THE TABLE WOBBLES: CITIES AND A FALTERING MULTILATERAL ORDER

Ian Klaus

Senior Fellow, Chicago Council on Global Affairs

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 Medellin 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.

Cities have been improving both their capacity to address global challenges and their knowledge of the political and economic forces that create such challenges.

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-

While always keeping an eye on urban areas, transnational city-focused organisations have also oriented their activities and policies around key international agreements.

IAN KLAUS

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-

THE TABLE WOBBLES: CITIES AND A FALTERING MULTILATERAL ORDER

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).

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.

IAN KLAUS

> 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.

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?

References

Birch, E., "More than Window Dressing? Stakeholder and Participants in the UN Global Agreements on Sustainable Development". Penn: Current Research on Sustainable Urban Development, February 2018.

Birch, E, Mauricio Rodas and Ian Klaus, "Financing Cities' Recovery from Covid-19 and Preparing for Future Shocks," October 2020 (online). [Accessed 3 October 2020]: https://www.urban20riyadh.org/sites/default/files/2020-10/Financing%20Cities%27%20Recovery%20from%20Covid-19%20and%20Preparing%20for%20Future%20Shock_22102020.pdf

C40, "C40 Mayors' Agenda for a Green and Just Recovery," June 2020 (online). [Accessed 15 November 2020]: https://c40.my.salesforce.com/sfc/p/#36000001Enhz/a/1Q000000kVoY/kuR1PLHMGR2K9eEbo8aivV.xPegZVTqwt.EjX.4a.hk

Garcés, M., "The United Nations in the Age of Nationalism: Making The UN Relevant To All: Statement by H.E. Mrs. María Fernanda Espinosa Garcés, President of the 73rd Session of the UN General Assembly," April 2019 (online). [Accessed 10 September 2020]: https://www.un.org/pga/73/2019/04/16/the-united-nations-in-the-age-of-nationalism-making-the-un-relevant-to-all/

GTF - Global Task Force, "A Seat at the Table," October 2016 (online). [Accessed 22 November 2020]: https://cdn.theatlantic.com/assets/media/files/a_seat_at_the_global_table.pdf

Klaus, I and R. Singer, "The United Nations: Local Authorities in Four Frameworks". Penn: Current Research on Sustainable Urban Development, February 2018.

Lieven, A., *Climate Change and the Nation State: The Realist Case*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2020.

Moyn, S., *The Last Utopia: Human Rights in History*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012.

Moyn, S., *Not Enough: Human Rights in an Unequal World*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2018.

Naidoo, R and B. Fisher, "Reset Sustainable Development Goals for a pandemic world" *Nature* 583, 198–201 (2020).

Nature, "Time to revise the Sustainable Development Goals," Editorial, 583, 331-332 (2020).

Obama, B. "Remarks By President Obama At Closing Session Of Sustainable Development Goals Summit", The White House, Office of the Press Secretary, September 27, 2015 (online). [Accessed on 21.12.2020]: https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2015/09/27/remarks-president-sustainable-development-goals

OECD, "OECD Policy Responses to Coronavirus (COVID-19): City Policy Responses," July 2020 (online). [Accessed 17 November 2020]

http://www.oecd.org/coronavirus/policy-responses/cities-policy-responses-fd1053ff/

Revi, A., "Harnessing Urbanization to Accelerate SDG Implementation in a Post-COVID-19 World," *UN Chronicle,* October 1, 2020 (online). [Accessed on 2 October 2020]
https://www.un.org/en/un-chronicle/harnessing-urbanization-accelerate-sdg-implementation-post-covid-19-world

Sachs, J, Guido Schmidt-Traub, Mariana Mazzucato, Dirk Messner, Nebojsa Nakicenovic and Johan Rockström "Six Transformations to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals" Nature Sustainability , vol. 2, August 2019, pp. 805–814.

UNSG, "Policy Brief: COVID-19 in an Urban World," July 2020 (online). [Accessed 2 October 2020].
https://www.un.org/sites/un2.un.org/files/sg_policy_brief_covid_urban_world_july_2020.pdf

Watts, M., "Climate science tells us the 1.5°C is likely to become the most important number in human history," (online). [Accessed 20 November 2020]
https://www.c40knowledgehub.org/s/article/Climate-science-tells-us-that-1-5-C-is-likely-to-become-the-most-important-number-in-human-history?language=en_US