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### **I. The century of cities**

The growing recognition that the 21st century will be the century of cities reflects something evident: today's major challenges and global issues ultimately play out at the local level, which is also the main generator of solutions and responses. However, the important work city networks have done over the past few decades has also greatly contributed to this recognition. The success of this work has produced a self-applauding political discourse at both local and state levels around the world. Further, it is reflected in the emergence of new and powerful city networks boosted by North American philanthropists, which are generally reluctant to move away from spaces with real leveraging power. At the same time, however, it leaves local governments with a difficult inheritance. They have been elevated to the category of leading actors without being suitably recompensed in the form of increased competences and resources, and without being offered new models of more plural and inclusive governance that allow them to live up to this greater responsibility.

### **II. Marking a new period and new responsibilities**

Networks are thus largely responsible for the repositioning of cities as key actors in the major organisations of world governance, such as the United Nations, the European Union, the OECD and others. However, this achievement also includes new responsibilities for city networks. We need to move away from the traditional local discourse – one that is thorough and necessary and which has argued in support of cities as key international actors – to engage in a more specific discourse that highlights the central role of local governments and signals the beginning of a new period. It is time to define better indicators and other instruments of public policy to demonstrate the extent to which cities are key players in tackling the new global challenges. This is fundamental for providing a serious, critical, constructive and, above all, localised response to the UN Sustainable Development Goals. In a more or less consistent way, this need has been vindicated by the New Global Urban Agenda and defined

from a regional perspective within the European Urban Agenda. The new period should represent a Copernican Shift in which networks take on new responsibilities in order to remain useful actors for cities.

### **III. Information and knowledge management.**

Local public administrations are the first point of contact with citizens. The amount of information and knowledge they receive and process on a daily basis is enormous. Managing this knowledge and, above all, capitalising on lessons learnt in order to be able to share and enrich them exponentially should be at the heart of any city network. And although this need is known and widely discussed in endless forums and meetings, useful results are taking too long. Perhaps, if the structure of the networks allowed for more effective knowledge management, cities wouldn't need to group spontaneously to work on specific and timely issues. These informal groups of temporarily networked cities provide agility that traditional – often more bureaucratic – structures do not offer. But, at the same time, these kinds of spontaneous alliances lack the appropriate tools to carry out the proper follow-up of initiatives. Traditional networks should be able to provide these by creating true knowledge banks that act as catalysts for exchanges and good and bad practices.

### **IV. Networks within “the network”**

This need to reorient the functioning of networks might seem eminently technical at first glance, as it has focused specifically on the need to improve the capacities of local government. But this is not enough. It is increasingly essential to offer spaces that are politically appealing to members in an environment where *how something is communicated* comes before *how it is done*. And here we find an important time-lag. While many of these organisations spread the philosophy of networking many years before the internet appeared, they have failed to respond to the challenges posed by social networks. New technologies and new communication channels should offer spaces that create opportunities to increase links, exchanges and debate between the members of city networks. They should also allow the networks to connect more easily with citizens, who are often oblivious to the work they do, thereby improving transparency and accountability. Dialogue with citizens is fundamental given that the vast majority of the funding that has traditionally sustained city networks comes from public funds.

### **V. Renewal from within**

It will be difficult for networks to introduce the change required without revising their mindset and routines. Though successful at positioning local debates in the international arena, they now face new challenges. If networks and their sub-networks want to remain useful to their members, this generational change is absolutely essential. A clear commitment is required to the rejuvenation and feminisation of their overall management structures, as well as of the middle-management positions. Without this renewal of human resources, it will be difficult

to integrate the new perspectives necessary for the transformation required. The comfort of finding the “usual suspects” in city forums is unfortunately proof of the difficulty of including new viewpoints and ideas for tackling new challenges.

## **VI. Politically useful cooperation**

Today it is widely acknowledged that large cities (and also small and medium-sized ones) share similar issues and problems, and that without collaborating it will be difficult for them to find inclusive, innovative and integrated solutions to global challenges. The challenge ahead of us is to reconsider the ways this cooperation can be optimised. The further we move into the 21st century, the more aware we become of the differences to the last century, when city networks first emerged. Surely we need to listen attentively to what results elected city leaders expect. The fact that they are less and less committed to the governance of city networks might not just be due to their busy agendas...

## **VII. Learning and legitimising**

Perhaps it is necessary to recapitulate and further refine our view on what are currently the fundamental motivations for cities and mayors to seek international projection. Legitimacy and learning are probably two of the main reasons for cities to seek international relations: “legitimacy” of their public policies – because “no one is a prophet in their own land” and initiatives driven by a city often end up being valued by the local population only once they have attracted international interest, or it becomes clear that other renowned cities use similar solutions; and “learning” because, as mentioned above, cities are spaces of applied knowledge which are difficult to understand in the 21st century without constant exchanges with the exterior, that is to say, with other cities with similar problems.

## **VIII. Competition and survival**

Networks will only be able to sustain the interest and involvement of their members if they conduct an in-depth analysis of the current needs of cities and produce ground-breaking proposals and new perspectives on how to tackle them collectively. This is where networks with a more thematic approach – some of them with a strong injection of philanthropic funds – are competing with those that have traditionally specialised in the internationalisation of municipalism. However, sharing thematic knowledge and promoting international municipalism are two sides of the same coin. It is not always easy to combine them and to consolidate meeting spaces in which to offer new inter-organisational proposals – as the Global Task Force coordinated by United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG) has successfully done. In any case, a fragmented scenario dominated by competition between different networks will make it difficult to provide the necessary context for strengthening local governments. Cities’ needs and interests should be placed at the top of the agendas of networks again. They should be the main priority for any city network, above and beyond its survival.

