amazon's second headquarters, and concerns over developers' impacts on affordable housing helped shape conversations that produced the national Human Rights Cities Alliance UPR submission, "[The growth of corporate influence in sub-national political & legal institutions undermines U.S. compliance with international human rights obligations.](#)"

Our local UPR Cities coalition had planned to work during the spring of 2020 to prepare a local version of its UPR report which would identify specific municipal and county policy recommendations deriving from international human rights commitments. We planned to formally present our UPR report to local officials in conjunction with the timing of the UN's review of the U.S. government.

The pandemic has given local and national organizers additional time to build local activist knowledge about human rights and opportunities in the UN. The pandemic highlights that the United States is indeed exceptional for its failure to recognize the right to health, and this failure is behind its disastrous and dangerous inability to address the COVID-19 crisis. This failure has deadly global repercussions, and the UPR process provides one avenue for other world leaders to address the connections between the human rights of U.S. residents and the health and safety of their own populations. Human rights movements are needed to fortify their political will.

As an example of how community leaders have responded to this crisis moment, Pittsburgh's Human Rights City Alliance and an array of coalition partners have organized a virtual community forum series, [Learning from COVID-19: Shaping a Health and Human Rights Agenda for our Region](#). The series convenes panels of organizers helping spread awareness of local conditions and responses to the pandemic, and deliberate attention is made to generating ideas for alternative policy landscapes and strategies for transforming the status quo. Since participants in these forums are the same ones who have been working around the UPR initiative, there are synergies across these efforts, and local organizers are increasingly using human rights to frame their demands.

It is important for our movements to be conscious of the long traditions of human rights activism and its relationship to supporting the social foundations for life and health. Through this lens we can see a long-emergent human rights globalization that provides today's movements with institutional support and movement strategies that can challenge the power structures of globalized capitalism and confront its violence against nature, indigenous peoples, women and other vulnerable groups.

The right to the city movement has helped movements from below in localities around the world to "bring human rights home" by holding local governments accountable to globally recognized norms. They have helped build unity [against corporate power](#) and the health and food industrial-complexes and offer a

compelling justification for the decommodification of basic needs. These ideas, the emerging global institutional framework they are shaping, and the models of global- and local-level organizing they have generated reflect a powerful *project of human rights globalization* that supports life, community, and the human and ecological care work upon which all depends. In this moment of global pandemic, we should look to this movement knowledge and organizing infrastructures for guidance to build a planetary movement for transformative change.

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