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Amsterdam

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1. Introduction: setting the scene

Amsterdam stands as a metropolitan city with a strong presence and long history on the international plane. It is vocal in its commitment to international law and human rights and has institutionalized this i.a. through its Office for European and International Affairs governing its international relations. On October 27th, 1275, Amsterdam was granted city rights. In 2025, it celebrates its 750th anniversary and commemorates its long history - also as an international city - with both its open, tolerant and inclusive traditions as well as its dark and violent pages. The Amsterdam city government was eg heavily involved in colonialism and slave trade.¹ As the first city in The Netherlands, the current mayor of Amsterdam, Ms. Femke Halsema, recognised this city government involvement and offered apologies on July 1st, 2021, during Ketikoti at the National Slavery monument in the Oosterpark.

“Amsterdam is [... ..] an international city that stands up for freedom and human rights. We have moreover a duty of care for our inhabitants.”

Amsterdam Mayor Femke Halsema, 14 May 2025



Throughout its history, Amsterdam has led a European and later global life, as a hub in and as a location of global economic, social, cultural and personal networks and transnational initiatives. While the past is crucial for any life in and of a city, this report looks mostly at the present. That said,

Amsterdam today is of course very much shaped by the past. The city government recognises this and aims to develop policies to counter the negative impacts of the past and to establish international relations with other postcolonial cities.²

Since 2002, Amsterdam has an international policy adopted by its city council. In 2014, Amsterdam changed its approach moving away from the sister-city format and the more geographical approach, which had its origins mainly in the Cold War era, to a local challenges-

¹ Pepijn Brandon et al. (eds), *De Slavernij in Oost en West. Het Amsterdam-onderzoek* (Amsterdam: Spectrum, 2020).

² [Amsterdam, een stad uit duizenden. Visiedocument Inclusie en Antidiscriminatiebeleid 2023|2026.](#)

driven approach.³ This means Amsterdam takes the challenges it faces within the city as the “point of departure” for its international relations and policy.⁴ Some of the focal points of the city thus include the right to housing, the rights of migrants and refugees, digital rights, and sustainability. Regarding the latter, Amsterdam was the first Dutch city to submit a Voluntary Local Review to the UN in 2022, reporting on how it aligns its local policies with all 17 Sustainable Development Goals and presenting its results in July 2022 at the UN High-Level Political Forum in New York City.⁵ Moreover, through its ‘Amsterdam Trade & Innovate’ platform, the city conducts regular international trade missions and hosts visiting delegations on topics ranging from creative industries to smart urban development.⁶

Over the years, Amsterdam has joined numerous city coalitions, some directly, some indirectly through VNG International⁷: eg Eurocities, C40 Cities Climate Leadership Group, the Global Parliament of Mayors, United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG), and the Cities Coalition for Digital Rights – to name just a few.⁸ Amsterdam has also taken on leadership roles within these networks on specific topics. It initiated and hosted for instance the 2024 ‘Dealing with Drugs Conference’ through the European Harm Reduction Network and it co-founded the Cities Coalition for Digital Rights alongside Barcelona and New York in November 2018.⁹ Moreover, the more recent city diplomacy initiative of Urban20 or U20, which is conveyed by C40 and UCLG and aims to assure the presence of the urban perspective at G20 meetings, is an example of an urban global platform in which Amsterdam participates and in a way plays above its weight. So, while driven in its international policies and institutional presence by local challenges, once active, Amsterdam aims to have impact and lead.

³ Interview with Sabine Gimbrère, Director of the International Office of the City of Amsterdam (Amsterdam, The Netherlands, 14 July 2025), interview is accessible with authors.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ See City of Amsterdam ‘Voluntary Local Review 2022’ accessed 27 August 2025 from <https://sdgs.un.org/sites/default/files/vlrs/2022-12/vlr_amsterdam.pdf>

⁶ See Iamsterdam ‘Over Amsterdam Trade & Innovate’ (updated 5 Juni 2025) accessed 18 June 2025 from <<https://www.iamsterdam.com/amsterdam-trade-innovate/over-amsterdam-trade-innovate>>

⁷ VNG International is the International Cooperation Agency of the Association of Netherlands Municipalities (VNG).

⁸ See for reference Global Cities Hub Geneva ‘International City Networks Directory’ accessed 27 August 2025 from <<https://globalcitieshub.org/en/city-networks-directory/>>

⁹ See City of Amsterdam ‘Dealing with drugs I’ accessed 27 August 2025 from <<https://www.amsterdam.nl/dealingwithdrugs/one/>> and Cities Coalition for Digital Rights ‘About Us’ accessed 27 August 2025 from <<https://citiesfordigitalrights.org/thecoalition>>

UCLG and other city networks were actively engaged at the 2024 Summit of the Future that was intended to develop new insights and initiatives for new multilateralism. For Amsterdam, as for many cities and city organisations, the Summit was a disappointment. The attempts to increase the involvement of local authorities, which was part of the UN Secretary-General's Common Agenda document both directly and more indirectly in the context of 'networked multilateralism', did not result in a strong outcome document for cities and urban perspective representatives. While one finds some sensitivity to the local perspective and to 'localisation' of development and SDGs, in the final text of the Pact for the Future, local authorities as such are mentioned only twice, that is, in one and the same article.¹⁰ They have now become part of the 'whole-of-government' concept, which includes all levels of government.¹¹ This reflects the often strong resistance by states against local governments developing a significant position in global governance and international law.¹² Also in The Netherlands, such tensions between national and local level of government exist.

“The most we can do when it comes to international law is influence it by lobbying”

Sabine Gimbrère, Director International and European Affairs

Background: Dutch constitutional set-up

In general, where it comes to international law and governance, cities have to implement and comply with international law as state organs of their respective states.¹³ When the Netherlands has consented to international obligations or global policy, Amsterdam's municipal policies and practices can in principle not ignore this or deviate significantly therefrom. In the Netherlands, foreign policy is mandated to the national government, the international advancement of respect for and the development of international law is an integral part thereof. Traditionally, cities have been reluctant to develop their own position in international affairs or on international law. However, in line with the global phenomenon – the internationalization of the city – the city of

¹⁰ United Nations 'The Pact for the Future' (20 September 2024), Action 55 accessed 27 August <<https://www.un.org/pga/wp-content/uploads/sites/109/2024/09/The-Pact-for-the-Future-final.pdf>>

¹¹ Ibid, at 55-56.

¹² Agnieszka Szpak 'UN summit of the future – Where are cities? A lost chance for more inclusive and effective multi-level governance' (2025) 161 Cities the International Journal of Urban Policy and Planning, 1.

¹³ Helmut Philipp Aust and Janne Nijman 'The emerging roles of cities in international law – introductory remarks on practice, scholarship and the *Handbook*' in Helmut Philipp Aust and Janne Nijman (eds) *Research Handbook on International Law and Cities* (Edward Elgar, 2021) 1, 5.

Amsterdam is increasingly and more manifestly present in international law and governance contexts and transnational networks as this report will show. A policy area in which Amsterdam tests for example the limits and takes a somewhat more autonomous course vis-à-vis the national government, is migration. That is, both in how it deals with migrants, *sans papiers* and asylum seekers within the city, based on European human rights law, and in how it intervenes in the migration law and governance developments at the European and global level.¹⁴

In May 2025, the current mayor of Amsterdam, Ms. Femke Halsema, felt compelled to speak up – during a local council meeting in Amsterdam’s city Hall – on the war in Gaza. On behalf of the local government as a whole, she delivered a very carefully drafted condemnation of Israel’s ‘genocidal violence’ and human rights and humanitarian law violations in Gaza and Hamas’ terror attacks on October 7th, 2023.¹⁵ She did so while acknowledging explicitly that Amsterdam must “exercise some restraint” when it comes to issues of foreign policy. At the same time, Palestinian suffering had such profound impact on the people of Amsterdam that a statement by Mayor and local government was justified. In other words, the Amsterdam Mayor has shown great awareness and sensitivity to this division of competences when the local government responded to the war in Gaza.¹⁶

Early September 2025, the Amsterdam Mayor and government called on the Dutch government to provide medical support to the children from Gaza who need aid urgently. The Mayor has stated also that ‘Amsterdam considers it its humanitarian duty to offer medical aid to the seriously ill and wounded from the warzone and to collaborate on this.’¹⁷ As the letter also states, the WHO has been asking for medical evacuation for months now. The Amsterdam academic hospital has offered help. Amsterdam is together in this with other Dutch cities like Utrecht, and coordinates with the Dutch Association of Municipalities (VNG) and has sought

¹⁴ See *infra*, at 6.

¹⁵ Burgemeester Femke Halsema ‘Toespraak in de gemeenteraad over Gaza op 14 mei 2025’ accessed 1 Jun 2025 from <<https://www.amsterdam.nl/bestuur-organisatie/college/burgemeester/speeches/toespraak-gemeenteraad-gaza-14-mei-2025/>>

¹⁶ Femke Halsema said ‘Foreign policy is the domain of the Dutch Government. The city of Amsterdam should exercise some restraint in this. However, Amsterdam is also an international city that stands up for freedom and human rights. We also have a duty of care for our residents’ in Gemeente Amsterdam ‘Toespraak in de gemeenteraad over Gaza 14 mei 2025’ (14 May 2025) <<https://www.amsterdam.nl/bestuur-organisatie/college/burgemeester/speeches/toespraak-gemeenteraad-gaza-14-mei-2025/>> accessed 27 August 2025.

¹⁷ [Letter by Mayor Halsema to City Council of 5 September 2025.](#)

contact with German cities through Eurocities.¹⁸ Herewith, it puts pressure on the Dutch government and parliament which have been overtly dismissive.

In short, Amsterdam is involved in a balancing act. Within the Dutch governmental context, the responsibility for foreign policy and the development of the international legal order is assigned to the national government in Art. 90 of the Dutch Constitution.¹⁹ And yet, Amsterdam is actually quite visible on international law and policy issues and within city diplomacy networks and global governance contexts. This is particularly interesting in the context of Article 124 of the Dutch constitution and Article 108(1) of the Dutch Municipal Law, which states that “the power to regulate and administer *the household* of the municipality is left to the municipal government.”²⁰ This grants municipalities the responsibility to regulate and administer matters that touch on their ‘household’, which is a pretty open term to refer to local public affairs and conveys a degree of autonomy. Historically, this constitutional and legal set-up has been interpreted not to include foreign affairs for local governments. However, with a local challenges approach at a time that local challenges often have clear global dimensions, an expansion of Amsterdam’s transnational and international relations and activities and international (human rights) law based (policy) initiatives may be understood as a natural development and within a reasonable interpretation of its mandate. When in 2014, the then mayor Eberhard van der Laan, sent the new international policy document, *Notitie Internationaal beleid 2014 – 2018 “Amsterdam Verantwoordelijke Hoofdstad [Amsterdam Responsible Capital City]”*,²¹ to the city council for adoption, the legal basis was explicated as indeed Art. 108 of the Dutch Municipality Law.²²

¹⁸ Het Parool, 5 september 2025. See for the Mayor’s letter: <https://www.parool.nl/amsterdam/burgemeester-halsema-vraagt-kabinet-ernstig-zieke-kinderen-uit-gaza-toe-te-laten~b2f3ea17b/> accessed 6 September 2025.

¹⁹ [Dutch constitution](#), art. 90.

²⁰ Gemeentewet 1992 Article 108 (1); Original text reads “De bevoegdheid tot regeling en bestuur inzake de *huishouding* van de gemeente wordt aan het gemeentebestuur overgelaten” Translated by DeepL (free version) on June 18 2025. Emphasis added. See also on the autonomy of Dutch local governments art. 124 of the Dutch Constitution, stipulating that local governments can create new competences when the local or urban ‘household’ so requires. The Council’s general responsibility or ‘competence’ to make local acts on the basis of the public interest of the city is stipulated in art. 149 of the *Gemeentewet*. See also Nijman fn 23.

²¹ [INTERNATIONAAL BELEID 2014-2018 AMSTERDAM INTERNATIONAAL VERANTWOORDELIJKE HOOFDSTAD](#)

²² [Voordracht voor Besluit Gemeenteraad](#) ‘Kennismaken van de notitie, getiteld: ‘Internationaal Beleid 2014-2018: Amsterdam Internationaal Verantwoordelijke Hoofdstad’ en instemmen met het internationaal beleid 2014-2018’, 5 March 2014.

It will be interesting to follow in the coming years, how the dynamic between municipal autonomy and state authority unfolds and whether Amsterdam will further maintain and possibly expand its presence within transnational city networks and international (governmental) organisations and on international law and policy issues related to local challenges, and also how it will engage autonomously with international law and global policy issues and debates both bound as an organ of the Dutch State, taking up implementation, or more autonomously when acting upon interpretations of international law and governance that deviate from the national government's, or even as a city that attributes persuasive authority to international law and policy even when not bound as part of the Dutch State.

This tension between local and national authorities and possible legal interpretations of obligations has surfaced before, for example, in the law and policy domain mentioned earlier, migration.²³ In 2015, Amsterdam decided to go against national migration policies citing the European Committee of Social Rights that ruled that the Dutch State was violating Article 13§4 and 31§2 of the European Social Charter, as it wished to respect the right to social and medical assistance and the right to housing, of undocumented inhabitants of Amsterdam.²⁴ Another example is the drug policy reform on which Amsterdam is active. Halsema pointed to “the tension between local initiatives and the broader national laws, European policy, and the UN conventions on drugs, which do not always reflect the realities on the ground.”²⁵ This captures both the productive interaction as well as the possible tensions between the three levels of government, the local, national and global, which will be mapped and analysed more closely in this city report by zooming in on selected case studies.

Aims and roadmap of this report

²³ Janne Nijman ‘Renaissance of the City as Global Actor: The role of foreign policy and international law practices in the construction of cities as global actors’ In Gunther Hellmann, Andreas Fahrmeir, & Milos Vec (Eds.), *The transformation of foreign policy: drawing and managing boundaries from antiquity to the present* (Oxford University Press, 2016) 209, 212.

²⁴ European Committee of Social Rights 2014. CEC v. The Netherlands, Complaint No. 90/2013, paras 143-145; Barbara Oomen and Moritz Baumgärtel ‘Frontier Cities: The Rise of Local Authorities as an Opportunity for International Human Rights Law.’ 29 (1) (2018) European Journal of International Law 607, 617; See for a closer analysis section 2.2. ‘refugees and migration.’

²⁵ Correlation – European Harm Network ‘Dealing with Drugs II at #EHRC2024: Mayor Halsema on Amsterdam’s Push for Drug Regulation to Tackle Crime and Protect Public Health’ (22 October 2024) < <https://correlation-net.org/2024/10/22/dealing-with-drugs-ii-at-ehrc2024-mayor-halsema-on-amsterdams-push-for-drug-regulation-to-tackle-crime-and-protect-public-health/> > accessed 25 April 2025.

The report asks *when, how and why* the city of Amsterdam claims an international role for itself outside its conventional position as a mere subordinate entity – be it with its own responsibility – of the Dutch state. The report is focused mainly on the city’s local government and guided by two sets of questions. *When, how and why* does it turn to the international to influence global governance and international law and policy on challenges and issues relevant to the city and its inhabitants? And, vice versa, *when, how and why* Amsterdam aligns its governmental efforts locally with international law or policy frameworks even when this involves a circumvention or clash with national policies? This report’s exploration amounts only to a first examination in the context of the ILA Committee’s City Report series, more needs to follow. However, we will try to shed some light on whether the city is reaching out in a way that asserts a form of global agency. To get a greater insight into these issues from a more practical perspective, we conducted moreover an interview with Ms. Sabine Gimbrère, the director of Amsterdam’s international office, to supplement our theoretical findings with her practice-based experience and perspective.²⁶

This report starts from the understanding that the relationship between cities and international law and governance is twofold: cities engage with international law and policies both individually and as part of the state, while international institutions seek cooperation with cities for their policy initiatives to land locally. This interaction is underpinned by a growing “renaissance” in city diplomacy: driven by a renewed sense of global responsibility, cities pursue international engagement to meet local needs.²⁷ Their ability to act globally depends not only on initiative but also on recognition by others thus making “global city” status a relational identity.²⁸ When cities engage, adopt and implement international norms on their own, even without being legally required by their state, they do so mostly because they find the values behind these norms convincing.²⁹ By engaging in this way, cities establish themselves as significant players in international law and governance.

As Swiney observes, cities are employing numerous, sometimes overlapping, strategies to participate at the international level and therefore even sometimes are “leapfrogging over their

²⁶ We are grateful for the time Ms. Gimbrère has taken to speak with us. The interview has been extremely valuable for this first attempt to analyse Amsterdam and international law and governance. Full responsibility lies of course with the authors.

²⁷ See also Nijman (n23) 223.

²⁸ Ibid 224.

²⁹ Aust & Nijman (n13) 6.

national governments.”³⁰ These strategies include building networks, working with international organizations, joining UN and global discussions, copying state-style alliances and events, using the language of international law, and creating shared rules, sometimes referred to as “global law” or “international urban law”³¹ to hold each other accountable.³² Amsterdam can be seen to use some of these approaches. The city also frames its identity through international (human rights) law language by declaring itself to be a “human rights city,” with human rights explicitly embedded in its governance model. As this report will demonstrate, many of Amsterdam’s (international and European) initiatives are rooted in human rights law language and logic. Moreover, sustainability also constitutes a focal point for the city of Amsterdam. While Amsterdam’s global engagement covers many areas, this report focuses on its human rights approach (section 2), its international interventions on drug and crime policy (section 3), and the city’s keen eye for the international dimension of digital transformation (section 4). These three case studies serve as key examples of how the city uses such international strategies as referred to above to address its local challenges with a global reach beyond traditional boundaries; similar approaches are evident in other fields as well but need to be left for a next examination. We will conclude this city report with some final observations on the guiding questions mentioned.

2. Human Rights

2.1. Amsterdam’s Human Rights Agenda on a Local and International Level

Amsterdam clearly states its commitment for “standing up for human rights on an international level”³³ and fighting for “freedom and equality worldwide.”³⁴ Amsterdam’s self-image is that of a “Human Rights City” reflected both in its foreign and local policies wherein Amsterdam “explicitly refers to international or regional human rights treaties and uses

“We have always been a safe haven for persecuted people”

³⁰ Chrystie Swiney ‘The Urbanization of International Law and International Relations: The Rising Soft Power of Cities in Global Governance’ 41(2) Michigan Journal of International Law (2020) 227, 243.

³¹ Luis Eslava and George Hill ‘Cities, post-coloniality and international law’ *Handbook* in Helmut Philipp Aust and Janne Nijman (eds) *Research Handbook on International Law and Cities* (Edward Elgar, 2021) 77, 78.

³² Swiney (n30) 243-244. Notably, Nijman (n23) 19-23 argues that cities employ strategies such as mimicking traditional state diplomacy through foreign affairs offices, formal agreements, and diplomatic protocols, as well as actively participating in international law processes and intergovernmental networks to expand their global role beyond national boundaries.

³³ City of Amsterdam ‘Policy: Diversity’ accessed 17 April 2025 from <<https://www.amsterdam.nl/en/policy/policy-diversity/>>

³⁴ Ibid.

human rights.”³⁵ In its local diversity policy Amsterdam defines itself by “freedom and tolerance” and states that it has been a city of “refuge” since the 17th century and this has, in turn, also shaped its very identity and government decisions.³⁶ Since 2016 Amsterdam has a human rights agenda in which human rights form the basis of its policies towards its urbanites, with the selected focal pillars of accessibility, children’s rights, privacy and human rights education.³⁷ This agenda was compiled through a bottom-up approach of neighborhood discussions where residents voiced their concerns on a number of issues which were then reflected in the final policy document.³⁸ Amsterdam’s explicit engagement with human rights started during mayor van der Laan’s term from 2010-2017, as he integrated human rights into multiple policy domains such as refugee integration, children and youth as well as policies regarding the LGBTQ+ community.³⁹ In 2014, when Amsterdam’s international policy was captured with the concept or motto of “Amsterdam Responsible Capital City”,⁴⁰ human rights became one of the focal policy points since it was “more topical than ever.”⁴¹ ‘In view of Amsterdam’s [international] profile and its role as an internationally responsible city’, the municipal executive (Mayor and Alderpersons) advised the City Council to make human rights an integral part of its international policy.’⁴² It pledges to take up human rights issues when maintaining transnational relations with other municipal governments.⁴³

With this approach, Amsterdam states that, as a relative prosperous city, it aims to reciprocate the benefits that it has gained from international relations.⁴⁴ Moreover, Amsterdam supports other organizations’ connections to human rights networks and during international visits human rights issues and values are

“We choose membership of city networks based on the challenges we face as a city”

³⁵ Lisa Roodenburg & Sofia Stolk 'The desire to be an international law city' (2020) International Law's Collected Stories 79, 87.

³⁶ City of Amsterdam (n33). See also Interview with Sabine Gimbrère (n1) where she states that “we have always been a safe haven for persecuted people.”

³⁷ See Roodenburg & Stolk (n35).

³⁸ Gemeente Amsterdam ‘Amsterdammers over mensenrechten’

<https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/Documents/Issues/LocalGvt/States/Amsterdam_5.pdf> accessed 24 April 2025.

³⁹ Roodenburg & Stolk (n35) 87.

⁴⁰ Roodenburg & Stolk (n35) 88.

⁴¹ Roodenburg & Stolk (n35) ‘Amsterdam Responsible Capital City (n21) 12.

⁴² ‘Amsterdam Responsible Capital City (n21) 15.

⁴³ The pledge goes beyond human rights to include women’s and LGBTQ+ community issues. Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid. ‘Amsterdam Responsible Capital City’ (n21) 4.

addressed by the mayor.⁴⁵ Amsterdam is a member of several human-rights oriented networks including UCLG, C40, Shelter City, ICORN (International Cities of Refuge Network) Fearless City, and Eurocities, to name a few.⁴⁶ More critical voices see Amsterdam's human rights agenda as 'window dressing' used to for financial purposes, namely, to gain (EU) subsidies and increase desirability of the city for foreign businesses.⁴⁷

Yet, it is not just by way of city alliances and implementing human rights at the local level itself that Amsterdam is engaging with human rights. One notable example of Amsterdam extending to the international level is its submission of input to the OHCHR report on 'Local governments and human rights' in 2019. Amsterdam's five submissions included an official submission by Amsterdam's director of the international office Sabine Gimbrère recounting Amsterdam's active engagement with human rights as well as four annexes: its LGBTI policy the 'pink agenda,' the earlier mentioned bottom-up neighborhood discussions regarding human rights 'Amsterdammers over mensenrechten,' and policy briefs on human rights from both 2016 and 2018.⁴⁸ The submissions discuss how the responsibility for upholding human rights which has traditionally been seen as a duty of the national government, is more and more becoming a concern for municipalities as well.⁴⁹ In the Netherlands municipalities have been given expanded roles as the results of decentralization on the social domain, meaning municipalities are now directly responsible for areas that impact fundamental rights, such as youth care, elder care, housing, and education.⁵⁰ Therefore local authorities can no longer view human rights as solely a national matter but must actively integrate human rights into their own policy development.⁵¹ In turn, Amsterdam features in the 2019 Report of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights 'Local governments and human rights' explicitly in the context of gentrification and housing on which it has been very outspoken and active.⁵² Here it is stated that Amsterdam

⁴⁵ Ibid 89.

⁴⁶ Roodenburg & Stolk (n35) 89 (footnote).

⁴⁷ Ibid 89.

⁴⁸ See UN High Commissioner for Human Rights 'Report on local government and human rights' (2 July 2019) under Inputs received Amsterdam accessed 8 July 2025 from <<https://www.ohchr.org/en/calls-for-input/report-local-government-and-human-rights>>

⁴⁹ See Gemeente Amsterdam 'Brief Mensenrechten in Amsterdam' accessed 8 July 2025 from <https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/Documents/Issues/LocalGvt/States/Amsterdam_2.pdf> 1.

⁵⁰ Gemeente Amsterdam (n49) 2.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² See Report of the High Commissioner for Human Rights 'Local government and human rights' (2019) A/HRC/42/22, para.9; Also see for a closer analysis of Amsterdam's engagement section 2.4. 'the right to housing' below.

has implemented policies with an awareness that “an adequate housing strategy safeguards human rights.”⁵³ Also mentioned are Amsterdam’s human rights centered approach to (open) technology and its adoption of the pink agenda (2015-2028) to further the rights of the LGBTQ+ community in the city. The report also acknowledges the interaction between the national and local government to fulfil a state’s obligation to implement human rights. For example, it acknowledges that there are “shared and complementary duties of States and local governments to respect, protect and fulfil human rights.”⁵⁴ While it sees central government mandated with the “primary responsibility for the promotion and protection of human rights,” it states that “local government has an important complementary role to play.”⁵⁵

Notably, Gimbrère in her official submission to the OHCHR says that “Amsterdam as a human rights city is a continuous process that may never be finished as such.”⁵⁶ Moreover, she states that human rights form an integral part of all engagement of the city government, since Amsterdam as a Dutch municipality is “bound by international law and human rights law.”⁵⁷ That said, as a city that understands its identity in terms of liberty and toleration, Amsterdam - and Amsterdammers - expects of itself, independently of the Dutch state context, that it maintains and develops its ‘human rights city’ identity in a meaningful way. In the interview, Gimbrère explained that while this human rights city identity has historically been quite central to the self-construction of the city and to its policy outlook, this has changed somewhat in the last few years. Gimbrère notes that during Vice Mayors Groot Wassink’s term he aimed to increasingly use civil rights (*‘burgerrechten’*) instead of human rights as the latter he perceived as too limitative.⁵⁸ Documentary city sources nevertheless show a strong presence of human rights frames, and civil rights frames seem to have been mainly used in the digital rights context.⁵⁹

Amsterdam is realistically careful in selecting which city network to put energy in. As Sabine Gimbrère explains, ‘there are so many city networks nowadays, also in the field of human

⁵³ Ibid. High Commissioner for Human Rights.

⁵⁴ Ibid para2 footnote2 in which the High Commissioner states that the report relies on the Advisory Committee on the role of local government in the promotion and protection of human rights (A/HRC/30/40).

⁵⁵ Ibid para 61.

⁵⁶ Sabine Gimbrère, ‘Human Rights in the City of Amsterdam’ (11 April 2019) accessed 10 July from <https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/Documents/Issues/LocalGvt/States/Amsterdam_3.pdf> 1.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Interview with Gimbrère (n1) 6.

⁵⁹ See for instance in the Gemeente Amsterdam ‘Coalitieakkoord 2018-2022 Democratisering’ accessed 29 august 2025 from <https://openresearch.amsterdam/image/2021/2/1/coalitieakkoord_amsterdam_democratisering.pdf> 59.

rights, and their impact is often questionable. Why join a network, knowing that neither city staff nor politicians have time to spend on it. And that the impact is not substantive.’ Amsterdam has signed “10, 100, 1000 Human Rights Cities and Territories by 2030”⁶⁰ but does not form part of central human rights city networks such as the Human Rights Cities Network⁶¹ or the UNESCO International Coalition of Inclusive and Sustainable Cities (ICCAR).⁶² The latter is the biggest global city network aimed at “fighting racism, discrimination, xenophobia and exclusion.”⁶³ Rotterdam is the only Dutch city that is currently a member of this network.⁶⁴ This is despite the current mayor of Amsterdam, Halsema issuing an official apology for the city’s historical role in slavery in 2021.⁶⁵ Gimbrère critically notes in the interview that “in the end its more important what you do and what city networks you join” than whether you talk about a certain identity.”⁶⁶ She also states that while city council members frequently refer to Amsterdam as a human rights city, the mayor does not use this phrase often.⁶⁷ Nonetheless, human rights are frequently referred to in many local and global (policy) initiatives.

Another example of Amsterdam aiming to bring its unique experience to the UN is through its submission to the Human Rights Committee. The city participated in discussions in Geneva for the preparation for a General Comment on Article 21, the right of peaceful assembly, of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.⁶⁸ The city gave its perspective on revised draft on General Comment no. 37 stating that “Amsterdam wants to be a frontrunner in the field of human rights as codified in the Universal Declarations of Human Rights.”⁶⁹ It

⁶⁰ <https://uclg.org/new/10-100-1000-human-rights-cities-and-territories-by-2030/>

⁶¹ See here <https://humanrightscities.net/>

⁶² Note, after extensive research Amsterdam seems neither to be part of the UNESCO International Coalition of Inclusive and Sustainable Cities (ICCAR) nor its European branch, the European Coalition against Racism (ECCAR) launched in March 2004. See for the European list of members <<https://www.eccar.info/en/members>> accessed 25 May 2025 where the only Dutch city currently a member is Rotterdam. No traces of Amsterdam can be found in its policy documents such as the Bologna Declaration, the Declaration of Nancy nor the 10 Points Plan of Action.

⁶³ European Coalition of Cities Against Racism ‘ICCAR’ accessed 25 May 2025 from <<https://www.eccar.info/en/iccar>>

⁶⁴ See European Coalition of Cities Against Racism ‘Rotterdam’ accessed 25 May 2025 from <<https://www.eccar.info/en/rotterdam>>; See also European Coalition of Cities Against Racism ‘List of the member cities of ECCAR’ accessed 25 May 2025 from <<https://www.eccar.info/en/members>>.

⁶⁵ Gemeente Amsterdam ‘Route naar Herstel’ accessed 25 May 2025 from <<https://www.amsterdam.nl/sociaaldomein/nieuws-sociaal/nieuwsartikelen-index/diversiteit/slavernijverleden-doorwerking/route-herstel/>>

⁶⁶ Gimbrère (n1) 7.

⁶⁷ Ibid 7.

⁶⁸ See Gimbrère (n56). See also Gemeente Amsterdam ‘General Comment No. 37 on article 21’ (10 February 2019).

⁶⁹ Gemeente Amsterdam. Ibid.

clarified that under Dutch law it is the local government and not the national government that has the mandate to safeguard the freedom of assembly and maintain public order.⁷⁰ This gives Amsterdam a unique approach to the respect and implementation of this human right.⁷¹ Where the draft operated with more abstract and arguably state-level assumptions, Amsterdam drew on its first-hand, daily experience with managing demonstrations in practice. For instance, on paragraph 15 Amsterdam noted that while “the formal Dutch legal structure applies to demonstrations that involve two or more people,” the city of Amsterdam has experienced that solo protests can still create public order challenges and therefore asks the Human Rights Committee to potentially address this in more depth.⁷²

Importantly, Gimbrère observes that at the European level, where the European Commission has democracy and the rule of law as some of its focal points, a turn to the local level of government is visible. The Commission for example “has to acknowledge that the national governments are no longer their best allies [on these issues] so they need to acknowledge that we are.” Due to Amsterdam’s lobbying efforts more and more MEPs agree that cities should be consulted when drafting the EU’s rule of law reports.⁷³

2.2. LGBTQ+ policy

Amsterdam states that “the LGBTI community’s struggle for equal rights has a long, rich history”⁷⁴ in the city and thus LGBTQ policy remains a focal point for the city of Amsterdam.⁷⁵ Amsterdam maintains a robust and multi-faceted “Pink Agenda” that aims to enhance the safety, resilience, visibility, and confidence of LGBTQ residents which also



⁷⁰ Ibid. The submission reads that the “central government has no say in how local authorities deal with demonstrations.”

⁷¹ Gemeente Amsterdam (n68) 2-3.

⁷² Gemeente Amsterdam (n68) 2-3. Other examples Amsterdam includes are on paragraph 62, Amsterdam argued that frequency and location do matter in dense urban settings, citing the reality of up to six simultaneous demonstrations on Dam Square. Against paragraph 82, it maintained that a notification requirement is not restrictive but necessary “in a city like Amsterdam” with over 1,400 demonstrations a year so effective protection of participants can be ensured.

⁷³ Gimbrère (n1) 11-12.

⁷⁴ City of Amsterdam ‘Policy: LGBTI rights’ accessed 27 August 2025 from <<https://www.amsterdam.nl/en/policy/policy-diversity/policy-lgbti-rights/>>

⁷⁵ Ibid.

reaffirms the city's identity as a "Rainbow City."⁷⁶ In 2011 Amsterdam co-founded the *Rainbow City Network*, reflecting a commitment to LGBTQ rights through transnational cooperation.⁷⁷ Member cities of this initiative pledge to implement progressive public policies to safeguard sexual rights, to empower LGBTQ individuals to express their identities freely, and to maintain bodily autonomy.⁷⁸ The pink agenda emphasizes the power of "familiarity breeds acceptance" by spotlighting role models and to raise societal empathy toward LGBTQ individuals.⁷⁹ The city provides extra support for vulnerable sub-groups with initiatives like the "pink carpet" label for care institutions that address seniors' specific needs.⁸⁰ Inclusive language practices and gender-neutral facilities are promoted across municipal operations.⁸¹ Amsterdam's international engagement includes signing the Declaration of Dordrecht for transgender workplace rights, the participation of Pride events abroad, and the city hosts LGBTQ activists via the Shelter City program.⁸² The Shelter City program, temporarily shelters human rights defenders at risk, allows them to re-energize, build a network and continue their work abroad, and to return then strengthened to their country of origin.⁸³ During pride, Amsterdam shelters and hosts LGBTQ activists through this program.⁸⁴

Amsterdam included among its policy objectives the support of other cities in putting human rights on their agenda.⁸⁵ This involved more specifically assistance of human rights defenders and LGBTQ+ and women's rights. Amsterdam shares its expertise both by founding and joining city initiatives such as examples mentioned above.⁸⁶ Recently, LGBTQ+ policy and human rights dovetailed when Mayor Halsema travelled to Budapest to stand with its mayor for the human right to demonstrate and for LGBTQ+ rights. Both Amsterdam and Budapest are part of the city alliance 'Pact of Free Cities' founded by the four Visegrad capitals in 2019. The founding document directly refers to the need to protect individuals from discrimination as "laid down in

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Rainbow Cities Network 'About us' <https://www.rainbowcities.com/about-us/> accessed 17 April 2025.

⁷⁸ City of Amsterdam (n74).

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Shelter City 'We are Shelter City A global movement for human rights defenders at risk' <<https://sheltercity.org>> accessed 17 April 2025.

⁸⁴ City of Amsterdam (n69).

⁸⁵ See Gimbrère (n56) 2.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union.”⁸⁷ When Budapest’s mayor Gergely Karácsony outmanoeuvred a Hungarian law that bans LGBTQ+ pride and thus managed to ensure a pride march could take place in the city on 28 June 2025, the Amsterdam Mayor Halsema marched with him. An example of solidarity and support being shown among cities and mayors.

2.3. Refugees and Migration

In the introduction to this report, we indicated that with respect to migrants, refugees and undocumented people Amsterdam takes a firm, rights-based approach that is at times at tension with the national government’s approach. The city has explicitly referred to international human rights law when local policies conflicted with national ones in this area.⁸⁸ During the so-called refugee crisis 2015/16, when the Dutch national government denied undocumented migrants access to emergency social assistance and shelter, Amsterdam and Utrecht implemented policies that enabled immigrants and asylum seekers to access these services regardless of a formal residency status.⁸⁹ One rights-based argument Amsterdam used was that in 2014 the European Committee of Social Rights found the Netherlands to be in violation of the European Social Charter by denying emergency assistance to homeless people and undocumented migrants.⁹⁰ Despite this, the Dutch government refused to comply, claiming the Charter was non-binding and didn’t apply to non-nationals.⁹¹ In response, the Committee of Ministers reaffirmed the ECSR’s findings. That same year, three UN special rapporteurs criticized the Netherlands for breaching human rights law through the exclusion of undocumented and

“We do a lot that deviates from national legislation when it comes to migration and refugees”

Director of International Affairs, Ms S. Gimbrère

⁸⁷ Pact of Free Cities ‘Founding Document’ <<https://www.pactoffreecities.com/documents>> accessed 17 August 2025.

⁸⁸ Agnieszka Szpak, Robert Gawłowski, Joanna Modrzyńska, Paweł Modrzyński, and Michał Dahl, ‘Chapter 2: The Position of Cities in International Relations and International Law’ in *The Role of Cities in International Relations: The Third Generation of Multi-level Governance?* (Edward Elgar Publishing 2022) 22, 24. Szpak et al observe that European cities respond to the refugee crisis and in that context state: ‘[a]nother city with a broad human-rights agenda is Amsterdam. The city has been known to quote international human rights law if local policies were in conflict with national ones. [Eg] [d]uring the 2015 refugee crisis (...).’

⁸⁹ Stefan Wittwer, Katrin Hofer and David Kaufmann ‘An urban take on sustainable development policies and corresponding positioning strategies’ 3(1) *Npj urban sustainability* (2023), 4; See also Ibid 24-25.

⁹⁰ European Committee of Social Rights (n24).

⁹¹ Oomen and Baumgärtel (n24) 617.

homeless migrants from emergency aid.⁹² They also criticized the lack of support by the Dutch central government of the municipalities, which had stepped in to offer aid locally in response to the inadequacy of national government policies.⁹³ According to Gimbrère the city does “a lot against national legislation” in this context, even within EU Commission-backed partnerships that the city coordinates.⁹⁴

The city referred moreover to its responsibility to ensure public health and safety for everyone who lives in the city.⁹⁵ Though Amsterdam’s defiance of national policies has been ruled “extra-legal” by the Dutch Administrative High Court in 2016, and national funding for asylum shelters subsequently had been cut, Amsterdam continues the shelters by paying for it itself.⁹⁶ While technically one could argue that Amsterdam has the competences to deal with its local public policy issues based on Article 108(1), public health and safety seem ‘household’ issues and human rights is a way these issues are organised in the law, the appeals division of the administrative high court ruled that there is “no legal or international duty to provide shelter to undocumented migrants” and that the “local authority has no specific power” to do so.⁹⁷

Moreover, Amsterdam and other Dutch municipalities engage in formal negotiations regarding migration policy with the Dutch government through the VNG.⁹⁸ Amsterdam, jointly with Barcelona and Valencia, wrote moreover a letter to the head of the European Institution⁹⁹ where they requested European solidarity regarding refugees and reinstated their openness to be hosts for them.¹⁰⁰ During the urban agenda adopted in 2016,¹⁰¹ the EU launched several

⁹² Ibid 617; See also United Nations Human Rights Council, ‘Communications report of Special Procedures’ UN Doc A/HRC/29/50 (2015), 21, 56.

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ Gimbrère (n1) 8.

⁹⁵ Ilker Ataç, Theresa Schütze & Victoria Reitter ‘Local responses in restrictive national policy contexts: welfare provisions for non-removed rejected asylum seekers in Amsterdam, Stockholm and Vienna’ 43(16) (2020) *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 115, 124.

⁹⁶ Ibid 123.

⁹⁷ Appeals Division of the Council of State, Case 201601948/1/V1, 29 June 2016 para 3.2.

⁹⁸ Wittwer et al (n89) 4; See for more information regarding the VNG ‘Over de VNG’ <<https://vng.nl/rubrieken/over-de-vng>> accessed 29 August 2025; See also VNG ‘De Schaduwzijde van Hoop, Le fen trots’ accessed 29 August 2025 from < <https://vng.nl/sites/default/files/2025-04/onderbouwing-manifest-de-schaduwzijde-van-hoop-lef-en-trots.pdf> >

⁹⁹ The letter was addressed to heads of the European Council, European Parliament, the European Commission as well as the EASO’s Executive Director.

¹⁰⁰ Szpak et al (n83) 25; See also Eurocities ‘Public Statement on Vulnerable Children in the refugee situation in Greece’ (10 September 2020) <https://eurocities.eu/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/Letter_Cities-ready-to-take-in-refugees-1.pdf> and < https://eurocities.eu/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/Letter_Cities-ready-to-take-in-refugees-1.pdf > accessed 29 August 2025

¹⁰¹ See Urban Agenda for the EU <<https://www.urbanagenda.urban-initiative.eu>> accessed 29 August 2025.

partnerships regarding the integration of migrants and refugees, which the European Commission has asked cities to continue due to their success.¹⁰² These city alliances are not only “very practical”¹⁰³ with a focus on sharing concrete experience and expertise, but it also includes actors other than cities such as national governments, NGOs and most notably an Advisory Council of refugees.¹⁰⁴ Amsterdam’s progressive migration policy has been ongoing.¹⁰⁵ In 2024, the city council approved a motion to launch a new pilot program, starting January 2025, that should help hundreds of asylum seekers to find jobs or volunteer opportunities quicker.¹⁰⁶ This initiative aims to speed up their integration and offer them better prospects different from national rules that currently restrict work access for asylum seekers to once they have received an official residency status.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰² Interview with Gimbrère (n1) 8.

¹⁰³ Interview with Gimbrère (n1) 8.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

¹⁰⁵ See Gemeente Amsterdam ‘Werken tijdens uw asielprocedure’ < <https://www.amsterdam.nl/zorg-en-ondersteuning/ondersteuning/vluchtelingen/werken-tijdens-asielprocedure/>> accessed 29 August 2025.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid. See also City of Amsterdam ‘Motie inzake pilot asielzoeker versneld aan het werk’ accessed 29 August from <<https://amsterdam.partijvoordedieren.nl/moties/motie-inzake-pilot-asielzoeker-versneld-aan-het-werk>>

¹⁰⁷ David Hielkema and Tim Wagemakers ‘Amsterdam gaat asielzoekers sneller aan een baan helpen: goed voor de integratie, en levert de stad geld op’ (*Het Parool*, 21 November 2024) <<https://www.parool.nl/amsterdam/amsterdam-gaat-asielzoekers-sneller-aan-een-baan-helpen-goed-voor-de-integratie-en-levert-de-stad-geld-op~b6df3bbc/?referrer=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.google.com%2F>> accessed 1 June 2025; See also Gemeente Amsterdam (n105).

HOUSING AND SHELTER

People without a residence permit do have the right to rent accommodation in the Netherlands, but they cannot rent a house if a housing permit is required. If you rent from a private owner, you have legal rights as a tenant. Keep proof of your payments, to ensure these rights. Since most landlords ask for proof of income, many undocumented migrants end up renting as subtenants, with greater risk of being exploited. > **For info go to:** www.wooninfo.nl/nieuws/faq/hebben-ongedocumenteerden-huurrecht

> **For shelter and guidance, rejected asylum seekers can - under certain criteria - get a place in the LVV shelter ('Landelijke Vreemdelingen Voorziening').** For more information, go to Centrum Ongedocumenteerden Amsterdam (ACO), Houtmankade 334, 1013 RR Amsterdam, opening hours are Monday to Thursday from 10.00 until 12.00hrs, or call: 020 737247. www.amsterdam.nl/zorg-ondersteuning/ondersteuning/vluchtelingen

In case of medical risk, undocumented people can get a temporary 'emergency bed'. You can ask for a medical screening of the Municipal Health Authority (GGD) at Centrum Ongedocumenteerden Amsterdam, (ACO) Houtmankade 334, 1013 RR Amsterdam, opening hours Monday to Thursday from 10.00 until 12.00hrs, 020 7372472. You can also contact your support organisation or your healthcare provider.

Looking for assistance in finding emergency shelter?

For assistance in finding emergency shelter, contact ACO, Steungroep Vrouwen zonder Verblijfsvergunning, Wereldhuis, Stap Verder, or Amsterdam City Rights.

> **Wintershelter: Do you need emergency shelter because of the cold?** Check the website of the municipality:

www.amsterdam.nl/dakloos, or contact the support organisations.

POLICE AND DETENTION

Reporting a crime to the police

Any victim of a criminal offence is allowed to report the offence to the police. Since the launch of the 'Free In/Free Out' policy or 'Veilige Aangifte' in 2016, all victims of crime are allowed to report offences to the police regardless of their legal status. In other words, it should be safe for people without a residence permit to report a crime. Experience shows that this is more often the case in bigger cities such as Amsterdam than in rural areas. If you are not confident enough to report a crime by yourself, ask a friend, an acquaintance, or a support organisation like Stap Verder www.stapverder.info, Wereldhuis www.wereldhuis.org, Amsterdam City Rights www.amsterdamcityrights.org or Steungroep Vrouwen zonder Verblijfsvergunning www.svzv.nl to call in advance, or even to go with you to the police station.

> **Please note: The police may ask you for a proof of your identity, but if you hold no valid ID this is not a valid reason to refuse you the right to report.**

Detention

The police are only allowed to check your identity if they have a valid reason to do so; for instance, if you didn't pay the tram-ticket, or if you drink in the park, where it is forbidden to do so. If you cannot show a valid ID card or a valid residence permit at the moment you are approached by police, the police are allowed to detain you for 9 hours (nightly hours don't count). If further investigation is required, this period of detention can be extended by 72 hours. After that, you could be transferred to the Aliens Police. At the Aliens Police a decision is taken (in theory) within 6 hours, and this could become Alien Detention, or lead to a decision to be obligated to leave the Netherlands, or even Europe within four weeks.

> **Please note: You have the right to a lawyer.**

> **Make sure that a person or an organisation you trust always has your personal details: your name, date of birth, country of origin, and V-number. If needed, this trusted person or organisation can contact your lawyer, if you are detained for some reason.**

RETURN TO YOUR COUNTRY OF ORIGIN

There is support for people without a residence permit who wish to return voluntarily to their country of origin. To encourage voluntary return, a number of schemes have been developed providing financial stimulus to those wishing to depart. These are paid for by the Dutch government. For independent, non-government advice, contact the International Organization for Migration (IOM) in the Netherlands, which offers help to migrants worldwide at www.iom-nederland.nl, and supports people in the Netherlands without a residence permit who wish to return voluntarily to their country of origin.

> **Please keep in mind the benefits provided by the Dutch government usually do not cover the money spent to come here.**

KNOW MORE ABOUT YOUR RIGHTS

information for undocumented people in Amsterdam

This flyer provides information about the rights of undocumented people and where to go for assistance. People without a valid residence permit can and should be helped. As citizens of Amsterdam, they contribute to city life, yet many are prevented from meeting their basic needs because of their lack of official status. The city should take positive action to care for all its citizens, whether or not they have papers, and it should have consideration and understanding for the difficulties with which many undocumented migrants live.

#humanrightsinthecity

Initiated by Neighborhood Feminists www.neighborhoodfeminists.com Food Support Organizations and Amsterdam City Rights www.amsterdamcityrights.org to inform undocumented people about their rights. The information is compiled by Steungroep Vrouwen zonder Verblijfsvergunning (SVZV) www.svzv.nl, Stichting LOS www.stichtinglos.nl and the Amsterdam City Rights team.

> **Visit the Support Desk for information and individual support. Every Monday between 13.00 - 17.00h hrs. at the Here to Support Office, Afrikanerplein 1, 1091 PN Amsterdam.** Contact mail@amsterdamcityrights.org for information / feedback.

For information about your rights:
www.basicrights.nl - www.stichtinglos.nl
www.helpfulinformation.redcross.nl
www.amsterdamcityrights.org

Download the City Rights app to find places in Amsterdam that provide support: [App Store](#) [Google Play](#)



2.4. Housing

Since 2017 Amsterdam's internal housing strategy is the so-called 40-20-40 strategy where 40% is regulated rent, 40% mid-range (rent and purchase) and 20% expensive rent and purchase.¹⁰⁸ Yet, Amsterdam's real estate market is still deeply in crisis.¹⁰⁹ Amsterdam does not treat the housing crisis in terms of the individual right to affordable housing, as a human rights issue, because in that case "we'd fail dramatically."¹¹⁰ That said, Amsterdam has turned to the international level of governance on the issues of housing. It has used human rights language as a normative and strategic tool to lobby at the international level – specifically at the UN High-Level Political Forum in New York - by relying on the *right to housing* laid down in Article 11.1 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights.¹¹¹ Together with other cities, such as Barcelona, Berlin, London, Mexico City, Seoul, Jakarta, Beitunia and Montevideo and many others through the city alliance 'Cities for Adequate Housing,' Amsterdam has signed a municipalist declaration. This declaration was presented by the "signatory cities" at the 2018 UN High-Level Political Forum "to follow up on Sustainable Development Goal 11,"¹¹² and relies on both the international human rights norm of the right to housing while also mobilising the political concept of the 'right to the city.'¹¹³ Notably, this alliance was supported by UCLG,¹¹⁴ the then UN Special Rapporteur on the right to housing, Leilani Farha, as well as the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights.¹¹⁵ It includes a clear commitment for finding new housing strategies as well as the need to do so "in terms of social inclusion and human rights standards."¹¹⁶ Housing is framed as an issue tied to social inclusion and justice,¹¹⁷ while the real estate market in all these cities is affected by globalisation and part of the global

¹⁰⁸ See Gemeente Amsterdam 'Woonagenda 2025' accessed 10 July 2025 from <<https://openresearch.amsterdam.nl/page/58802/woonagenda-2025>> 9

¹⁰⁹ Jon Henley 'Everything's just... on hold': the Netherlands' next-level housing crisis (*The Guardian*, 6 May 2024) accessed 17 June from <<https://www.theguardian.com/news/article/2024/may/06/netherlands-amsterdam-next-level-housing-crisis?>>

¹¹⁰ Interview with Sabine Gimbrère (n1)

¹¹¹ Janne E. Nijman 'The Urban Pushback: International Law as an Instrument of Cities' (2019) 113 *Proceedings of the ASIL Annual Meeting* 119, 122.

¹¹² Cities for Adequate Housing 'Municipalist Declaration of Local Governments for the Right to Housing and the Right to the City' (New York, 16th July 2018). Accessed 11 June 2025 from <<https://citiesforhousing.org/citiesforhousing.org/index.html#section--0>>

¹¹³ Ibid. See also Nijman (n111) 122

¹¹⁴ United Cities and Local Governments

¹¹⁵ Cities for Adequate Housing (n112)

¹¹⁶ Ibid.

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

capitalist economy. Turning to the UN, this alliance of local governments hopes to find a global governance entry point for structural change – the housing crisis is rooted in a global economy in which homes are commodified. Human rights in the context of housing are employed selectively: on the international level it is used to lobby for change while within the bounds of the city some – or at least Amsterdam – does not talk about the housing crisis in terms of the right to housing to avoid noncompliance and contradictions within a human rights identity.

The appeal to the international level of governance and law is not only symbolic but rather reflects disappointment in national governments. The members of the alliance, among which Amsterdam, understand the housing crisis not just as a local phenomenon but as very much defined by the global capitalist economy, which requires an answer at that global level of governance while national policies are lagging behind. The ‘Cities for Adequate Housing’ declaration explicitly frames the cities’ struggle as one against “the lack of national and state funding, market deregulation, growing power of global corporations, and increasing competition for scarce real estate.”¹¹⁸ Cities argue they are “the most sensitive to the everyday needs” of citizens and argue that national housing frameworks are failing to uphold economic and social rights in urban contexts.¹¹⁹ Cities share an annoyance with their national governments for paying too little attention to the specific housing crises found in the urban context.¹²⁰ This move has been framed as cities asking the UN for support in protecting the housing market.¹²¹ Knowing that the UN cannot do much about this issue, the cities hope that the UN nevertheless can give “a signal to national governments.”¹²² A signal to move away from housing as commodity rather than human homes and to put a brake on investors using the housing market for serious financial gain, these cities appeal to the UN and its member-states, among which their own states, to respect the positive obligation towards their residents to fulfil their right to housing. Moreover, cities argue that the international economic order needs to change as the current system fuels speculation, deepens inequality, and undermines their ability to ensure affordable housing.¹²³ As

¹¹⁸ Cities for Adequate Housing (n112)

¹¹⁹ Ibid. Note also, the declaration names a number of issues such as “real estate speculation, high cost housing, socio-spatial segregation” but also name “inadequate regulation” as a leading factor for the “goal of ensuring equitable, inclusive, and just cities” being “at risk.”

¹²⁰ Michiel Couzy ‘Steden vragen hulp aan VN om woningmarkt te beschermen’ (*Het Parool*, 16 July 2018) accessed 11 June 2025 from <<https://www.parool.nl/nieuws/steden-vragen-hulp-aan-vn-om-woningmarkt-te-beschermen~bf0c0990/>>

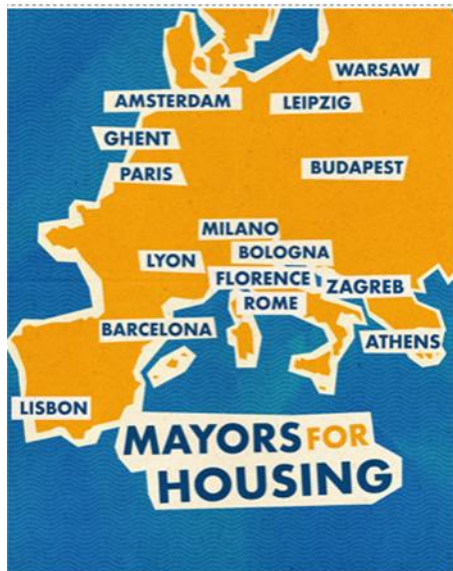
¹²¹ Ibid.

¹²² Ibid.

¹²³ Cities for Adequate Housing (n112)

such, these cities are not merely lobbying upward, but actively circumventing the nation-state by appealing directly to international bodies like the UN and leveraging international law and human rights discourse to criticize national failures to regulate the global economy and the global real estate market. Urban housing is thus reframed as a global social justice issue.

Even recently, on May 15th, 2025, the fifteen mayors from the *Mayors4Housing* alliance, in which Amsterdam participates, launched a “European Housing Action Plan” and presented it to EU Officials in the housing field.¹²⁴ Identifying multiple reasons for the housing crisis in



European cities, the document also stresses the issue of being “reliant on constrained transfers from national governments” as well as how “years of public underinvestment” that have not been fixed by private investments, have led to “market failure.”¹²⁵ Stating that curbing the housing crisis must be done collaboratively with national governments, the European institutions *and* cities the Action Plan emphasises that cities must be recognized as “key actors” to ensure political ambition is “translated into effective local action.”¹²⁶ In its call for action, the document states that housing must be recognized as the “fifth pillar of

the Welfare State” which means that “the universal right to decent and affordable housing” must be ensured with a special focus on “vulnerable and marginalized groups.”¹²⁷ Importantly, the document grounds its vision in international human rights law, citing both the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights as well as the Charter of fundamental Rights of the European Union and the European Social Charter.¹²⁸ The action plan also calls for direct access for cities to EU monetary resources and has supply, sustainability, and safeguards for residents as its three objectives.¹²⁹ Mayors do

¹²⁴ EuroCities ‘EU must act now: Mayors of major cities unveil European Housing Action Plan’ (27 May 2025) accessed 11 June 2025 from <<https://eurocities.eu/latest/eu-must-act-now-mayors-of-major-cities-unveil-european-housing-action-plan/>>

¹²⁵ Cities for Adequate Housing (n112)

¹²⁶ EuroCities’s ‘European Housing Action Plan’ accessed 19 June 2025 from < https://eurocities.eu/wp-content/uploads/2025/05/20250515_EHAP_M4H_final_OK.pdf> 4 & 5

¹²⁷ Ibid 5

¹²⁸ Ibid

¹²⁹ EuroCities (n126) 9

not merely ask for stronger national policy but *directly* call for access to EU financial instruments, arguing that cities must be recognized as key political actors in housing governance, thereby “leap-frogging”¹³⁰ over their national governments. Amsterdam actively invokes international legal frameworks to make a normative claim and engages in diplomatic mimicry with other cities to lobby at international forums such as the UN and the EU.¹³¹ Gimbrère noted that within European institutions concrete results are yielded, for instance, legislation on short-term rental changed due to city lobbying.¹³² Calling for direct access to finances is moreover part of a broader pattern, most lobbying is aimed at that.

2.5. Palestine

During the global struggle against Apartheid in South Africa, cities around the world played a crucial role by cutting official ties with the regime, boycotting institutions complicit in oppression, and standing in solidarity with the South African people.¹³³ These local actions were part of a broader international movement that helped pressure the Apartheid government toward change. Today, a similar wave of municipal solidarity is emerging in response to the war in Gaza and the occupation of Palestine. Cities like Chicago, Barcelona, Liège, and Oslo have taken more symbolic as well as practical measures, such as, calling for the implementation of the UN ‘Uniting for Peace’ resolution and for a ceasefire in Gaza,¹³⁴ cutting city ties, to distance

¹³⁰ Swiney (n30) 243

¹³¹ See also Nijman (n23) 223-227. Nijman identifies that cities conclude transnational agreements “grounded on international law” directly participate in intergovernmental organisations when asserting themselves as global actors.

¹³² Gimbrère (n1) 9; See Regulation (EU) 2024/1028 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 11 April 2024 on data collection and sharing relating to short-term accommodation rental services and amending Regulation (EU) 2018/1724 [2024] OJ L 202, 1.

¹³³ See for the Dutch situation, Nijman (n23) 210; See also for instance Karlyn Barker ‘States, Cities fight Apartheid’ *The Washington Post* (7th February 1985) accessed 6 May 2025 from

<<https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1985/02/08/states-cities-fight-apartheid/c0b8b347-d075-42c6-9c47-da31d41cf7ba/>>; See also ‘Local Authorities Against Apartheid’ *Aamarchives* accessed 6 May 2025 from

<<https://www.aamarchives.org/who-was-involved/local-authorities.html>>; See also Pieter Jeroense saying that municipalities were outspoken during Apartheid in Zuid-Afrika found in NOS Nieuws ‘Oproep burgemeester Halsema aan kabinet: roep Israëlische regering tot de orde’ (NOS, 14 May 2025) accessed 1 Jun 2025 from <<https://nos.nl/collectie/13959/artikel/2567263-oproep-burgemeester-halsema-aan-kabinet-roep-israelische-regering-tot-de-orde>>. See also for the situation in the US, Andrew Novak, ‘Reconsidering extraterritorial human rights obligations of cities and local governments: Reassessing apartheid divestment ordinances in the United States, 1975-1994’ in Nijman et al. (eds), *Urban Politics of Human Rights* (Routledge, 2023) 25-50.

¹³⁴ Chicago City Council, substitute resolution January 31st, 2024.

themselves from Israel's policies, citing parallels with Apartheid and expressing support for Palestinian rights.¹³⁵ In November 2015, Amsterdam's city council adopted an approach of mere engagement with Israeli projects, which meant no collaboration with the IDF or the Ministry of Defence more broadly, nor engagement with partners that were active in and contributed to the maintenance of the occupation and the illegal settlements.¹³⁶ This approach was "more strict than what the Dutch national government does even nowadays".¹³⁷ In a letter to the city council in 2017, Amsterdam's collaboration with Ramallah and Tel Aviv was further discussed, in particular, with respect to when collaboration is possible and when clearly undesirable. It reiterated the 2015 policy line, which had stated in addition to the ban on cooperation with the IDF or the Ministry of Defense, the conditions for collaboration plainly: in the context of economic cooperation, 'no export to, no import from, and neither direct nor indirect financial relations with illegal settlements in the OPT shall be maintained.'¹³⁸ In the letter, the mayor and the municipal executive recognised that Amsterdam's policy went beyond the Dutch national policy. This letter is also very noteworthy on another, more general human rights issue. It states that 'The municipal executive decides to adopt the UNGP as its guideline. The UNGP have been translated into a framework, the Ruggie framework, which [in turn] has guided the creation of a municipal assessment framework.'¹³⁹

"In hindsight you could say we were doing [in 2015 and since] what nobody did at the time"

More generally, Amsterdam's approach is one of seeking dialogue with and between diverse communities, specifically Amsterdam's Jewish and Muslim community.¹⁴⁰ After the terror attacks of Hamas on October 7th 2023, Amsterdam has also been outspoken on the rise of antisemitism and the need to fight against it. Amsterdam has nevertheless also criticized Israel and expressed its commitment to international law. On October 19th 2023, the Amsterdam

¹³⁵ Graham Keeley 'Barcelona mayor cuts ties with Israel, citing Palestinian rights' *Aljazeera* (9 February 2023) accessed 6 May from <<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/2/9/barcelona-mayor-cuts-ties-with-israel-citing-palestinian-rights>> See also MEE staff 'Belgian city of Liege cuts ties with Israel over Apartheid' (27 April 2023) *Middle East Eye* accessed 6 May <<https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/israel-belgium-liege-city-cuts-ties-over-apartheid?>>

¹³⁶ Interview with Gimbrère (n1) 4.

¹³⁷ Ibid.

¹³⁸ College B&W, [Aanvullende collegebrief over de samenwerking met Ramallah en met Tel Aviv](#), 23 juli 2017

¹³⁹ Ibid.

¹⁴⁰ Gemeente Amsterdam 'Amsterdammers in Gesprek: tegen discriminatie en voor verbinding' accessed 2 May from <https://www.amsterdam.nl/sociaal domein/nieuwsartikelen-nieuwsbrief/diversiteit/amsterdammers-gesprek-discriminatie/>

municipal government issued a press release in which it acknowledged that the “deadly violence of recent weeks has caused sadness, anger, and concern among the people of Amsterdam.”¹⁴¹ Therefore it called on all parties involved in the conflict between Israel and Palestine to respect international humanitarian law.¹⁴² This includes “allowing aid workers and relief supplies access to occupied areas and sparing civilians and humanitarian workers.”¹⁴³ In the same press release the city also responded to a UN flash appeal for the occupied Palestinian territories which was released on 12 October 2023,¹⁴⁴ agreeing to donate 1 million euros to the Red Cross for food, medical care and water for civilians.¹⁴⁵ Roughly three weeks later, the city council adopted a motion to “join the international calls for a humanitarian ceasefire in Israel and Gaza, release of hostages and start of a sustainable peace process.”¹⁴⁶ Amsterdam said that it joined this call because of the large numbers of civilian casualties that have occurred and the fact that many international non,- and inter-governmental organization have also called for a ceasefire specifically quoting the UN, the Red Cross and Amnesty International.¹⁴⁷ Then, in June 2024 another motion to donate 1 million euros to the Red Cross in Gaza was adopted by city council.¹⁴⁸ Most notably, on 13 November of the same year the majority of the city council voted in favour of a motion that referred to a “real and imminent” genocide in Gaza and called on the Dutch cabinet to “comply with international law” in “word and action” basing itself on the order

¹⁴¹ Gemeente Amsterdam ‘Amsterdamse bijdrage aan humanitaire hulp voor oorlogsslachtoffers’ accessed 30 August 2025 from <<https://www.amsterdam.nl/bestuur-organisatie/college/burgemeester/persberichten/amsterdamse-bijdrage-humanitaire-hulp/>>

¹⁴² Ibid.

¹⁴³ Ibid.

¹⁴⁴ See United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs ‘Flash Appeal for the Occupied Palestinian Territories 2023’ (originally published 12 October 2023, republished 06 November 2023) accessed 2 May from <<https://www.ochaopt.org/content/flash-appeal-occupied-palestinian-territory-2023>> The United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs identified a “financial requirement of approximately US\$1.2 billion to meet critical needs.”

¹⁴⁵ Gemeente Amsterdam (n141).

¹⁴⁶ Gemeente Amsterdam ‘Motie 628 - Oproep staakt het vuren’ (8 november 2023) accessed 3 June 2025 from <https://amsterdam.raadsinformatie.nl/document/13520397/1/628_23+Motie++Ernsting+c_s_+Oproep+staakt+het+vuren?connection_type=17&connection_id=10009371> See also Partij voor de Dieren Amsterdam ‘Motie begroting 2024 - Oproep tot staakt het vuren’ (9 November 2023) accessed 2 May 2025 from <https://amsterdam.partijvoordedieren.nl/moties/motie-begroting-2024-oproep-tot-staakt-het-vuren?> . See also (n 120).

¹⁴⁷ Ibid.

¹⁴⁸ See also Partij voor de Dieren Amsterdam ‘Motie inzake Amsterdam voor Gaza’ (16 June 2024) accessed 2 May 2025 from <<https://amsterdam.partijvoordedieren.nl/moties/motie-inzake-amsterdam-voor-gaza>>

of the ICJ on provisional measures in the *South Africa v Israel*.¹⁴⁹ There has however been no response by the Dutch government to date (August 2025).

Early May 2025, the municipality of Utrecht adopted a motion that contested it must officially use the term “genocide” in the context of Gaza in all external communication and public statements.¹⁵⁰ Utrecht grounds this position on the fact that it is a “human rights city” and a member of the Human Rights Cities Network. As to the law, it refers to the ICJ’s *South Africa v Israel* order of provisional measures as well as to a report by the UN Special Rapporteur, Francesca Albanese, that states that the legal threshold for genocide has been met.¹⁵¹ It also criticizes other Dutch municipalities for being so restrained and failing to call it a genocide even though “correct terminology” is crucial when it comes to “serious human rights abuses”.¹⁵² On 14 May 2025, the current mayor of Amsterdam, Femke Halsema, also on behalf of the local government as a whole, also used the wording of “genocidal violence” in a city council meeting.¹⁵³ The mayor strongly condemned the “horror of human rights violations”¹⁵⁴ perpetrated by Israel, and called on the Dutch government to take concrete actions against the Israeli government.¹⁵⁵ There “can be no double standard when it comes to human rights,” she argued. The Amsterdam government thus voiced the condemnation of anti-Semitism, stated that Hamas must be convicted and prosecuted, and called for the release of hostages while also standing behind the “innocent Palestinians and Gazans who are being criminally murdered” by

¹⁴⁹ Gemeente Amsterdam ‘Motie 575 accent – Naleven internationaal recht in woord en daad’ (13 November 2024) accessed 3 June 2025 from

<https://amsterdam.raadsinformatie.nl/document/14862640/1?connection_type=17&connection_id=11214557>; See also David Hielkema & Tim Wagemakers ‘Amsterdamse gemeenteraad roept kabinet op ‘internationaal recht na te leven’ en verwijst naar ‘dreigende’ genocide’ (*Het Parool*, 14 November 2024) accessed 2 May <<https://www.parool.nl/amsterdam/amsterdamse-gemeenteraad-roept-kabinet-op-internationaal-recht-na-te-leven-en-verwijst-naar-dreigende-genocide~be732e75/?referrer=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.google.com%2F>>

¹⁵⁰ Gemeente Utrecht ‘Motie 184 Hanteer de terminologie van internationale mensenrechtsorganisaties’ (8 May 2025) accessed 3 June 2025 from <<https://utrecht.bestuurlijkeinformatie.nl/Reports/Document/f300e769-0fdc-455d-9c18-d0b5a8516cb9?documentId=d6c2fd4d-36a9-485e-84d6-d10d95c22d65>>; See also Ilham Oukhiar ‘Utrecht wil als eerste gemeente term ‘genocide’ officieel gebruiken voor situatie in Gaza (*RTV Utrecht*, 9 May 2025, amended 12 May 2025) accessed 3 June 2025 from <<https://www.rtvutrecht.nl/nieuws/3890806/utrecht-wil-als-eerste-gemeente-term-genocide-officieel-gebruiken-voor-situatie-gaza>>

¹⁵¹ Gemeente Utrecht (n150)

¹⁵² Ibid

¹⁵³ Halsema (n15)

¹⁵⁴ Ibid

¹⁵⁵ David Hielkema and Tim Wagemakers ‘Halsema verwijst voor het eerst naar genocide en wil dat kabinet Israël tot de orde roept’ (*Het Parool*, 14 May 2025) accessed 1 June from <<https://www.parool.nl/nieuws/halsema-verwijst-voor-het-eerst-naar-genocide-en-wil-dat-kabinet-israel-tot-de-orde-roept~b1de784b/>>

Israel.¹⁵⁶ The Mayor referred to the local government's "duty of care" for Amsterdam's residents and the fact that Amsterdam is an international city of "freedom and human rights", while condemning Israel's violations.¹⁵⁷

As mentioned earlier, the mayor also explicated that Amsterdam must "exercise some restraint" when it comes to foreign policy as this belongs to the realm of the Dutch national government.¹⁵⁸ Pieter Jeroense, the director of the international branch of the Association of Dutch municipalities (VNG International), has stressed that municipalities that are outspoken about Gaza do not just merely do this to enhance their public profile but rather want real change to happen.¹⁵⁹ Amsterdam aims to pressure the national government to act finally and enhance diplomatic pressure on Israel.¹⁶⁰ However, as the interview with Gimbrère clarified, the Dutch national government has not responded to these calls at all; "they never react to anything."¹⁶¹ While Amsterdam's approach is in line also with international law obligations of Third States as outlined by the ICJ in Advisory Opinions of 2004 and 2024,¹⁶² the Dutch caretaker government fell on August 22nd, 2025, over a conflict about sanctions against products coming from the colonists in the OPT leaving the Netherlands in violation of international law.

The city of Amsterdam has also dedicated a website to inform residents about its approach more generally, to list its measures such as the donation to the Red Cross, to facilitate demonstrations, to maintain active and open communication with Muslim and Jewish organizations, and to increase monitoring of threats and actions against hate speech.¹⁶³ These measures also form part of the city's efforts to maintain social cohesion and ensure safety during a period of heightened tension. This approach clearly shows how issues that concern foreign policy have great impact at the local level and require a response by the local government as well. As noted earlier, Dutch municipalities have a mandate to govern local affairs, which increasingly includes responding to international matters with direct local impact, creating a

¹⁵⁶ Halsema (n15)

¹⁵⁷ Ibid

¹⁵⁸ Halsema (n15)

¹⁵⁹ Pieter Jeroense in NOS Nieuws (n133)

¹⁶⁰ Ibid

¹⁶¹ Interview with Gimbrère (n1) 16

¹⁶² 'Legal Consequences of the Construction of a Wall in the Occupied Palestinian Territory', Advisory Opinion, ICJ GL No 131, [2004] ICJ Rep 136, (2004) and the 'Legal Consequences Arising from the Policies and Practices of Israel in the Occupied Palestinian Territory, including East Jerusalem', Advisory Opinion, I.C.J. Reports 2024, p. 1, No. 186 (July 19, 2024).

¹⁶³ Gemeente Amsterdam (n140).

complex interaction between municipal autonomy and national authority. That said, both Utrecht's and Amsterdam's decision to use the legal qualification of "genocide" in the context of Gaza cannot merely be captured by only referring it back to local community impact. Something else is happening, where the city takes a strong normative stance and calls for respect for international law. In this case, the three levels of government interact in a complex way: the Dutch government has taken a rather supportive stance towards Israel and its response to the terrorist attack of October 7th, while municipalities in The Netherlands and beyond invoke publicly international (humanitarian) law and human rights and refer to international institutions such as the UN to call out their respective governments to act much more forcefully against Israel's violations and support the Palestinian people. Amsterdam has fared a careful course guided by a strong conviction of the rule of law and a great sensitivity to the needs and histories of its local communities. Yet as a governmental agent it reached a point that it turned to the national government and the Dutch state to call on its third state obligations, showing great awareness of and commitment to maintaining the international legal order.¹⁶⁴

In the remainder of this city report, we turn to the domain of Drugs and Crime and in next section 4 to the SDGs and the digital agenda.

3. Drugs and Crime

Throughout history, cities have been the spearheaders for drug policy reforms.¹⁶⁵ For instance, during the heroin crisis of the 1980s, cities like Amsterdam, Frankfurt, Hamburg, and Zürich were among the first to respond with new and practical solutions.¹⁶⁶ In 1990, they came together to form the *European Cities on Drug Policy* network (ECDP) by signing the Frankfurt Resolution.¹⁶⁷ These cities were facing serious public health issues, including the spread of HIV among people who used drugs, and felt that national drug policies were too slow and too focused on criminalisation and punishment.¹⁶⁸ Instead, they started to introduce harm reduction measures

¹⁶⁴ *Raadsinformatiebrief* (n17): Letter to the members of the city council by mayor Femke Halsema to answer written questions by members Abdi, Heinhuis, Yemane, Nadif, Aslami, Broersen, Khan and Alberts on getting ill and wounded Palestinians out of Gaza, 5 September 2025: <https://amsterdam.raadsinformatie.nl/document/15937650/1>

¹⁶⁵ Alex Wodak 'All drug politics is local' (2006) 17(2) *International Journal of Drug Policy* 83, 83-84

¹⁶⁶ Tom Blickman and Katie Sandwell 'Cannabis in the City: Bottom-up policy reform for cannabis regulation' 51 *Tni Institute Drug Policy Briefing* (2019) 5-6

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

such as heroin-assisted treatment, drug consumption rooms, and programs that combined housing, work, and care.¹⁶⁹ Sometimes this meant working around national laws or pushing legal boundaries. It was the Amsterdam local government rather than the Dutch national government that pioneered harm reduction approaches in the spread of HIV in the early 1980s.¹⁷⁰ Though back then not explicitly framed as a human rights issue, over time these local efforts influenced national governments and even helped shape international thinking about drug policy since a recent shift towards a more harm reductionist approach can be observed.¹⁷¹ The work of ECDP shows how cities can drive important international – in this case, European – law and policy changes from the ground up.

Today, Amsterdam is extremely active in its advocacy for health-based drug policies and criticism of current international approaches. Mayor Halsema has been vocal in her criticism of national and international drug-policies, notably through interviews and opinion pieces in international media.¹⁷² She has taken position on de-criminalisation and eventually legalisation of drugs also in international institutional settings, mainly through drug-specific city alliances and events. As mentioned in the introduction, in January 2024 the mayor hosted the international conference ‘Dealing with Drugs’ in Amsterdam to confront jointly the challenge of drug-related crime and to explore how thereto further regulation of the drug market can be employed.¹⁷³ The conference brought “cities, governments, scientists and practitioners” as well as relevant NGOs together.¹⁷⁴ Here too we see cities claim an internationally collaborative role for themselves on the issue next to or even instead of national governments. At the conference, the mayor of Bern

¹⁶⁹ Ibid.

¹⁷⁰ Wodak (n165)

¹⁷¹ See for instance UNAIDS ‘UNAIDS welcomes the adoption of a crucial resolution recognizing harm reduction measures at the UN Commission on Narcotic Drugs’ (22 March 2024) accessed 19 June from <https://www.unaids.org/en/resources/presscentre/pressreleaseandstatementarchive/2024/march/20240322_harm-reduction>; See also World Health Organization ‘Global HIV, Hepatitis and STIs Programmes – people who inject drugs’ accessed 19 June from <<https://www.who.int/teams/global-hiv-hepatitis-and-stis-programmes/populations/people-who-inject-drugs>>; Also, note it is hard to draw a direct correlation between these cities initiatives and more harm reductionist approaches being observed on the international though Blickman and Sandwell (n154) do make this connection. Yet, this development on the international level was gradual and came about by the influence of many stakeholders, experts and NGOs. Yet, it is clear that cities have often been proactive, before their national governments did much, in implementing more health-based approaches.

¹⁷² See Femke Halsema ‘As the mayor of Amsterdam, I can see the Netherlands risks becoming a narco-state’ *The Guardian* (5 Jan 2024) <<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2024/jan/05/amsterdam-netherlands-drugs-policy-trade>> accessed 12 April 2025; See also Henry Mance ‘Mayor of Amsterdam: ‘In time, drug legalization is inevitable’ *The Financial Times* (15 July 2024).

¹⁷³ Correlation - European Harm Network (n25)

¹⁷⁴ Femke Halsema ‘Amsterdam and the pursuit of sensible regulation of drugs’ accessed 19 June 2025 from <<https://www.amsterdam.nl/dealingwithdrugs/>>

stated that “nations will never act because they are not confronted with the problems. The problems are on the ground, on the field, in the city (...) which is why we need to act.”¹⁷⁵ In the same vein, the emphasis of the conference was on the need to advance effective and humane drug policies at the city level and to gather support from mayors worldwide.¹⁷⁶

Concretely, the aim of the ‘Dealing with Drugs’ conference was two-fold: to bring together policymakers, academics and civil society vested in drug policy reform together to forge a worldwide coalition of ‘innovators’ of drug-policy and to launch the “Amsterdam Manifesto Dealing with Drugs.” This manifesto is rooted in the recognition of past policy failure and fifty years of human rights violations due to punitive drug-policy and “war on drugs” approaches.¹⁷⁷ It proposes an alternative “integrated approach to drugs, taking into account public health, human rights, social justice and safety.”¹⁷⁸ The coalition’s pledge includes the commitment to policy development that is scientific knowledge and evidence based, that harvests global knowledge through sharing of experience with good practices, and that upholds human rights and the rule of law as well as the values of empathy and humanity.¹⁷⁹ A diverse array of urban organisations and experts active in the field have signed this Manifesto, notably however alongside Amsterdam (merely) three other city mayors did, namely the mayors of Bogota, Bern and Brussels.

In October 2024, Halsema initiated and hosted moreover a satellite event on ‘cities and international drug regulation’ at the European Harm Reduction Conference in Warsaw. The conference included a panel of mayors from different cities. In an interview beforehand when asked what the key challenges for the implementation of an innovative drug policy are, Halsema pointed to “the tension between local initiatives and the broader national laws, European policy, and the UN conventions on drugs, which do not always reflect the realities on the ground.”¹⁸⁰ In Warsaw too, Halsema advocated for an innovative health-led drug policy and for alternative,

¹⁷⁵ Mayor of Bern Alec von Graffenried in an interview at the dealing with drugs conference. See ‘Dealing with drugs I short film’ Minute 02.30 accessed 19 June from <<https://www.amsterdam.nl/dealingwithdrugs/one/>>

¹⁷⁶ See Halsema (n174)

¹⁷⁷ City of Amsterdam ‘Amsterdam Manifesto Dealing with Drugs’ (26 January 2024)

<<https://www.amsterdam.nl/dealingwithdrugs/amsterdam-manifesto-dealing-drugs>> accessed 7 April 2025.

¹⁷⁸ Ibid.

¹⁷⁹ Ibid.

¹⁸⁰ Correlation – European Harm Network ‘Dealing with Drugs II at #EHRC2024: Mayor Halsema on Amsterdam’s Push for Drug Regulation to Tackle Crime and Protect Public Health’ (22 October 2024) <<https://correlation-net.org/2024/10/22/dealing-with-drugs-ii-at-ehrc2024-mayor-halsema-on-amsterdams-push-for-drug-regulation-to-tackle-crime-and-protect-public-health/>> accessed 25 April 2025.

more realistic policies to be debated “in local governments, national parliaments and especially in international assemblies.”¹⁸¹

In concrete terms on a local policy level these health-led drug policies mean prioritizing harm reduction measures such as supervised consumption rooms, needle exchange programs, and medically assisted treatments and decriminalizing the possession of small quantities of drugs through a policy of toleration.¹⁸² Halsema being “proud”¹⁸³ of the health-led drug policy that Amsterdam is following, called for “international solutions”¹⁸⁴ crucial to curb global illegal drug trades. Halsema sees the role of cities as central to drugs trade and crime: the port of Rotterdam has become a “global transit hub” for illegal drugs, and cocaine, in particular, and Amsterdam serves as the “international financial hub” of the illegal drug trade.¹⁸⁵ This makes it “vulnerable to money laundering” and criminal money becomes much too prominent in the local economy; vulnerable Amsterdam youth is moreover easily exploited to sustain the city’s drugs availability and infrastructure. Safety in some of its streets is jeopardized¹⁸⁶ due to drugs related crime.

Gimbrère explained that the reason for Amsterdam to be so active in the field relates back to the local challenges-driven approach it takes to its international initiatives and policies.¹⁸⁷ Interestingly, in addition to the health and human rights-based approach to drugs, Amsterdam employs increasingly an economic narrative that asks what it would mean if the city itself produced and sold drugs in a regulated, safe way, rather than leaving the profits in the hands of criminal organizations.¹⁸⁸ An attempt to move beyond moral arguments and seek support for regulation through economic arguments. Again, the problem is felt locally in Amsterdam’s streets, while it can only be addressed effectively at the international level as the drug market and supply chains are global.

¹⁸¹ Ibid.

¹⁸² See for instance the 2019 Idpc publication ‘Drug consumption rooms in the Netherlands accessed 19 June from <<https://idpc.net/publications/2019/07/drug-consumption-rooms-in-the-netherlands>> though this is a nation-wide policy; For Amsterdam specific see Correlation ‘Amsterdam’s New Mobile Drug Consumption Room to Begin Operations Soon – Interview with Anika Apfel’ (Correlation, 01/04/2025) accessed 19 June from <<https://correlation-net.org/2025/04/01/amsterdams-new-mobile-drug-consumption-room-to-begin-operations-soon-interview-with-anika-apfel/>> which describes how the municipality moved from enforcement to harm reduction in their policy approach; See also Blickman and Sandwell (n166).

¹⁸³ Ibid.

¹⁸⁴ Ibid.

¹⁸⁵ Halsema’s interview in Correlation (n25).

¹⁸⁶ Interview with Gimbrère (n1) 13.

¹⁸⁷ Interview with Gimbrère (n1) 14.

¹⁸⁸ Ibid.

Halsema traces the issues Amsterdam is facing due to illegal drug trade and crime back to the “global drug prohibition trends”¹⁸⁹ that can have “counterproductive outcomes.”¹⁹⁰ In this vein, she calls for international cooperation prioritizing health and safety over punishment and argues for a revisit of international law. In particular, she criticizes the prohibition of drugs laid down in international treaties as this focuses on punitive measures instead of health and safety and calls for a revision of the international treaties.¹⁹¹ Hence, on Amsterdam’s behalf, mayor Halsema calls for changes in the international legal approach to drug policies and relates to the growing trend for new approaches, referring to the current UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Volker Türk, who spoke on “The international pursuit of sensible regulation of drugs” at the Dealing with Drugs II conference.¹⁹² An “ally” of Amsterdam’s human-rights based approach,¹⁹³ Türk has been vocal in his criticism of the war on drugs and has called for decriminalisation and a transformative approach to address and counter the world’s drug problem.¹⁹⁴ At the Dealing with Drugs II conference, he refers to the International Guidelines on Human Rights and Drug Policy published in 2020, to provide the legal “framework for developing human rights-based approaches that prioritize health, dignity, and inclusion.” These guidelines were the result of a three-year consultation process in which Amsterdam played a significant role as one of three cities to hold consultations alongside Pretoria and Bangkok.¹⁹⁵ Amsterdam was the only city where the consultation meeting was a community consultation of people who use drugs, placing the lived realities of those most affected at the center of policy development.¹⁹⁶ The guidelines serve as a tool to address the gap of shared standards and to create clarity on “what human rights law requires of states [and thus also of municipalities] in the

¹⁸⁹ Halsema’s interview in Correlation (n25).

¹⁹⁰ Ibid.

¹⁹¹ Ibid; She most likely refers to the Single Convention on Narcotic Drugs (1961) 520 UNTS 151; Convention on Psychotropic Substances (1971) 1019 UNTS 175; United Nations Convention Against Illicit Traffic in Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances (1988) 1582 UNTS 9.

¹⁹² See for UNHCHR Volker Türk’s speech here: <https://www.ohchr.org/en/statements-and-speeches/2024/12/hc-turk-international-pursuit-sensible-regulation-drugs>

¹⁹³ Interview with Gimbrère (n1) 14.

¹⁹⁴ United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights Volker Türk ‘Human rights challenges in addressing and countering all aspects of the world drug problem’ (2023) UN Doc A/HRC/54/53. See also UN News ‘War on drugs has failed, completely and utterly’: UN human rights chief < <https://news.un.org/en/story/2024/12/1157836> > accessed 25 April 2025.

¹⁹⁵ United Nations Development Program ‘International Guidelines on Human Rights and Drug Policy’ (6 November 2020) < <https://www.undp.org/publications/international-guidelines-human-rights-and-drug-policy> > accessed 25 April 2025 27.

¹⁹⁶ Ibid.

context of drug control law, policy and practice.”¹⁹⁷ Moreover, they “apply existing human rights law to the legal and policy context of drug control” with a focus on human rights protection.¹⁹⁸ Published by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), they have been developed by diverse UN agencies, academics and member states.

The UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Volker Türk, appreciated “the initiative of the mayor of Amsterdam to mobilize global city leaders on the sensible regulation of drugs” in his welcoming words at the Dealing with Drugs Conference II.¹⁹⁹ City and UN, mayor and UNHCHR come together around drugs related international law and policy and agree normative change is needed.

As one of us has analyzed elsewhere, the construction of a city’s identity as a ‘global city’ and/or as a ‘global actor’ is highly relational.²⁰⁰ This means that whether a city takes tangible actions on the global level depends not only on its self-perception but on whether other actors recognize this said global city identity.²⁰¹ In this context, a two-fold relationality can be observed: Türk recognizes the important role of cities in the global regulation of drugs²⁰² and the move to “sensible regulation of drugs”.²⁰³ Here relations between cities and UN institutions are crucial, while international law remains state-centric and thus a revisit of international norms requires action within the international community of states. Cities are recognised as norm carriers and policy innovators. This role only fits, when a city develops relations with itself which relate to the relevant international law and policy on the issue.

Amsterdam projects itself as a leading actor both locally and globally in the development of innovative drug policy and international regulation; it does so through the strategic use of human rights language and international legal frameworks. Amsterdam can be seen as a law-broker: while it cannot (yet) formally influence the (re-)creation of international drug-related law, it translates international human rights norms into its local drug policies and global policy proposals; it organises transnational collaboration and leads in the campaign for the revision of relevant treaties. Such a global strategy aligns with what Nijman describes as cities mimicking

¹⁹⁷ Ibid

¹⁹⁸ Ibid 4.

¹⁹⁹ City of Amsterdam ‘Dealing with drugs II’ Video Message by the High Commissioner for the human rights Volker Türk (4 December 2024) <<https://www.amsterdam.nl/dealingwithdrugs/two/>> accessed 25 April 2025.

²⁰⁰ Nijman (n23) 218 & 223.

²⁰¹ Nijman (n23) 218 & 223.

²⁰² As he refers to ‘global city leaders’.

²⁰³ Türk (n199)

state diplomacy. Amsterdam engages directly international law and human rights language to legitimize and seeks collaboration at the global governance level of the UN, to advance globally a health- and rights-based approach. Amsterdam's emphasis on collaboration across municipalities and with the UN highlights how it sees itself as a global actor capable of shaping drug policy reforms from the ground up.

4. Amsterdam's Digital Agenda and the SDGs

4.1. Digital Transformation and Digital Rights

For a long time now, Amsterdam has been a city invested in digitization. It has been the first municipality in Europe to start a Smart City program in 2009 expanding on its earlier Digital City Projects.²⁰⁴ In a broader sense, the Amsterdam Smart City

“The focus within our digital agenda is that technology and innovation should be available to all citizens”

Program, now called Amsterdam InChange, is a private-public initiative and (online) platform by the Amsterdam Economic Board where “governments, knowledge institutions, social organisations and innovative companies” collaborate.²⁰⁵ The City of Amsterdam is one of their partners.²⁰⁶ They articulate their mission as being “values first,”²⁰⁷ seeing “tech as a means”²⁰⁸ to increase life quality not an end in itself which includes “open and transparent sharing of knowledge.”²⁰⁹ Their focal themes are circular city, energy, mobility, citizens & living, digital city and their smart city academy.²¹⁰ Gimbrère sees the notion of smart cities as one of the past, a “container notion” that no longer plays much of a role in Amsterdam policy debates and decision making. The “strong” digital agenda that Amsterdam has adopted is now the priority of the city and is focused on “the commons,” to prevent Amsterdammers from becoming too dependent on big tech companies.²¹¹ Thus, in the context of smart cities, Amsterdam's human rights focus resurfaced again. In 2018, Amsterdam joined forces with Barcelona and New York to launch the Cities Coalition for Digital Rights (CC4DR), a global

²⁰⁴ Shazade Jameson, Christine Richter and Linnet Taylor ‘People's strategies for perceived surveillance in Amsterdam Smart City’ (2019) 40 Urban Geography 1467, 1468.

²⁰⁵ Amsterdam Smart City ‘About Us’ accessed 8 May 2025 from <<https://amsterdamsmartcity.com/about>>

²⁰⁶ Amsterdam Smart City ‘Partners’ accessed 8 May 2025 from <<https://amsterdamsmartcity.com/partners>>

²⁰⁷ Amsterdam Smart City (n205)

²⁰⁸ Ibid.

²⁰⁹ Ibid.

²¹⁰ Amsterdam Smart City ‘Amsterdam Smart City’ accessed 8 May from <<https://amsterdamsmartcity.com>>

²¹¹ Interview with Gimbrère (n1) 17

network which has since grown to include over 60 cities worldwide working together to shape digital policies grounded in human rights principles.²¹² The coalition aims to tackle “common digital challenges”,²¹³ to establish a “legal, ethical and operational framework to advance human rights in digital environments”,²¹⁴ and to share best practices.²¹⁵ The United Nations Human Settlements Programme, United Cities and Local Governments, and Eurocities are partners of this coalition.²¹⁶ The main goal of Amsterdam within this coalition is “protecting the digital rights of its citizens” against human rights violations, eg to protect their privacy and ensure free access to data.²¹⁷ Cities that are part of this coalition have signed a framework in forms of a declaratory document inspired by the UN Internet Governance Forum.²¹⁸ The principles of this declaration document are the following five:

1. Universal and equal access to the internet, and digital literacy
2. Privacy, data protection and security
3. Transparency, accountability, and non-discrimination of data, content and algorithms
4. Participatory Democracy, diversity and inclusion
5. Open and ethical digital service standards

In its Digital City Agenda 2023-2026²¹⁹ Amsterdam affirms that “technology can put human rights under pressure, such as the right to privacy, non-discrimination, autonomy and human dignity.”²²⁰ It commits firmly to digital rights, stating that it aims to be a city where “the use of digital technologies is fair, transparent and responsible, with attention to digital rights.”²²¹

Another partner in the context of CC4DR is UN-Habitat, which moved from a smart city concept to a people-centred approach. UN-Habitat’s *People-Centered Smart Cities* initiative provides local governments with a normative framework for inclusive digital transformation.²²²

²¹² Cities Coalition for Digital Rights ‘About Us’ accessed 8 May 2025 from

<<https://citiesfordigitalrights.org/thecoalition>>

²¹³ Ibid.

²¹⁴ Ibid.

²¹⁵ Interview with Gimbrère (n1) 17

²¹⁶ Ibid.

²¹⁷ Interview with Gimbrère (n1) 17

²¹⁸ Declaration of Cities Coalition for Digital Rights accessed 8 May 2025 from

<https://citiesfordigitalrights.org/assets/Declaration_Cities_for_Digital_Rights.pdf>

²¹⁹ Gemeente Amsterdam ‘Agenda Digitale Stad’ accessed 8 May from

<<https://www.amsterdam.nl/innovatie/agenda-digitale-stad/>>

²²⁰ Ibid.

²²¹ Ibid.

²²² UN-Habitat ‘People Centred-Smart Cities’ accessed 24 June 2025 from <<https://unhabitat.org/programme/people-centred-smart-cities>>

Developed by a global working group of 31 experts from 25 countries, the six thematic playbooks are non-binding but represent a growing body of soft law shaping urban technological governance worldwide. They encourage cities to adopt a multi-stakeholder approach to digital innovation that advances sustainability, prosperity, and human rights. Amsterdam features prominently across five of the six playbooks, both as part of the CC4DR and as a city-specific case study. Together, these references position Amsterdam as a leading example of people-centered digital governance.

One recurring theme is the need to build municipal capacity. Amsterdam's innovation office, led by a Chief Technology Officer who collaborates with local tech businesses and start-ups, is highlighted as a best practice.²²³ The CC4DR itself is repeatedly mentioned for its Digital Rights Helpdesk, developed with UN-Habitat to provide cities worldwide with policy and technical advice on rights-based digital strategies.²²⁴ As on other challenges, national governments are criticized for not acting enough and for not delivering results especially to benefit women, children, older people and indigenous people. Amsterdam is also cited for its role in addressing inequalities in connectivity. The playbooks note the city's *CityNet* project, where Amsterdam co-invested in a high-speed fiber network alongside private companies and housing associations.²²⁵ By structuring the project as a market investment rather than a subsidy, Amsterdam set a precedent for municipally owned broadband in Europe that expanded internet access without breaching EU competition rules.²²⁶ Such initiatives are presented as models for closing the digital divide in an inclusive way. The city's approach to algorithmic transparency and privacy-respecting AI is highlighted as well.²²⁷ Amsterdam's algorithm register makes information about municipal algorithms public and accessible, giving residents insight into how automated systems shape services.²²⁸ Its open-source Public Eye project, a crowd management system that counts people without storing personal data, is cited as an example of privacy-by-

²²³ UN-Habitat 'Centering People in Smart Cities' downloaded 24 June 2025 from

<<https://unhabitat.org/programme/people-centered-smart-cities/people-centered-smart-cities-playbooks>>

²²⁴ UN-Habitat 'Assessing the Digital Divide' downloaded 24 June 2025 from

<<https://unhabitat.org/programme/people-centered-smart-cities/people-centered-smart-cities-playbooks>> 19.

²²⁵ UN-Habitat 'Addressing the Digital Divide' downloaded 24 June 2025 from

<<https://unhabitat.org/programme/people-centered-smart-cities/people-centered-smart-cities-playbooks>> 44.

²²⁶ Ibid.

²²⁷ UN-Habitat 'Shaping Co-creation & Collaboration in Smart Cities' downloaded 24 June 2025 from

<<https://unhabitat.org/programme/people-centered-smart-cities/people-centered-smart-cities-playbooks>> 45.

²²⁸ Ibid.

design technology that can be adapted by other cities.²²⁹ Additionally, Amsterdam participates in the Urban AI Observatory, launched with other global cities to develop guidelines on the responsible use of artificial intelligence in urban spaces, filling perceived gaps in EU regulation.²³⁰ Finally, the CC4DR is recognized as an effective model for international collaboration.²³¹ Amsterdam's digital governance efforts not only intersect with UN-Habitat but also find some resonance at the International Telecommunication Union's (ITU) global smart city standards and policy work. However, Amsterdam is only mentioned once as a best practice example in relation to its implementation of a graphic digital twin smart city platform.²³²

4.2. The Voluntary Local Review

On 8 July 2021, the Amsterdam city council adopted the 'Comprehensive Vision Amsterdam 2050: a humane metropolis.'²³³ The city focuses on five pillars in this long-term vision which are polycentric development, growth within limits, sustainable and healthy mobility, rigorous greening and making the city together.²³⁴ Moreover, sustainability is deeply embedded in Amsterdam's urban identity. As the first city in the world, it has adopted the "doughnut economics" model to balance human well-being with ecological sustainability and economic growth.²³⁵ Alongside setting goals for itself, Amsterdam has published a tool for "transformative action" which is a strategic framework and policymaking tool aimed at inspiring and guiding other cities in adopting a doughnut economy.²³⁶ Quoted by different sources as an aspirational

²²⁹ Ibid 46.

²³⁰ See Cities Coalition for Digital Rights 'The Global Observatory of Urban AI launches its ATLAS' (21 July 2022) accessed 24 June 2025 from <<https://citiesfordigitalrights.org/global-observatory-urban-ai-launches-its-atlas>> which explains that the Urban AI Observatory is a global initiative led by CIDOB with Barcelona, London, and Amsterdam, supports ethical and rights-based AI in cities through its Atlas which is an interactive platform that maps urban AI projects from around the world, offering insights, data, and practical examples to guide policymakers, researchers, and the public in responsible AI development.

²³¹ UN-Habitat 'Building Capacity for People-Centred Smart Cities' downloaded 24 June 2025 from <<https://unhabitat.org/programme/people-centered-smart-cities/people-centered-smart-cities-playbooks>> 27.

²³² ITU 'Best practices for graphical digital twins for smart cities' (Technical paper ITU-T YSTR.BP-DTW, 02/2023) accessed 24 June 2025 from <<https://www.itu.int/publications/en/publication/itu-t-ystr-bp-dtw-2023-02-best-practices-for-graphical-digital-twins-of-smart-cities>>

²³³ City of Amsterdam 'Policy: Urban Development' accessed 8 May from <<https://www.amsterdam.nl/en/policy/urban-development/>>

²³⁴ Ibid.

²³⁵ Ciara Nugent 'Amsterdam Is Embracing a Radical New Economic Theory to Help Save the Environment. Could It Also Replace Capitalism?' *Time* (22 January 2021) accessed 6 May 2025 from <<https://time.com/5930093/amsterdam-doughnut-economics/>> See also 'Amsterdam City Doughnut' accessed 6 May 2025 from <<https://doughnuteconomics.org/stories/amsterdam-city-doughnut>>

²³⁶ Ibid.

and innovative model for other cities,²³⁷ ambitious targets have been set by Amsterdam which include the city becoming completely emission-free and halving its raw material use by 2030 and have full circularity by 2050.²³⁸ The detailed circular economy strategy focuses on three key areas: food and organic waste streams, consumer goods and the built environment.²³⁹ To measure progress, Amsterdam is developing a monitoring system to track the ecological and social impact of its circular transition.²⁴⁰

Amsterdam subscribes to the SDGs. In 2022, as the first municipality in the Netherlands, Amsterdam submitted a Voluntary Local Review (VLR) to account for its implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals to the United Nations.²⁴¹ A VLR is a city-led reporting tool that mirrors the Voluntary National Reviews submitted by national governments under the 2030 Agenda.²⁴² Originally developed from the ground up by local governments, VLRs have since become a key way for cities to structure their local SDG efforts and share best practices.²⁴³ As Gimbrère noted, the strength of the SDGs lies in the “common language” they create.²⁴⁴ Though amongst cities that have developed their VLR there is a shared agreement that the language of the SDGs has been too state-centric and that next time the international community develops global policy goals, cities should have a seat at the table, to make sure the goals can be “more useful” to cities.²⁴⁵

“We are key in actually implementing the SDGs which we have proven with our VLR”

Amsterdam’s mayor Halsema refers to the fact that cities play an essential role in localizing the SDGs as most people will live in cities by 2050 citing the UN.²⁴⁶ While she hopes this report will spark momentum for local actors to create a “better future for our city,”²⁴⁷ she clearly emphasizes that the main goal of the report is convincing policy makers on the global

²³⁷ Ibid.

²³⁸ Ibid.

²³⁹ See City of Amsterdam ‘Policy: circular economy’ under ‘what does the strategy involve?’ and under ‘More information pdf Amsterdam Circular Strategy 2020-2025 public version’ accessed 8 May 2025 <<https://www.amsterdam.nl/en/policy/sustainability/circular-economy/>>

²⁴⁰ Ibid see under ‘measure our progress.’

²⁴¹ City of Amsterdam (n5).

²⁴² Fernando Ortiz-Moya and Marco Reggiani ‘Operationalising the follow-up and review of the sustainable development goals at the local level: insights from European cities and their voluntary local review experience’ (2025) 11(1) *Journal of Urban Ecology* 1-2.

²⁴³ Ibid.

²⁴⁴ Gimbrère (n1) 18-19.

²⁴⁵ City of Amsterdam (n3).

²⁴⁶ Ibid 17.

²⁴⁷ Ibid.

level of the necessity “to engage all levels of government in drafting new global goals.”²⁴⁸ Amsterdam is “willing and capable to engage,” Halsema stressed that “the local level is indispensable” when it comes to implementing global goals.²⁴⁹ Notably, even the High Commissioner for Human Rights has acknowledged that “responsibility for implementation and review” of the 2030 agenda is “often shared between national and local governments” and that “local governments are key actors in localizing” the SDGs.”²⁵⁰

Halsema’s language tends to focus on broad values rather than clearly articulated legal standards that must guide city policies. The emphasis on local engagement and willingness to cooperate internationally shows the city’s normative orientation, but it does not specify which exact norms or frameworks the city must comply with. For instance, values like sustainability, inclusion, and cooperation across governance levels are clearly mentioned but the VLR does not explicitly reference specific international (human rights) laws or legal norms.

The report’s focus lays on SDGs 1, 8, 10, 11, 12 and 13 while all other goals are only explored in brief. This means no poverty, decent work and economic growth, reduced inequalities, sustainable cities and communities, responsible consumption and production, and climate action are explored in detail. The rationale for selecting these specific SDGs is outlined in Appendix 1, which offers four main reasons: (1) they are highly relevant at the local level, as reflected in their frequent inclusion in other Voluntary Local Reviews; (2) there is a substantial body of local policy addressing them; (3) they represent a balanced mix between people-focused (SDGs 1 and 10), prosperity-oriented (SDG 8), planet-centered (SDG 13), and integrative goals (SDGs 11 and 12); and (4) they allow for a meaningful reflection of Amsterdam’s unique context through available data and policies.²⁵¹ These choices also seem to create a clear entry point to examine how sustainability and human rights intersect in the city’s urban agenda even though this is not made too explicit. For example, by addressing housing under SDG 11, tackling inequality through SDG 10, and framing climate action (SDG 13) as a social as well as environmental issue.

Moreover, the VLC reads that Amsterdam’s submission in particular and VLRs in general “can provide policy coherence in relation to the Voluntary National Reviews of countries” by

²⁴⁸ Ibid 18.

²⁴⁹ Ibid.

²⁵⁰ High Commissioner for Human Rights (n52) para33.

²⁵¹ City of Amsterdam (n5) 127.

showcasing what cities are doing and thus both levels of government can be “using the SDGs as a common language.”²⁵² It seems thus that a goal is to create consistency by translating international goals into local actions and allowing local experiences to inform higher-level SDG policies. However, the connection between Amsterdam’s urban policies and SDG implementation and international legal frameworks remains indirect and underdeveloped as it is not made explicit throughout the report. Lastly, while the VLR was a “big success when making it,” the follow-up has turned out difficult as the current city government focuses more on broad prosperity (*‘brede welvaart’*) which, even though there exists a direct relationship to SDGs, is a step-away from this common language of the SDGs that make them so useful.²⁵³

²⁵² Ibid 23.

²⁵³ Interview with Gimbrère (n1) 18.

5. Conclusion

With this City report, we have aimed to give a first examination of Amsterdam's turn to the international. The city turns to international law and governance when local challenges demand it. It will relate then to international law and governance directly or indirectly. We have seen Amsterdam invoke European human rights law in the case of migration and asylum issues or refer to the WHO and reach out to cities in the context of a city network like EUROCITIES when seeking to implement its duty to aid seriously ill and wounded Palestinian children. Amsterdam and its mayor turn to the international for the fight against the local implications of the global problem of drugs and drugs-related crimes. Local challenges that require a global, collaborative approach through transnational city networks and/or collaboration with international organisations. Amsterdam and its mayor in particular do not shy away from going onto a transnational or international stage when local challenges requires this. The UN High-Level panel being a prima example. When LGBTI+ rights were at stake, and the freedom of expression needed to be defended in Budapest, transnational inter-city and inter-mayoral solidarity leads to action: Mayor Halsema travels to Budapest or posts support on LinkedIn for the Istanbul mayor. Similarly, we have seen Amsterdam has pulled in international law, law and governance on the local policy areas with a global dimension. It invites collaboration of international organisations or city networks were helpful. It invoked the SDGs and was among the first in the world to develop a VLR. There is no need to repeat the findings of this first Amsterdam city report.

In short, Amsterdam is an example of a city that navigates the complex sphere between the local, national and the global by asserting a form of *glocal* agency that has both pragmatic and aspirational aspects. The city's engagement with international law and policy is always guided by its local challenges: issues that this report analysed more closely such as human rights, migration, housing, drug policy, sustainability and digital rights illustrated this. They are experienced concretely on Amsterdam's streets, yet they resonate, and can only be solved, within a global context. Therefore, by turning to the global level, Amsterdam not only seeks to influence international law and policy but also aims to use and develop these frameworks to address local issues, especially when national authorities fail to do so. Equally, the city has not just turned to the international, it has also welcomed international law and institutions into its local context. In its law-, policy- and decision-making, Amsterdam often brings together the local and the global

level of law, policy and government. As such, it constitutes a form of *glocal* agency that will continue to reconstitute itself.

The “continuous process”²⁵⁴ of becoming a human rights city shapes for example Amsterdam’s actions in practice. The city engages with international law both within its formal mandate such as its submission to the UN Committee on Civil and Political Rights on the freedom of assembly, as well as arguably in the grey zone of its mandate when it calls out Israel’s international humanitarian law and human rights abuses or when it relies on findings from the European Committee of Social Rights to deliberately circumvent national policies when the human rights of migrants are at stake. The city must “deal with [migrants] even when they’re here without papers.”²⁵⁵ In such cases international law provides backing for local human-rights based action and Amsterdam chooses to interpret Article 108(1) of Dutch municipal law expansively. When issues or challenged that concern the ‘household’ of the city have a global dimension, Amsterdam seems to understand its mandate as invoked. It demonstrates moreover a sense of responsibility to act upon international law violations when the Dutch government fails to do so. Recently again in the case of Gaza or in the case of pressure on Free Speech and LGBTQI+ rights. This sense of responsibility can also be traced back to Amsterdam’s long-standing human rights identity. The UN High-Level Political Forum and the OHCHR both in the context of human-rights based drug policies and SDG implementation, increasingly recognize cities as essential partners or “key actors.”²⁵⁶

Nevertheless, the city is also aware of the careful balance it must strike between respecting national competences and asserting local autonomy as can be observed in the condemnation of genocide and human rights violations committed by Israel and the criticism of the Dutch national government’s response to it. Here, Amsterdam has fared a careful course guided by a strong conviction of the rule of law and a great sensitivity to the needs and histories of its local communities. Yet as a local governmental that heads a state unity, Amsterdam reached a point that it turned to the national government and the Dutch state to call on its third state obligations, showing great awareness of and commitment to maintaining the international legal order.

²⁵⁴ Gimbrère (n54) 1.

²⁵⁵ Gimbrère (n1) 8.

²⁵⁶ High Commissioner for Human Rights (n52) para33.

Still, a firm opposition from states to local governments asserting a meaningful role in international law and global governance can be observed not just globally, also in The Netherlands. This will remain one of the main pitfalls of the attempt by cities to urbanise international law and institutions by bringing the latter to the city and by representing urban interests and perspectives at the international level or law and governance.

In the domains we explored, the initiative to collaborate between the local and the global level seemed to come from the city of Amsterdam – driven as these glocal interactions are by local challenges. Through various city networks and city alliances, Amsterdam aims to work on solutions, share best practices and mobilize as well as lobby at the European and international level on issues that transcend municipal borders such as the ones analyzed in the present report.

In sum, Amsterdam showcases a deliberate and strategic engagement with international level of government shaped by its commitment to address local challenges where need be in a global context. In return, international institutions have shown interest in partnering up with Amsterdam to address *glocal* issues. At times, Amsterdam aims to exercise normative authority on the world stage regarding issues that directly relate to issues felt on Amsterdam's grounds. In terms of potential, the report shows that international and transnational collaboration and solidarity is actively pursued by an international city like Amsterdam. It knows where constitutional pitfalls lie and thus seeks to balance autonomy and constitutional constraints and optimizes its space to address its local challenges. While the planet continues to urbanise, this report shows how the city of Amsterdam's turns to the international level of law, policy, and governance where local challenges so require.