
Cities in Global Governance

From multilateralism to multistakeholderism?

Agustí Fernández de Losada and Marta Galceran-Vercher (Eds.)



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CIDOB edicions
Elisabets, 12
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Tel.: 933 026 495
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Printing: Book-Print S.A.
ISBN: 978-84-92511-90-7
Legal deposit: B 2909-2021

Barcelona, February 2021

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Lorena Zárate is a founding member of the Global Platform for the Right to the City and part of its support team. She is the former President of the Habitat International Coalition (2011–2019) and was also Coordinator of the HIC-Latin America office (2003–2011). Her academic training includes history, pedagogy and political economy, and her current interests revolve around feminist, anti-racist and decolonial theories and practices with a particular focus on the territorial, urban and municipal dimensions. Born and raised in La Plata, Argentina, she lived for several years in Mexico City and now resides in Ottawa, Canada.

From multilateralism to multi-stakeholder alliances: cities shift from rhetoric to politics on the international stage

Agustí Fernández de Losada

For decades now, cities have been trying to open up a space in the structures of global and regional governance. Yet, beyond achieving growing recognition, their capacity for influencing traditional multilateralism is still more symbolic than effective and does not clearly result in improved answers and solutions offered to citizens. However, the alliances cities have been forging with other stakeholders in the international scene, running parallel to the structures of multilateral governance, are acquiring significant visibility while also showing considerable potential for mobilising resources and bringing about changes. Based on a twofold analysis, global and European, this article studies the extent to which the efforts of cities and their networks to join formal multilateralism have a limited track record, as well as the degree to which the commitment to creating multi-stakeholder alliances is more able to produce measurable results although it confronts major challenges in terms of legitimacy and accountability.

Global cities, world order and post-pandemic futures

Simon Curtis

Although the long term impact of Covid-19 on the world's cities cannot yet be known, what we can see is how the pandemic is interacting with existing trends and forces that are shaping both cities and the wider international system of which they are a part. Covid-19 will not transform cities permanently on its own. Instead, its short-term effects will interact with deep-lying structural transformative trends that are already playing themselves out in our cities. This article examines this intersection, and suggests the pandemic also represents an opportunity for different political actors to struggle to shape the future of cities.

The table wobbles: cities and a faltering multilateral order

Ian Klaus

Over two years in 2015–2016, United Nations member states adopted four outcome documents that together amounted to a de facto international development agenda. Over the last four years, these agreements and the wider agenda they constitute have come under new pressure. Most notably, nationalist governments have targeted the agenda as a threat to sovereignty. Meanwhile, a number of non-governmental organisations, subnational governments and national governments have noted that the agenda is no longer sufficiently ambitious to address global challenges. Finally, the health, social and economic effects of COVID-19 have recently rendered many of the agenda's most visible goals more difficult to achieve. Stakeholders have walked a narrow strategic line in

the face of these pressures: affirming the agenda while subtly tweaking their policy practice and rhetoric around the agreements according to historic events.

Cities and international law: legally invisible or rising soft-power actors?

Elif Durmuş

Traditional state-centric international law does not recognise local government as “subjects” of international law. But this is merely one understanding of international law, which is in itself not static. A pluralist, multistakeholder understanding recognises the increased engagement of local governments with international law and governance in the last decades. Meanwhile, even traditional international law has the tools to recognise – albeit very slowly – new actors that emerge in the field and declare them to enjoy legal personality. Legal personality is then determined by the assessment of the de facto engagement of the new actor in the international legal system. This means that local governments, deliberately or not, have been taking just the right steps by accumulating experience and demonstrating fluency and competence in implementing, negotiating and contesting international law; and accustoming other, more traditional actors of the international community to their presence in the field.

The role of cities in a reformed UN: towards the institutionalisation of the World Assembly of Local and Regional Governments

Marta Galceran-Vercher

The UN marks its 75th anniversary amid growing calls for the reform of multilateralism. The international municipalism has been advocating for this reform since its inception. Two of the most noteworthy proposals are obtaining permanent observer status at the General Assembly and institutionalising the World Assembly of Local and Regional Governments (WALRG). Despite some progress over the last decades, most initiatives remain more symbolic than real. Significant challenges therefore still lie ahead. Further institutionalising the WALRG would require rethinking its current governance scheme, especially its level of representativity and the role played by associations of local and regional governments.

Is something better than nothing? Multi-level governance and the European Committee of the Regions in EU policy-making

Andrea Noferini

In an even more uncertain world, many voices are calling for radical change in the governance models of development policies. The European Union – like the 2030 Agenda – has recognised the need for local and regional authorities (LRAs) to play a greater role in defining and implementing public policies. This paper addresses three fundamental questions: a) when and why LRAs became central to EU policymaking; b) how LRAs can take part in EU policymaking; and, finally, c) the extent to which the European Committee of the Regions adequately frames LRA representation in EU policymaking. The analysis focuses on the

European Committee of the Regions, the youngest of the EU's constitutional organs, and a singular supranational body that allows LRAs to participate in the formal legislative process of the EU's multi-level political and policy system.

Towards an ecology of knowledges for global politics: civil society and local government alliances in Habitat III

Eva Garcia-Chueca, Lorena Zárate

The shift from traditional multilateralism to increased multi-stakeholder governance is gaining momentum in international relations. In this scenario it is necessary to ask what the implications and limits of the model are, and also who will benefit and who will be left out. With a view to advancing towards greater transparency and legitimacy of multi-stakeholder governance, this article explores the possibility of constructing it from below through horizontal dialogues (ecology of knowledges) in which civil society and local government can take part with full guarantees of recognition. To this end, it analyses the coordination experience of the Global Platform for the Right to the City (civil society) and United Cities and Local Governments (cities network) under the auspices of the UN's Habitat III summit. The paper highlights the need to have mechanisms, criteria, and principles that order multi-stakeholder governance so that not only the voice of the strongest is listened to.

What's next? New forms of city diplomacy and emerging global urban governance

Anna Kosovac and Daniel Pejic

Everyday urban governance is taking on increasingly global dimensions, leading city governments to expand their alignment with international frameworks and engagement with global processes. While these activities are often driven or coordinated by dedicated international teams within city governments, the global dimensions of urban governance are expanding to include policy teams across local authorities and partners working outside government, such as academic institutions, businesses and philanthropies. This "glocalisation" may be producing new forms of global urban governance operating both within and outside the traditional multilateral system. Drawing on survey data from 47 cities from around the world and a case study on the city of Amsterdam, this chapter explores how new forms of city diplomacy interact with evolving conceptions of multistakeholderism and the impact this may have on the governance of global challenges.

INTRODUCTION

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Cities have been advocating for a seat at the global table for decades. They are part and parcel of the international system, yet they remain structurally powerless and virtually invisible under international law. Global governance structures have been designed by and for nation-states, and they leave little room for the involvement of other stakeholders, including local governments. Since the 1990s, some advances have been made in formalising the role of cities in the architecture of global and regional governance, especially within the European Union (EU) and the United Nations (UN). Yet, for the most part, they remain more symbolic than effective, and the system is crying out for thorough reform.

Meanwhile, the global management of the COVID-19 pandemic and other social, economic and ecological crises has been marred by a profound lack of international cooperation, throwing the need to revamp multilateralism into stark relief. These developments have also revealed that if international processes and structures are to solve global problems, they need to be anchored in the multistakeholder reality of the global policy ecosystem. Recently, “multistakeholderism” has emerged as a seemingly more inclusive global governance framework and an alternative to the limitations of traditional multilateralism. Bringing together state and non-state actors with shared interests and concerns, multistakeholderism is driven by pragmatism and the willingness to collaborate on solutions. But, will it deliver on its promises of becoming a more democratic and effective governance framework? And to what extent does this reform context offer an opportunity for cities to strengthen their global voice and role?

Contribution of this volume

This edited volume seeks to contribute to the policy and academic discourse on the reform of the multilateral system by unpacking the role of cities and their networks in global and regional governance, spelling out the policy implications, and making recommendations on how cities could gain greater global leverage beyond symbolism. In particular,

it addresses the tensions and complementarity between two evolving pathways for bringing urban interests and expertise to the global stage. On the one hand is the long-standing ambition of the international municipalism movement to reform the UN system. On the other is the enhancement of new forms of global urban governance operating outside the traditional multilateral system, which may be depicted as an inchoate form of multistakeholderism.

The volume opens with an article by **Agustí Fernández de Losada**, in which the author critically examines the extent to which the efforts of cities and their networks to reform multilateralism are little more than rhetorical wrappings and may be short-sighted. Conversely, the alliances they have been forging with other international stakeholders (i.e. philanthropies, the private sector, civil society) may hold greater potential to generate an impact on the ground and transform urban localities for the better. However, these multistakeholder alliances may face democratic challenges as they are led by actors other than cities with greater capacity to set agendas and draw up urban transformations and solutions. This introduction is followed by other seven contributions organised in three parts.

Cities and the global order

The first part of the monograph sets out the opportunities and limitations of cities' political agency within the current global order and its primary normative framework: international law. **Simon Curtis** posits that global cities, as we know them today, are the product of a historically specific form of liberal order, underpinned by a particular configuration of geopolitical power. They are also intrinsically linked to a distinct era of globalisation. The future of cities (and their global political agency) will thus be formed at the intersection of the deep-lying structural transformative trends playing out in the broader international system in which they are embedded. The author analyses them through three dimensions: globalisation, global governance and geopolitics. While COVID-19 will not transform cities permanently, it will accelerate some of the trends already in place.

However, it is not only the world order that seems to be reconfiguring itself, but the guiding principle of global governance itself: multilateralism. **Ian Klaus** addresses the troubling state of multilateralism by examining how the four agreements that constitute the wider agenda on international development, and most notably the 2030 Agenda, have come under strain. The author shows that the most visible climate or development goals have been rendered either significantly more challenging to achieve or in need of reconsideration. While cities are stepping into the breach to deliver upon the global goals (for example their localised actions and the development of reporting mechanisms), such multistakeholder approaches are unlikely to be able to fully fill a gap left by the lack of ambition of important member states. And this, Klaus argues, will have consequences for both cities and the international system in which they are seeking a seat at the table.

The law is another area of state-centricity. Indeed, **Elif Durmuş** notes that as international law has traditionally been seen as an exclusively

inter-state endeavour, it does not recognise local governments as subjects. Yet, Durmu contends, this does not reflect the developments of world affairs today. Actorness in international law is tied to the acquisition of *functional legal personality*, meaning holding legal rights and duties, but also participating in law-making. Over the last three decades, cities and their associations have been engaging with international normative frameworks, partaking in inter-governmental negotiations and creating local-centric norms and governance mechanisms. Through these initiatives, cities may be taking steps in the right direction to gain the de facto recognition as global actors that, for the moment, they are still denied *de jure*.

Empowering cities in a reformed multilateral system

For cities to gain greater leverage within the global governance system, its legal structures, institutions and norms need to be rewired. As **Marta Galceran-Vercher** shows, this root and branch reform has been on the agenda of the international municipalism since its inception. Two very specific proposals are on the table: getting permanent observer status before the UN General Assembly and institutionalising a mechanism for a permanent and structured dialogue between cities and national governments within the UN system: the World Assembly of Local and Regional Governments (WALRG). While on paper these initiatives seem like a remarkable step forward, their real efficacy in helping cities move beyond mere symbolism is questioned. Significant challenges still lie ahead, notably with regards to the WALRG's level of representativity and the role city networks should play in it.

To further examine the prospects and viability of a more formalised role for cities within the UN, **Andrea Noferini** draws on the EU's experience. Specifically, the European Committee of the Regions is the world's most advanced governance scheme for channelling the voices of local and regional governments (LRGs) in policymaking processes. This formal mechanism allows LRGs to participate in the EU's legislative process, but it has serious weaknesses and limitations due to the heterogeneity of its members, its consultative character and the non-binding nature of its opinions. This raises questions not only about whether the replication of this model at global level is feasible but whether it is desirable. A key lesson emerges from this discussion and analysis: formal recognition should not be equated with enhanced influence on global or regional governance.

Multistakeholderism and other forms of global urban agency

The third part of the monograph explores alternative pathways for cities to engage in global politics to those currently available under intergovernmental multilateralism. **Eva Garcia-Chueca** and **Lorena Zárate** critically appraise the virtues and limits of multistakeholderism as a more inclusive global governance framework, particularly focusing on who benefits from this model and who loses out or is excluded. This is examined through the analysis of the involvement of the Global Platform for

the Right to the City and United Cities and Local Governments in the Habitat III summit. While this landmark event provided an opportunity for civil society and local governments to participate in the intergovernmental process, it also revealed important shortcomings and inequalities. To ensure that all voices are heard, multistakeholderism should be built from below through horizontal dialogues (ecology of knowledges) in which all stakeholders are treated on the same footing.

Along similar lines, **Anna Kosovac** and **Daniel Pejic** explore how new forms of city diplomacy interact with evolving conceptions of multistakeholderism. Drawing on survey data from 47 cities from around the world and a case study on the city of Amsterdam, the authors show that it is now standard practice for local authorities to engage in partnerships with philanthropies, universities and the private sector to access resources, knowledge and expertise. These alliances may be producing new forms of global urban governance operating both within and outside the traditional multilateral system.

FROM MULTILATERALISM TO MULTI-STAKEHOLDER ALLIANCES: CITIES SHIFT FROM RHETORIC TO POLITICS ON THE INTERNATIONAL STAGE

Agustí Fernández de Losada

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I. Influencing global agendas. A matter of responsibility

The commitment of city governments to influence international political agendas is not a new phenomenon, although it has intensified with globalisation, the growing importance of sustainable development, and accelerating processes of urbanisation. The various municipalist platforms working in the international arena are concerned, among other matters, to advance the interests of cities and urban citizens before the multilateral bodies.

Indeed, international agreements have an increasingly direct impact on local realities and determine many of the policies promoted by city governments. Having an influence in these agreements cannot and should not be seen as an option but as part of the responsibility of local leaders. Nevertheless, in a setting that is still greatly monopolised by the nation states, and in which new actors with greater capacity to set the agenda are emerging, the possibilities for cities to influence international policy making are very limited. They have managed to gain some level of recognition and urbanisation is now widely acknowledged as a critical global challenge. However, they have not been able to shape global agreements in such a way as to enable the environment in which they operate to provide better solutions for their citizens.

Starting with a brief overview of the channels available to cities for associating with multilateral bodies, in Europe and at the global level, this article aims to ascertain the extent to which they are managing to move beyond mere rhetoric and to shape the international political agenda. In the last few decades cities have focused on attaining recognition and visibility at the symbolic level. Yet, the pressing challenges they face demand that they should move towards result-driven action in order to bring about measurable improvements in the policies and solutions they are promoting in their local communities. In its analysis of the wide range of traditional and multistakeholder platforms available to cities for intervening in the international arena, the article draws attention to some of the challenges that might arise in terms of relevance, legitimacy, and accountability.

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II. Cities and the EU: an institutionalised but diffuse connection

For decades now, European cities have been trying to influence policies pursued by the European Union (EU). Mainly through the Structural and Cohesion Funds, but also through other financial programmes, the EU has been increasing its presence in the local sphere, situating itself behind the main urban infrastructure projects, the most advanced development strategies, and the most transformative innovations. An agenda seeking to strengthen the urban dimension of European policies has gradually been taking shape. It is constructed on the basis of intergovernmental agreements that make up the present European urban *acquis*, with the Leipzig Charter on Sustainable European Cities¹ (2007) and the Pact of Amsterdam (2016), through which the Urban Agenda for the EU² is adopted, as its most notable components.

However, although some progress has been made, there is still a long way to go before the EU places urban challenges at the heart of its political agenda. The weight of cities is still relatively slight, especially when compared with other actors like regions. Nevertheless, they do have well-defined mechanisms for channelling their contributions. The European Committee of the Regions³ (CoR) offers cities and regions an institutionalised channel to make their voice heard. Besides this consultative body, cities also use informal channels through which they manage a dense and dynamic network of institutional and professional relations that give rise to effective collaborative links.

The existence of a consultative institution that represents regions and cities in the institutional framework of a multilateral organisation like the EU is, without a doubt, a very significant innovation. Yet almost three decades after it was established in 1994, the Committee has shown that its ability to influence in the EU's legislative processes is limited (see Noferini in this volume). Several factors might explain this limited power, including the non-binding nature of the reports the Committee issues, the wide range of interests that arise when regional and local governments are brought together in the same chamber, and the increasingly noticeable absence of big cities. In any case, all of these factors can be explained on the basis of one common denominator: the reluctance of national governments to share power.

It is undeniable that the Committee can place issues on the agenda and that it has the legitimacy to be involved in the definition of policies presented by the EU in certain areas that have repercussions at regional or local level. But it is also true that cities are increasingly opting to channel their aspirations through their own networks or by establishing direct links with European institutions. On certain occasions, the European Commission even sidelines the Committee when establishing forums for dialogue with cities, for example the EU Covenant of Mayors for Climate & Energy⁴ or the Policy Forum on Development⁵.

Access to post-COVID-19 recovery and resilience funds launched by the EU through the Next Generation EU⁶ package provides a very good example of this. In a letter⁷ sent in November 2020 to the presidents of the Parliament, the Commission, and the Council, the mayors of some of the larger European cities demanded that 10% of the total

1. See https://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/archive/themes/urban/leipzig_charter.pdf
2. See https://ec.europa.eu/info/eu-regional-and-urban-development/topics/cities-and-urban-development/urban-agenda-eu_en
3. See <https://cor.europa.eu/en>
4. See <https://www.covenantofmayors.eu/>
5. See <https://europa.eu/capacity4dev/policy-forum-development>
6. See https://ec.europa.eu/info/strategy/recovery-plan-europe_en
7. See: <https://eurocities.eu/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/202010-Letter-from-European-Mayors-on-the-EU%E2%80%99s-Recovery-and-Resilience-Facility.pdf>

funds should be reserved for direct management by local governments. Beyond the importance of the initiative, what is significant here is the fact that the mayors did not channel this demand through the European Committee of the Regions, which has barely said a word about the matter. Using the main city networks, they established direct communication with the EU institutions in order to be heard.

III. From being invisible to being partners (with limited powers)

Beyond Europe, the connection of cities with global agendas began to take shape with the Earth Summit held in Rio de Janeiro in 1992.⁸ On this occasion, the commitment of the United Nations (UN) to sustainable development and closer engagement with issues of relevance at the local level—the environment, inequalities, poverty, housing, urban space, et cetera—was made explicit. However, it was not until twenty years later that the universality of global agendas in the framework of the Post-2015⁹ process situated cities at a different point. Indeed, in a context of shared challenges and interdependencies it was possible to upscale to the global negotiating tables issues of great importance for them, regardless of their level of development.

Cities approach to global agendas has been accompanied by a most remarkable effort to occupy a seat at the UN negotiating table. This endeavour has taken them from total invisibility to being seen as relevant stakeholders, joining one of the Major Groups¹⁰ that resulted from the Earth Summit of 1992. And going one step further, they have attained a special status allowing them to take part in deliberative processes, although without vote, within UN Habitat, the agency specialising in human settlements (García-Chueca, 2020; Galceran-Vercher in this volume). Nevertheless, they have not managed to extend this status to the core organs of the UN, as has been repeatedly demanded by mainstream voices of the international scene.¹¹

At this point, the commitment cities have made to operate by speaking with one voice in the framework of the multilateral system should be noted. The process of merging the main international municipalist networks in 2004 had situated United Cities and Local Governments¹² (UCLG) as the main interlocutor with the UN. But in the context of a constantly expanding ecosystem of international networks of cities (Fernández de Losada and Abdullah, 2019; Acuto and Rayner, 2016), the creation in 2013 of the Global Taskforce of Local and Regional Governments, a consultative and coordination mechanism bringing together the main networks, placed cities and local governments in a scenario of greater authority and legitimacy for being listened to and taken into account.

However, all these efforts have not led to a more effective capacity to influence political agendas. Over the years, urban issues have gained relevance in international regulations, cities have been acknowledged and are consulted, but they are still a long way from participating in decision-making processes. Member states have been and continue to be unanimous in their firm belief that local authorities and the rest of accredited organisations should play an advisory, but not decision-mak-

Although some progress has been made, there is still a long way to go before the EU places urban challenges at the heart of its political agenda.

8. United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, 3-14 June 1992. See <https://www.un.org/en/conferences/environment/rio1992>
9. The Post-2015 Development Agenda is a process that arose from Rio+20 and is the origin of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.
10. See <https://www.global-taskforce.org/local-authorities-major-group>
11. United Nations (UN). Strengthening of the United Nations system. Report of the Panel of Eminent Persons on United Nations-Civil Society Relations. A/58/817. See <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N04/376/41/PDF/N0437641.pdf?OpenElement>. Also, the report by the High Level Group of eminent personalities, created by Kofi Annan in 2004, which proposed that the UCLG should be recognised as an advisory body to the Secretary General and the General Assembly.
12. See <https://www.uclg.org/>

Cities approach to global agendas has been accompanied by a most remarkable effort to occupy a seat at the UN negotiating table.

ing, role in any interaction with the UN (Birch, 2017). The drive to achieve a status of greater recognition has not enabled cities to leave the fringes of the multilateral system and acquire a more central role.

IV. Yielding more symbolic than effective influence

In fact, although cities have achieved undisputed recognition, their ability to influence traditional multilateralism is still more symbolic than effective without any clear impact in terms of improvement in the responses and solutions that they offer to citizens. There can be no doubt that regulations arising from international agendas are increasingly expressing a clear acknowledgement of the importance of urbanising processes (Kosovac, Acuto, and Jones, 2020). But cities are still focusing more on “being part” and placing items on the agenda than on improving the quality of texts that are approved at the international level by drawing on their own priorities and realities to inform the decisions taken.

Some of the more significant achievements of cities in the international arena in recent years clearly illustrate this reality. The inclusion of SDG 11 on sustainable cities in the framework of 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development¹³ is fruit of an extraordinary advocacy campaign led by a very strong multi-stakeholder alliance consisting of cities, multilateral and national agencies, and transnational civil society, as well as philanthropic and knowledge sector organisations. However, deployment of the targets around which the SDG was organised is still more in response to the national than to the local standpoint, approaching urban challenges in an aseptic way without including critical issues like recognition of local autonomy, demands for improvement of local financing systems, or multilevel organisation. SDG 11 has the virtue of existing, of placing on the table matters that are essential for cities (as almost all of the SGD do), but it does not include specific formula for enabling the regulatory and institutional environments in which they operate.

Another good example is the mention of the right to the city as a shared ideal of the New Urban Agenda (section 11). This is an achievement resulting from the negotiating efforts of many actors—local government, civil society, academia—whose inclusion in the Agenda had met with stiff resistance from the national governments. However, the text approved in Quito does not display the concept in all its complexity—as it is cited only once and in isolation—but presents it with a significant lack of internal coherence. If the idea of the right to the city recognises the social function of the city, this is not expressed in a text that is clearly guided by the logic of sustainable economic growth (Fernández de Losada and Garcia-Chueca, 2018; Garcia-Chueca and Zárate in this volume).

The link with global agendas has also served cities to mark out political positions in the national sphere. In the United States, for example, the commitment of the main cities to the climate agenda set out in the Paris Agreement¹⁴ on climate change and the migratory agenda stemming from the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration¹⁵ has led to confrontation with the Trump administration. The paradox is that cities have based their opposition to the decisions of the federal govern-

13. See <https://sdgs.un.org/2030agenda>

14. See <https://unfccc.int/process-and-meetings/the-paris-agreement/the-paris-agreement>

15. See <https://www.un.org/en/conf/migration/global-compact-for-safe-orderly-regular-migration.shtml>

ment on the basis of compliance with agreements in whose design they have barely participated.

However, in addition to responding to the agendas promoted by states and multilateral organisms, cities have also been proactive in placing sensitive issues on the international agenda. In 2018, a group that included some of the world's main cities spearheaded a declaration aiming at promoting the right to adequate housing in the right to the city framework. The manifesto "Cities for Adequate Housing. Municipalist Declaration of Local Governments for the Right to Housing and the Right to the City¹⁶" was backed by the commitment of the UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Housing, operative support from the UCLG, and a privileged audience in its presentation at the UN High Level Political Forum in 2018. Yet, despite the power of the political message they managed to convey and the relevance of the specific measures they suggested, the initiative has not had any impact in terms of legislative changes at the national level or in boosting the capacity of local governments for regulating the very complex housing market.

The difficulties cities are having in moving beyond the symbolic dimension and attaining concrete results from their advocacy efforts in the international arena are also the result of the lack of binding power of most of the institutions linked to traditional multilateralism. The system of outcome documents¹⁷ making up the global sustainable development agenda provides a good example of this. Their relevance is also highly symbolic inasmuch as they offer a framework of reference for all stakeholders, but they do not provide for processes of legislative transposition, sanctions, or mechanisms of accountability. At a time like the present, when the crisis caused by COVID-19 has further exacerbated the crisis of multilateralism, and new forms of power are emerging, the limitations inherent to the system are becoming an important factor that cities should take into account.

V. New spaces of power and multi-stakeholder partnerships

Indeed, the multilateral arena is becoming increasingly extensive and complex. The bodies linked with traditional multilateralism share spaces with others appearing in the domain of a new multilateralism with emerging powers and less institutionalised forms of organisation. The consolidation of mechanisms like the G20 and the BRIC group, platforms like the World Economic Forum, and projects like the Belt and Road Initiative promoted by China are staging the process of mutation in which the world order is presently immersed.

Cities are not immune to this reality and, in parallel with their continued efforts to associate with or influence the UN and the European Union, they are also approaching these new areas of power. In this regard, it should be asked whether their ability to influence this new less institutionalised reality is greater than what they have shown in the traditional forums or whether, on the contrary, they are still restrained by the unchanging leverage of national governments and other stakeholders like transnational corporations, which have gained considerable muscle with regard to the international agenda.

Over the years, urban issues have gained relevance in international regulations, cities have been acknowledged and are consulted, but they are still a long way from participating in decision-making processes.

¹⁶. See <https://citiesforhousing.org/>

¹⁷. Including the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, the New Urban Agenda, the Addis Ababa Action Agenda on Financing for Development, the Paris Agreement on Climate Change and the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction.

Cities are still focusing more on “being part” and placing items on the agenda than on improving the quality of texts that are approved at the international level by drawing on their own priorities and realities to inform the decisions taken.

One of the platforms that best illustrates this new reality is Urban 20¹⁸ (U20), a mechanism launched in 2017 by the mayors of Buenos Aires and Paris and convened by the C40¹⁹ and UCLG. This is a tool of urban diplomacy bringing together mayors of the world’s main cities with the aim of making recommendations to the G20. It operates by means of a scheme of association with a wide range of knowledge partners which offer advice and knowledge. As Klaus wrote (2018), it stems “from a realization that cities cannot act alone to solve global challenges like climate change and income inequality. And it reflects the fundamental truth that nation-states cannot solve those problems without working hand-in-hand with cities”. In some sense, “the U20 is part of a larger effort to evolve the global order, including the G20, to reflect the reality of power in the twenty-first century and to meet its challenges” (Klaus, 2018).

It is still too early to measure the effective ability cities have had for influencing the G20 agenda. However, there are signs of a growing interest in urban challenges. At least this is suggested by the G20 Global Smart Cities Alliance²⁰, an initiative launched by the Japanese presidency of the G20 in 2019 with operational and financial support from the World Economic Forum. The Alliance, which brings together the main city networks, national governments, and a significant constellation of academic and economic actors from around the world, aims to promote responsible and ethical use of technologies in cities by establishing a regulatory framework of reference with a view to fast-tracking best practices, mitigating potential risks, and fostering greater openness and public trust.

This is a clear indication of the interest the urban domain has awakened among the most influential global economic operators like the World Economic Forum. Similar interest has been shown by the world’s leading philanthropic institutions, including Bloomberg Philanthropies, the Rockefeller and Ford foundations, and Open Society, which are supporting some of the platforms with the greatest presence in the global urban ecosystem. Indeed, platforms like the C40, the Resilient Cities Network²¹, and the Mayors Migration Council²² approach city interests by building global multi-stakeholder alliances with key actors in the private sector, knowledge based institutions, and national and international agencies. These partnerships enable them to access knowledge, innovation, and funds and increase their capacity to set the agenda.

Although from the standpoint of differing logics, urbanising processes are also part of the international positioning strategies of some of the leading global powers. The Belt and Road Initiative, one of the pillars of China’s project of global expansion, has the potential to redraw the urban reality in many countries of the world (Curtis and Mayer, 2020). This massive effort of infrastructure investment, which is being introduced in practically every region of the planet poses enormous challenges for cities, while also conditioning their development. Beijing is setting out the parameters in which the initiative operates and the investment priorities. However, the Chinese government is not exactly flexible, so cities that want to be part of the Belt and Road Initiative must accept the rules of the game. Not doing so would mean paying a hefty price in terms of their positioning and competitiveness.

18. See https://www.c40knowledgehub.org/s/article/Urban-20-U20?language=en_US

19. See <https://www.c40.org/>

20. See https://globalsmartcitiesalliance.org/?page_id=107

21. See <https://resilientcitiesnetwork.org/>

22. See <https://www.mayorsmigrationcouncil.org/>

It seems clear that moving forward within a multi-stakeholder scheme would make it possible to mobilise resources and capacities that are not within reach of platforms that operate on the basis of homogenous affiliation, such as UCLG, Metropolis²³, and ICLEI²⁴ - Local Governments for Sustainability. Their resources and capacities allow them to count on highly professionalised teams to promote innovative, high-impact initiatives, and to acquire considerable visibility and recognition (Fernández de Losada and Abdullah, 2019). This capacity for impact contributes towards mobilising the most relevant and politically influential leaders. The notable involvement of the mayors of the world's main cities in the work of C40 clearly testifies to this.

The multi-stakeholder approach raises no small number of questions that require careful attention.

Nevertheless, the multi-stakeholder approach raises no small number of questions that require careful attention. Economic dependence on philanthropic organisations or large private corporations—by contrast with the independence supposedly enjoyed by fee-based traditional networks—can give rise to considerable doubts that must be tackled. Do these organisations effectively respond to a city-led approach? Who sets the agenda? What priorities do they respond to? To whom are they accountable? What mechanisms of democratic control are they subject to? The mayors who, attracted by an undeniable capacity to deliver results, are presently leading these multi-stakeholder platforms should address questions which, sooner or later, could undermine their legitimacy.

VI. Going beyond rhetoric to reinforce democratic legitimacy in international action

The analysis carried out in the present text shows that cities have achieved recognition in the international scene which nobody disputes anymore. This may happen within the framework of traditional multilateralism with a status which, varying in accordance with the institutional context, keeps them situated on the margins of the system; or it could be in the context of the new multilateralism, where they operate in keeping with a multi-stakeholder scheme together with other actors, both governmental and private, with considerable capacity for mobilising resources and knowledge.

However, this recognition does not imply greater ability to effectively influence the international agenda. Although cities are increasingly able to place issues on the table, doubts remain about their capacity to exert anything more than symbolic influence, and to transcend rhetoric to produce substantial policy changes in these agendas (Fernández de Losada, 2018). Such changes should respond to their priorities and provide the solutions they need in order to enable the institutional and regulatory environments in which they operate. Yet, they keep coming up against resistance from national governments in the spaces of traditional multilateralism, and the interests of other stakeholders with a growing capacity to set the agenda within the new multilateralism.

In times of crisis and emergency like the present, when citizens are calling for effective solutions, cities must be able to present measurable results deriving from their efforts to have an influence in international agendas. Symbolism and rhetoric have played their part

23. See <https://www.metropolis.org/>
24. See <https://iclei.org/>

on the way to acquiring a consolidated presence in the international domain. This is no longer the case. Having greater knowledge of the impacts of their international action should be turned into a demand that legitimises it. And the same applies to advancing in a framework of accountability that reinforces citizen commitment and democratic control. Obtaining measurable results is crucial. But these results must respond to the priorities and needs, interests and aspirations of cities and their citizens. Not to those defined by other actors. To understand it otherwise could pervert the democratic logic that must inspire the international action of cities.

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- GLOBAL CITIES, WORLD ORDER AND POST-PANDEMIC FUTURES

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The long-term impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the development of the world's cities is not yet known. But as with previous outbreaks of disease throughout history, it will be felt in the ways infrastructure and urban planners adapt to the spread of the disease. Just as the cholera outbreaks of the 19th century accelerated moves to sewerage systems and new sanitation infrastructure and practices in cities, so the legacy of this 21st century pandemic will reshape urban form. Already we are seeing varied responses: in some cities transportation is being remodelled by the rapid implementation of new cycling networks; in others existing agendas are being brought forward, such as Paris Mayor Anne Hidalgo's "15-minute city", where all the goods and services people need are placed within walking distance of their homes; urban greening trends have accelerated (e.g. Boston's "Big Dig"); existing shifts towards surveillance technologies and the use of big data in cities have been extended; central business districts have emptied in response to needs to physically distance (placing question marks over their viability in the long term); and new local community solidarity initiatives have emerged in response to the collective challenges the pandemic poses (Safi, 2020).

But cities were already in the throes of decades-long transformations of a profound nature before the virus struck. Although clearly an important shaping force on society, COVID-19 will not transform cities permanently on its own. Instead, its short-term effects will interact with deep-lying structural transformative trends that are already playing themselves out in our cities, and in the wider international system in which cities are embedded. It will accelerate some of those trends and retard others. The future of cities will be made in the intersections of these trends, and by political actors that can successfully bend long-term trends and short-term crises towards the realisation of their own visions.

We might see the emergence of COVID-19 and its rapid transmission around the world as offering an inflection point: drawing together multiple strands in politics, society, economics, ecology and technology; laying bare previously overlooked connections and conjunctures; offering a vantage point from which to reflect on broader historical movements and shifts. The advent of the virus has also acted as a catalyst: accelerating some develop-

COVID-19 will not transform cities permanently on its own. Instead, its short-term effects will interact with deep-lying structural transformative trends that are already playing themselves out in our cities, and in the wider international system in which cities are embedded.

ments in cities that were already visible before the pandemic struck, such as the implementation of digital technologies in the creation of “smart cities”, the emerging tensions between major cities and the states in which they are embedded, and prompting reflection on how to make cities more socially just and environmentally sustainable.

At the same time, cities, states and societies have all had to adapt and change in relation to the specific challenges the virus presents. COVID-19 has paused the frenetic onward surge of urban life and given a chance to reflect on broad trends. But while the virus alone is not enough to fully recast the shape and direction of cities, it may be woven through and entwined with these trends, with its influence making certain futures more probable and others less so. The future of global cities, their interplay and engagement with other powerful entities like states and international organisations and broader geo-political, geo-economic and ecological forces already posed pressing and open questions before the pandemic hit.

In this short discussion of these major transformative trends I make use of the concept of the “global city” to denote a historically specific urban form: a form that may be subject to transformation. The sociologist Saskia Sassen (1991) introduced this concept to the discussion on urban change to describe a distinctive form of city whose features, morphology and webs of global connectivity emerged in the late-1970s in response to the restructuring of the global economy following the collapse of the post-World War II Bretton Woods system. Global cities are urban forms that are intrinsically and inseparably linked to the specific era of globalisation that followed from this economic restructuring. Global cities were a product of the regulatory environment created at this time (with its emphasis on free market exchange, privatisation, deregulation and financialisation) and were shaped by the global flows of deregulated capital that it set loose. They became its material expression (in the generation of new urban forms and infrastructures) and came to shape the development and direction of globalisation itself.

But in these origins lies a further crucial point that is often missed by many urban theorists. The global city has been made possible by a particular configuration of *geopolitics*. Global cities are the product of a historically specific form of liberal world order, underpinned by a historically specific configuration of geopolitical power (Ikenberry, 2011). Under the hegemony of the United States, a liberal, open trading order has been fostered over the past four decades, underwritten by US military power in the last resort, but providing a secure and stable environment in which cities could begin to play important roles on the world stage, firstly as economic actors and sites of economic power and, more recently, as political players (Curtis, 2016). It is only in this stable global environment that cities, long stripped of their military or defensive capabilities, could begin to find their niche and to evolve.

Now this environment seems to be under threat from a number of different sources. Losing the protection it afforded is likely to have profound consequences for the viability of “global cities” as such. The US hegemony that underpins the system has been perceived to be in decline for a decade, while other powers like China have risen, shifting the locus of economic power to the east. But the advent of the Trump administration and its inward-looking nativist policies has further exacerbated this per-

ception of decline, decay and abdication of international leadership. The rising prominence of authoritarian states on the world stage, from China to Iran, Russia, Turkey and Brazil, lends further weight to the idea that the liberal moment is passing, as do the increasing prevalence of right-wing movements across the world. Threats to the future of the European Union also push in this direction – none more so than Britain’s decision to leave. But the most important challenge to this configuration of world order is the unresolved 2008 financial crisis, which swept away not only decades of growth, but also the ideological legitimacy of neoliberal capitalism – the very form of global economic organisation from which global cities drew their lifeblood. All of these are morbid symptoms of a system under great strain. Even before the disaster of COVID-19 was inserted into this toxic mixture, the future of global cities, if we mean the specific form of city that thrived in this now decaying environment, was under threat. The pandemic further threatens to accelerate a decline in what is an open form of global order, offering the prospect of borders, barriers and walls of various kinds closing down the free movement of global flows.

A divide has begun to emerge between global cities and the heartlands of the territorial nation-states in which they formed.

However, even when such existential threats are real, the very fact of the existence of global cities – novel urban forms not seen before in the historical record – has opened up new possibilities in the international system. Global cities have original features, new capacities and capabilities and a new weight on the world stage that have altered the nature of world politics and global governance and offer novel possibilities, pathways and futures for the evolution of international society. And this is necessary, because in a world of transnational challenges, including global pandemics, but also the climate emergency and the crises of global capitalism, cities’ capacities to help with global challenges via their globe-spanning networks, leadership and agenda-setting capabilities, are going to be necessary. This is a world in which states have struggled to deal with such challenges. That makes cities acting together on the world stage a critical governance resource – and one that needs to be better understood and defended.

In the space of this short essay I want to examine the intersection of three dimensions of the transformation of cities before concluding with some thoughts on what is at stake in the future evolution of global cities in a post-pandemic world. These dimensions are: globalisation, global governance and geopolitics.

I. Globalisation

Globalisation produced global cities. But it has become apparent in the last decade or so that globalisation has brought many problems in its wake and that its future is unclear. Because global cities are products of the forces that unleashed contemporary globalisation, especially in their reliance on deregulated markets and global capital flows, they also exhibit, in their very morphology and form, many of the tensions and contradictions of globalisation (Curtis, 2019a). They become strategic sites where the more abstract forces underpinning globalism reveal themselves in concrete form. They focus and amplify systemic tensions. We have seen this in the way social movements protesting globalisation choose global cities as their sites of protest and resistance – the anti-globalisation protests of the 1990s and early 2000s, and the Occupy movements of the post-2008 financial crisis and austerity decade, for example.

Cities and their leadership are able to exercise a new form of power on the world stage: the ability to convene networks of various actors.

They also demonstrate these tensions in their very materiality: in the co-existence of poverty and great wealth within the same neighbourhoods, or in the sprawling slums and informal settlements of developing world cities, such as Sao Paulo or Delhi, which nestle close by the gated communities of the super-rich (Davis, 2006; Graham, 2016). Global expressions of the “right to the city” movement have come into being, as urban citizens everywhere protest against the ways the inequalities of free market, finance capital-led globalisation have been materialised in cities, and demand more democratic control over how urban space is allocated and used (Harvey, 2012).

But it is not just the left that has problems with the orientation of globalisation. Now, with years of austerity beginning to bite, global cities, with their cosmopolitan and open orientation, with their diverse populations and multiple forms of identity, culture and belonging, have started to come into conflict with the rise of nationalist and nativist feeling brought by globalisation’s attendant uncertainties and destabilisation of tradition. A divide has begun to emerge between global cities and the heartlands of the territorial nation-states in which they formed. We have seen this in voting patterns around Brexit and the election of US President Trump: a clear preference in metropolitan areas for remain in the case of Brexit, and for Democrat in the case of the US election in 2016. We have seen it in the tensions between the Trump administration and US cities over Sanctuary Cities and the rights and protections they afford migrants. We have seen it in disagreements over the implementation of the Paris Agreement (Trump repudiates it, while global city mayors say they will implement it). Recently, we have seen it in debates about law and order in liberal US cities in the wake of the Black Lives Matter protests.

Can this divide be healed, or will it continue to drive a wedge between global cities and the nation-states in which they are historically embedded? This becomes a hugely significant question for the post-pandemic future, because global cities have begun to exhibit many new capabilities and new forms of agency and power as they have evolved over the last four decades of globalisation. These capabilities and forms of agency and power may be particularly significant in a future in which many transnational problems (themselves unleashed by globalisation) are proving beyond the capacities of states to deal with, largely because of structural limitations built into an international system based on territorial sovereignty. The question is: will they be fostered, or will they be crushed by the return of the state and the rise of nativist politics?

II. Global governance

Global cities first emerged as a functional requirement of a new form of global economy. But many powerful cities are now moving to translate their economic power into political influence on the world stage.

As the state drew back from allocating society’s productive resources in response to the new neoliberal paradigm, these decisions were transferred into the hands of private actors: major firms or emerging transnational corporations who located themselves within the central business districts of global cities such as London, New York and Hong Kong. This spurred the natural agglomeration economies that cities have

always fostered; kickstarting decades of astonishing growth for these key locales. Such cities drew upon their historical advantages – and the new regulatory environment – to draw in wealth and concentrate power.

But now these cities have begun to seek power beyond the economic sphere. The primary mechanism for exercising new political powers has been unexpected, perhaps, but also fully in line with the ways global cities have evolved economically – via globe-spanning networks, connected by digital information technology infrastructures. There has been a surge in the growth of functional political networks connecting cities around the world. Today there are between 250–300 organised associations of cities globally – the vast majority of which have been formed in the last three decades – covering issues such as climate, security, health, resilience and many others (Acuto, 2016; Fernández de Losada, 2019). Such transnational municipal networks (TMNs) are conduits for cities to exert influence on global agendas, development goals and international norms (including the evolution of international law) (Blank, 2006). They offer new forms of governance that act in parallel to that pursued by traditional state diplomacy, giving cities a new presence among the constellation of global governance actors, helping both to shape and implement the agenda of the United Nation’s Sustainable Development Goals, the New Urban Agenda and the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction, for example.

But, more than this, some of the most powerful TMNs have even begun to develop their own agendas, regardless of the direction of states. The C40, for example, a group of almost 100 of the world’s most powerful cities, embraced a “global green new deal” agenda in 2019, committing its members to develop policies to achieve the Paris climate goals of limiting global warming to 1.5°C above pre-industrial levels and halving emissions by 2030 (Curtis, 2019b). Such decisions are far from negligible: C40 members encompass a twelfth of the world’s population, their economic power represents a quarter of the global economy, and they are the key strategic sites in which the climate emergency will have to be tackled.

The emergence of this kind of activity is hugely significant because it represents a new form of agency and governance capacity within international society: a new form of diversity in a system long the preserve of state actors. Cities and their leadership are able to exercise a new form of power on the world stage: the ability to convene networks of various actors, including the expertise of private firms, to amplify the voices of social movements and to direct the capacities and abilities of those networks towards certain governance goals. Additionally, many cities offer a form of legitimate representative agency, with mayors having been democratically elected by sizable populations. Such developments offer the prospect of real influence on global governance agendas and outcomes in the years to come.

However, the question arises once more: how will states accommodate the rise of this new form of agency? Will they embrace the novel governance capacities emerging within cities and work with cities to empower them to help solve global governance challenges such as climate change and health issues? This would enable international society to move beyond the roadblocks and impasses built into its structure, where competitive state sovereignty has led to the repeated failure to deal with these challenges. Or will states seek to suppress these emerging forms of agency and city diplomatic activity? Already we see signs of this – in the

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clashes between US cities and the Trump administration mentioned earlier and in moves by Russia to resist the encroachment of city activities onto the territory of state sovereignty (Acuto, 2017).

The post-pandemic future for global cities faces two forks in the road. The first is a choice between a cosmopolitan, interconnected internationalism and an international system of renewed state control. The second is between an increasingly crisis-wracked form of capitalist city.

III. Geopolitics

Indeed, the pandemic has accelerated recent trends towards the return of the state. States have had to step in to underwrite economies in ways that exceed even the 2008 financial crisis, using their sovereign power to keep stalled societies afloat and roll out national health responses. Everywhere the neoliberal illusion of the small state is beginning to be burned away by the harsh light of the pandemic. The return of the state to the centre of economic decision-making joins the trends towards populist nationalism and authoritarian states that were already gaining momentum. The international environment is quickly shifting, and the climate that made liberal globalisation and the global city possible is beginning to darken. The emerging forms of multi-stakeholder global governance described above may not be able to survive in a less hospitable climate, as the liberal world order begins to decay.

The decline of US hegemony has been mirrored by the rise of Chinese power and influence in the last decade. As China exerts more influence and seeks to reshape the nature of international society, we should expect this to be reflected in the nature of urban space. Just as global cities are a reflection of, and intrinsically connected to, US liberal hegemony, so the very different values China espouses will materialise in the tight connection between geopolitics and urbanisation. Since 2013 China has been engaged in a vast project of infrastructure construction and urban development across Afro-Eurasia, both within and beyond its borders. The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), as this multi-faceted policy is named, is nothing less than an attempt to instantiate a Chinese-led form of globalisation. Drawing, so far, around 70 countries into its orbit of influence, the BRI incorporates two-thirds of the world's population, has a projected \$1.5 trillion price-tag, and incorporates six land and maritime economic corridors (Mações, 2018). Belt and Road cities have yet to find their form, but the early signs are that they will be shaped by a number of trends drawn from Chinese developmental models: emphasising the spatial form of the transnational economic corridor and smart surveillance technologies applied to cities, as seen in Shenzhen, Hangzhou and Shanghai within China, and beyond in the models of Bonifacio Global City, Manila and the "smart city" of Astana (Curtis and Mayer, 2020).

Such cities and urban corridors will likely eventually project political and economic principles and preferences that are very different to the open, liberal trading order in which global cities have thrived. Indeed, the current travails of Hong Kong are emblematic of the fault lines where two possible world orders grind against each other: the open, networked trading city of recent decades and the emerging Belt and Road system of tomorrow.

China's relative success in suppressing COVID-19 – especially through the application of smart surveillance technologies – as more open societies in the West struggled, may mean its urban model appeals

to developing countries seeking an alternative to the liberal model. It should also be noted that Chinese cities are active participants in many transnational municipal networks (Mierzejewski, 2020). The possibility remains that, as Chinese-inflected forms of urbanism evolve, China may use these conduits to diffuse its own experiences, urban developmental models and technological forms back through the networks. The eventual fate of global cities, and the networks they have begun to form, may eventually come to look quite different to the picture we have today.

IV. Post-pandemic futures

The inter-connected future of the international system and of cities is at a crossroads. This was the case even before COVID-19; but the pandemic has opened a window on these dynamics, even as it influences them in various ways.

What possible futures are emerging at this juncture? They are multiple and complex, but as a useful simplifying sketch two distinct pathways are appearing along two contrasting political fault-lines.

The first is a choice between greater state control over cities and continued autonomy and independence for cities and their transnational networks. As we have seen, certain states find the devolved model cities have carved out for themselves in world affairs hard to accept, as well as their increasing economic and political weight, and may seek to rein this trend in. But, at the same time, global cities have begun to offer a new capacity for governing global challenges – something the world needs given states' failures on issues such as the climate emergency. At the same time, many global cities also have a level of democratic legitimacy that challenges the sovereign prerogatives of states: many urban citizens are beginning to invest their identity and loyalty in the city and its leadership. Not only do such cities often have vast and diverse populations that fit uneasily within the nation-state framework, they also offer a unique form of multi-scalar local-to-global reach missing in moribund national politics today. This is very visible in the current pandemic, where top-down statist responses that marginalise local expertise and knowledge, such as in Britain, have performed poorly. Perhaps a useful middle way would be a renewed partnership between states and cities where states recognise the capacities and capabilities of cities and their globe-spanning networks as a resource and collaborate to empower them to meet global challenges.

The second choice of path emerges from the increasingly strident calls for greater social justice, equity and ecological sensitivity embodied under the "right to the city" that oppose the defence and intensification of the neoliberal hyper-financialised form of the global city, with its vast wealth disparities and contrasts in life experiences. Even before the pandemic this contrast was increasingly on the political agenda, exacerbated by over a decade of austerity policies and held in place by an increasingly authoritarian form of neoliberal capitalism, augmented by trends such as surveillance technologies and the secession of urban elites into gated communities and fortified spaces. The pandemic has merely clarified this picture: those with wealth and private resources have retreated into well-connected home offices, while those without have been left to cope as best they can.

The post-pandemic future for global cities faces two forks in the road. The first is a choice between a cosmopolitan, interconnected internationalism and an international system of renewed state control. The second is between an increasingly crisis-wracked form of capitalist city and moves to build alternative urban forms with greater balance, social justice and equity. The pandemic will not transform cities by itself: it offers a political opportunity that groups with different visions of future cities are trying to grasp.

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For years, cities have been improving both their capacity to address global challenges and their knowledge of the political and economic forces that create such challenges. This effort has been well-funded by major philanthropies, private corporations, national governments and even cities themselves. Operating simultaneously on a number of scales – city, nation-state, regional and global – this campaign has at times appeared shambolic. It has no single leader, hub or strategy, but is spread across a host of networks, non-governmental organisations and stakeholder groups. Nonetheless, over the last decade urban stakeholders have increasingly refined their messaging, goals and diplomatic practices: mayor-driven reports now rival those of policy and research institutions in quality; city summits advance with the pomp of party conferences and the polite rigour of diplomatic negotiations; and partnerships are forged between urban-stakeholder groups and well-respected governments, companies and international organisations. To be sure, this campaign has facilitated policy exchange, enabling cities to set ambitious goals and take practical steps around climate change, economic inequality and governance practices. While doing so, it has also sought to elevate urban voices on global issues, to highlight urban solutions to global challenges and to establish a role for urban stakeholders in global agenda setting.

In practice, these developments have required that while always keeping an eye on urban areas, transnational city-focused organisations have also oriented their activities and policies around key international agreements. Practitioners of city diplomacy and policy leads within city networks are fluent in the language of multilateralism and possess nuanced understanding of the major international agreements. They are expert in the global and the local, as it were, as likely to know the Mayor of Medellín as the Executive Secretary of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change. This knowledge – and particularly its transformation into practical policy steps in cities – is hard won and speaks not only to the immense organisational effort that has gone into elevating cities on the global stage, but also to the infrastructure of human knowledge and capital such efforts have both produced and depended upon.

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As part of this diverse effort at policy implementation, knowledge building and global organising, the panoply of urban stakeholders – from elected mayors to civil society representatives – have been campaigning for a city seat at the international table. In 2016, in advance of Habitat III, the Global Task Force issued a political statement and ten recommendations that if put into practice would form a new global governance model by, among other measures, raising the volume of local voices (GTF, 2016). The “Seat at the Table” statement was supported by more than 500 mayors and was an especially visible moment in a campaign that has taken on diverse shapes and platforms: cities and city networks have assumed semi-formal roles translating research and findings from international organisations into urban-focused material; urbanists and associated experts have advised the UN Secretary-General on organising around urban issues; and networks and platforms have continued to lobby international organisations for both more attention to urban issues and the reform of existing institutions to reflect the unique governing status of mayors. But sometimes a restaurant changes before your turn on the waiting list. In other words, while scholars, commentators and advocates of global urban politics have maintained a keen focus on international organisations and the UN in particular, the coveted table has been growing ever shakier before their eyes. And nowhere is this clearer than on the global development agenda.

I. The table wobbles

Over the course of 2015–2016, UN member states adopted four agreements that together amounted to an international development agenda: the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015–2030, the Addis Ababa Action Agenda, the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (and the 17 SDGs) adopted at United Nations Headquarters in New York during High-Level Week, and the New Urban Agenda (NUA). These four agreements, along with the Paris Agreement on climate change, constitute the core of the global agenda as it existed at the beginning of 2017. The products of hundreds of meetings, contributions from thousands of experts and stakeholders and years of negotiations, the five agreements include extended time horizons (Klaus and Singer, 2018). The Sendai Framework, Addis Ababa and 2030 agendas all explicitly look forward to 2030. The NUA is meant to provide a framework for urbanisation until the mid-2030s; and while the Paris Agreement calls for action “as soon as possible”, it also targets goals to be achieved in “the second half of this century.” To be sure, the 2030 Agenda and the Paris Agreement both include near-term reporting and assessment mechanisms and the Paris Agreement explicitly provides a framework for signatories and the international community to revise their ambitions and contributions upwards. But, true to the structural nature of the challenges they are meant to address, the temporal vision for the agenda looks out decades. In this sense, the agenda carries a rather heavy historical load, not only in the high stakes of the issues addressed, but in the expectation that it will maintain relevance, efficacy and legitimacy for years.

The agenda’s long time horizon was matched by an equally ambitious vision for enabling a diverse array of stakeholders to contribute to achieving assorted benchmarks. As Samuel Moyn and many others have pointed out, the international order upon which the agenda rests has historically

affirmed the primacy of the nation-state and its sovereignty within that system. Take the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, for example. “The Universal Declaration”, Moyn writes, “retains, rather than supersedes, the sanctity of nationhood” (2018: 91). In addition to reflecting a reality of geopolitics, the primacy afforded the nation reflected an historical belief after World War II in the possible benefits of domestic intervention by the state in rights delivery. In many ways that primacy still remains, but over the last 30 years, the UN has become increasingly open to, and indeed reliant upon, collaboration with a broad array of stakeholders. “On the UN side, new forms of stakeholder activism emerged after the end of the Cold War,” writes Eugenie Birch (2018: 6). Indeed, the number of accredited NGOs within the UN system has swelled from roughly 700 in 1990 to upwards of 4,500 at the end of the 2010s (Birch, 2018: 5).

This historical development was reflected in the roll out of each of the five aforementioned outcome documents, but nowhere was the multistakeholder vision more in evidence than in the 2030 Agenda and the associated SDGs. The fractious negotiation was meant to turn to shared action, encouraged through goals, reporting, monitoring and marketing. When UN member states adopted the 2030 Agenda in 2015, the SDGs were rolled out with iconic and recognisable, yet easily adaptable, iconography. The mustard yellow of SDG 2, bright red of SDG 4 and fresh tangerine of SDG 11, along with all the other colours and symbols, have been transposed onto the ubiquitous SDG lapel-pins, the shirts of New York City school children, museum exhibits and private sector products.

As this campaign of multilateral public diplomacy spun out across the world, experts and diplomats developed and agreed targets and indicators by which to measure progress on the goals. SDG 2 has eight targets (“universal access to safe and nutritious food”, for instance) and 13 indicators (“prevalence of undernourishment”, for instance). SDG 4 has ten targets and 11 indicators. The brilliant colours and iconography and the accessibility of the targets and indicators have helped ensure that the SDGs – the product of arcane UN negotiations – have wide recognition and appeal. “Our new development goals are ambitious”, then President Barack Obama (2015) observed at the United Nations during the General Assembly’s High-Level Week in September 2015, “But thanks to the good work of many of you, they are achievable – if we work together”. The US president spoke to an audience of heads of state and foreign ministers in the hope that national perspectives might be reconciled in favour of collective action to address global challenges and meet shared goals. While the agenda was negotiated by member states, each of the four constitutive agreements as well as the Paris Agreement highlighted the role of local governments, civil society and the private sector in their implementation. They were sold, as it were, and the international community bet on itself to deliver.

The “together” of which the president spoke hopefully was a big tent. But, amid shifts in national and geopolitics and global crises such as climate change and the COVID-19 pandemic, where does this agenda sit today? Some have exited to the right, some to the left, but while five years later the poles of that tent remain in place, it’s no longer exactly clear who remains inside. The most obvious shift in support for the agenda has come in the form of renunciations from governments which, playing to and encouraging nationalist revivals, have targeted the agree-

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ments and the wider multilateral framework around everything from climate change to trade as attacks on sovereignty. In 2017, the United States announced its intention to leave the Paris Agreement, with the official departure coming in October 2020. In 2018, Brazil announced it would abandon its commitment to host COP25 the following year. Both decisions were couched in nationalist terms: Pittsburgh over Paris, and all that. María Fernanda Espinosa Garcés, President of the 73rd Session of the UN General Assembly observed that critics of the agenda and multilateralism more widely, “peddle an insular vision of nationalism to score political points with domestic constituencies. They point to some unspecified time in the past, when things were supposedly better” (Garcés, 2019). Nationalist revivals need not, by definition, undermine progress on the global agenda. Narratives that enable progress on climate change and development can and have been couched in nationalist or realist terms, as Anatol Lieven has recently argued (Lieven, 2020). If resurgent nationalism is here to stay, such a framing will be necessary.

But the nationalist, often populist, often authoritarian, turn in multilateral diplomacy and international organisations is just one of the developments that has challenged the agenda’s viability. The stability of the agenda has come under pressure from other slightly unexpected sources: developments in climate science, economics and social policy that have noted the need to strengthen the agenda’s ambition and goals. The most notable example here occurred in 2018 with the publication of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change’s *Special Report on Global Warming of 1.5°C (SR1.5)*. The report detailed the dramatic differences in outcomes in everything from biodiversity to health and poverty between a world of 2.0°C warming over pre-industrial levels and one of 1.5°C. While Article 2.1.(a) of the Paris Agreement is certainly consistent with *SR1.5*’s finding, the international community was shocked by the differences in impact between the two levels. This was not a departure from Paris, rather an affirmation of its most ambitious goals. Nonetheless, it also means implicitly that the higher-end numbers of the Paris Agreement are not suitably ambitious to meet the climate crisis.

Layered on top of these trends, of course, is the proximate crisis of COVID-19. In October, Aromar Revi published one of two *UN Chronicle* responses to the Secretary-General’s “Policy Brief” on COVID-19 and urbanisation. As a Co-Chair of the UN Sustainable Development Solutions Network and Coordinating Lead Author of the *Special Report on Global Warming of 1.5°C*, Revi is practiced at identifying how the difficult is doable; but he shared some math on COVID-19’s implications for the SDGs, and the picture he revealed was not pretty. The International Monetary Fund (IMF) estimated a 5% drop of global GDP in 2020; local governments saw average revenue reductions of 15–25%; and in the first months of lockdown, informal workers – frequently urban and composing the vast majority of workers in low-and-middle-income countries – lost as much as 60% of their earnings. These developments, and myriad other social, economic and political COVID-19-derived effects, have profound implications for the ability of the global community to deliver upon the 2030 Agenda and SDGs. By Revi’s count, at least 11 of the 17 goals suffered significant setbacks in 2020. Close your eyes and throw a dart at the SDG dartboard you no doubt have in your pantry and you are likely to hit one of 2020s many challenging stories: food insecurity has increased (SDG 2), access to edu-

cation has been radically disrupted (SDG 4), and public transportation has ground to a halt (SDG 11). Building on analysis by Robin Naidoo and Brendan Fisher, the editorial team at *Nature* came to a reasonable but nonetheless startling conclusion: “Researchers both outside and inside the UN are questioning whether the goals are fit for the post-pandemic age. The goals’ ambition is as important as ever, but fresh thinking is needed on the best ways to achieve them” (*Nature*, 2020).

II. Emerging adaptations

Such is the suddenly fluid if troubled state of the global development agenda near the end of 2020. Since its adoption and rollout to much fanfare in 2015 and 2016, its most important component parts have been under pressure from nationalist diplomats and leaders and its most visible goals have been rendered either significantly more difficult to achieve or in need of reconsideration due to new research, science and policy. Moving forward, these developments will have consequences for both stakeholders and for the international system in which they have sought a seat at the table. For stakeholders in particular, a number of different strategic responses are emerging.

In the last six months, a series of constructive proposals for rethinking various parts of the agenda have emerged. Such proposals, it’s worth noting, need not necessarily include or imply a reduction in ambitions. They can include – and have in certain cases, particularly concerning the 1.5°C target – a heightening of ambitions around localised action. In their *Nature* article, Naidoo and Fisher argued that the High Level Political Forum “must establish a few clear priorities, not a forest of targets. It should also consider which goals can be achieved in a less-connected world with a sluggish global economy” (Naidoo and Fisher, 2020). While recognising the interdependency of the SDGs, Jeffrey Sachs, Guido Schmidt-Traub and co-authors also attempted to identify key transformations needed to achieve each goal independently. “Governments need a strategy to design and implement key interventions”, they wrote in late 2019 (Sachs et al., 2020: 806). More recently, in their extensive tracking of the responses of cities and urban areas to COVID-19, the OECD has noted that “cities are now using the global policy frameworks and facilitating their uptake as policy tools rather than compliance agendas to guide the design and implementation of their recovery strategies” (OECD, 2020: 38). The shift in language might be lost on some, but not on the city diplomats who have worked extensively to develop reporting mechanisms – the voluntary local reviews – for scores of cities around the world. In negotiation and practice, member states have prioritised selected goals and agreements over others, but hewing less closely to the agenda, using the goals as guides rather than metrics, or choosing to prioritise a few goals is a privilege that is more easily exercised by stakeholders, including local governments.

“Events, dear boy, events,” Harold Macmillan famously counselled when asked what would determine his government’s direction, and it’s hard not to note the degree to which the dual pandemics of systemic injustice and COVID-19 have informed stakeholder policy positions and rhetoric. The lessening of economic inequality, as opposed to the alleviation of poverty, has never been a central or even peripheral goal of the UN (Moyn, 2018).

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And yet, in suggesting reform of the SDGs, Naidoo, Fisher and the wider *Nature* editorial team opened up a healthy discussion of the fixation on growth. Meanwhile, the “C40 Mayors’ Agenda for a Green and Just Recovery” puts environmental and economic justice front and centre in a way that might not have been possible in 2015. This heightened attention to economic inequalities is coupled with continuing attention to the need to strengthen multilevel cooperation and governance practices: “As mayors” the report notes, “together with our staff and residents, we are already building a green and just recovery. We call on national and regional governments, central banks and international financial institutions to join us”. While not especially new, the importance of such coordination has been brought home in cities across the world as they’ve struggled with the vast majority of identified COVID-19 cases without always receiving support from national governments and international organisations. Just as the multilevel governance conversation has continued, it is likely discussion around inequality will only grow, whether it be focused around justice or emerging agendas built around the global commons.

Finally, many close UN-watchers still see the agenda as an essential political and policy tool, but one that cannot be delivered upon without notable reform of governance practices. If the SDGs are at risk, so too is the multilateral system that developed and marketed them, which now has a leadership role in implementing and tracking them. “The prospect of more intense and frequent future crises of global scope, like the COVID-19 pandemic or the onset of dangerous climate change”, Revi wrote (2020), “could lead many contemporary institutions that are not fit-for-purpose to become irrelevant or be swept away by the storm-tides of history”. The fix, according to Revi, and many others working with local authorities, must be structural: “There is a strong case for national Governments and the United Nations system to consider a time-bound transition to a greater institutional voice and agency for local and regional governments. This is just, rational and in the mutual interest of citizens and all levels of government” (Revi, 2020). Such voice and agency, authors like Revi and organisations like the Urban 20 noted this year, would have to be supported by a strengthening of the financial capacity of local authorities (Birch et al., 2020). In practice, this position adopts many of the same policy prescriptions as those advanced by the city networks and others focused on multilevel governance and financial innovation, but with an additional rhetorical dimension: it calls out the threat not only to cities and nation-states, but indeed to the wider post-WWII international architecture, should such evolution not occur.

Local authorities have taken significant steps toward delivering upon the Paris Agreement and the SDGs, but multistakeholder approaches, resilient though they are, benefit from support from national capitals and are unlikely to be able to fully fill a gap left by the abdication of important member states. The agreements that compose the wider agenda were signed, after all, by nation-states and undoubtedly prioritise nation-states as the key actors for delivering upon them. The litany of policy failures that enabled the global financial crisis of 2007–2008 and the associated euro crisis have imparted a simple, enduring lesson: legitimacy, hard enough to maintain, is even more difficult to gain. If the agenda’s legitimacy or relevance is lost so soon after it was conceived, who will put their confidence in the next one or the system that backed it?

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CITIES AND INTERNATIONAL LAW: LEGALLY INVISIBLE OR RISING SOFT-POWER ACTORS?

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International law is seen by many practitioners, as well as by conservative legal scholars, as a strictly inter-state endeavour. Symbolically associated with the Treaty of Westphalia, this may have been true for many centuries. But since – at the latest – the *Reparations for Injuries* Advisory Opinion of the International Court of Justice recognised the legal personality of the United Nations as the first non-state entity, this strict state-centricity has ceased to reflect the state of affairs. Instead, today's reality of global governance and its primary normative framework – international law – is messy, pluralist, multistakeholder, uses soft governance tools rather than hard and binding law, and bridges public–private divides. In fact, arguably, states were never monolithic, unified rational actors conducting international law and governance, but were, in fact, when scrutinised through a socio-legal lens, an amalgamation of influence from elements within and without the state apparatus, such as diplomats, networks, bureaucrats, faith organisations, political groups, other levels of governments and more (Berman, 2007). International law worked to reduce such influences to stricter imagined categories such as “subjects” and “objects” for the purpose of creating a solid, dependable, as well as binding legal framework with chances of enforcement. This “subjecthood” or *international legal personality* is the primary concept in positive international law distinguishing actors from non-actors. Now, however, even the most positivist¹ of international lawyers are confronted with the pluralisation of actors without established legal personality engaging in practices traditionally reserved for states. There is, additionally, a growing preference for norms designed to govern international behaviour to be soft, non-binding and created through multistakeholder governance processes rather than binding treaties signed by states only. Non-state actors, starting with international organisations like the United Nations, but later also encompassing individuals, NGOs, transnational corporations and armed groups, have been gradually accepted by international lawyers to be participants and to possess legal significance in international law (Gal-Or et al., 2015). The pluralisation of actors and the softening of the norms created corresponds to a move from multilateralism – referring to an inter-state governance system – towards multistakeholderism – referring to a system of norm generation and governance that involves many actors relevant to a subject matter, which is the premise of this volume.

1. Legal positivism refers to the standpoint that lawyers ought to be interested only in what law is and not what it should be. According to legal positivists, what law is can be determined conclusively by looking at whether it was issued by the relevant authority. “Soft law” and any actors excluded from official law-making capacity should be disregarded as non-law and non-actors, as giving them a quasi-legal value might threaten the legal system.

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In this world, cities and their transnational city networks (TCNs) have been engaging with increasing resonance, competence and rigour in the governance of (and norm generation on) issues that would traditionally be considered within the jurisdiction of the state. Our previous research (Durmuş and Oomen, forthcoming) focussing on the field of migration has found that this engagement of cities with matters of global governance, including by mobilising international law, can be generally divided into two types of engagement, namely: (a) seeking a seat in traditionally state-centric processes; and (b) creating city-centric (or local-centric, to be more inclusive of non-urban localities) fora to engage collectively with international law and global governance. The two types of engagement are complemented by cities’ engagement with international law in governing their *own* locality. For some, the question then becomes: Is any of this city engagement relevant for international law? What are the prospects for achieving recognition of cities’ activities and space for their engagement in formal international legal frameworks? This piece argues that international law, even as it currently stands, can be observed both conservatively and more progressively. The progressive perspective recognises – often through the support of interdisciplinary research – the *de facto* engagement and even influence of local governments on international law. This piece also argues that even if observed through a conservative legal positivist lens, the engagement of local governments with international law is likely to be increasingly relevant to the developments in the content and practice of international law. This is true regardless of whether it takes a long time for any *formal* change of status to occur – if it occurs at all. If cities, collectively, are seeking formal recognition of their role and status in international law, they are on exactly the right path, both in seeking a seat at the table in state-centric processes and in organising and convening with their peers to engage in international law and governance matters without reservations and concerns about whether or not they are “permitted” by international law to do so (as “subjects” or holders of international legal personality). The recognition of new players in the game, whether by progressive or more conservative observers or by existing players, does not come about by such permission but by a retroactive recognition of accumulated evidence showing a new *de facto* reality. I will now seek to explicate this by first reflecting on what the conservative and more pluralist perspectives concerning actors in international law are and how they have changed, followed by a reflection on the current state of affairs with regard to cities’ engagement with international law. Finally, I will summarise some suggestions for practitioners representing the municipalist movement in global governance.

I. Is international law only inter nations?

There is an understanding that international law was always organised as a strictly inter-state global legal order – the so-called “Westphalian system”, referring to the Treaty of Westphalia which established states as equal and sole subjects of international law. However, even the epitomised Treaty of Westphalia itself had city signatories.² Further, the independent cities forming the Hanseatic League in the 12th century would “adopt[...] rules on trade and safe navigation routes [which] then bound all member-cities; these rules influence[d] the development of the maritime law of nations” (Nijman, 2016: 11). In the centuries to come, the modern state would establish itself as the primary and only subject

2. https://avalon.law.yale.edu/17th_century/westphal.asp

of international law. Developments in technology and globalisation, however, inevitably created a need and opportunity for more actors to emerge, such as international organisations. The most significant step for the recognition of so-called “non-state actors” in international law was the Advisory Opinion of the International Court of Justice (ICJ) on *Reparations for Injuries Suffered in the Service of the United Nations*, which concerned a UN Special Rapporteur targeted by the national government in which he was operating (International Court of Justice, 1948). In this advisory opinion, the ICJ – through circular reasoning – recognised that the United Nations has a functional kind of partial legal personality. While not the same as the full and primary legal personality states enjoy, this would allow the UN to fulfil the functions enshrined in its Charter. The Court thus stated that the United Nations *must have had* a kind of legal personality in order to sign the agreements, undertake the responsibilities and enjoy the rights endowed to it by states in its creation.

This advisory opinion was the first legal recognition of the new, no longer strictly inter-state reality of global governance. The emergence and status of new non-state actors were thereafter analysed by international lawyers in a similar manner. Thus, if a need arose for this actor to *function* in the international legal order with a degree of autonomy, a *degree of functional legal personality would emerge* for this actor, which might mean that it could hold its own rights, obligations, and/or participate in law-making. For example, when human rights emerged as a field of international law in which individuals held rights against states, it was argued that individuals had acquired functional legal personality, meaning they had become actors in international law (Gal-Or et al., 2015). Of course, legal personality is not the only way an observer could determine the extent to which an entity is an “actor” in international law, but it remains the most established legal concept for this purpose, although many scholars find little need for this concept at the present day.

Despite the increased attention on cities in the social sciences in the past decades, local governments have been largely overlooked in the legal scholarly discussions around so-called non-state actors, although some lawyers have explored cities from other legal perspectives (Blank, 2006; Aust, 2015; Oomen and Baumgaertel, 2018; Durmuş, 2020). This has partially to do with the fact that formal international law *does* have a place for local governments, albeit not an autonomous one. Nijman has recognised that cities in the international field have characteristics of both sub-state actors (state organs) and non-state actors, acting in their autonomous interest outside the direction of the central government (Nijman, 2016). The prior understanding is easily compatible with state-centric international law while the latter proves problematic. According to the International Law Commission’s Articles on State Responsibility for Internationally Wrongful Acts, local governments are considered “state organs” (UNGA, 2008: Art. 4), showing their sub-state character. This means that every action or omission by local governments that breaches an international obligation of their respective state is attributed to the state – they have no autonomous standing. Within this safe, established framework, the UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC) has been engaging in the last few years with the question of the role of local governments in promoting and protecting human rights as *state organs* bound by all the international legal obliga-

There are two types of engagement by cities with global governance: (a) seeking a seat in traditionally state-centric processes; and (b) creating city-centric fora to engage collectively with global governance.

If cities are seeking formal recognition of their role in international law, they are on the right path, both in seeking a seat at the table with states and in organising in their own fora.

tions binding their respective states (HRC, 2015: para.1). When it comes to law-making in international law (one of the capacities of *international legal persons*), one could argue that customary international law, which is built by accumulated *state practice* accompanied by a belief that the practice constitutes law, could offer a narrow entry point for local governments, where local governments contribute to its development as a *state organ* (Durmuş, 2020). Otherwise, positive international law has offered no place to local governments in their autonomous, non-state capacity.

Parallel to this pluralisation of actors, the last decades have also witnessed a decline in the usage of the formal sources of international law codified in the ICJ Statute (Art 38(1)) – treaties, customary international law and general principles of law – and an increased preference for non-binding commitments and guidelines, so-called “soft law”. Many fewer treaties are now concluded between states than in the 1990s, while non-binding norms such as the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) attract more interest, advocacy and mobilisation from the international community. The usage of such forms of soft law also allows the international community to circumvent the question of who exactly is a formal subject of international law with the capacity to conclude treaties, and instead focus on simply reaching as wide a societal consensus as possible. The new norms made this way are often not binding and have little (or no) justiciability (ability to be enforced by courts). This in no way means that soft law is ineffective, however, as international law depends on actors to enforce it in the absence of a central enforcer. If soft law created in multistakeholder processes with broad consensus enjoys more popularity and wider mobilisation (like the SDGs) while states perpetually turn away from binding law, the power of soft law should not be underestimated.

Yet, the positivist vision is not the only way to see international law. Some pluralist scholars have long recognised the power of actors and types of norms not contemplated by “official” international law. Legal pluralists, especially representatives of the “New” New Haven School of International Law (Koh, 2007) have been exploring the notion of “bottom-up international law-making” (Levit, 2007) by “norm-generating communities” (Berman, 2007) constantly proposing, negotiating and contesting different imaginations of the law with different levels of persuasive power and authority. Norms are created, interpreted, challenged and enforced – travelling, as they change, between different international actors and governance levels – within a constant multi-directional process (Berman, 2007; Durmuş, 2020). These scholars, following the original New Haven scholars of the Cold War era, argue that law’s power comes not only from coercion and enforcement capacity, but above all from persuasion by the actors who advocate for them, including by those *within* the state. Through the interactions with other members of the international community, the advocates of a certain norm may successfully change what other actors consider to be in their best interests and in those of the international community. While positive international law may remain reluctant and conservative, this pluralist lens is very helpful in understanding how global governance functions today.

II. What are cities doing?

Cities and their transnational city networks have been engaging with international law and issues of global governance with increasing intensity for at least three decades. While local governments in this engagement demonstrate qualities of both non-state and sub-state actors (Nijman, 2016; Durmuş, 2020), most relevant for the purposes of this piece is to focus on the activities of local governments that are somewhat autonomous and comparable to the engagement of non-state actors, since these are activities that go unrecognised by, and challenge, formal international law. Here, our previous research in the field of migration and human rights has shown a multiplicity of ways in which local governments engage with international law.

Engaging with international law in their own local governance

Firstly, local governments can engage with international law in their own localities regardless of whether they are also seeking to engage in the global governance of these issues. Symbolic ratification of international treaties and the adoption of international soft law instruments into local governance are good examples for this engagement. Instances from practice include San Francisco and other US cities symbolically ratifying the Convention on the Elimination of All Kinds of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) while the United States has not (Davis, 2016), the city of Graz creating a local implementation plan for the local realisation of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), and the widespread practice of referring to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in local law and policymaking. When the United States withdrew from the Paris Climate Agreement, many cities pledged to continue to comply with the international treaty, demonstrating that the “state” is not monolithic. While this engagement certainly constitutes a contestation of what formal international law considers permissible and by which actors, this practice alone is not considered direct engagement in global governance by this author and thus will not be discussed extensively. Such activity concerns the governance of *the locality* the local government represents, and does not necessitate interaction, negotiation and deliberation with other international actors. Of course, such practices often do not stand alone. They may be linked to activities such as reporting progress on adopted international norms to monitoring bodies, which include interactions with international actors and would therefore fit within the categories below.

Participating in traditionally state-centric processes

The second type of engagement, as found in our recent research on migration and human rights, is how cities and TCNs seek a seat at the table in traditionally state-centric global law and governance processes (Durmuş and Oomen, forthcoming). Some of the most noteworthy examples are local governments’ advocacy campaign for the inclusion of SDG 11 on Sustainable Cities and Communities in the 2030 Agenda and their efforts to be recognised in the Paris Climate Agreement as important actors in the fight against climate change (Art. 7(2); Art. 11(2)), as well as in the Global Compacts for Migration and Refugees (41 referenc-

The International Court of Justice showed in 1948 that if a new actor in international law had functions which required a degree of autonomy, and this was accepted by other actors such as states, a *degree of functional legal personality* would emerge for this actor.

A legal pluralist perspective on international law argues that law's power lies not only in coercion but persuasion, and that actors big and small, even unrecognised, can influence what others consider "good" for themselves and the international community.

es to local governments in total). Local governments gathered in parallel to government representatives for the Global Compact for Migration in Marrakech in December 2018, demonstrating their eagerness both to take part in state-centric processes and gather amongst themselves, even if not "permitted" to join the states. Also worth mentioning are local governments' efforts to secure formal recognition within the United Nations system, including but not limited to the conferences and proceedings of UN-Habitat. Some municipalist victories in these regards include the recognition of the International Union of Local Authorities as a consultative entity before ECOSOC in 1948, the inclusion in 1992 of local governments as a Major Group to be consulted in the UN especially within the climate regime (Garcia-Chueca, 2020), the creation of the UN Advisory Council for Local Authorities (UNACLA) in 1999, and local governments acquiring accreditation at the United Nations to participate in UN proceedings (unless their national governments reject to it in time) (Durmuş and Oomen, forthcoming: 7). Recently, in June 2019, the UN Human Rights Council for the first time organised a consultative meeting on the role of local governments in human rights that invited TCNs such as UCLG to the Council's headquarters in Geneva. By the same token, cities such as New York have gone as far as reporting to the United Nations on their progress in implementing the Paris Climate Agreement and the SDGs locally through the Voluntary Local Reviews, as if they were required to do so by the normative mechanisms (Javorsky, 2018).

All of these activities – seeking to take part in international law-making, seeking to have their role and responsibility with regards to norms recognised, voluntarily reporting their compliance with international norms, seeking official accreditation, acquiring an actual body in the United Nations system dedicated to them, establishing their role strongly enough for United Nations organs to invite them to deliberations (such as the Habitat III Conference) that involve the development of international norms – fit squarely with the International Court of Justice's reasoning that an arising functional need in international law (the creation and functioning of the UN) necessitated a recognition of a limited kind of legal personality. States' jealous guarding of their sovereignty means it would be far-fetched to expect such formal legal recognition for sub-state actors any time soon. But it is clear that local governments have been successfully implementing the kind of steps that brought other non-state actors increased recognition, in order to be recognised if not as a "non-state actor" – as international lawyers call NGOs, international organisations and armed groups – then as "stakeholders" in the multi-stakeholder processes of global governance.

Creating local-centric norms and governance mechanisms

Finally, local governments, seemingly fed up with the disproportionately high effort required to seek inclusion in mainstream international legal processes, also convene in their local-centric fora to discuss global governance issues and even engage in their own norm generation to address these issues (Durmuş and Oomen, forthcoming). They do this within institutionalised city networks such as the European Coalition of Cities Against Racism (ECCAR), the World Human Rights Cities Forum (WHRCF), and United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG); as

well as in specialised processes structured around the creation of normative documents, such as the conferences leading up to the signing of the European Charter for Safeguarding Human Rights in the City in Saint Denis in 2000. These practices mimic states' practices in global governance, creating permanent international organisations as well as convening conferences to create international treaties. Examples such as the adoption of the Cities for Adequate Housing Declaration (2018), the Global Charter-Agenda for Human Rights in the City (2012) and the launch of a Global Green New Deal by C40 (2019) in collaboration with Fridays for Future are significant here. All these initiatives disregard the question of whether cities *may* engage in international law and demonstrate innovation, initiative and brazen leadership – showing the world what *they* think international law should look like.

III. Analysis and suggestions for practitioners

So, if the question is “What does international law say about all this engagement?” the answer is “That depends on how one sees international law”. From a pluralist perspective, cities are very active components of the global system of intertwined norm-generating communities advocating and negotiating their understandings of international law and to diverging extents succeeding in influencing other actors in the field. From a more conservative perspective, local governments are nonetheless relevant both in their “sub-state” role (demonstrated by UN-Habitat and the UNHRC’s interest in and increasing embrace of local governments), as well as in their “non-state” autonomous activities, including engagement with and even creation of international norms, both by seeking to join traditional actors and by organising among themselves. This is because, whether formal law “sees” these processes or not, the engagement of cities does not go unnoticed and can to diverging degrees influence other more central actors in the international system. As an official from the UNHRC Advisory Council stated at the closing ceremony of the WHRCF in Gwangju in 2018, the UNHRC often bases its reports on the role of local governments in human rights on the documents created by cities in their networks.³ These UNHRC reports are then cited by international lawyers exploring the role of cities in international law and the cycle of influence continues. Local governments were also a significant actor in developing and codifying the content of the right to housing, a formal legal right, through the UN-Habitat conferences (Marcenko, 2019).

The final conclusion of this piece is that, whether cities have higher legal status or official recognition in their agenda or not, they have been taking exactly the right steps to influence the development of international law and to be included in global governance processes. A pluralist lens reveals what legalists may not see, namely that local governments are part and parcel of the patchwork of international law and governance, as some of the most enthusiastic internationalist actors taking the initiative and showing the motivation we now miss amongst states. If cities seek official legal recognition, the activities they engage in, particularly seeking inclusion in state-centric processes, are exactly the criteria recognised by the international community in determining who is an actor and who is not. However, these processes are often frustrating for cities and their networks and require energy that might be deemed dispro-

From a pluralist perspective, cities are active components of the global system of norm-generating communities advocating and negotiating their understandings of international law. Whether formal law “sees” these processes or not, cities’ influence (big or small) informs actors and norms in the international system.

3. Participant observation by the author at the WHRCF, October 2018, Gwangju.

portionate to the scant space and voice they gain from it. Therefore, in order to continue demonstrating their full potential, fluency and competence in international law and global governance, cities and TCNs should continue investing in their own local-centric fora and their local engagement with international law. These combined efforts are bound to gain more and more recognition from all actors in the field, and local governments – just like other non-state actors who now enjoy a more established legal status – could reach the recognition, power and influence they seek and deserve.

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EMPOWERING CITIES IN A REFORMED MULTILATERAL SYSTEM

- THE ROLE OF CITIES IN A REFORMED UN: TOWARDS
THE INSTITUTIONALISATION OF THE WORLD
ASSEMBLY OF LOCAL AND REGIONAL GOVERNMENTS

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- IS SOMETHING BETTER THAN NOTHING? MULTI-LEVEL
GOVERNANCE AND THE EUROPEAN COMMITTEE OF
THE REGIONS IN EU POLICYMAKING

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THE ROLE OF CITIES IN A REFORMED UN: TOWARDS THE INSTITUTIONALISATION OF THE WORLD ASSEMBLY OF LOCAL AND REGIONAL GOVERNMENTS

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The United Nations (UN) marked its 75th anniversary at a time when the coronavirus pandemic and other global crises were underscoring the fragility of multilateralism as the guiding principle of global governance. The Secretary-General acknowledged a few months ago that in the 21st century we cannot continue to accept a dysfunctional global governance system made exclusively by and for national governments. António Guterres proposed moving towards “a networked multilateralism” built in collaboration with civil society, the private sector and local governments. It would be a multilateralism based on “[s]hared values, shared responsibility, shared sovereignty, shared progress”.¹ In this context, the organisations that make up “international municipalism” eagerly joined the UN75 global conversation and put forward bold demands for greater recognition.

These claims and aspirations are nothing new. In fact, reforming the multilateral system to make it more encompassing and permeable to cities’ interest has been on the agenda of international municipalism since its inception. As far back as 1920 the International Union of Local Authorities (IULA), predecessor of United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG), sought permanent participation in the League of Nations (LON) (Gaspari, 2002). The demands met little success and both the LON and its successor, the UN, ended up structuring a fragmented relationship with cities’ representative bodies that is similar to its treatment of civil society.

Admittedly, there has been some progress in the past three decades to formalise the role of local governments in global governance structures, especially within the UN system (Garcia-Chueca, 2020). An important milestone in this regard was the recognition in 1992 of local governments as one of the Major Groups that should be involved in implementing global sustainability agendas. Another significant landmark was the second United Nations Conference on Human Settlements (Habitat II) in 1996, which was attended by more than 500 mayors and municipal leaders who managed to participate in the deliberations. More relevantly, during Habitat II local governments associations for the first time convened the World Assembly

1. Press conference by Secretary-General António Guterres at the United Nations Headquarters, June 25th 2020. Available online: <https://www.un.org/press/en/2020/sgsm20142.doc.htm> [Accessed: 20 September 2020].

Cities' impact on global discussions remains more symbolic than real. In most cases, they are invited to participate as mere observers or implementers of the major agreements but have little effective involvement in decision-making and lack the capacity to influence the agenda.

of Cities and Local Authorities (WACLA), which served as a formal mechanism for providing input to the Habitat II negotiations.

Since that time, UN-Habitat has become a crucial platform for advancing the municipalist agenda, which has in turn brought about a change in mindset towards the role of cities in formulating global agendas. Some of the most noteworthy examples are the creation of the UN Advisory Committee of Local Authorities (UNACLA), which has served as an advisory body to the Executive Director of UN-Habitat since 2000, or the revision of the rules of procedure of the agency's Governing Council.

More recently, the Global Taskforce of Local and Regional Governments (GTF), a coordination mechanism promoted by UCLG around which the main associations of local governments have coalesced, has successfully influenced some of the most recent intergovernmental processes. As a result of such advocacy efforts, the Paris Agreement and the UNFCCC Climate Action Agenda recognise the need to involve cities; local governments were invited to participate in the deliberations over the adoption of the New Urban Agenda (NUA); and one of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) has an unequivocally urban dimension.

But despite these arguably municipalist victories, cities' impact on global discussions remains more symbolic than real. In most cases, they are invited to participate as mere observers or implementers of the major agreements but have little effective involvement in decision-making and lack the capacity to influence the agenda. Further, when looking at the initiatives put in place to grant them access and participation rights, one should clearly distinguish between the UN institution (i.e. the bureaucracy and the secretariats) – interested in forging partnerships with non-state actors as means of implementing the organisation's mandate – and UN member states (Ruhlman, 2015). This distinction is important, because the latter have always been reluctant to transfer any morsel of power to local authorities in fear of eroding national sovereignty.

Hence, the main global city networks continue to call for "a seat at the global table" (Salmerón Escobar, 2016), which would involve a structural shift in how the UN and its members relate to local governments. Certain concrete proposals exist for remodelling the system in this direction, such as upgrading the current consultative status with ECOSOC to permanent observer status before the UN General Assembly; the creation of a new agency that would give more visibility to cities and urban issues within the UN (something like UN-Cities or UN-Urban); and the establishment of subsidiary bodies of consultative nature with some UN agencies, which could be inspired by the European Committee of the Regions. To be sure, some have more potential than others, and the current context of UN reform could help accelerate such changes. In order to understand them further, the remainder of the chapter provides an overview of some of the current mechanisms and limitations of cities' participation within the UN system, focusing on the institutionalisation of a World Assembly of Local and Regional Governments (WALRG), and discusses the challenges that lie ahead.

I. From consultative status with ECOSOC to permanent observer at the UN General Assembly

Formally, cities' participation in the UN is articulated through local government networks like UCLG and ICLEI, both of which have consultative status with the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) and act as focal points for the whole urban constituency on a rotating basis.² Such recognition entitles them to attend the events and working sessions of ECOSOC-related agencies and commissions, where they may make written and oral statements and organise side events, along with basic (although surprisingly restricted) privileges, such as receiving passes to access UN facilities (UN-DESA, 2018). This access makes it possible for mayoral delegations to participate in multilateral summits such as the Conference of the Parties (COP) to the UNFCCC and the High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development, as well as being involved in intergovernmental negotiations such as those over the 2030 Agenda.

Nevertheless, this has repeatedly been criticised by international municipalism as insufficient and inadequate recognition. First, because consultative status was initially intended for NGOs and therefore does not recognise local governments as governmental actors (or their networks as intergovernmental actors, for that matter) but as civil society entities. Today, 5,725 entities currently have consultative status.³ And secondly, because this categorisation significantly restricts cities' real capacity for political influence in global discussions, as it does not grant them direct access to the General Assembly, which is the main deliberative, policymaking and representative organ of the UN. As a result, city networks are forced to negotiate participation rights with each of the different UN agencies separately, which may explain the proliferation of memorandums of understanding between them.

Given these limitations, associations of local governments have been calling for permanent observer status for decades (UCLG, 2013). This would allow cities' voices to be heard in the General Assembly's sessions and resolutions, and is therefore seen as an important step forward. Furthermore, cities and their organisations could maintain a permanent mission at UN headquarters, which would enhance their contacts with national delegations and provide opportunities for political advocacy. Sometimes effective diplomacy is merely a matter of being in the room where decisions are made (or as close to it as possible). But what are the real chances of achieving such an advanced level of recognition?

Until recently, permanent observer status was reserved for non-member states (e.g. the Holy See and Palestine), intergovernmental organisations (e.g. the African Union or the OECD), and entities such as the International Committee of the Red Cross. In other words, bodies formed and supported directly or indirectly by national governments. However, that changed in 2016, when the International Chamber of Commerce joined this select club. Some saw a future opportunity for cities in this move, and the reasoning seems clear: if the world's largest business organisation can acquire this status, why shouldn't local governments be entitled to similar recognition? But as it remains a route that requires the unanimous approval of all members of the assembly, it is worth recalling that many countries still see cities' growing global assertiveness as a threat to their national sovereignty.

Associations of local governments have been calling for permanent observer status for decades. This would allow cities' voices to be heard in the General Assembly's sessions and resolutions.

2. For further insights, see the governance paper of the Local Authorities Major Group, available online. [Accessed: 20 September 2020]: https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/7384LAMG%20governance%20paper%20for%20HLPF%20Working%20Group_final.pdf

3. For a list of entities with consultative status, see: <https://esango.un.org/civilsociety/displayConsultativeStatusSearch.do?method=search&sessionCheck=false>

Efforts to establish a structural participation mechanism for cities within the UN system have also been hindered by the question of the representativity and accountability of the associations claiming to speak on behalf of local governments.

II. The need to speak with a single voice

Beyond the above-mentioned limitations, efforts to establish a structural participation mechanism for cities within the UN system have also been hindered by the question of the representativity and accountability of the associations claiming to speak on behalf of local governments. In point of fact, similar considerations would apply to any other stakeholder constituency (i.e. women, youth, business, etc.), as highlighted by recent works on stakeholder democracy (Dodds, 2019) and multistakeholderism as a new global governance practice (Raymond and DeNardis, 2015; Gleckman, 2018). This is not a trivial matter, since for at least the foreseeable future, a scenario of individual cities engaging and reporting progress directly to the UN does not seem feasible.⁴

Indeed, irrespective of the type of recognition awarded, be it consultative or permanent observer status, whenever local governments are given “a seat at the global table”, there is generally *only one* seat for them. That means that whatever oral intervention or written comment is submitted to any UN meeting or intergovernmental process, it has to be made through a single interlocutor, speaking on behalf of the whole constituency. Speaking with one voice is undoubtedly challenging, not least because the ecosystem of city networks is a fragmented and highly complex one in which the leading organisations are frequently vying for funding, resources, members and access to political forums (Fernández de Losada and Abdullah, 2019).

Despite this competitive environment, the larger global networks (i.e. UCLG, ICLEI, C40) have understood that “networking with networks” should be made an essential element of their diplomacy efforts if they are to successfully expand their global reach and influence (Abdullah and Garcia-Chueca, 2020). From a symbolic point of view, offering an image of unity is of even more paramount importance. Indeed, without genuine cooperation that includes the co-creation of a truly shared global agenda for local and regional governments, city networks can claim to speak, at best, only on behalf of their member cities, but not in representation of the whole urban constituency. Strategy-wise, cooperation also serves to lend legitimacy to the agenda-setting efforts of these associations, which explains why the Global Taskforce of Local and Regional Governments emerged during the post-2015 international process, when the role for local governments in sustainable development was being discussed (including the negotiation over SDG11, the so-called “Urban SDG”) and the stakes for the urban community were therefore too high to fail.

4. A notable exception here is the submission of a Voluntary Local Review (VLR) by New York City during the 2018 High Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development (HLPF). This was a truly individual initiative, as city networks were already reporting the progress made on the implementation of Agenda 2030 by all LRGs worldwide through the SDG localisation report. Other cities, such as Helsinki (Finland) and Bristol (UK), are following NYC’s steps, turning this individual initiative into a collective one.

III. The role of the Global Taskforce and the World Assembly of Local and Regional Governments

Just as the Earth Summit in 1992 and Habitat II in 1996 catalysed the unification process that culminated in the foundation of UCLG in 2004, the Post-2015 Development Agenda Process and Habitat III once again created the need for cities and their networks to coordinate joint inputs and responses. The rationale was that cities and their networks would be much more efficient in their advocacy efforts if they addressed their messages as a unified constituency. Hence, the GTF was established in

2013 and was, in turn, instrumental in relaunching the World Assembly of Local and Regional Governments in 2016.

Operationally, the GTF was set up as the technical coordination and consultation mechanism for the major international networks of local governments to undertake joint advocacy work relating to global policy processes, particularly those connected with sustainable development. Interestingly, this initiative was conceived following the very same logic that brought UCLG into being some decades ago, which can be summarised in the following twin aims: (1) to unify the voice of local and regional governments (LRGs) worldwide before the international community; and (2) to create a space from which to build LRGs' joint positions and organise their advocacy strategy at the global level. Ultimately, it aspired to present local governments as a unified constituency in order to improve the chances of making the most of this *single seat* eventually afforded to them at the global table.

Yet, the GTF was not devised only as a technical mechanism, but also as a political one. Indeed, among its functions is the authority to convene the World Assembly of Local and Regional Governments, which is presented to the international community as “the political voice” of the urban constituency (UCLG, 2019: 23). More relevantly, the United Nations recognises the WALRG as the formal mechanism for following up and reviewing the implementation of the New Urban Agenda at the local level.⁵ This means that, formally, whenever the WALRG is convened, the declarations issued should be taken into consideration as the formal input of the LRG constituency into the implementation of the NUA.

Today the Global Taskforce is made up of 25 global and regional networks, including C40, ICLEI, the Global Parliament of Mayors and UCLG, the latter being the coordinator and facilitator of this initiative. It should be noted, however, that the level of involvement of these associations has evolved over time. For instance, C40 was initially quite reluctant to join this coordination mechanism, which was seen as a UCLG-dominated space. Yet, today, collaboration between the different networks seems to be much more robust. A clear illustration is the report on the local implementation of SDGs that is presented annually during the High-Level Political Forum and which despite being led by UCLG usually receives significant input and contributions from the other networks. Another example is the ongoing collaboration between C40 and UCLG to convene the Urban 20 initiative.

IV. The challenges ahead

In sum, there has been some progress and promising initiatives have materialised in recent years aimed at reforming the UN to make it more inclusive towards local governments. Also, research has shown that at least at the discursive level, the acknowledgement of cities as decisive actors has improved in most UN frameworks (Kosovac et al., 2020). Still, there is a long way to go and the challenges ahead are significant, particularly with regards to translating a strictly nominal and rather symbolic recognition into effective and tangible influence in global governance outputs.

Cities and their networks would be much more efficient in their advocacy efforts if they addressed their messages as a unified constituency. Hence, the GTF was established in 2013.

5. General Assembly resolution 71/256. New Urban Agenda. Resolution adopted by the General Assembly on 23 December 2016, A/RES/71/256, paragraph 169, page 29.

Institutionalising the WALRG would require rethinking its current governance scheme, especially its level of representativity and the role played by city networks.

To start with, prospects for obtaining permanent observer status with the General Assembly do not look bright, despite this being one of the core demands local authorities have once again brought to the fore over the course of the UN75 consultations. Also, it remains to be seen whether such status would bring any substantial change, as at the end of the day, voting power would remain with member states. The consolidation of the World Assembly of Local and Regional Governments is surely a remarkable step forward, and its acknowledgement in the New Urban Agenda should be cherished. However, the WALRG has yet to obtain recognition by UN agencies other than UN-Habitat, let alone acquiring formal UN status before the General Assembly. Until that time arrives, its declarations will remain non-binding and therefore more symbolic than effective. Further, institutionalising the WALRG would require rethinking its current governance scheme, especially its level of representativity and the role played by city networks.

As has been argued, the competing and overcrowded ecosystem of city networks makes it hard for local governments to speak with a single voice. Yet, it is not only a matter of having too many organisations all claiming to be the most effective and legitimate advocate of local governments. Instead, the issue of representativeness is profoundly rooted in the very nature of the category of “local and regional governments” itself. Indeed, the urban voice is not and will never be a homogeneous one, but rather diverse and rich in nuances. The interests and challenges of large metropolitan areas have little in common with those of small and medium-sized cities. Aspirations to build a single shared agenda that fits all shapes and sizes can therefore appear unworkable. Cities and regions belong to different levels of jurisdiction, and a single assembly could never hope to represent them both satisfactorily. The European Committee of the Regions suffers from this very structural flaw. Perhaps a bicameral system of representation could be a way forward in achieving greater levels of representativity and relevance.

Likewise, most proposals for a reformed UN attach great importance to networks of local and regional governments and their role in orchestrating joint positions out of a cacophony of urban voices. While their salience as conveners and mediating agents between the local and the global reality can hardly be disputed, other aspects should be appraised before uncritically assuming that this is the best system of organising the interests of local governments globally. For instance, power dynamics that operate within these organisations are still poorly understood. In particular, how they are governed, who sets the agenda and – increasingly importantly – what role partners (i.e. corporates and civil society organisations) play. This is all the more relevant as we seem to be transitioning towards multistakeholder schemes of governance (see Garcia-Chueca and Zárata in this volume). More research is needed into the agency of these organisations’ secretariats and their influence in shaping how members prioritise governance objectives and interventions (Lecavalier and Gordon, 2020). This is not a minor point, as the interests of these secretariats may not always be aligned with those of the diverse membership they claim to represent.

Last but not least, perhaps it is time to decouple the debate on the role of cities in global governance from the debate on how to improve their recognition *within* the UN. For one thing, the number of “global tables”

at which local governments must aim to exert influence has multiplied and the UN no longer remains the sole body in charge of global governance. This calls for city networks to diversify their efforts in order to make cities' voices as necessary in spaces like the G20 as they are in any intergovernmental process sponsored by the UN. The consolidation of the Urban 20 initiative attests to this trend. But the pathway for cities *within* a system made by and for national governments may always be limiting and shortsighted. Local governments should not pursue recognition for the sake of recognition, but ought to aspire to create global impact instead. And if this cannot be attained *within* the system they strive to reform, other pathways *without* the UN may need to be explored.

Perhaps it is time to decouple the debate on the role of cities in global governance from the debate on how to improve their recognition *within* the UN.

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IS SOMETHING BETTER THAN NOTHING? MULTI-LEVEL GOVERNANCE AND THE EUROPEAN COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS IN EU POLICYMAKING

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In a globalised, polycentric, fragmented and increasingly uncertain world, many voices are calling for a radical change in the governance models of development policies. New, urgent problems – COVID-19, climate change, digitalisation, growing inequalities – invite a paradigm shift in collective decision-making models. Increasingly, “from government to governance” is the slogan used to express this change. On the one hand, it underlines the inadequacy of traditional centralised public decision-making models and, on the other, the openness of policymaking to actors who were until now largely absent from the various national, European and international political arenas.

In this context, it seems that local and regional authorities (LRAs)¹ are gaining ground on central governments, which have always been the centre of political power and undisputed rulers of public decisions. The 2030 Agenda recalls, for example, that localisation – the involvement of LRAs in the implementation of the SDGs – is fundamental to achieving its goals and that cities and territories must be able to maintain certain autonomy to define and implement public policies on a local scale.

Although substantially dominated by inter-governmental logics, the European Union (EU) has recognised the greater and growing interdependence between its different levels of government. Recent estimates reveal that 60% of the decisions taken by local and regional authorities are influenced by European legislation and nearly 70% of EU legislation is implemented by local and regional authorities (CEMR, 2016). With the approval of the Territorial Agenda 2020 (2011) and the Pact of Amsterdam (2016), the EU has in fact reinvigorated the territorial and urban dimension of its public policies.

In the early 1990s, thanks to the 1992 Maastricht Treaty, the territorial question and the urban dimension acquired relevance on the European agenda through the creation of the European Committee of the Regions (CoR) – a voice and consultative body for territorial interests. After almost 30 years of operation, the evaluations of the CoR’s work are conflicting and fluctuating. Nonetheless, it is worth remembering that the CoR remains the only supranational body that guarantees cities and

1. The vocabulary is often contested and the literature and official documents give a variety of terms, such as local and regional authorities (LRAs), local and regional governments (LRGs), sub-national authorities (SNAs) and sub-state authorities (SSAs). In this text reference is mainly made to regional, supra-local and local governments, meaning (on the whole) representative public organisations with (some) degree of autonomy and control over (some) salient policy areas.

After almost 30 years of operation, the evaluations of the CoR's work are conflicting and fluctuating. Nonetheless, it is worth remembering that the CoR remains the only supranational body that guarantees cities and regions have access to – and a degree of supervisory power over – the legislative process in such a complex political structure as the EU.

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In light of this debate, the main objective of this paper is to respond concisely to three fundamental questions: a) when and why LRAs became central in EU policymaking; b) how – and by which means – LRAs can take part in EU policymaking; and, finally, c) the extent to which the CoR adequately frames LRA representation in EU policymaking. As its analytical framework, the paper uses the now classic approach of multi-level governance (MLG), a combination of reflections that first emphasised the forms of mobilisation of LRAs in European policymaking.

The analysis focuses on the CoR and warns that while on the one hand its consultative nature, political fragmentation and composition constitute major obstacles, on the other hand, the wide heterogeneity of territorial interests makes the development of coordinated and ordered collective action between the many and varied interests of the cities and regions of Europe extremely challenging.

I. The territorial and urban dimensions of EU policies in a multi-level governance context

Historically, the traditional prudence regarding urban matters and the “territorial blindness” of the EU have limited the formal rights of LRAs and their organisations to participate in supranational decision-making. Nevertheless, in the last decades, the role of LRAs in EU policymaking has been increasingly recognised. A first relevant question is when and why cities and regions became central to EU policymaking.

Scholars agree that, starting in the 1990s, the deepening of the European process of integration and the implementation of decentralisation reforms in many states encouraged the “territorial turn” of development policies. This approach enhanced the decentralisation of decision-making to LRAs with the aim of implementing territorially targeted public policies more aligned with local preferences and policy instruments. At the end of 2000s, the influential Barca Report put the need for place-based approaches on the European agenda, stressing the importance of regional specificities and local institutions as well as of an endogenous model of socioeconomic development (Barca, 2009). The expansion of cohesion policy – thanks to the partnership principle – stimulated the generation of development policies based on the active involvement of a wide range of local and regional actors. Territorial and urban disparities, social exclusion, industrial recovery and the environment were some of the main concerns for which place-based approaches were considered most appropriate.

Although place-based approaches have been criticised for their “local bias”, they are still considered a major source of inspiration and they have been included in the 2030 Agenda framework through the concept of localisation. In the SDGs context, localising means “taking into account sub-national contexts in the achievement of the 2030 Agenda, from the setting of goals and targets, to determining the means of implementation and using indicators to measure and mon-

itor progress”.² Basically, localisation recognises local development as an endogenous and spatially integrated phenomenon, conferring primary responsibility for its planning, management and financing on LRAs.

From the theoretical perspective, pioneering contributions on MLG revealed, for the first time, that the presence of LRAs in EU policymaking was a novel phenomenon of a potentially innovative nature in the context of EU policy, polity and politics (Hooghe and Marks, 1996; for a review, see: Piattoni, 2010). Basically, MLG revealed that LRAs were increasingly involved in EU affairs beyond and within member states even in cases where the formal right to make a decision lay with national governments or the EU legislator. More optimistic defenders of the MLG approach claimed that this increasing interdependency between regional, local and national governments and the EU institutions could open the door to the establishment of a “new mode of EU governance” with the involvement of a third tier of government alongside member states and EU institutions.

Although, formally, LRAs have not gained decision-making power over EU affairs, MLG is still important because it has contributed to inserting the debate about the role of LRAs into the EU political and policy agenda. The development of LRA external action (usually labelled paradiplomacy or municipal diplomacy), the proliferations of Euroregions and Eurocities in the field of territorial cooperation, the establishment of official delegations in Brussels and the proliferation of city networks are the “classic” examples used to justify this greater involvement of LRAs in the EU’s multi-level polity. There were 15 regional lobby offices in Brussels in 1988 and more than 200 in 2013 (Callanan and Tatham, 2014). In the field of territorial cooperation, recent studies confirm the presence of more than 300 Euroregions – a model of institutionalised cooperation between LRAs across the EU’s internal and external borders (Durà et al., 2018).

In sum, MLG reinforced the conceptual shift “from government to governance” that recognised the emergence of a novel decision-making mechanism characterised by the sharing of authority between levels of government during the entire process from policymaking to implementation. Under this three-tiered EU polity scenario, MLG directed scholarly attention to the means through which governments try to achieve coordination in efforts to improve policy outcomes, legitimacy and coherence.

II . The LRAs in EU policymaking

So, regions and cities have been considered a relevant tier of government within the EU multi-level political system. The second question regards how – and by what means – LRAs can take part in EU policymaking.³ Basically, LRAs can influence EU policymaking in two ways: by participating in the supranational legislative arena and, domestically, by being involved in the negotiation process of EU affairs within the member states (in the context, for example, of cohesion policy, in intergovernmental meetings on EU affairs and in the monitoring of the subsidiarity principle by regional parliaments).

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2. Statement adopted by the Global Taskforce of Local and Regional Governments at the Local and Regional Authorities Forum at the HLPF of June 2018.
3. In this section, I will focus on the legislative process (the upstream phase of policymaking). For reasons of time and space, I will not consider the downstream phase of policymaking, i.e. the role of LRAs in the implementation of EU legislation. This choice is justified by the fact that, while the role of LRAs as implementers of EU policies and legislation is widely recognised and analysed, much less emphasis is usually devoted to the participation of LRAs in the legislative process.

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In both cases, formal representation spaces are limited. When LRAs have the opportunity to meet with their central governments to discuss EU affairs, they usually prefer to activate their rights through the formal member state structures rather than beyond them. In the end, most LRAs – particularly sub-state entities – collaborate with central state authorities rather than bypassing them (Tatham, 2008). In some cases, however, the weakness of formal domestic channels of representation has contributed to the development of alternative models including informal “going it alone” and “variable geometry” strategies aimed at circumventing central governments’ gatekeeper positions.

At the supranational level, legislative powers are framed within the EU’s classical “institutional triangle”, which includes the three main institutions: the Commission as the agenda-setter and the two “legislative chambers” represented by the Council and the European Council. If we exclude the role of the European Committee of the Regions (CoR; see next paragraph), LRA access to the three institutions is constrained and usually occurs via lobby activities performed, respectively, by individual LRAs, national associations of LRAs and international networks of LRAs (such as the Council of European Municipalities and Regions, CEMR; the Conference of Peripheral and Maritime Regions, CPMR; Eurocities; and Metropolis, to name just a few).

Regional and local lobbying is usually welcomed by the Commission as it lacks the expertise and resources to gather insightful local data for initiating legislation on territorial issues at EU level. LRAs and their associations can offer the Commission such expertise and they act in this respect like other interest groups. LRA involvement in the initial stage of the legislative process can reduce the risks of implementation failure, as LRAs know what is technically feasible and politically appropriate at the local level (Heinelt, 2017). In response to the wishes expressed by LRAs in the consultation process for its “White Paper on European Governance”, in 2003 the Commission established a more systematic dialogue with European and national associations of LRAs at an early stage of policy shaping. The goal was to introduce a more systematic political dialogue with associations of LRAs before the formal decision-making processes got started. The “systematic dialogue” applied exclusively to local and regional government organisations is usually considered an example of the EU’s “new modes of governance”.

Due to its inter-governmental nature, the Council of Ministers of the EU is unlikely to be contacted directly by associations of LRAs – especially cities. Although access to the Council grants (some) sub-state governments a formal and direct role in the EU legislative process, central governments still act as “gatekeepers” and access to the Council depends in many member states on the political will of central government (Tatham, 2008). In this respect, contacts with representatives of individual national governments are more effective for LRAs attempting to influence negotiations at EU level and final decisions on EU legislation.

Given the increased salience of the European Parliament (EP) in EU legislative processes, MEPs are in need of greater knowledge, information and expertise on territorial issues if they want to make their participation valuable in the bargaining dynamics of co-decision procedures. LRAs and their associations can provide these information assets to MEPs

and allow them to increase their awareness of local political issues and debates that would otherwise remain too distant. Since 2005, for example, the URBAN Intergroup at the European Parliament has acted as a cross-party, cross-committee group with a horizontal approach to discussing urban issues. By bringing together over 89 MEPs representing all the political groups at the EP it collaborates with 143 partners from the local, regional, national and European levels that represent the interests of Europe's towns and cities or who work in the relevant field of urban development.

III . The European Committee of the Regions

The third question regards the CoR's role and the extent to which the youngest of the EU's constitutional organs can adequately frame LRA representation in EU policymaking (Christiansen, 1996; Hönnige and Panke, 2015; Heinelt, 2017). Established by the Maastricht Treaty in 1992, the CoR is composed of 329 locally and regionally elected representatives from all member states who are organised into political groups. Although LRAs and their associations can propose candidates, in almost all member states, central governments formally decide on the list of candidates for the CoR. Candidates' profiles therefore vary depending on the relative powers LRAs possess domestically to get their preferred candidates approved by their national governments.

Moreover, the domestic administrative and territorial distribution of powers in each EU member state varies and central governments find different ways to privilege (or inhibit) local or regional representation. Member states with a strong regional tier of government (Austria, Belgium, France, Germany, Italy and Spain) send very few representatives from the municipal level to the CoR. Germany, for example, reserves only five of its 24 seats on the CoR for local government representatives. By contrast, all CoR members from Bulgaria, Estonia, Cyprus, Finland, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malta and Slovenia are from the municipal level because no "meso-regional" government exists in these member states between the municipal and national levels (Heinelt and Bertrana, 2012). As a consequence of this, representation in the CoR is highly fragmented and – more importantly – larger and influential cities have insufficient presence.

As the "voice" of regions and cities in the EU, the role and the functioning of the CoR are laid down in articles 300 and 305–307 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the EU (TFEU). Since the entry into force of the 2007 Treaty of Lisbon – granting the CoR legal status before the CJEU for actions for annulment under Article 263 of the TFEU – the CoR has strengthened its position, being regarded, along with national parliaments, as the guardian of the principle of subsidiarity. The fact that, until now, the CoR has never defended its own prerogatives before the CJEU should not decrease the value of the instrument itself, as it still represents a strong deterrent to EU institutions neglecting the subsidiarity principle in EU law making.

The CoR's consultative role can be exercised throughout the different stages of the EU decision-making process, including the pre-legislative phase, the adoption of the proposal and the discussion of said pro-

Whether the CoR can be considered the Union's third representative chamber or not is still up for debate. Nonetheless, given the representative and political mandate of its members, to consider the CoR a merely technical, consultative assembly would probably be to underestimate its real influence within EU policymaking.

Considering the lack of a legal basis in the EU treaties and the heterogeneity of cities and regions in Europe, a single cohesive, shared and agreed model of LRA representation at EU level is hard to imagine.

positional. Consultative functions are fulfilled in various ways, one the most important elements being the opinions adopted at the plenary meetings. Besides this, however, the CoR also performs many complementary activities, such as specific collaborations with LRAs and networks of LRAs and the organisation of events, conferences and meetings in Brussels with local stakeholders. Formally, the CoR is involved in the law-making process by forming mandatory, requested and own-initiative opinions. Consulting the CoR is mandatory for both the Council and the Commission before deciding on matters that concern local and regional issues, such as economic, social and territorial cohesion, education, culture, public health, trans-European transport, telecommunications and energy networks. On other topics the CoR might be requested to issue an opinion if the Commission or the Council think it is necessary. Finally, the CoR may also take the initiative and issue an opinion when regional interests are involved.

On average, the CoR adopts between 60 and 70 opinions per year (Schönlau, 2017). Although the CoR's opinions are not binding, when it issues own-initiative opinions EU institutions – particularly the Commission – tend to seriously consider them. Neskova concludes, for example, that the European Commission acts in accordance with the preferences of the CoR 45.5% of the time (Neskova, 2010). Regarding own-initiative opinions, Hönnige and Panke (2015) recognise that the committee's role improves when opinions are delivered quickly to the members of the European Parliament and the staff of the permanent representations. It is therefore crucial that the CoR submit its opinion quickly, as a delayed opinion could be less influential in the decision-making processes within the two legislative institutions.

Over its nearly 30 years of existence, the CoR, as a consultative "supra-national body" within the EU institutional system, has notably increased its own distinctive legitimacy thanks to certain forms of "institutional activism" that have contributed to the expansion of its competences and influence within formal and informal EU policymaking. Although some scholars recognise that this activism remains merely symbolic if not complemented by changes in the EU treaties, the CoR still remains the only official EU organisation that grants representation to LRA interests within EU policymaking. Whether the CoR can be considered the Union's third representative chamber or not is still up for debate. Nonetheless, given the representative and political mandate of its members, to consider the CoR a merely technical, consultative assembly would probably be to underestimate its real influence within EU policymaking.

In the end, this ambiguity is intrinsically linked to the differential nature of expectations that the CoR itself has always raised with respect to EU institutions. On the one hand, the Commission's interest in the CoR has focused on technical expertise and feedback on EU policies with a territorial impact. On the other hand, the European Parliament has, from the beginning, privileged the more political nature of the CoR in the hope of adding legitimacy to European integration and policymaking. Clearly, the structure that was set in the Maastricht Treaty – a committee with no formal decision-making power, and which brings together representatives of very different kinds of LRA and with a membership to be

determined essentially by national governments – represents a typical EU compromise (Piattoni and Schönlau, 2015). Indeed, this formula was very attractive for the supranational institutions, since it had the advantage of adding legitimacy at the EU level without creating potential for obstructing the decision-making process.

Conclusions

Europe has many different types of LRA: there are municipalities, provinces, counties, sub-state federated units and regions. Capital regions and metropolitan areas cohabit with rural municipalities, peripheral areas and small and medium-sized towns. At the regional level, sub-state entities vary from democratically elected and economically endowed regional governments to deconcentrated administrative units with executive tasks and scarce autonomy (Hooghe et al., 2016). Considering the lack of a legal basis in the EU treaties and the heterogeneity of cities and regions in Europe, a single cohesive, shared and agreed model of LRA representation at EU level is hard to imagine (Heinelt, 2017). However, spurred by the deepening of the process of European integration and of decentralisation processes, a constant increase of the role of LRAs in EU policymaking can be observed. This is based on the recognition by the EU institutions that LRAs can improve the effectiveness and the legitimacy of European public policies.

Since the CoR was established LRAs have had access to the formal arenas of the EU's legislative process. The heterogeneity of its members and the way CoR representatives are selected by member states weaken the potential for more incisive and cohesive action as, more often than not, opinions are taken at the level of the minimum common denominator. Moreover, the fact that the largest and most influential cities are not fully represented in the CoR has increased the search for alternative routes, particularly city networks (Fernandez de Losada, 2020). Despite its consultative character and the non-binding nature of its opinions, the CoR has been able to position itself on highly salient issues with territorial impact that are of interest to LRAs.

In the international system, the CoR still represents a singular body that allows LRAs to engage in relevant institutionalised debates and to participate in the formal legislative process of the EU's multi-level political and policy system. In the current crisis of multilateralism and in the era of global agendas, international actors and central governments have begun to open decision-making arenas up to non-traditional actors (Galceran-Vercher, 2020). Better endowed and forward-looking LRAs and networks of LRAs have already explored some channels to ensure and increase their involvement in the definition, implementation and monitoring of global agendas. Honestly, it is hard to assess whether the CoR will contribute to inspiring a process of institutional reform within the United Nations or other international agencies. Nonetheless – and even considering all the limitations of the functioning of the CoR – it would be surely unwise and imprudent not to study this option. After all, there is no more advanced mechanism in the world than the EU for channelling the voices of LRAs in policymaking processes.

it is hard to assess whether the CoR will contribute to inspiring a process of institutional reform within the United Nations or other international agencies. Nonetheless it would be surely unwise and imprudent not to study this option.

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MULTISTAKEHOLDERISM AND OTHER FORMS OF GLOBAL URBAN AGENCY

- TOWARDS AN ECOLOGY OF KNOWLEDGES FOR
GLOBAL POLITICS: CIVIL SOCIETY AND LOCAL
GOVERNMENT ALLIANCES IN HABITAT III

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- WHAT'S NEXT? NEW FORMS OF CITY DIPLOMACY
AND EMERGING GLOBAL URBAN GOVERNANCE

Anna Kosovac and Daniel Pejic

TOWARDS AN ECOLOGY OF KNOWLEDGES FOR GLOBAL POLITICS: CIVIL SOCIETY AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT ALLIANCES IN HABITAT III*

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** The reflections presented in this paper are the result of the authors' direct experience in the networks studied, and in the preparatory process of Habitat III. Eva Garcia-Chueca was coordinator of the United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG) Committee on Social Inclusion, Participative Democracy and Human Rights (2007-2017) and a Habitat III expert in the Policy Unit on the Right to the City and Cities for All (2015-2016). Lorena Zárata was president of the Habitat International Coalition (HIC) from 2011 to 2019, in which capacity she took part in numerous Habitat III international meetings and preparatory gatherings, as well as in the summit itself. HIC is a founding member of the Global Platform for the Right to the City (2014—).*

I. From the crisis of multilateralism to multi-stakeholder governance

The structures of global governance have been designed by and for nation states, giving rise to the multilateral frameworks that have been dominating international relations since the Second World War. The globalisation that accelerated with the end of the Cold War has led, *inter alia*, to two influential phenomena that have contributed towards challenging the prevailing multilateralism. First, it has favoured the appearance of a multiplicity of non-traditional actors who are seeking to have some influence in global decision-making spaces. Civil society organisations, subnational governments, and big corporations, to give just a few examples, are now mobilising transnationally in order to participate in international relations and to assert their interests and points of view. This atomisation of international dynamics has not only eroded the nineteenth-century power of nation states, but it has also come with thoroughgoing changes in the power relations between them and with other stakeholders. To a great extent, this has been caused by the predominance of neoliberalism on the global scale, which has enabled concentration of economic power in the hands of a few transnational corporations and financial institutions. These stakeholders have gained more and more muscle in global governance over the last three decades during which structural adjustment policies have greatly affected governmental organisations.

The second phenomenon to be emphasised with regard to the impact of globalisation in multilateral governance is the unprecedented interconnection of causes and effects of contemporary problems. With such a degree of complexity, collective answers to global challenges are necessary to face issues such as energy transition or eradication of inequalities. Without concerted action involving the long-term commitment of several kinds of stakeholders it will be difficult to find sustainable solutions with sufficient capacity for transformation. No strangers to this reality, nation states are increasingly appealing to non-state stakeholders, as evidenced by the text resulting from Habitat III, the New Urban Agenda (NUA) and, shortly before that, the Agenda 2030 (2015).

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With these elements as a backdrop, it might be said that traditional multilateralism is in crisis, as Ian Klaus's text in this volume also shows. Aware of this, the United Nations (UN) has, for some years now, been discussing how to bring about possible reforms. It even devoted its 75th anniversary celebrations in September 2020 to promoting international debates that would help to define a strategy for action (Bargués, 2020). In this regard, there are now several discussions on the need to shift from multilateral global governance to a model of multi-stakeholder governance that would make international relations more plural by recognising the voices and roles of other actors with growing influence in international affairs.

But what exactly does this mean? And, above all, what would be the implications of introducing *multi-stakeholder governance*? It is often argued that the multi-stakeholder factor constitutes a more inclusive framework of global governance making it possible to circumvent the intrinsic limitations of traditional, eminently state-centric multilateralism by facilitating the coordination of state and non-state stakeholders and their joint action in tackling global challenges (Cogburn, 2006). It is also said that it is an approach that allows a more pragmatic response to problems because it enables collaboration between stakeholders with different standpoints and interests in the quest for and development of solutions.

Nonetheless, this definition brings to mind the early theoretical formulations of "governance", according to which it constituted a method of government that allowed a deepening of democracy by means of better dialogue with a range of stakeholders. But is *governance* synonymous with *democracy*? If we bear in mind the fact that the historical roots of governance coincide with processes of deregulation and privatisation that began to appear in the United States in the mid-1980s (Estévez Araújo, 2009), the answer to this question should challenge the automatic assumption that multi-stakeholder is synonymous with greater inclusion. Indeed, it was precisely in this historical context that "governance" became a functional model of government for neoliberalism, crucially contributing to reducing the presence of the state and bolstering that of the market by justifying the entry of private interest groups into institutional political decision-making spaces. Accordingly, this considerably legitimated their voice and politically influential action, which had previously been carried out through less formal and more questioned channels. In practice, then, governance was a synonym of less democracy, if democracy is understood as meaning plural participation and defence of the public interest.

When applied to international relations, "multistakeholderism", as it is known, should raise similar misgivings. This framework could be used to advance towards a democratic deepening of global debates, but it can also become an indispensable ally whereby big corporations can have direct access to governments and, above all, ensure that their influence is seen as legitimate because it is wielded through the institutional channels established by global governance. In fact, certain recent initiatives of the United Nations seem to be moving in the direction of reinforcing this latter possibility. The signing of a Memorandum of Understanding between the UN and the World Economic Forum in 2019 has created an unprecedented institutional space for political dialogue between the UN and multinational corporations, although this is not available for any other international actor (Gleckman, 2019).

Multistakeholderism is not, therefore, a guarantee *per se* of greater and better inclusion. This will depend on the stakeholders that are participating (or that *can* participate), in the power relations existing among them, and also on the availability of appropriate mechanisms for incorporating traditionally excluded voices. The key lies in mobilising different kinds of knowledges and resources from below to the detriment of technocratic approaches which, privileged by the rhetoric of pragmatism, ultimately contribute towards depoliticising global politics and weakening a public sphere which—not because it is global—should then be less democratic and transparent. Multi-stakeholder governance must also have mechanisms of responsibility, accountability, and transparency (Gleckman, 2018).

II. An ecology of knowledges to decolonise international relations

In keeping with these concerns, we suggest that multi-stakeholder governance should be interpreted from the standpoint of the “ecology of knowledges” (Santos, 2009) as a mechanism for endowing it with greater scope and legitimacy. From this perspective, we aim to fill one of the most important gaps in the existing literature on multi-stakeholder governance (Scholte, 2020) which has mainly focused on carrying out descriptive analysis of how and why multi-stakeholder initiatives emerge, how they function, and how and why they have a certain impact on policies. However, few studies consider whether the results of multi-stakeholder governance are just. In other words, insufficient attention has been given to identifying who benefits and who is left out.

In the quest for greater legitimacy and distributive justice, it is also necessary to take into consideration the fact that, generally speaking, international relations actively reproduce hierarchical schemes of colonial origin. This is a discipline theorised by European, American and, to a lesser extent, Australian intellectuals who have constructed a field of knowledge that has been devoted to studying matters of interest from their own cultural perspectives (the inter-state system, hegemonies between countries, global economic policy) while, at the same time, remaining silent about international power structures created by themselves by way of schemes of imperial domination that situated the territories and peoples of colonies in a situation of inferiority and subordination (Jones, 2006). Accordingly, international relations are rooted in the exclusion of certain countries and groups, so it is not hard to imagine that multi-stakeholder governance arising from this unequal environment reproduces the same problem. However, present worldwide reflections about governance could be an opportunity for moving towards a necessary decolonisation of international relations if inclusion on an equal footing of historically silenced actors is guaranteed.

The ecology of knowledges can contribute towards this because it offers a critical approach to these questions based on the idea that knowledge entails *recognition*. In other words, it upholds the need to value (recognise) the different voices existing in the world and urges horizontal (de-hierarchised) dialogue between them so as to build bridges of mutual understanding. This means allowing equal participation by all actors but, above all, those who are far from centres of power and key decision-making spaces. Global politics, dominated by state-centrist standpoints, often

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bureaucratised and subject to geopolitical interests, has the chance to become more humanised by means of processes of collective construction arising from the participation of stakeholders that are traditionally invisible in the more traditional dynamics of international relations. However, decolonisation of international relations requires political will and institutional efforts to channel certain voices. In this regard, ungoverned (meaning deregulated or without clear norms to address the imbalances of power among the parties) multi-stakeholder governance will inevitably be exclusionary (firstcomers will be insiders and the capacity to influence will depend on the extent to which certain conditions are met).

This article explores the possibilities for a bottom-up ecology of knowledges in the case of two stakeholders that should play a key role in multi-stakeholder governance schemes: civil society and city governments. The choice of these actors is justified as 1) they constitute clear elements of deep rootedness in territories where global problems are manifest, and 2) they have connections with people on a daily basis and thus with historically silenced groups. The article specifically seeks to respond to the question of how to develop strategies for collaboration among these actors so that their voices can be more audible in the global domain with regard to which political messages they convey, and which limits they find.

In order to respond to this question, the article analyses the process of coordination which took place between a network of actors from organised civil society, the Global Platform for the Right to the City (GPR2C)¹, and a network of cities, United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG)², within the framework of preparing and adopting the New Urban Agenda (NUA). The aim of studying this particular experience is to provide greater clarity as to how multi-stakeholder governance is deployed in practice, inside and outside multilateral frameworks, and to describe the elements that can contribute towards reinforcing an ecology of knowledges for global policy.

III. Habitat III: a window of opportunity for bottom-up multi-stakeholder governance?

The third UN Conference on Housing and Sustainable Urban Development was held in 2016. Known as Habitat III, it was a continuation of two previous conferences on human settlements organised decades earlier in Vancouver (1976) and Istanbul (1996). On this occasion, the United Nations General Assembly, after several years of progressive recognition of city governments in global governance, especially since 2000 (García-Chueca, 2020), urged UN-Habitat to strengthen the channels of participation of local governments and other stakeholders in the preparatory process of the Conference (United Nations, 2013).

The willingness of the United Nations to engage in dialogue with actors other than the member states was not new. Practically since it was first created, the United Nations has facilitated the participation of civil society in the General Assembly by means of granting consultative status. Other channels of communication have progressively been opened and formalised with the establishment of the so-called Major Groups, after the Earth Summit (1992) and, after 2013, recognition of other actors (such as philanthropic and academic entities) as part of the preparatory process of the 2030 Agenda.

1. As per their own definition: "We are an open, flexible, diverse network of civil society and local governments organizations committed to political action and social change through the promotion, defense and fulfillment of the Right to the City at the global, regional and local levels, giving a particular voice to those people and communities affected by exclusion and marginalization." See: <https://www.right2city.org>
2. As per their own definition: "UCLG is an umbrella organisation for cities, local and regional governments, and municipal associations throughout the world defending their interests internationally and promoting democratic local self-government." See: <https://www.uclg.org>

Partnerships between civil society and city governments were not new phenomena either. They had been forming intermittently but steadily since the first expressions of the World Social Forum (WSF), after 2000. The “municipalist” section of the WSF was constituted over about a decade by the Forum of Local Authorities for Social Inclusion and Participatory Democracy (FLA), the most significant space for international dialogue between organised civil society and local governments. The combined efforts that made the two spaces of WSF and FLA possible also laid the foundations for the appearance of proposals that have had a long political history in terms of international narratives calling for solidarity, democratic participation, inclusion, and human rights. Especially notable in this regard are the World Charter for the Right to the City (2004)³ and the Global Charter-Agenda for Human Rights in the City (2011).⁴

These precedents prepared the ground for the fact that, in 2015, two prominent expressions of organised civil society and international municipalism, the GPR2C and UCLG respectively (heirs of the processes of multi-stakeholder dialogue linked to the WSF and the FLA⁵), joined forces with the shared aim of influencing the future urban agenda. Although the United Nations environment was not new to either of the two platforms, gaining influence in a multilateral framework was no easy task. Participation in the Major Groups allowed a certain amount of dialogue with the UN (a limited right to speak, as Galceran-Vercher argues in this volume). But chances of having real influence were slight given the role of the diplomatic delegations of the member states, the only ones with the right to vote.

In this situation UCLG and GPR2C joined forces and their partnership not only had an impact on the outside—which is to say, reinforcing their ability to have political influence in the process of Habitat III—but there were also internal repercussions within their own organisations, buttressing and nourishing some elements of their messages and proposals. The right to the city was the catalyst for these synergies, both outside and inside. In the case of the UN, it constituted a shared narrative promoted by both platforms during the NUA negotiations with a view to speaking out for the need for urban policies to be designed to place people at the centre of political action. As for their own membership, it allowed reinforcement of certain strategic contents. For the GPR2C, working with local governments meant expanding the impact of its political proposals while also deepening its thinking about the need to bolster local democracy and political decentralisation (or the “rights of cities”). For UCLG, the connection with civil society brought legitimacy and underpinned the territorial and democratic approaches that the organisation had advocated since its inception.

This simultaneous *inside* and *outside* situation also characterised the approach opted for in order to influence the process of defining the NUA, which combined 1) political influence in the working spaces and official phases of the preparatory process of Habitat III, and 2) participation in other urban forums and coordination with agencies of the UN system apart from UN-Habitat including, *inter alia*, the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights and the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO). The strategies *inside* Habitat III involved working in a coordinated manner to influence the different drafting phases of the NUA over the eighteen months prior to the summit. This included being

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3. See https://www.right2city.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/A1.1_Carta-Mundial-de-Derecho-a-la-Ciudad.pdf (in English, https://www.hlrn.org.in/documents/World_Charter_on_the_Right_to_the_City.htm).
4. See <https://www.uclg-cisdp.org/es/el-derecho-la-ciudad/carta-mundial> (in English, <https://www.uclg-cisdp.org/en/right-to-the-city/world-charter-agenda>).
5. The Committee on Social Inclusion, Participatory Democracy and Human Rights, one of UCLG’s working groups, has played a key role in this process as it functioned as the connection between the FLA and the UCLG, and between UCLG and the GPR2C.

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involved in the preparation of Issue Papers, shaping the Policy Units (by designating experts who could be spokespeople for their points of view), and participation in regional and thematic forums. Both networks took part in several discussion sessions of these forums and also joined the drafting committees of the respective final declarations.

Strategies *outside* the official process included consolidating already existing spaces for political discussion between civil society and local governments, among them the Gwangju World Human Rights Cities Forum, where several debates were concerned with the future NUA. These strategies even involved forging *ad hoc* alliances like the network of cities called “Cities for the Right to Housing and the Right to the City” whose manifesto, based on specific commitments of cities regarding housing and urban planning policies, detailed proposals that were relevant for the political discussion at Habitat III.⁶ Meanwhile, during this period, the GPR2C and UCLG furthered the discussions they had been having prior to Habitat III with several UN agencies that could be sympathetic to some of their messages. Particularly noteworthy in this regard is collaboration with the UN Special Rapporteur for the Right to Adequate Housing, who was promoting the campaign The Shift,⁷ in which the GPR2C and UCLG actively participated, and also with the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights which, shortly beforehand, had undertaken the unprecedented task of studying the role of local governments in safeguarding human rights.⁸

The synergies created inside and outside of Habitat III, and with and outside UN-Habitat, enabled gradual reinforcement of shared messages between the GPR2C and UCLG. In brief, these revolved around the need to consolidate five issues that are fundamental for urban policies: 1) the focus on human rights; 2) the territorial approach; 3) public sector-community collaboration through processes of co-creation and co-production; 4) greater local autonomy, not only political but also financial; and 5) deepening of democracy. While the first three matters filtered into the negotiations and were incorporated into the New Urban Agenda, the last two were met with outright rejection by several national governments and were excluded from the adopted text. Habitat III therefore provided a window of opportunity for a certain degree of bottom-up multi-stakeholder governance, although this was affected by significant structural limits which we shall describe in greater detail below.

IV. Conditions for bottom-up multi-stakeholder governance

What real scope exists for bottom-up multi-stakeholder governance able to influence multilateralism? Some people argue that Habitat III was a milestone in terms of multi-stakeholder participation because of the dimensions of the process and number of actors involved (Birch, 2017). A quantitative look at the matter would probably yield eloquent figures: eighteen months of political discussions prior to the summit, four regional conferences, seven thematic conferences, ten Policy Units consisting of a total of two hundred international experts, the involvement of forty-four UN agencies, and thousands of participating organisations, platforms, and entities.⁹

6. Available at <https://citiesforhousing.org>

7. For further information see <https://www.make-the-shift.org/>.

8. For further information see <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/Issues/LocalGovernment/Pages/Index.aspx>.

9. All the relevant documents and details related to this process are available at <https://habitat3.org/>

However, a qualitative analysis cannot escape a more critical reading. Both participation in the various working spaces and phases of discussion, and incorporation of proposals coming from outside the domain of nation states faced major challenges. Asymmetry in the conditions of participation (in terms of access to resources, information, capacity for political communication, and the need for a certain degree of professionalisation, for example) did not favour horizontal dialogue among the stakeholders. The multiplicity of in-person events and preparatory documents, most of them available only in English, made active participation difficult for traditionally excluded actors without the means to cover high transport and translating costs. Moreover, the richness of the preparatory process and the inputs collectively produced over more than a year were seriously undermined when the diplomatic delegations of the member states took over the debate.

Hence, in the months leading up to the summit there were significant setbacks with several key contents of the drafts that had been produced hitherto (including the right to the city as a common good, inclusion of the rights of LGBT+ groups, furthering of processes of decentralisation, and strengthening of democratic institutions and processes). Another major problem in this framework was confirmation of the fact that, in numerous instances, private sector interests were channelled by voices coming from governments, and that many of their demands were directly incorporated into the final version of the document. Meanwhile, it became clear that the dynamics of negotiations among the member states made the discussions more dependent on broad geopolitical balances than on different specific standpoints regarding urban matters. Indeed, the diplomatic representatives participating in the name of the member states in the various spaces of negotiation often lacked knowledge of urban and housing issues, which meant that the relevance and scope of some proposals were not properly understood (Zárate, 2017).

Consequently, participation of the GPR2C and UCLG in the process of Habitat III was hampered by serious structural constraints resulting from the prevailing inter-state multilateralism. In this situation, the possibility of advancing towards an ecology of knowledges for global policy does not look like an easy path to take. In addition to nominal recognition of multi-stakeholder governance in the 2030 Agenda or the NUA, it is necessary to introduce thoroughgoing changes into the international relations system in order to make it viable. In other words, this means making it possible to move from *formal* governance, assessed in terms of how many participate, to *substantive* governance (regulated, inclusive, decolonised), assessed in terms of *who* participates, *how* and *for what purpose* (with what political goals: individual and profit-making or collective and for the common good). Far from being secondary, these elements determine the more or less democratic nature of multi-stakeholder governance.

Another important aspect to be borne in mind concerns the impact of multi-stakeholder governance. Although outward impact (in terms of influencing multilateral frameworks of governance) did not yield all the results desired from the standpoint of organised civil society and local government, the coordination between the GPR2C and UCLG constituted a fundamental moment in the consolidation of a strategic partnership between the two stakeholders. This made possible the development of shared proposals and narratives that presently constitute the basis for

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influencing global agendas dealing with urban matters. The collaboration of both platforms within the Habitat III framework was a space of mutual learning and international visibility, which had results at several levels: within each of the two networks, between them, and outwardly. Hence, their convergence during this period consolidated forms of collaboration that were already underway, at the same time as it opened up new possibilities for working together and more systematically. These are still operative and have turned out to be crucial in confronting the present pandemic (participation in strategic planning exercises, preparatory processes for their own summits, collaboration in the development of research, organisation, training and learning activities, and involvement in peer-to-peer exchanges, to mention only the most relevant). Likewise, the visibility resulting from having participated in Habitat III also resulted in a strengthening of their political position *vis-à-vis* some national governments and the UN system in general.

V. Towards greater distributive justice in international relations

In the context of a crisis of multilateralism, discussions about the need to move towards a scheme of multi-stakeholder governance that would recognise the views and roles of other actors present in international relations are gaining momentum. In response to interpretations of multi-stakeholder governance that automatically understand it as a more inclusive formula, this article starts out from the idea that the multi-stakeholder model is not *per se* a guarantee of greater and better inclusion. This will depend on the stakeholders that participate (or that *can* participate), the power relations existing among them, and the existence of adequate mechanisms for incorporating voices that are traditionally excluded.

With the aim of advancing towards models of multi-stakeholder governance with sufficient transparency and legitimacy, it is important to pay attention to *who* participates (and who does not), *how* and *for what purpose*, while establishing mechanisms, criteria and principles for organising their participation. Such regulation would offer transparency, facilitate accountability and, if guided by principles of distributive justice, could contribute to progress towards a bottom-up ecology of knowledges which, in the last instance, would make it possible to democratise global politics in a context of enormous worldwide challenges.

As stakeholders that are close to both territories and communities, civil society and local government should have a major role in the processes of multi-stakeholder governance that have been designed within multilateral frameworks of governance. In turn, this dialogue in the face of multilateralism does not exhaust the possibilities for collaboration between them because, as this article has shown, the synergies that can appear between these actors are not only geared towards reinforcing their political messages *vis-à-vis* the United Nations, but they can also feed into their own strategies of international cooperation and global political influence outside multilateralism.

Being both inside and outside current international relations frameworks, while also combining local roots with a global presence, is one of the potentials these actors have. Multi-stakeholder governance can benefit

from this if the necessary principles and norms are established to permit their participation on an equal footing and with guarantees of horizontal dialogue. Otherwise, multi-stakeholder governance can contribute, even unintentionally, to legitimating private interests and giving them priority because the actors representing them have greater capacity for political influence.

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WHAT'S NEXT? NEW FORMS OF CITY DIPLOMACY AND EMERGING GLOBAL URBAN GOVERNANCE

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Witnessing city leaders participate in major multilateral fora, such as the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) or the Global Forum on Migration and Development (GFMD), has provided a convincing visual representation of their emerging role in global governance. Narratives of city engagement and participation in the “international system” are now also being correlated with systematic evidence of the way multilateral processes are being reshaped, albeit timidly, to include urban actors as critical partners in addressing the world’s most pressing global challenges. For example, a recent analysis of United Nations (UN) frameworks found that 80% of documents that referred to cities had been published since the year 2000 and, of these, 85% characterised cities as “actors” capable of influencing the achievement of collective global goals (Kosovac et al., 2020a). Despite these trends, without radical reform, cities are likely to be granted only marginal and consultative positions in multilateral institutions, akin to other non-state actors. These positions will not be representative of the importance of city leadership in governing global challenges in a predominately urban world. Accordingly, the diplomatic activities of cities have focused not only on influencing traditional multilateral actors and processes, but on developing alternative modes of global urban agency, whether through bilateral relations, city networking, or partnerships with other international actors such as non-government organisations, philanthropies and research organisations. This city diplomacy has resulted in emerging forms of formal and informal “global urban governance”, which are operating both within and outside what is traditionally understood as the international system. Global urban governance recognises that urban political agency involves interactions with actors at the local, national, regional and international levels. To understand 21st century global governance and its increasingly urban dimensions we first must unpack this multiscalar reality.

Global urban governance is already impacting a range of major policy areas such as the environment, sustainable development, migration, health and culture, to name but a few. City leaders can be effective global governors, but they are constrained by institutional, legal and

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resource barriers, in terms of both finance and expertise). Hence, they play to what the scholarship on modern urban governance tells us are their key strengths – working in partnership and building coalitions of likeminded actors, often operating across political scales, in order to advance the interests of their constituents (Beal and Pinson, 2014). In this way, the global agency of cities closely reflects the principles of multistakeholder governance; however, mainstream international relations has given limited consideration to how cities fit into multistakeholder typologies (Raymond and DeNardis, 2015). In this chapter we focus specifically on the way cities partner with other non-state actors such as universities, philanthropies and the private sector to maximise the impact of city diplomacy and support initiatives that build the capacities of global urban governance. Drawing on a recent survey of the diplomatic activity of 47 cities around the world and a brief case study of Amsterdam, the chapter contends that if we seek to understand the governance of modern challenges through a multistakeholder lens, we need to focus on city leaders and their interactions with academic, philanthropic and business partners. Based on these trends, we also project forward to provide some tentative predictions of how the future of global urban governance may be shaped by these coalitions of actors and the changes that may result from the COVID-19 pandemic.

I. Emerging trends in city diplomacy

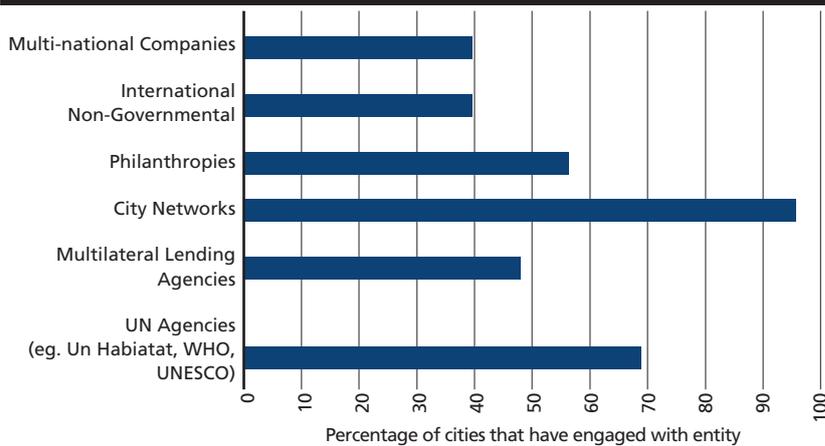
Within urban studies and to some extent international relations, there have been long-standing discussions on the increasing role of city diplomacy; however, to date limited systematic empirical evidence has underpinned these dialogues. To contribute to closing this knowledge gap, in 2019 we conducted a global survey (together with the Chicago Council on Global Affairs) to understand how cities structure and deliver their international engagement programmes. A total of 49 responses were received from 47 cities, representing a cross section of regions and forms of local government.¹ The results provide valuable context for understanding the way cities structure their international activities both within and outside multilateral processes and suggest some trends for predicting future city diplomacy.

The international activities of cities tend to be run from designated international offices or departments within the government. Of the cities that responded, 88% indicated that they have a dedicated international office within their city, with only 6% stating that they did not. This finding reveals a clear intent from the majority of cities to position themselves globally in a manner that is more than ad hoc. This also helps understand the respondents: that internationalisation occupies a formal place within their institution is a key element in contextualising the data.

Our results indicate that private actors and philanthropies have a major role in the way cities conduct their international engagement activities (Figure 1): 96% of those surveyed were part of at least one city network, while around half engage regularly with philanthropies (56%) and multilateral lending agencies (48%); 40% of respondents indicated that they partner with multinational companies as part of their international engagement.

1. Please note that there are more responses than cities because two cities responded twice. For the full list of participant cities, see Kosovac et al., 2020.

Figure 1: Findings from the survey “In the last 12 months, which of the following organisations has your city engaged with?”



Source: Analysis of 47 cities by Connected Cities Laboratory

The global agency of cities closely reflects the principles of multistakeholder governance; however, mainstream international relations has given limited consideration to how cities fit into multistakeholder typologies.

Funding constraints were identified as a key barrier to cities engaging in city diplomacy, with over 77% of surveyed city officials agreeing with the statement “We would engage more in city diplomacy if we had more funds exclusively allocated for this.”

Multistakeholder partnerships provide an opportunity to increase resourcing for international city engagement by incorporating funds and in-kind arrangements from the private sector, philanthropy and academia (leveraging research grants). Private funding arrangements can be an effective way of increasing cities’ international engagement, but they come with caveats and the need to coordinate divergent objectives. The international aims of businesses often align with cities’ diplomatic strategies, for example, we have seen synergy between multinational corporations looking to promote simplified pathways for labour migration and international advocacy from city leaders for more open immigration policies. City leaders generally look to support companies operating in their cities and their international ambitions, but as city governments engage more actively in areas such as environmental governance and climate change mitigation the goals and standards they adopt may work against the profit motives of private sector actors. We explore examples of these multistakeholder tensions through a brief case study of the city diplomacy of Amsterdam.

II. The role of external stakeholders in supporting global urban governance

Scholarship on urban governance and urban entrepreneurialism demonstrates the multistakeholder reality that city leaders must contend with to achieve outcomes for their constituents (Pierre, 2011). As cities increasingly project their agency internationally in order to achieve these outcomes, the constraints on their potential to govern only become more pronounced. City diplomacy operates in a realm where the actors often have limited legal and/or political legitimacy, as well as limited resourcing. Despite this, city leaders recognise that international engagement is becoming essential to addressing the urban dimensions of global challenges such as climate change, mass migration and inequality. As a

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result, local authorities look to supporting agents, such as philanthropies, universities and the private sector, for assistance in providing the resourcing, knowledge and expertise they need to maximise the benefits of their city diplomacy. Likewise, these organisations often look to partner with city governments for access to data, expertise or the legal authority/legitimacy to achieve their own urban objectives. These types of partnerships are becoming essential to the semi-formalised architecture of global urban governance.

Philanthropic partnerships

Large philanthropic funders, particularly those based in the United States, have had a highly visible impact on the ecosystem of transnational city networking. To highlight a few well-known examples, the support of the Clinton Climate Initiative (CCI) and Bloomberg Philanthropies for the C40 Cities Climate Leadership Group, and The Rockefeller Foundation for 100 Resilient Cities have been essential to the development of the capacities and prominence these networks have exhibited globally. The Open Society Foundations (OSF) have been a critical catalyst in the emergence of cities as transnational actors in migration policy, supporting the mayoral summits on migrants and refugees that led to the establishment of the Mayors Migration Council (MMC). Alongside the International Organization for Migration (IOM) and United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG), the MMC now co-steers a dedicated “Mayors Mechanism”, which is one of the key pillars of input into the multilateral Global Forum on Migration and Development. Naturally, there are risks to an overreliance on philanthropic funding to underpin the architecture of city diplomacy, as funding priorities can change. The decision of the Rockefeller Foundation to stop funding the 100 Resilient Cities Initiative, for example, demonstrates how even well-established transnational networks are vulnerable to shifting philanthropic priorities.

Analysis shows that in general transnational city networks rely heavily on multilateral organisations in partnerships that undoubtedly give some networks access to multilateral processes (Acuto and Leffel, 2020). At the same time, these relationships may subordinate city network activity. One example is the World Health Organization (WHO) who, despite long-standing support for the WHO Healthy Cities Network, have been reluctant to formalise a place for cities within their infrastructure. In this context, major philanthropic funding for city networks can provide the capacity for them to work independently both within and outside traditional multilateral systems. In the case of C40 Cities and its input into IPCC processes, or to some extent the MMC and broader discussions on migration governance, we can see the benefit of well-resourced transnational city leadership organisations who are able to coordinate city leaders and maximise their collective influence on conversations both inside and outside traditional multilateral systems. For example, in the case of migration, some city leaders provided input into the development of the Global Compact for Migration (GCM); however, they had to be invited by their respective states. This excluded cities whose states were not involved in the negotiation process, such as the United States, who withdrew from the process in November 2017. Italy and Brazil were among the countries that did not ultimately endorse the agreement (Brazil voted in favour in December 2018 only to withdraw in January 2019). Subsequent to these negotia-

tions, the mayors of Los Angeles, Milan and São Paulo committed their cities to the GCM's goals and became founding members of the Leadership Board of the MMC. They have leveraged their positions on the MMC Board to become prominent global advocates for the importance of city leadership in global migration governance, including promoting commitment to the GCM, Global Compact on Refugees and city-led initiatives such as the Marrakech Mayors Declaration and the Call to Local Action on Migration.

University partnerships

While universities have not been significant primary funders of global urban initiatives, city governments nevertheless work with academic institutions as a gateway to international knowledge and partnerships, as well as the expertise to translate and contextualise knowledge to local or regional realities. For instance, many local authorities have partnered with universities to support their localisation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The Connected Cities Lab at the University of Melbourne has brought together ten local authorities from across Asia–Pacific to work collaboratively on local projects aligned with the SDGs. This programme includes cities from diverse contexts such as Malaysia, India, Vanuatu and the Solomon Islands. These partnerships may be critical for cities of the Global South, where local authorities have even more limited resources to engage internationally. In Africa, for example, the African Centre for Cities at the University of Cape Town and the African Urban Research Initiative have been crucial in connecting African cities with international urban initiatives.

Private sector partnerships

There is a much more limited understanding of the ways private sector actors are shaping the ecosystem of global urban governance, although emerging scholarship is considering this relationship in the mitigation of climate change (see for example Gordon (2020) and Johnson (2018)). Select examples indicate they have played an important role in catalysing or supporting initiatives in urban resilience and sustainable development. For instance, Arup's decade-long partnership with C40 has produced a range of research outputs and a codeveloped Climate Action Planning Framework, while they have also supported 22 cities to develop resilience strategies as part of the 100 Resilient Cities initiative. It is not uncommon for local authorities to partner with private actors when undertaking international economic missions to other cities or regions, and this has formed an important part of sister city arrangements. There is undoubtedly significant potential to increase public–private and private–civil society partnerships on global urban issues. In the context of COVID-19, a number of private actors, such as IKEA and Siemens, have recently supported explicit urban initiatives aimed at mitigating the impacts of the virus, and in the case of Jones Lang LaSalle and the World Economic Forum have driven discussion on the impact of COVID-19 in cities (Acuto, 2020). The private sector provides access to funding that can greatly enhance the scope of global urban governance. However, in these partnership models, divergent objectives for investment need to be reconciled. In the case study we present below on the collective city diplomacy of Amsterdam, we highlight these tensions in a localised context.

The multistakeholder dimensions of city diplomacy are clearly exhibited in the case of Amsterdam, where city officials consider private companies, universities and civil society organisations as both partners and key actors in driving their international engagement.

There are reasons to be optimistic regarding the role of cities and urban initiatives in shaping global governance. To some extent, the COVID-19 crisis has solidified the centrality of local authorities and their partners in addressing global challenges.

III. Collaborative urban governance and city diplomacy in Amsterdam

The multistakeholder dimensions of city diplomacy are clearly exhibited in the case of Amsterdam, where city officials consider private companies, universities and civil society organisations as both partners and key actors in driving their international engagement. While there is acknowledgement that private companies can cause or exacerbate urban challenges on a global scale (as in the cases of Airbnb and Uber), the City of Amsterdam also recognises the opportunities of partnering with such companies to solve urban problems at local and global scales.

Our international policy is based on our urban challenges... Each urban challenge looks for the best partners to address them (city official, interview with researcher, 2019).

The “best” partners as judged by the city government may include private companies, universities, philanthropies and other civil society organisations. A strategic framework (Gemeente Amsterdam, 2012) was adopted by the international office of Amsterdam to actively invest in the development of a network of public and private partners in the city, forming a quasi-consortium of actors to inform and guide decision-making within local government on its activities abroad. A key element of the strategy is convincing these partners to engage in city-led diplomacy in order to broaden opportunities for Amsterdam in the areas of (but not limited to) trade, tourism and economic prosperity. Representatives from the private sector and universities often travel with the Mayor of Amsterdam as part of the international delegation in an effort to position Amsterdam as a global city that effectively takes a consultative and deliberative approach in its engagement with diverse city actors. The inclusion of these actors in the governmental delegation provides benefits not only to the city in its intersectoral engagement, but also “opens doors” for private and academic groups to advance their own international objectives. Partners on a dedicated mayoral international mission are often chosen on the basis of topic or interest area, and an agreed “mission statement” for the trip is circulated to all participants in the delegation. This statement acts as a coordinating tool to minimise conflict or misunderstandings during diplomatic engagement activities.

By establishing these partnerships, the City of Amsterdam’s international office is able to harness state-of-the-art knowledge from the University of Amsterdam to inform its policies and priorities, while also offering the opportunity for alignment between the private sector and broader city goals. Partners within the private sector then work toward addressing societal challenges within the city, providing the local government with innovative practices that do not need to be purely funded by the city. In this way, skills and funds can be leveraged to create a wider benefit for the citizens.

This form of collaborative urban governance is directly influenced by the “polder model”, a uniquely Dutch approach to political consensus building. The Dutch word *polder* refers to elevated tracts of land reclaimed from bodies of water. The polder model involves the establishment of a joint system of decision-making in areas that are

traditionally fragmented (*polder*) (Schreuder, 2001). In line with a neoliberal approach of increasing privatisation, the polder model was developed in the 1980s and 1990s as a way of creating a collective group of stakeholders to deliver a unified all-of-community approach to societal policymaking. The neoliberal drivers of this form of collaborative governance in many ways reflect broader trends toward urban entrepreneurialism, although the model has been shaped by many uniquely Dutch factors. The Dutch political system has traditionally been fractured, with a large number of political parties vying for power, resulting in no single political party being able to achieve a majority in parliament. This has produced a culture of coalitions and consultative decision-making, leading our interviewee to assert: “We are a country of people of compromises” (city official, interview, 2019). This embedding of a negotiation-based culture underpins the way Amsterdam engages internationally, presenting a multistakeholder model of city diplomacy that could be pursued by other cities.

Conclusion

Given the evidence we have provided, and changes we have witnessed as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, what predictions can be made about the future of city diplomacy and global urban governance? Naturally, in the midst of the most consequential modern global crisis much is uncertain, and we must be reserved in our forecasts. While global urban agency is undoubtedly increasing, there is potential fragility in formalised transnational urban initiatives like city networks. The challenges of COVID-19, which are impacting all areas of global cooperation, are placing unprecedented strain on multilateral initiatives, which were already experiencing pre-crisis vulnerability with global trends toward nationalism. These challenges could stall or diminish emerging forms of global urban governance, and the urban focus may re-localise. Certainly, in the case of major philanthropies, the crisis has prompted some pivoting toward national priorities, such as the OSF’s shift in 2020 of significant funding towards COVID-19 support programmes in US cities. Pre-crisis, the Ford Foundation was also moving to focus its city and state inequality programme on US locales. Restrictions on international travel have increased the barriers for catalysing new initiatives, while also creating novel avenues for digital engagement across regions. It remains to be seen whether these trends will persist once the world emerges from the crisis.

In the case of universities, the pandemic and its impact on the international movement of students has placed unprecedented financial strain on academic institutions in many countries. The budgetary impacts of these challenges will persist for many years and have the potential to affect investment in new globally focused initiatives and partnerships. While universities have not been major direct funders of global urban initiatives, their role as facilitators which connect local governments to international knowledge and partners may also be diminished. A similar observation could be made for private sector actors, who are struggling through the worst economic conditions in modern history. This will undoubtedly lead to a degree of centring on core business to the detriment of more innovative and forward-thinking initiatives.

Despite this, there are reasons to be optimistic regarding the role of cities and urban initiatives in shaping global governance. To some extent, the COVID-19 crisis has solidified the centrality of local authorities and their partners in addressing global challenges. As highlighted by the Global Resilient Cities Network (the next evolution of 100 Resilient Cities), cities are on the “frontline” of COVID-19, with over 90% of cases occurring in urban settlements (United Nations, 2020). City leaders have been responsive and pragmatic in rising to meet the challenges of the virus with a number of city networks quickly mobilising to share resources and approaches to mitigating the impacts of the crisis. In some contexts, these responses have been juxtaposed with sluggish national responses. The reliance on new forms of digital connectivity, driven by the private sector, will in some way reshape post-crisis transnational collaboration. This will hopefully create new opportunities for city diplomacy, which to date has been hindered by limited travel budgets and a stigma toward city leaders who travel too frequently. The future of global governance has perhaps never been more uncertain, however what *is* certain is that the urban dimensions of global governance have never mattered more.

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