
MULTISTAKEHOLDERISM AND OTHER FORMS OF GLOBAL URBAN AGENCY

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GLOBAL POLITICS: CIVIL SOCIETY AND LOCAL
GOVERNMENT ALLIANCES IN HABITAT III

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- WHAT'S NEXT? NEW FORMS OF CITY DIPLOMACY
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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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bureaucratized 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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