

EVOLVING DIMENSIONS OF INTERNATIONAL HUMAN RIGHTS LAW: A CRITICAL EXAMINATION OF LEGAL FRAMEWORKS, ENFORCEMENT MECHANISMS, AND GLOBAL CHALLENGES IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

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Abstract

The global human rights law has developed to a considerable extent through principal instruments such as the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). The effective enforcement of these international norms is very much dependent on local autonomy and the ability of municipal institutions to translate international responsibilities into locally applicable policies. This study is qualitative, exploratory, and comparative in nature, reviewing international agreements, municipal policy documents, and case law of the UN Human Rights Council and European Court of Human Rights. Three nations, Germany, the United Kingdom, and India, were examined to assess municipal integration of international norms. Findings indicate that federal-local cooperation in Germany facilitates successful migrant integration, welfare policy, and housing policy, while the United Kingdom is plagued by post-Brexit divergences and fragmented implementation and funding issues. India's Panchayati Raj institutions have incremental development but are faced with resource deficits and bureaucratic inefficiencies. The research highlights that effective human rights implementation in the long term relies on establishing municipal capacity, improved intergovernmental coordination, and innovative local policymaking. Strengthening multi-level governance is necessary to reconcile international commitments with locally specific conditions and deliver effective rights at the local level.

Keywords: Local self-government, municipal policy, sub-national governance, rights enforcement, multi-level governance

Introduction

The international human rights law evolution after the middle of the twentieth century is a radical change in the world legal order, dedicated to dignity, equality and justice. With the implementation process of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) in 1948, the international community had closed a system of binding treaties, such as the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) and Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) thus implementing all facets of a human rights system (da Silva and Goes, 2025). It is these institutions that have been formed, including the UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC) and the International Criminal Court (ICC), to help strengthen the effluent and adherence approaches (Hannum, 2016). To an extent that much progress has been achieved, application of international human rights norms in fact heavily relies on the sub-national institutions of governance. The municipal and local jurisdictions stand out as the most significant participants in the global framework operationalisation as they convert global promises into the terminologies of policies, which respond to the local social, cultural, and economic interests (Benyera et al., 2018). With the

globalisation shaking up governance architecture, local self-government has become an increasingly critical arena of socialisation, providing the means of integrating global norms into local life. Comprehending the dynamic characteristics of global human rights law, thus, involves further investigation into how local institutions adapt international standards to multi-level systems of governance, bridging the international, national and local governance. The adoption of these international standards, however, has been sporadic, not coordinated, at most at the municipal level. Though most states are signatories to major treaties in principle, their realisation process has been disrupted by administrative, political, and budgetary barriers in transferring policies to sub-national levels. Weak capacities of the institutions, incoherent legal frameworks, and divided priorities between domestic priorities and international obligations usually exist in sub-national governments (Dann and Riegner, 2019). In most states, the tensions between national sovereignty and international duties further complicate the role of municipality responsibilities, where a local governmental entity is confused about its roles in policymaking and the enforcement of policies (Cioffeno et al., 2022). There is no autonomy and efficient division of resources, with political limitations, and therefore, not all states are implemented equally (Duwell and Bos, 2016). As much as there are hopes that international law exhibits universal rights, there are loopholes due to the insufficient capacity of municipalities and gaps between government structures that have created colossal gaps in enforcement. The forces of multi-level governance can explain the domestic implementation of the international human rights norms. This is a view in which power, responsibility and choice are distributed through the framework of global, national and municipal systems. It shows the extent to which such levels make a difference in governance in a quest to ensure international commitments are rewarded and manifested in reality. Closely allied with this is the principle of subsidiarity, that policy and decision should be made and implemented as near to these people as possible to affect them. These approaches present a solid basis to investigate intercountry differences in the implementation of municipal governments by providing renewed ability to adjust international regimes to local contexts of a variety of social, economic, and cultural environments (smilingly called the B caricature in splitting local and international resistance). They also explain how local governments in certain regions can effectively transfer international commitment into policy, and in other regions, there are more structural or financial or institutional weaknesses ailed due.

The twenty-first century brings about new transnational issues, which increase disparity and impose more burdens on local governments. Another reason to initiate mass displacement is climate change, forcing municipalities to deal with housing shortages, resource provision, and social protection policies, as well as maintain their human rights commitments (Estrada-Tanck, 2016). Likewise, mass migrations and refugee flows strain local infrastructures and force the local jurisdictions to balance between humanitarian duty and monetary and administrative scarcity. The challenge of governance that increases with digitalisation, the new technologies of artificial intelligence, facial recognition, and mass surveillance, leads to acute ethical and legal issues found in the arena of privacy, autonomy, and algorithmic bias (Almeida et al., 2022). Also, the sub-national vulnerabilities of a legal framework, as seen during global health crises (such as the COVID-19 pandemic), have witnessed emergency response situations that tended to conflict with the human rights safeguarding process (Dabrowska-Klosinska, 2021). These additive pressures, saddled with economic globalisation and overlapping regulatory landscapes, expose municipalities to the risk of a mandating splinter (and the corresponding policy controversy) to implement it effectively (Akpuokwe et al., 2024). In these regards, success in attaining sustainability in human rights enforcement takes the form of multi-level governance, which would cut across international commitments to local realities. Municipal governments should also have sufficient financial resources, capacity of the institution and absence of government interference so as to make rights-based policies fit the local contexts. The history of adequate attempts, though, has not adequately considered the variations due to jurisdictions in enforcement itself, thus leaving significant gaps in

the extent captured by their performance in the effective implementation of international frameworks in efficient local policy. This paper addresses these gaps by looking at the encounter between international human rights commitments and local execution plans. It considers how sub-national authorities convert global obligations into action, focusing on the administrative, policy, and institutional challenges they encounter. Drawing lessons from Germany, the United Kingdom, and India, the study surveys different governance models and municipal strategies to outline possibilities and constraints in rights enforcement. In doing so, it promotes enhanced comprehension of multi-level governance and emphasises the key position of the local self-government in advancing inclusive, equitable, and sustainable protection of human rights.

Objectives of the Study

1. To analyse the evolving dimensions of international human rights law and assess how global legal frameworks influence municipal governance structures, local policy implementation, and the responsibilities of local self-government within multi-level governance systems.
2. To examine the institutional, administrative, and financial opportunities and challenges faced by sub-national governments in enforcing international human rights obligations while balancing local governance priorities and resource constraints.

Research Questions

1. How do evolving international human rights norms shape the roles, responsibilities, and policy approaches of local self-government institutions in ensuring effective rights protection?
2. What are the key institutional, fiscal, and administrative challenges that regional and municipal governments face in translating international human rights commitments into locally adapted policies?

Literature Review

The development of international human rights law during the twentieth and twenty-first centuries is a progressive evolution from the state-focused style to a multi-level governance system of global, regional, and local arrangements. The adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948 and subsequent treaties such as the ICCPR and ICESCR formed the basis for the safeguarding of fundamental rights. Regional frameworks such as the European Convention on Human Rights and the Court of Justice of the European Union case law have then extended the depth and scope of those safeguards (Kelemen, 2016). Efforts to formalise human rights compliance have likewise led to the creation of specialised mechanisms, like efforts toward a World Court of Human Rights, to bridge international enforcement (Rasilla, 2019). Moreover, reforms in initiatives concerning ocean governance and international environmental law reflect the growing convergence between human rights and more general sustainability concerns, reflecting the need for adaptive legal measures (Petrelli, 2025). Such developments illustrate a continuing trend towards multi-level accountability, whereby local, national, and international institutions increasingly bear responsibility for ensuring effective enforcement of human rights (Rosenau, 2021). Although such treaties establish universal rights, their strengthening depends to a large extent on the manner in which local governments adopt them in municipal charters, housing systems, welfare initiatives and in urban administration policies. Incorporation of international human rights law is taking place more and more in dependency on municipal governance preferences, which are the key impetuses of rights policy application in a wide variety of social, economic and political contexts. Decentralisation tendencies have entrenched the status of local governments in localising international responsibilities in systems that can be locally operated, yet there exist vast differences in their realisation worthiness to fit (Rosenau, 2021). Comparative examination highlights the manner in which regional courts, such as the European Court of Human Rights and European Court of Justice, influence local policymaking through the establishment of legal precedents and conformity with international

standards. Nonetheless, there is inconsistent implementation because of the lack of coherent enforcement of ownership, especially in situations when the political intents or resource constraints deny municipalities the opportunity to honour their commitments (Rensmann, 2017). Furthermore, the increasing integration between the arrangements of corporate social responsibility (CSR), environmental, social, and governance (ESG) reporting, and local policy development is revealing that private actors influence the creation of rights protection at sub-national levels (Kandpal et al., 2024). Such an interjunction between public and private systems of government restates the necessity of collaboration policies, which connect the international human rights norms with realities domestically. In the absence of such alignment, variations in application undermine both the universality and the effectiveness of right protection, particularly in multiform sociopolitical contexts. Although there has been increasing interest in international frameworks, there are still research gaps relative to monitoring at the municipal level and the differences in ability among local governments to effectively execute human rights protection at the local level. The emerging condition of global human rights enforcement is increasingly exposed to global-level issues that have direct implications for local authorities. There are increasing migration pressures and refugee disasters that increase pressure on the local institutions tasked to provide human rights needs to shelter, provide social welfare, and integrate beyond their previous capacity (Huntington and Scott, 2020). Moreover, the development of new information and communications systems and the globalisation of digital media have pitched freedom of expression, surveillance, and regulating algorithms, which demand the involvement of local governments responsible for the development of regulations based on rights (Sander, 2019). Municipal governments are also vulnerable to climate and environmental concerns, especially in light of the fact that e-waste management, resource supply, and climate displacement demand joint efforts between the international, national, and sub-national levels (Khan, 2016). In addition, there is a growing need for flexibility between the privacy and publicity of governance, as international corporations undergo globalisation and technology transformation, with new waves of control expanding to the domestic scope of regulating and enforcing the rights (Narula et al., 2019). The threats indicate the necessity of creative multi-level implementations that enable the capability of local institutions to respond to arising weaknesses and also stay tied to the international human rights commitments. Without adaptation, the cities are at risk of falling behind when dealing with advanced cross-border complexities that can characterise twenty-first-century governance (Rosenau, 2021).

Materials and Methods

Research Design

To determine emerging dimensions of international human rights law in sub-national governance, the research employed the use of a qualitative research design, exploratory and comparative studies. Multilevel analysis was carried out to view the international legal codes interpreted and applied in some selected jurisdictions. Research intent took the form of an investigation of trends, differences, and interests in sub-national enforcement mechanisms. Through the comparison of other municipal systems, the authors also intended to recognise points of convergence and divergence within policy accommodation, incorporation of law and practice, and the administration, reflecting a broader view of what occurs between the commitments of universal human rights and local systems of government.

Data Sources

The study data were gathered through both primary and secondary sources of the international human rights law and local governance. These were primary sources such as international conventions, treaties and the case law of the United Nations and the European Court of Justice. Academic articles, government, and municipal policy papers were the secondary sources. Sub-national implementation processes were also studied through a comparative analysis of legal studies

and legislation at the country level. Data obtained was fitted to establish integration and compliance patterns across the levels of government with a view to obtaining the entire picture of policy challenges and the implementation procedures.

Case Study Selection

In Europe, the United Kingdom, Germany, and India were chosen because of their specific municipal model of governance and their correspondence to comparative policy information on implementing international human rights by government at the grassroots level. Two main criteria were used to select these countries: that the international human rights policies were actively realised at the sub-national level, and there was the availability of good municipal governance data. Sample municipalities and local policy structures were considered in each jurisdiction in such a way that the contrast in the patterns of implementation could be assessed. These cases offered new socio-political and administrative surroundings; thus, the study was able to make valuable comparisons with regard to policy integration and enforcement measures.

Analytical Framework

Data collected were interpreted and synthesised by conducting a systematic thematic content analysis. In the analysis, three key dimensions have been considered: issues of enforcement, municipal-level adaptation of law and the mechanisms of integrating policy. Coding of international agreements, legislative documents, and municipal policies was based on themes and patterns that occur repeatedly. A comparison of case studies was used to compare governance strategies, institutional capacity and policy outcomes. This framework of analysis allowed the study to draw international human rights obligations and sub-national enforcement tools closer together, obtaining a deeper understanding of sub-national governance effectiveness in enforcing global legal standards. Special attention was given to municipal charters, welfare frameworks, and integration policies to understand city-level variations in enforcing rights obligations.

Results

Global Trends of Human Rights Legal Regimes

The findings evidenced a deep transformation in human rights governance worldwide, with an enhanced trend towards multi-level enforcement. Global institutions such as the UN treaty bodies, European Court of Human Rights (ECHR), and International Criminal Court (ICC) have extended their monitoring roles, pushing municipalities towards enhanced compliance reporting as shown in Table 1. The greater application of domestic human rights charters illustrates the growing decentralisation of rights protection. Further, the integration of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) into legal frameworks promotes equality and sustainability at the local level. Collaboration between global institutions and municipal governments has strengthened shared accountability, promoting more inclusive, localised strategies for enforcing rights.

Table 1. Global Trends in Human Rights Legal Frameworks

Dimension	Key Global Developments	Local Governance Implications
Enforcement Mechanisms	Expansion of UN treaty bodies, ECHR, and ICC oversight	Municipalities required to strengthen compliance reporting
Local Charters	Growing adoption of human rights charters by cities	Increased decentralisation of rights protections
Policy Integration	Incorporation of SDGs into human rights frameworks	Local policies aligned with sustainability and equality goals
Institutional Cooperation	Greater collaboration between UN agencies and regional courts	Shared accountability between international and municipal

		institutions
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Comparative Lessons from Germany and the United Kingdom

The comparative analysis of the United Kingdom and Germany revealed contrasting approaches to bringing international human rights norms into municipal governments. In Germany, transpositions of international treaties directly into federal law allow municipalities to follow proactive migrant integration, housing and welfare policy, as Table 2 reveals. The United Kingdom, in contrast, would depend primarily upon the Human Rights Act (HRA) to incorporate the ECHR scheme, but is convicted of incompatibility caused by legal divergences related to Brexit and budget constraints. Whereas there is a high level of municipal compliance and a provision with high levels of federal frameworks in Germany, the implementation in the UK is not without its marks across each territory, with the emphasis on implementing coordinating policies and funding arrangements.

Table 2. Comparative Case Study Findings - Germany vs. United Kingdom

Dimension	Germany	United Kingdom
Legal Framework	International treaties are fully embedded in federal law	The Human Rights Act integrates the ECHR into domestic law
Municipal Role	Active participation in migrant integration, housing, and welfare policies	Local councils enforce housing, policing, and welfare protections.
Challenges	Budgetary limitations and balancing federal-local authority	Policy inconsistencies due to Brexit and resource constraints
Outcomes	High compliance with rights-based policies and strong federal support	Mixed success with uneven regional implementation

Administrative Challenges in Local Human Rights Enforcement

Administrative jurisdictions face boards with gigantic implementation challenges for human rights frameworks locally. Budgetary limitations reduce welfare, housing, and migrant integration initiatives, while capacity deficits due to a lack of officer training hamper effective implementation, as shown in Table 3. In addition, conflicts between customary practices and universal standards lead to inconsistencies in the safeguarding of rights, especially in rural regions. Duplication of legal mandates between the federal government and municipal governments tends to slow down decision-making and impede accountability. All these challenges can be tackled by increased funding, capacity-building programs, sensitisation, and the establishment of harmonised governance structures to increase coordination and ensure equitable access to human rights protection at the local level.

Table 3. Key Administrative Challenges Identified Across Case Studies

Administrative Challenge	Impact on Local Implementation	Recommended Solutions
Budgetary Limitations	Restricts housing, welfare, and integration programs	Increase targeted funding for municipalities
Capacity Gaps	Limited training of municipal officers on rights enforcement	Introduce structured capacity-building initiatives
Conflicts with Customs	Cultural norms sometimes override international obligations	Implement awareness campaigns and local sensitisation programs
Legal Overlaps	Unclear responsibilities between federal and municipal	Develop harmonised legal frameworks and coordination

	authorities	mechanisms
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Discussion

This study's research displayed that even as global human rights frameworks provide universal standards, their practical application relies on efficient local governance mechanisms. Examination revealed that cities play a central role in translating international commitments into local policies, yet hindrances emerge through limitations of resources, conflicting priorities, and structural inequalities. These findings reinforce the argument that effective human rights enforcement depends on strengthening municipal capacities and enabling bottom-up governance rather than relying exclusively on top-down international directives. Similarly, Wuerth (2017) observed that the global legal order has entered a “post-human rights era,” where localised governance models increasingly determine the real-world impact of international commitments.

In addition, German evidence showed that federal support consolidates municipal capacity to pursue inclusive policy, and the United Kingdom experience showed policy fragmentation following Brexit. These are in line with Suk's (2016) argument that constitutional safeguards must evolve under domestic structures to reflect local realities, especially where global norms face political resistance. Besides, integration issues with respect to migration and housing policies reflect the overall issues emphasised by Taran (2018), who reiterated that government of migration requires greater collective action among international agencies and local governments to ensure effective protection of vulnerable members. With this background, the study again emphasises building multi-level governance models that link global models with local realities, rendering policies pragmatic, comprehensive, and context-sensitive.

The cross-case results showed significant variation in the effectiveness of local enforcement mechanisms across the case studies. Municipalities were found to be more likely to comply with the international obligations in Germany, which can be attributed to the incorporation of federal policies and deployments of resources, which granted migrant integration and the right to a dwelling. These reasons correspond to the assertion expressed by Shivaji (2024), which states that the key to establishing adequate remedies to the potential breach of rights is proactive institutional reforms and preventive strategies. According to the German model, the key success factor for the operationalisation of global commitments is the financial stability and policy coherence of the municipalities.

The adoption of the Human Rights Act (HRA) and the European Convention on Human Rights by the United Kingdom at the same time gave legal force to the protection of rights, but offered an uneven application at the local level. These observations can be traced to the analysis of Suk (2016), which suggested that integration of rights protection into the domestic legal framework takes decades and demands a long-term commitment to political will and involvement of municipalities. The conflicts observed in UK councils reinforce the need to have decentralised systems of decision-making whereby neighbourhood professionals have the freedom to influence policies considering community-specific concerns.

Furthermore, it revealed that the research found loopholes in the implementation of the migration policy, especially locally. Although the idea of plans of integration was seemingly (i.e., according to Taran (2018) perfect, it fails in the context of non-sociologically receptive national regulations on international migration. Overall, these results indicate that enforced mechanisms are efficient concerning the collaboration model of governance, with international commitments and local innovation tightly mixed and with policy-making practices that are participative.

According to findings, a number of policy-related recommendations will appear to enhance multi-level governance systems and to enhance the implementation of international human rights systems at the grassroots level. To begin with, the municipalities need to have better capacity-building programs that will enable officers and policymakers to develop skills that are essential in the process of converting foreign obligations into local policies. This direction can validate the fact that

Shivaji (2024) highlights proactive solutions or solutions that address the structural obstacles before the paravention of rights. The case of Germany illustrates that the collaborative federal-local systems improve the capacity of municipalities, whereas the UK example outlines that the inconsistency in the legislation undermines its realisation at the city level. The experience of India reveals that the capacity-building programs for the institutions of Panchayati Raj are important to have an impact on the policy in an equal manner.

The comparative results elucidate the fact that human rights effectiveness relies on efficient collaboration of the international, national, and municipal government ranks. In the environment of a close dependency between federal and local governments in a country, municipalities become more capable of crafting and executing policies that suit the needs of the regions. Germany exemplifies the ability of well-assimilated governing structures to assist the municipal in innovating and providing effective solutions in the administrative structures. The case in the United Kingdom demonstrates that limiting local autonomy and fragmented policies may lead to contradictions after the legal and institutional reforms. The case of India suggests that the importance of establishing robust institutional capacity is equally valid, since some of its municipalities are experiencing challenges of resource scarcity and bureaucratic inefficiencies. Through these illustrations, it becomes undeniably clear that the capacity of the urban governments and enhancing intergovernmental cooperation are the two major concepts towards transforming international human rights promises into real, community-friendly policies.

Second, governments should make an investment in systems of integrated policy linking international, national, and local governance systems (Tuliakov,2024). These kind of structures would provide consistency in the adoption of pledges whilst being open to localization. The success of such an approach is evidenced by the German experience where the centralised coordination and the municipal autonomy are reconciled with each other. This would require enforcement of the global rights to be adaptive forms of governance which nurture local players to competently address complex issues which are context specific; this is not to mention they are to follow the developmental model of administration (Wuerth 2017).

Third, the paper suggests putting the greatest weight of priority on the migration-sensitive policies which will be undertaken by way of enhancing partnership between the international organisations as well as the national governments. According to the rights-based approach to migration, the mechanisms of municipal planning should also cover the incorporation of refugees, the provision of equal opportunities to acquire housing, and social inclusion. Lastly, transparency, accountability, and the effectiveness of policies can be enhanced through adopting participatory forms of governance that involve the citizens, community organisations as well as civil society associations. A combination of these steps promotes the concept where the international commitments are properly localised, promoting a higher degree of protection and inclusion within different municipalities.

Conclusion

This study examined the evolving aspects of global human rights law and emphasised its deep connection with local governance institutions. The study revealed that while global legal frameworks such as the ICCPR, ICESCR, and other treaties are the way to a wholesome framework of rights protection, it is their sub-national integration that ultimately makes them powerful. Municipal and regional governments are the critical actors in translating global commitments into actionable local policies that directly affect community welfare. The comparative analysis confirmed that Germany's integrated model of federal-local government ensured greater compliance and rights-based policymaking, while the United Kingdom's fragmented mechanism increased risks, particularly in housing, welfare, and migration management. The differences evidence the necessity for multi-level governance models to balance global norms with local circumstances. The study also pointed out the escalating dangers of migration, climate change, online surveillance, and resource

scarcity, calling for outside-the-box interventions attuned to the capabilities of municipalities. Mechanisms must be institutionalised, policy space must be built at the local level, and coordination among international bodies, national governments, and municipal institutions must be ensured in order to effectively enforce. Overall, the research supports that the implementation of international human rights is impossible without effective local implementation policies, and therefore, municipal governments, policymakers, and human rights institutions are the primary actors in championing inclusive, sustainable, and equitable rights protection. Strengthening municipal capacities, enhancing fiscal autonomy, and fostering international-local collaboration are essential for achieving sustainable, rights-based governance.

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