
UNPACKING AND RETHINKING CONTEMPORARY CITY NETWORKING

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In a globalised environment sovereignty no longer resides solely with nation-states. The planet's major challenges are shaped by global dynamics that can no longer be nationally regulated but need to be managed at the international level. But it is cities that have to deal with many of the consequences of these challenges, often without clear competences, without resources and feeling the urgency of citizen pressure. In response to this situation, cities attempt to influence the international political agenda, promoting legislative frameworks that better respond to their needs, and seeking to acquire the resources needed to deploy their competences.

The desire to influence international agendas has strengthened in recent years as the importance of the urban phenomenon has grown. The urbanisation process underway at global level, combined with cities' central role in tackling certain global challenges, such as climate change, inequality and human mobility, has made them central to the development of effective solutions (Fernández de Losada & Garcia-Chueca, 2018). As a result, multilateral bodies are much more open to dialogue with city representatives and seem more receptive to their needs.

It is in this context that international city networks – the platforms through which cities have for decades driven their political influence strategies – have gained recognition and begun to proliferate in every region of the world. From a once simple ecosystem formed of what may be called public membership networks, concentrated mainly in Europe, a complex one has evolved, in which these longstanding networks coexist with multi-actor networks operating at global level.

But the profusion of international-level networks is provoking tensions in the ecosystem. These tensions originate in the dispersal of efforts despite resources being scarce; the saturation of an overabundant supply of services; and the lack of effective answers to the most pressing problems cities face. The risk is real of entering a period of stagnation in which especially large cities and their mayors disengage from networks. Such cities possess the resources necessary to begin

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speaking for themselves before international bodies, while forming occasional, one-off alliances.

Beyond the structural and functional problems the ecosystem of networks is facing, its capacity to effectively influence international agendas is also at risk. Cities and their networks must seek more than recognition: they have already achieved this. They must transcend symbolism and rhetorical exercises (Fernández de Losada, 2018), and shape the international political agenda so that it responds effectively to local challenges and problems, providing solutions that can prompt transformations. This means going beyond the traditional approaches focussed on influencing state-defined agendas to elevate the political priorities of cities to the international arena, setting the political pace from the local level.

This is no easy task and it is first necessary to ensure all actors with a stake in the issue – and networks in particular – are oriented towards strategic, synergistic and effective action.

I. The rise of international city networks

International networks are the most effective channel for promoting the political interests and influence of cities. Faced with the difficulty of operating alone in the international arena, cities have spent decades promoting networks that can secure them the critical mass needed to acquire international legitimacy, visibility and strength. At the same time, these networks function as spaces for exchanging experiences, transferring knowledge and boosting shared projects.

City networking is not a new phenomenon. The first city network, the International Union of Local Authorities (IULA) was founded in 1913; the Council of European Municipalities and Regions (CEMR)¹ was formed in 1954 and the World Federation of United Towns and Cities (UTO) in 1957. But the rise of city networks to the international stage took place later, at two separate moments in time.

The first was in Europe in the 1980s and 1990s (Fernández de Losada, 2004). A number of policy changes and initiatives promoted a new interest in cities: the consolidation of the principle of local autonomy introduced by the Council of Europe, the formalisation of social and economic cohesion² as a competence of European institutions,³ the promotion of structural and cohesion funds and the creation of the Committee of the Regions.⁴ This was the start of a progressive and highly significant proliferation of networks of different types. The European map of city networks grew ever larger, and became increasingly complex and diverse. New networks emerged alongside the CEMR, ranging from generalist ones – like Eurocities⁵– and thematic ones –like Polis⁶ and Platforma⁷– to territorial ones – such as the Union of the Baltic Cities⁸ and MedCities⁹. All sought to influence the European political agenda, to open up spaces for knowledge transfer and mutual learning and to promote transnational projects. Despite similar initiatives arising in other regions – e.g. FLACMA (1981) and Mercociudades¹⁰ (1986) in Latin America, and CityNet¹¹ (1987) in Asia – Europe remained the heart of the municipalism movement.

1. <http://www.ccre.org/>

2. In 2008, the Treaty of Lisbon incorporated a territorial dimension, and economic, social and territorial cohesion began to be spoken of (articles 174 to 178 of the TFEU).

3. Single European Act, 1986.

4. Maastricht Treaty, 1993.

5. <http://www.eurocities.eu>

6. <https://www.polisnetwork.eu/>

7. <http://platforma-dev.eu/>

8. <http://www.ubc.net/>

9. <http://www.medcities.org/es>

10. <https://mercociudades.org/>

11. <https://citynet-ap.org/>

The second moment, which was global in scope, came about with the declaration of the *urban age*. At the turn of the century, cities began to play more important roles at international level and became linked to some of the main global agendas. Municipalism made headway on the international stage as a transversal movement and its gradual institutionalisation gave it visibility and greater recognition. The creation of United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG),¹² the global association of cities that emerged out of the merging of the IULA and the UTO in 2004, marked a turning point.

All of this had two major consequences.

On the one hand, global agendas started to increasingly address the urban and territorial. The inclusion of SDG 11 in the 2030 Agenda and the New Urban Agenda is the most significant example of this, and resulted in international organisations establishing channels of dialogue with local governments. Other significant milestones were the recognition by the UN's Economic and Social Committee (ECOSOC) of local and regional authorities as a Major Group and the creation of the Global Taskforce of Local and Regional Governments (GTF) as a mechanism for coordinating the voices of local governments in international political processes.¹³

On the other hand, platforms that are based on heterogeneous partnerships and that approach our global urban reality from a different perspective began to proliferate and coexist alongside the traditional public membership networks. Those, such as Cities Alliance,¹⁴ characterised by its multi-stakeholder composition, were followed by networks sponsored by major philanthropic foundations, such as C40 (funded by Bloomberg Philanthropies),¹⁵ and those which emerged around personalities such as the Global Parliament of Mayors,¹⁶ which is promoted by Benjamin Barber.

II. A complex ecosystem

Over the past three decades, the ecosystem of networks has become ever broader and more complex, and doubts about its effectiveness have become louder. Recent studies estimate that over 200 city networks operate at international level today (Acuto and Rayner, 2016). The table below provides an overview of the different types of networks operating at global level, their members, functions and the resources they possess.

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12. <https://www.uclg.org/>

13. <https://www.global-taskforce.org/>

14. <https://www.citiesalliance.org/>

15. <https://www.c40.org/>

16. <https://globalparliamentofmayors.org/>

Type of network	Type of member	Resources	Activities	Examples
Generalist global public membership networks	Local and regional governments	Fees Funding partners Grants	Political influence Knowledge Knowledge transfer Communication Agency	UCLG, Metropolis
Regional generalist public membership networks	Local and regional governments	Fees Funding partners Grants	Political influence Knowledge Knowledge transfer Communication Agency	CEMR, Eurocities, Mercociudades, MedCities, Union of Baltic Cities
Networks linked to cultural communities	Local and regional governments	Fees Funding partners Grants	Political influence Knowledge transfer Communication	CLGF, AIMF, UCCI, CIDEU
Specialised global public membership networks	Local and regional governments	Fees Funding partners Grants	Political influence Knowledge Knowledge transfer Communication Agency	ICLEI, Sharing Cities Alliance, ODP
Thematic regional public membership networks	Local and regional governments	Fees Funding partners Grants	Political influence Knowledge Knowledge transfer Communication Agency	Polis, Civitas, Platforma, ACTE Coalición LAC
Mixed or multi-level publicly led networks	Local and regional governments International organisations National governments Civil society organisations Private sector	Grants	Political influence Knowledge Knowledge transfer Communication Agency	Cities Alliance, CityNet
Privately led networks	Local and regional governments Philanthropic organizations Academia	Philanthropic contributions Grants Fees	Political influence Knowledge Knowledge transfer Communication Agency	C40, 100RC, Global Parliament of Mayors

Source: author's own compilation.

The so-called “traditional” or “public membership networks” – whose membership is formed exclusively of local and/or regional governments – have dominated the international political landscape for decades. This is true for Europe, where platforms such as CEMR and Eurocities enjoy great recognition and have become key actors in the negotiation of policies with a territorial dimension. In other regions and at global level, UCLG has been the indisputable reference point for the various United Nations (UN) agencies.

The panoply of public membership networks is very extensive. There are those that operate at global level, including UCLG, Metropolis¹⁷ and ICLEI – Local Governments for Sustainability,¹⁸ and others, like Eurocities, Mercociudades, MedCities, that operate regional. Some address their members’ interests from a generalist perspective, engaging with the broad range of local public policies, while other specialise on one specific issue. Some even operate within the cultural and linguistic geographies

17. <https://www.metropolis.org/>

18. <https://www.iclei.org/>

of the old European colonies: in the Ibero-American context this includes the Centro Iberoamericano de Desarrollo Estratégico Urbano (CIDEU)¹⁹ and the Union of Ibero-American Capital Cities (UCCI), the Commonwealth Local Government Forum (CLGF) operates in the territory of the Commonwealth, and the Association Internationale des Maires Francophones (AIMF) stretches across the former reach of *la Francophonie*.

The activity of most of these networks is focused on advocacy, knowledge creation, learning and, to a lesser degree, the development of initiatives on the ground (what might be called “agency action”). Their governing bodies are democratic in nature (elected) and representative, they have larger or smaller teams of professionals, and their budgets are above all sustained by the fees paid by their members and the grants they receive, whether from their own members or from multilateral bodies.

Alongside the public membership networks, multi-actor platforms exist that are characterised by diverse leaderships and mixed composition. The case of Cities Alliance is one of the most important, as it is configured to bring together public and private operators with a shared interest in urban policies. The alliance is led by a UN agency (UNOPS) and is made up of other multilateral bodies,²⁰ national governments,²¹ city networks,²² international civil society organisations,²³ private sector entities, foundations,²⁴ universities, research centres and knowledge networks.²⁵

This kind of platform tends to have a more technical profile and to focus its activity on generating specialised knowledge (urban policy in the case of Cities Alliance), favouring exchange of experiences and knowledge transfer and the development of pilot initiatives in the field. Nevertheless, in recent years it has also encouraged political advocacy – especially in the contexts of the 2030 Agenda and New Urban Agenda. Yet, because of the difficulty of defining a common stance with such a heterogeneous membership its role is still somewhat fuzzy.

But the ecosystem of city networks has been most profoundly shaken by the appearance of what may be called “privately led city platforms”. These organisations emerged around philanthropic institutions and influential individuals strongly committed to strengthening the role of cities as first-order actors in managing and resolving some of the principal global challenges.

An interesting, though unique, example is the Global Parliament of Mayors. Launched by the US academic Benjamin Barber following the publication of his book, *If Mayors Ruled the World: Dysfunctional Nations, Rising Cities* (2013), it defines itself as a governance structure where mayors from all continents can exchange experiences and solutions relating to the challenges they have in common. Currently comprising just under 30 mayors, it has the support of a prestigious advisory committee of academics and representatives from think tanks, city platforms and the private sector.

Nevertheless, it is the philanthropic foundations that have gained most notoriety. For some years now, they have placed attention on the process of urbanisation in which the planet is immersed, and on the need to strengthen the leadership and capacities of cities and their governments. In this context, particularly noteworthy are C40, backed by Bloomberg Philanthropies,²⁶ and 100 Resilient Cities (100RC),²⁷ launched by the Rock-

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19. <https://www.cideu.org/>

20. The World Bank, UNCDF, UN-Habitat and UN Women.

21. Germany, Brazil, Chile, Ethiopia, the United States, the Philippines, France, Ghana, the United Kingdom, South Africa, Sweden and Switzerland.

22. UCLG, Metropolis, ICLEI, C40, CLGF.

23. Slum Dwellers International (SDI), AVSI Foundation, Habitat for Humanity International and Women in Informal Employment: Globalizing and Organizing (WIEGO).

24. The Ford Foundation and Omidyar Network.

25. Erasmus University Rotterdam, the International Institute for Environment and Development and the United Nations Sustainable Development Solutions Network (UNSDSN).

26. C40 has three strategic funders: Bloomberg Philanthropies, the Children’s Investment Fund Foundation (CIFF) and Realdania.

27. <https://www.100resilientcities.org/>

What has disrupted the ecosystem of networks is not the private nature of the leadership of these networks or platforms. It is their capacity to mobilise cities, to influence the public policies they promote, to mobilise resources, to project themselves onto the global scene and to communicate their results

efeller Foundation. These two initiatives have solid philanthropic backing, powerful teams, effective communication strategies and great capacity to influence and intervene in the public policies major cities promote at global level. But just as the two initiatives have different origins, so their approaches to intervention diverge.

C40 emerged in 2005 as a city network driven by then mayor of London, Ken Livingstone, and soon had significant backing from the Clinton Climate Initiative. Nowadays its financing is backed by philanthropic funds and its governance structures are clearly public-private. The network's president is the mayor of Paris, Anne Hidalgo, and its board of directors, led by Michael Bloomberg, contains a majority of representatives of private foundations that guarantee the organisation's strategic funding.²⁸

100RC, on the other hand, was not conceived as a city network but as a platform created by the Rockefeller Foundation with the aim of helping participating cities promote resilience strategies. Its funding, like its management, is private, and cities participate as the recipients of a service. To a degree, 100RC operates according to a multi-actor rationale, as it creates a platform in which cities that need to promote resilience strategies are connected with private companies that can provide solutions.

But what has disrupted the ecosystem of networks is not the private nature of the leadership of these networks or platforms. It is their capacity to mobilise cities, to influence the public policies they promote, to mobilise resources, to project themselves onto the global scene and to communicate their results. As noted above, both operate with very considerable financial and human resources, which give them a competitive advantage over the traditional public membership networks, even the largest ones. Without needing to pay fees, these platforms provide cities with highly qualified pluridisciplinary teams. While C40 has a team of 174 professionals and 100RC has 97, UCLG only has 35 staff at its central office, ICLEI 66 and Metropolis 13. They also receive technical support – from the resilience strategies 100RC produces for its cities to the pilot projects C40 promotes – and spaces to exchange experiences and transfer knowledge.

Similarly, both C40 and 100RC have great capacity to project themselves onto the international scene and take centre stage at meetings that end up shaping the political agenda. The mayors meeting in the framework of the UN Conference on Climate Change (COP 21) in Paris, and Urban 20 promoted in Buenos Aires in connection with the G20 summit, are good examples of the capacity C40 has to shape the agenda. Also very important is their ability to communicate with and, through the most innovative channels, reach the most relevant actors, whether from politics, academia or the professional or private sectors. A clear sign of this is the number of Twitter followers the two platforms have: C40 has 83,341 followers and 100RC 84,718, while UCLG has 26,426, ICLEI 28,219 and Metropolis 17,098.

However, the new platforms do not have the representativeness or coverage of some of the major traditional networks. C40 brings together 96 cities from more than 50 countries and 100RC 97 cities from 49 countries. By contrast, UCLG's coverage is much broader: it represents a universe of over 240,000 cities, metropolises and regions and over 175 national local government associations located in 140 countries.

28. Two members of Bloomberg Philanthropies, one from Realdania, one from the Children's Investment Fund Foundation (CIFF) and one from the Clinton Foundation, as well as three representatives of cities.

III. Does the international ecosystem of city networks need rethinking?

The complexity that characterises the current ecosystem of city networks poses major challenges and numerous questions for international municipalism. The risk of duplicating efforts is great: this may result in already limited resources being wasted, and a loss of efficiency, the consequences of which are difficult to manage. Further, the dynamics of the ecosystem seem to point more towards competition between networks rather than a search for complementarities and synergies, which has severe effects for the ecosystem.

On the one hand, there is the risk of impairing the dialogue with other actors operating on the international stage, particularly multilateral bodies. The creation of this dialogue is one of the major achievements of city networks and it cost a great deal of resources. It is clearly linked with the recognition local governments have attained on the international stage today.

On the other hand, this multiplication of efforts produced a covert (because no one admits it) competitive environment that generates fragmentation and leaves cities faced with a vast range of services: services in the form of political representation before international bodies; observatories; spaces for learning, exchange and knowledge transfer; technical assistance, pilot projects, impact studies, strategies and plans of all sorts. What is on offer is at times overwhelming.

This has a range of consequences. On the one hand, though it may seem contradictory, this results in endogamy. Because of the abilities required to participate in international forums (languages, knowledge of international agendas and diplomatic practice, etc.) and the time constraints of highly demanding local agendas, which are often incompatible with the profusion of international events, the participants in these forums tend to be repeated: teams from the networks' secretariats, representatives of large cities and local leaders who champion international municipalism. The risk is therefore of impoverishing the contributions and the resulting political message.

Equally, in a context of very limited resources, despite slight advances having been made (joint organisation of events, shared stances, etc.), the networks and platforms compete to attract participants for their events, to intervene in the large international forums, to obtain international funding for their projects and activities, and so on. That this competitive mindset continues to prevail over cooperation results in dispersion and undermines the many benefits that could grow out of synergistic action. All of this is provoking a progressive disconnection, particularly among the local leaders and mayors with the most complex agendas, who cannot find the solutions they need to the serious problems they face in these forums. The strategic dimension is missing.

This disconnection is worsened by the fact that cities' capacities to influence global agendas remain limited. In certain cases this produces frustration. Advances have been made, but national governments continue to set the political agenda and the contributions from international municipalism remain more symbolic than effective.

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The ecosystem of city networks thus faces a double challenge. On the one hand, at an internal level, there is the risk of disengagement, with the most important cities questioning the effectiveness of the networks and choosing other paths. In parallel, externally, voices that are critical of international municipalism are being encouraged from sectors linked to traditional diplomacy, which has for years resisted recognising cities as legitimate actors in the international system.

The tensions in the ecosystem are leading many voices to consider the need to revise or rethink it. This is an exercise that should be encouraged, always bearing in mind the risks involved in moving towards simple and more effective frameworks that are less rich, potentially more complex and possess less legitimacy. Proposing Cartesian operations aimed at ordering and reducing the number of existing networks and platforms seems neither realistic nor does this approach align with the principle of local autonomy. At any rate, this has been done before, and a “common house” for international municipalism already exists – the UCLG.

Not risking the richness of the ecosystem in no way means denying the need to improve the ways of working within it. It seems fundamental to advance towards cooperative frameworks that set competitiveness aside and strengthen the synergies and complementarities that may exist between different networks, especially those with greatest capacity for influence.

At global level, the commitment to strengthening the GTF seems more pressing than ever. As a mechanism of coordination and consultation that encompasses the main networks of local governments operating at global level, it is a valuable attempt to show the desire to act jointly in one voice to influence the main global agendas. It is a voice that must be rich with nuance, as it represents highly disparate governments and realities.

But beyond strengthening the GTF, the networks and platforms of cities should begin to coordinate themselves to develop political influence strategies and information campaigns, to organise events, establish knowledge creation mechanisms, promote shared projects and create international financial resources. The international municipalism agenda is so intense that it runs the risk of becoming ineffective and irrelevant.

If the large networks operating at global level (UCLG, Metropolis, ICLEI, C40, etc.) shared forums and events it would save time and resources and would increase the visibility of cities on the global stage. If, in parallel, they jointly spearheaded knowledge platforms, influence strategies and communication campaigns, they would strengthen their message and credibility. And if they coordinated their efforts to mobilise funds designated to financing projects, it would help share efforts, encourage specificities, avoid duplication, and focus on strategic challenges.

IV. Transcend the symbolic and shape the political agenda

As well as progressing towards the consolidation of cooperative mindsets, cities and networks must also begin to reflect on where to direct their political influence endeavours on the international stage. They must find a

way to go beyond rhetorical and symbolic stances that are closely connected to their need to exist and to have a seat at the global table, and commit not only to influencing the agenda but also to shaping it.

Global agendas are defined by states. Like the other actors operating at global level, city governments and their networks aspire to influence this process of definition with limited room for manoeuvre. It is essential that they do so based on the implications for their local reality of any decisions made in those frameworks. Nevertheless, it is even more important to seek to shape the international agenda by upscaling local priorities to global agendas, where they are absent.

A good example of this is the effort underway to consolidate access to adequate and affordable housing in the UN²⁹ and European Union (EU) agendas. This city-led endeavour has benefitted from significant international alliances with, for example, the UN Special Rapporteur on adequate housing, and aims to influence international agendas as a means of influencing national regulatory frameworks.

It is increasingly common for cities to bring issues of contestation with their national governments to international governance structures (whether the EU or the UN). The housing agenda is a good example of this, but there are others. Another is the political alignment of European “refuge cities” and US sanctuary cities against their national governments on the issue of refugees and migrants. In the US, cities have also reaffirmed their commitment to the Paris Climate Accords following the Trump administration’s withdrawal from them.

These kinds of ad hoc initiatives will only become more prevalent, meaning a different scenario is being sketched out that cannot be ignored by the networks. Supporting cities to settle some of the challenges they face, which often lead to confrontations with states on the international stage, may be a good opportunity to again connect with what most concerns mayors. Supporting cities in their efforts to intervene in tackling challenges like the financialisation of cities – and its consequences in terms of access to housing, consumption and local business – climate change and migration, contributes to cities being able to propose effective, transformative solutions.

But setting the agenda means building alliances with other operators and possessing the resources to construct the arguments based on verifiable evidence. In this sense it is necessary for networks to continue advancing in the joint work they carry out with international organisations, national governments, civil society, the private sector and, in particular, with universities and research centres.

V. Conclusions: recover coordination and build alliances to transcend the symbolic and help cities set the international agenda

Though the world is moving towards a scenario of shared sovereignties, cities must not lose sight of the fact that national governments continue to play a central role on the international stage. They have the capacity to promote legislative processes, handle the main budgets, are members

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29. <https://citiesforhousing.org>

For international agendas to offer the solutions cities need, a powerful and effective ecosystem of networks is required. That means the ecosystem must resolve the dysfunctions and tensions that threaten to demobilise international municipalism and lead cities to conduct their external action via other means.

of the international bodies, and have had a monopoly on international relations for over 300 years.

In this context, raising local political priorities in order to find accommodations on international agendas is no easy task. Neither is ensuring those agendas provide effective solutions for cities. That is to say, solutions that go beyond the symbolic, that propose regulatory and operational frameworks that respond to their real interests and needs, and that serve to improve the capacities to tackle the challenges they face. This is particularly true, as has been shown, when cities and their national governments address these challenges from diverging or openly conflicting political perspectives.

Making this accommodation viable and ensuring international agendas offer the solutions cities need requires a powerful and effective ecosystem of networks. That means the ecosystem must resolve the dysfunctions and tensions that threaten to demobilise international municipalism and lead cities to conduct their external action via other means.

The current diversity of the network of ecosystems must not be seen as a weakness. Risks are involved, particularly those of dispersal, but the richness must be tapped. As argued above, networks of cities should set aside the competitive mindsets that still guide their operations and develop cooperative frameworks in order to join forces, encourage synergies and propose shared work programmes that effectively respond to the expectations of cities and other international operators.

But advancing towards cooperative frameworks is not enough. Cities and their networks must continue to empower the alliances they have been forging over time: with universities and knowledge centres, with the private sector, with civil society organisations and with international entities. And, although it is sometimes more difficult, with national governments. But above all, they must continue forging alliances with citizens and connect them with their international agenda. That is a challenge they are still a long way from rising to, but it will be fundamental to keeping the international action of cities and their networks anchored in reality.

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