

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.