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CITIES IN THE INTERNATIONAL ARENA

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With accelerating rates of urbanization worldwide, cities have become the laboratories in which we are tackling some of the main challenges that our planet is facing. In 2050 more than 70% of the population will live in cities and almost 2,000 million in informal settlements. At the same time, cities concentrate headquarters, economic activity, employment, talent and creativity, as well as poverty, exclusion, inequalities, conflict and vulnerability to climate change.

In recent years, this development has turned cities into major players in the international arena. Having become aware that decisions taken at the international level – in New York, Brussels or Nairobi – directly affect urban policies, cities have for some time now joined forces in formally organized networks to defend their interests, promote their needs and find solutions to the problems they share.

The first international organization of local governments, the International Union of Local Authorities (IULA), was created in 1913. In 1957 the World Federation of United Cities, which brought together the world's major cities, was founded. Towards the end of the past century, the regional integration processes of the 1990s rung in a proliferation of city networks, especially in Europe, but also in Latin America, Africa and Asia. Today, we are facing an increasingly diverse and complex ecosystem of city networks. Eurocities and the Council of European Municipalities and Regions (CEMR) have strong influence on European policy making; Mercociudades, promotes the participation of cities in the Mercosur integration process, South America's primary trading bloc; Metropolis has established itself as the voice of big cities; and ICLEI has become the principal advocate for local environmental policies in the international arena.

In 2004, the creation of United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG), the leading platform for international municipalism with headquarters in Barcelona, marked a turning point. UCLG, which resulted from the merger of IULA and FMCU, has become the prime interlocutor of the UN on all issues related to local and urban agendas. In collaboration with other global, regional or sectoral networks, it has managed to effectively engage cities and local governments in the drafting and implementation process of some of the main global agendas.

Today, it has become widely accepted that cities need to be involved in any successful global agenda on combatting climate change. With 70% of greenhouse gas emissions being produced in cities, they are essential to any global solution and their participation in the COP is no longer questioned. Further, the localization of the 2030 Agenda and its Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) has emerged as a necessity. A large and important part of the 169 targets included in the 2030 Agenda correspond to the competencies of local governments and they cannot be successfully implemented without the cooperation of cities.

The above demonstrates how networks are making the voice of cities heard. They have achieved that new measures aimed at tackling global challenges take into account the needs, interests and aspirations of cities. A good example is the New Urban Agenda which resulted from the Habitat III Conference held in Quito in 2016 and which is the first international agenda adapted by governments to include the highly symbolic concept of “the right to the city”.

Although there is still a long way to go, cities have gained a seat at the global table. Yet, at the same time, the growing prominence of the urban question in international agendas has caused a reconfiguration of the ecosystem of city networks that is not always coherent. Multiple platforms have emerged that promote initiatives related to cities and that try to engage with traditional international actors, especially governments and international organizations, as well as civil society and the private and knowledge sectors.

Of particular interest in this context is the emergence of city platforms sponsored by large philanthropic foundations. The two best-known are C40, which is funded by billionaire philanthropist and former New York mayor Michael Bloomberg, and the Rockefeller Foundation’s 100 Resilient Cities. Both are very dynamic platforms oriented at achieving fast and visible impact. They are highly professional and capable of attracting specialized talent and they are great communicators with a strong media presence and prolific activities in social networks.

What is most relevant about the operating models that these philanthropic platforms are implementing is their ability to build relations with other stakeholders. For example, C40 signed an agreement with the Danish government to support climate action plans in some of the fastest growing cities in Africa and Asia with two million euros. Similarly, 100 Resilient Cities has developed a partnership system which allows its member cities to collaborate with a group of powerful stakeholders, most of which are global companies such as Cisco or Veolia, offering solutions to the great challenges cities face.

However, the governance structure of these platforms might be questionable. Traditional networks such as UCLG or Metropolis are based on democratic procedures. Their governing bodies consist of representatives of their member cities and these, in turn, are accountable to their citizens. This becomes very evident in negotiations with the United Nations, the European Union or national governments. But who holds the great philanthropic platforms to account? The philanthropist who fund them, the cities they serve or their partners from other sectors? At a time when there are growing demands for transparency and accountability, this question is of vital importance.

There is no doubt that the reconfiguration of the ecosystem of city networks offers great opportunities. Cities are finally at the centre of the global agenda and the most important international actors have come to recognize them as key partners. However, there is an urgent need to revise the functioning of the ecosystem of city networks to make it more effective: to allocate and evenly distribute responsibilities and efforts, and to define strategies that prevent replication and that improve complimentary and coordination.

Cities and the networks representing them are faced with the challenge and opportunity to link global agendas with the everyday problems of citizens, which are essentially also their own problems. But to do this effectively they must review their engagement with other global actors and the messages they transmit. While new platforms, especially philanthropic ones, provide new ways of doing and addressing urban challenges, traditional networks continue to have more legitimacy. This dispersion of efforts among networks and platforms weakens their collective impact and blurs the messages they want to get across. We have reached a point at which we need to review the ecosystem of networks to give it greater coherence and to empower cities to steer international processes.