Rethinking the ecosystem of international city networks: Challenges and opportunities

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Sala Jordi Maragall, CIDOB. Elisabets 12, 08001 Barcelona
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In recent years, cities have consolidated their position as major players on the international scene. Yet, their ambition to project themselves internationally and to influence global agendas is not a new phenomenon. Cities have operated as organized networks for decades. The first international organization of cities, the International Union of Local Authorities (IULA), was created in 1913. 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). In 2004, the founding of United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG) as a platform for international municipalism marked a turning point.

Since then, city networks have played an important role in defining and implementing some of the main global agendas. Today, their involvement in the COP (Conference of the Parties to the UNFCCC), their success in adding a territorial dimension to the 2030 Agenda, or their participation in the Steering Committee of the Global Partnership for Effective Development Co-operation, are good examples of how city networks are making their voice heard. They have achieved that new measures aimed at tackling global challenges take into account their needs, interests and aspirations. While much remains to be done, cities have gained a seat at the global table.

However, 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, but also civil society and the private and knowledge sectors.

This reconfiguration of the ecosystem of city networks brings with it both risks and opportunities, especially for traditional networks that until recently occupied this space almost exclusively. The risks are tied to the diffusion of efforts and the lack of complementarity and coordination; all of which potentially translate into communication problems with the international organizations behind the major global agendas. However, these diverse efforts to promote the international presence of cities also harbour opportunities in that they open up spaces that foster alliances with different actors that are central to promoting better urban policies.

The seminar seeks to analyse the changing dynamics of the ecosystem of city networks during the past years, focusing on how the main platforms operate, what influence they have on global agendas, what services they provide to their partners and how they coordinate their efforts. By zooming in on the strategies that networks have been developing to enhance their influence and make their operations more effective, the seminar will examine in more detail the added value they provide. In short, the objective is to identify the challenges and opportunities posed by the reconfiguration of the traditional ecosystem of city networks as a result of the increasing centrality of the urban question; a centrality that is in part explained by the effectiveness of the work of traditional networks in recent years.
Programme

09.00 Opening remarks
Laura Pérez, Councillor for Feminisms, LGBTI and International Relations, Barcelona City Council
Jordi Bacaria, Director, CIDOB

09.15 Key aspects to understanding international city networks
Agustí Fernández de Losada, Director, Global Cities Programme, CIDOB

09.30 Panel 1: The role of city networks on the international stage. Challenges for a new global governance
Emilia Saiz, Secretary General, UCLG
Respondents: Giovanni Allegretti, Co-director, Independent Authority for the Guarantee and Promotion of Citizen Participation, Tuscany Region
Johannes Krassnitzer, International Coordinator, ART Programme, UNDP
Felip Roca, Deputy Director of International Relations, Barcelona City Council
Moderator: Paola Arjona, Technical Director, Red ALLAs, City of México

11.00 Coffee break

11.30 Panel 2: The emergence of new city platforms on the international stage. Opportunities and challenges
Emmanuelle Pinault, Head of City Diplomacy – Political Engagement, C40 Cities Climate Leadership Group
Respondents: Xavier Tiana, Secretary General, MedCities
Arnau Gutiérrez, Deputy Director General for International Affairs, Networks and Multilateral Organisations, Madrid City Council
Lina Liakou, Regional Director for Europe and the Middle East, 100 Resilient Cities
Moderator: Maruxa Cardama, Senior Policy Specialist, Cities Alliance

13.00 Lunch

14.00 How to optimize the potential of international city networks?
Mehrnaz Ghojeh, Senior Urban Development Specialist, City Leadership Laboratory, University College London

14.15 Panel 3: How to move towards complementarity between networks?
Anna Lisa Boni, Secretary General, Eurocities
Respondents: Octavi de la Varga, Executive Director of the Secretariat General of Metropolis
Marina Canals, Secretary General, Educating Cities
Braulio Díaz Castro, Deputy Director, Knowledge and Communication Management, Euro-Latin American Alliance of Cooperation among Cities (AL-LAs), International Affairs Office Mexico City Government, CDMX
Moderator: Nelson Fernández, Director of International Relations, Montevideo City Council, Technical Secretariat Mercociudades

15.45 Concluding remarks
Eva García Chueca, Scientific Coordinator, Global Cities Programme, CIDOB

16.15 End of seminar