

VIENNA'S HUMAN RIGHTS APPROACH TO THE CORONAVIRUS CRISIS

The coronavirus has left governments around the world and at all levels facing emergency situations. Lockdowns, stay-at-home orders and a wide range of other restrictive policies have reinforced existing socioeconomic inequalities. Cities are on the frontline of protecting their residents' rights and supporting them in coping with the new "normality". The City of Vienna, which has a cross-cutting commitment to human rights in all its areas of competence, has also taken a human rights-based approach to managing the current crisis.



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The outbreak of the coronavirus fundamentally changed people's lives overnight. Everyone, from children to adults and the elderly, has had to adapt to a new everyday and working "normality" and is faced with many new challenges, worries and future uncertainties. People's sense of insecurity has been heightened by the fact that not everyone has access to transparent, clear and comprehensive information on the risks of the virus and the measures implemented to contain it. Public authorities can only reduce this insecurity by disseminating reliable information and investing in building trust in their capacities to manage the crisis in compliance with democracy, the rule of law and human rights standards. However, when the virus first broke out containment was the top priority and many of these values did not seem to rank high on the political agenda. The longer the emergency measures last, the less information is made public about their bases in research and data, and the more controversies over them are growing. Questions are raised about whether our human rights are being disproportionately curtailed and the rule of law undermined.

Transparency, accountability, non-discrimination and participation are four important pillars of the human rights-based approach for ensuring democracy. The City of Vienna, which has been

a Human Rights City since December 2014 and has a cross-cutting commitment to human rights in all its areas of competence (Asadi, 2019), has also tried to respect human rights in its management of the coronavirus crisis, ensuring equality and non-discrimination in its response to citizens' needs and the provision of public services. The situation is a big test for the resilience of the city's human rights approach, which is embedded in the framework of broader European and international conventions and charters. In what follows, I discuss how this approach is being implemented in some of the most pressing areas of the city's crisis management.

The right to information

The right to information is an essential human right. Public authorities at all government levels must secure this right and its non-violation, as well as guaranteeing access to reliable and comprehensible information even in emergency situations.

PUBLIC AUTHORITIES CAN ONLY REDUCE INSECURITY BY DISSEMINATING RELIABLE INFORMATION AND INVESTING IN BUILDING TRUST IN THEIR CAPACITIES TO MANAGE THE CRISIS IN COMPLIANCE WITH DEMOCRACY, THE RULE OF LAW AND HUMAN RIGHTS STANDARDS.

As part of its response to the COVID-19 outbreak, the City of Vienna developed several user-friendly mobile applications, hotlines and platforms that provide information on health services, daily needs, regional products, digital cultural activities and other online municipal services. The coronavirus hotline offers information in different languages, including sign language, and there is dedicated information for children. Residents can submit personal inquiries in different languages to which the Integration and Diversity Department responds in 24 languages (by email or phone). The City of Vienna considers the right to translation part of the right to information. In the case of COVID-19 translation services have been viewed as particu-

larly important, as immigrant and minority communities that do not have access to translated information may be forced to rely on information provided by their countries of origin. But health policies and prevention measures vary across the world.

Children's right to education

The right to education is anchored in the Austrian constitution. However, its implementation is a federal competence and it must be available to all under any circumstances. The lockdown and the transition to homeschooling have compromised children's equal opportunities to access education. Factors such as the availability of an internet connection and

computer, enough space for pupils to work and parents who can support their child's learning have increased inequalities in the educational system, discriminating against those more affected by poverty (e.g. single parents, migrants and asylum seekers). As part of its commitment to the United Nation's (UN) Convention on the Rights of the Child and to "leaving no child behind", the City of Vienna has developed free online courses that support pupils in homeschooling and distributed 5,000 laptops (City of Vienna, 2020). Further, kindergartens and schools stayed open for children with no parental support, and teachers took great efforts to be in regular contact with their pupils. Building on the expansion of WLAN facilities in schools that took place prior to the pandemic, the education hub of the city's Directorate of Education has provided online tools to support teachers and pupils of all ages in distance learning.

The right to housing

Although the coronavirus is often deemed a "democratic virus", its socioeconomic consequences do not affect everyone equally. Existing inequalities, especially in the field of housing, have escalated. To comply with the right to housing (under Article 31 of the European Social Charter, Revised) and to ensure safe housing throughout the crisis, the City of Vienna has adopted a policy for preventing evictions. The

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housing department will stop evictions for its 220,000 flats, which house half a million residents, if they have problems paying rent. The cooperative and limited-profit housing sectors that account for another 180,000 flats have followed this example. Further, following the mayor of Vienna's appeal to the Austrian federal government to protect private rental sector tenants (which is a national competence), a new law was passed on April 4th. Those who cannot pay their rent between April and June because they lose their job or their working hours are reduced due to the coronavirus crisis need not fear being evicted or their rental contracts being terminated. They have until December 31st to make the outstanding payments.

Since the end of March, the application process for rental housing allowances has also been simplified (City of Vienna, 2020a). Until further notice, applicants no longer need to submit all the documents formerly required (e.g. those relating to unemployment or entitlement to benefits) – they can be presented later. In such cases, the city can make an advance assessment and grant an allowance for a limited period of six months. Further, extensions to existing housing allowances are taken on the basis of the last ap-

plication submitted prior to the crisis. Finally, the provision of emergency quarters for the homeless, which was originally only planned until April, has been extended until August (City of Vienna, 2020b). The pandemic has made homeless people even more vulnerable and they form part of the high-risk group. To secure their health, the number of shelters has been increased and the number of occupants per shelter has been reduced.

The right to work

To mitigate the economic impact of the coronavirus, the City of Vienna and its partners have created the “Stolz auf Wien BeteiligungsGmbH”, which invests in local companies that face liquidity problems because of the lockdown, but which have a promising future in the long-term. Eligible companies must be a strong part of Vienna’s identity, relevant beyond the city, economically important for up- and downstream sectors and able to secure a significant number of jobs. The initiative is a best practice in public-private partnership.

The city’s small businesses are also supported by rent reductions. Rent payments for the approximately 5,000 Viennese shops and businesses located in buildings owned by the city and affected by the lockdown are reduced or waived. The procedure is uncomplicated and non-bureaucratic. Business tenants are exempt from paying rent in April without having to present an application.

Measures taken to support employment have included amendments to the Vienna Social Welfare Act, creating a one-stop-shop for young adults (aged up to 25) seeking employment. The service offers a unique opportunity for cooperation between labour market services and the City of Vienna under one roof. The target group of this service are 25,000 unemployed and about 10,000 welfare recipients.

Right to bodily integrity

Even before the pandemic, one in five women in Austria were exposed to physical or sexual violence, mostly from their partner or ex-partner. Confinement measures have increased the risk of women and children becoming victims of gender-based violence, obliging governments more than ever to take protective action. The City of Vienna, which is committed to the right to integrity of the person of the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union (Article 3), has responded to increased demand for information by stepping up the resources of its 24-hour helpline for women (APA, 2020) and guaranteeing that shelter capacities would be increased if necessary (City of Vienna, 2020c).

Future challenges

The City of Vienna has proven flexible and inclusive in its response to the health, social and economic challenges posed by the coronavirus. An important principle it has adhered to is that of leaving services of general interest in local hands. This approach is showing that the successful “Viennese way” also works very well in times of crises. Given record unemployment and an impending social crisis, like any other city, Vienna will have to allocate more resources to combating the economic and social consequences of COVID-19. The availability of digital technology has opened a wide scope of possibilities and can potentially have a positive environmental impact on future working and travel habits. I am optimistic that Vienna, drawing on its human-rights approach to public policy, will be able to address the challenges lying ahead in a holistic and sustainable manner, all the while keeping the local, national and global context in mind.

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