EDITORS’ NOTE

The return of human rights

Since 2015, Regions & Cohesion, like many other observers of global affairs, has focused significantly on sustainable development. The passage of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) called attention to this issue. Its “transformative” or “universal” or “interconnected” perspective on development signified a paradigm shift in how we view development strategies in terms of focus, content, structure, agency, and responsibilities. Human rights were subsumed in these discussions on many ways.

Issue 8(2) of Regions & Cohesion is a reminder that human rights need not be subsumed or diminished within the global development agenda. Human rights are more than legal norms and jurisprudence. Above all, they have traditionally been and fundamentally remain expressions of political will. It seems that human rights have blended into the background since 2016 with the rise of populism in many parts of the world, the focus on the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, and even the #MeToo movement, which has placed a global spotlight on sexual assault and the role of women in society. All these issues are related to human rights, but they are not necessarily framed in terms of human rights. For example, the Mediterranean asylum/migration crisis has also attracted increased attention due to its visibility in populist political agendas, but human rights aspects are not necessarily highlighted. Other human rights issues, such as the impact of armed conflict in Yemen on that country’s population, the continued plight of the Rohingya in Myanmar (which received brief visibility but has once again faded in news channels), the sociopolitical emergencies in Venezuela where many citizens do not have access to basic goods and services, and the approximately 33,000 people who have gone missing in Mexico (according to official estimates), including the 43 students in the southern state of Guerrero (2014), have received significantly less global attention as international news coverage of these issues has fluctuated.

The articles in this issue focus quite explicitly on human rights in transnational, national, and sub-national contexts, and many of them highlight the importance of political will. The lead article, by Richard Iroanya, Patrick Dzimiri, and Edith Phaswana, examines the role of National Human Rights Institutions in democracy and development in Ghana and Uganda.
It presents an analytical framework for the examination of the effectiveness of these institutions in African states, and it highlights the links between the effectiveness of these institutions and democratic consolidation. This is followed by two articles that derive from the research agenda that has been disseminated through Regions & Cohesion since issue 7(3) entitled “At the margins of the State: Political participation and the emergence of citizenships in Latin America.” These two articles focus squarely on issues of indigenous rights in South America. The first, by Paula A. Hinestroza Blandón, discusses how indigenous rights and citizenships are configured in Colombia in relation to the global order in line with global political and economic processes, such as the neoliberal policies promoted since the 1990s. The author contends that the roles of both indigenous movements and States are relevant in these processes. The second, by Catherine Alès, examines how the Venezuelan government denies indigenous rights by claiming them legislatively but refusing to implement them politically. According to the article, this limits claims for increased rights among various political indigenous movements because these rights have been accepted formally, and through these mechanisms, indigenous movements can be controlled by the Venezuelan State. This is followed by the last academic contribution, by Steve Kwok-Leung Chan, which addresses links between deprived citizenship among minorities in Myanmar and human trafficking in Thailand. The article highlights how transnationalism undermines human rights protections—human trafficking occurs in international waters, where states have no jurisdiction—and it links a lack of political will among trafficked migrants to their conditions as marginalized citizens in their home country.

Last but not least, the contribution in the Leadership Forum is an illustrative interview with the coordinators of DeMano, a multidisciplinary project that combines scientific research with concrete social action in Ocotepec, a Mexican rural community composed of 93 families. This project works to alleviate the food insecurity of women and children, aiming to empower women through the development of their skills to restore productive soils, conserve native seeds, conserve the gene pool of vegetables, eliminate dependence on agrochemicals and achieve fair trade. Sustainable production and sustainable life are the main commitments on both sides: the project coordinators and the women of Ocotepec. In a world where many challenges to human rights exist, we hope our readers enjoy the positive message from this particular experience and also enjoy the beauty of rural Mexico in five selected images that DeMano has shared with us.

The Editors