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TOWARDS AN "IDEAL NETWORK" OF CITIES

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In a context of multiple crises with important urban dimensions, networks are an essential instrument of the international agenda of cities. They are, inter alia, a meeting place, a way of gaining access to knowledge and innovation, and a forum where strategies for political influence can be defined. At present, more than 200 international city networks comprise a rich, diverse and complex ecosystem.

This profusion of networks on the international scale is causing tensions in a saturated system, which is sometimes unduly bureaucratised and not sufficiently oriented to results. There is an urgent need to strengthen the various kinds of political leadership, to open up these networks to new realities and voices, streamline their functioning, make them more flexible, and improve accountability concerning their impact in improving people's quality of life.

Is it possible to visualize an ideal city network? What would it be like? What services should it offer? What results would it attain? How should it work and be governed? This article offers some of the thoughts that the authors obtained through a series of interviews with the representatives of eight of the most dynamic cities on the international scene: Barcelona, Berlin, Bogota, Buenos Aires, Durban, Milan, Montreal, and Vienna.

The role of cities today as legitimate actors of the international system is indisputable (Curtis, 2014). They are increasingly influential in their responses to a whole series of factors that are agreed upon in the specialized literature. The world is becoming more urbanised: cities are home to more than half its population and concentrate more than 70% of global economic activity, carbon emissions, and waste production on the international scale (UN Habitat, 2020). In other words, cities are the setting of some of the most complex challenges linked to globalisation—inequalities, technological disruption, climate change, global health, war, etcetera—but they are also part of the solution.

In recent decades, city administrations have made increasing efforts to get involved in international political agendas, which are more and more focused on matters of global and local impact. They have done this in two different directions. First, they have sought to influence their formulation by contributing evidence of local realities and contexts and, second, they have aligned local policies with issues and agreements reached at the global level. Nowadays, for city government policymakers, engaging with such international agreements as the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, the Paris Agreement on climate and, at regional scale, the "Next Generation EU" recovery plan for Europe, is not so much an option but a responsibility (Muggah and Zapata, 2016).

Furthermore, in the present context of multiple (geopolitical, economic, social, and environmental) crises, all of which have a major urban dimension, cities are focusing on the international scene. In the process, they have strengthened alliances with a wide variety of actors—ranging from other cities to multilateral organizations, national governments, the private sector, universities, research centres, and civil

society organizations— to help them in mobilising resources, obtaining knowledge, and strengthening their political positioning (Zapata, 2021). The aim of this endeavour has been to offer more effective and innovative solutions to the challenges they face. In this worldwide effort, networks and international alliances of cities have become a key part of the international strategy of mayors. Networks have been taking shape as entities with their own legal status, working to assist cooperation between local (and regional) governments and offering services to their members, ranging from political advocacy to knowledge management and transfer, in addition to providing support for implementation of innovative policies (Galceran-Vercher et al., 2021).

Networks and international alliances of cities have become a key part of the international strategy of mayors.

Evidence shows that the most active cities on the international scene tend to belong to numerous networks, usually simultaneously, even though many of them have overlapping goals and offer very similar services. A city's membership in a network is not always active and neither does it necessarily coincide with a predefined strategy nor it is based on the expected added value and results obtained. The table below (Figure 1) shows the number of networks where interviewed cities participate.

Figure 1. Number of memberships to international city networks
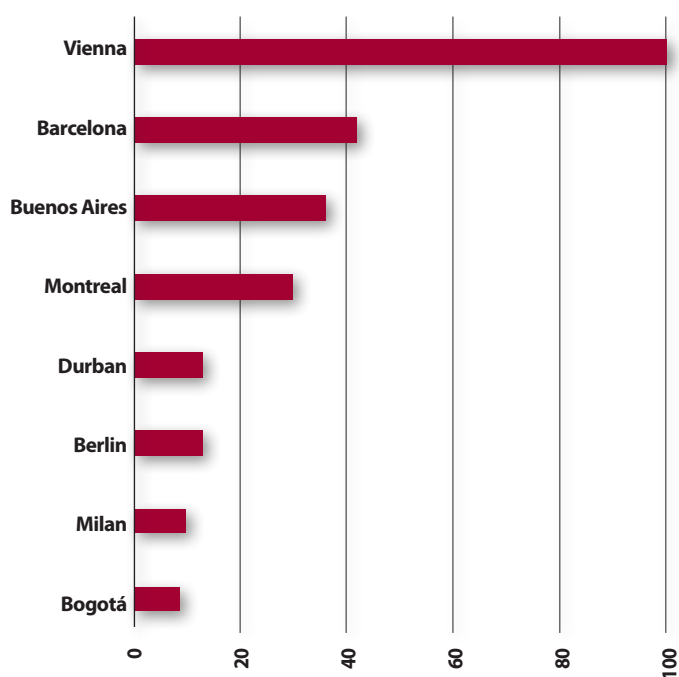
Source: Compiled by authors.

Cities have various reasons for joining a network. In general, networks are seen as necessary instruments for bolstering their profiles and visibility, and for reaffirming their international vocation. In the case of Berlin, for example, networks have been essential to position the city as an open, cosmopolitan, tolerant city. Vienna, however, perceives its participation in networks as an integral part of its essence as headquarters multiple international organizations. For Buenos Aires, networks have recently been an essential factor to create its profile as a city capable of attracting new talent and nomad workers. Finally, in Barcelona's case, the networks have been crucial to position itself as a reference in all areas of urban innovation.

Nevertheless, the usefulness of networks is not perceived in the same way by everyone. In this regard, over time, some cities have given priority to more strategic considerations with a focus on the added value they can bring and the (political or technical) benefits they can obtain from them. For example, Vienna has concentrated its participation in Eurocities and in The Council of European Municipalities and Regions (CMRE); Montreal, Bogota, and Berlin have opted for Metropolis; while Buenos Aires and Milan are strongly committed to C40. Unsurprisingly, Durban has identified UCLG-Africa as one of its priorities owing to the city's interest in strengthening decentralisation and local democracy in the continent.

What is the added value of international city networks?

One of the highest valued aspects of the networks is the space they offer cities to identify counterparts and allies in an environment of trust. As the city representatives interviewed pointed out, the networks foster alliances for promoting common causes and close relationships of bilateral cooperation which are subsequently developed independently of the network. Hence, bonds of trust can be created among cities in countries which, at national level, may have tense or challenging relationships. This fact gives cities an interesting potential for building bridges and resolve conflicts or controversies. In this regard, it remains to be seen how this possibility might unfold in a situation of extreme geopolitical tension, for example in face of the war in Ukraine.

The sum of efforts around a political agenda is another clear element of added value. Networks are ideal spaces for establishing positions in key areas of the global agenda and opening channels for influence. For example, the work done in the framework of C40 and

UCLG allowed Buenos Aires and Paris to launch the Urban20 group, a mechanism that links cities with the G20 political agenda. Another example is the Cities Coalition for Digital Rights, a platform launched by Barcelona, Amsterdam, and New York together with 50 other cities, with a view to dealing with digital inequalities and fostering the ethical use of artificial intelligence in urban contexts.

Networks are also useful for enhancing the visibility of mayors in the national and international scenes. For example, the presidency of Metropolis and the Latin American vice-presidency of C40, gave prominence to Claudia López Hernández, mayor of Bogotá, in the international sphere while also reinforcing her at the national level. Something similar occurred with Ada Colau, mayor of Barcelona, whose international leadership, forged in UCLG, C40, and Eurocities, has helped to her legitimize major and sometimes controversial urban projects like the so-called "superblocks" and the city's Low Emission Zones.

Access to practical knowledge and expertise is another highly valued element offered by the networks. Cities have to deal with similar challenges, and the solutions they offer to address them, often highly innovative, are greatly appreciated by their peers. Moreover, as place where experts gather, networks encourage mutual learning, exchange of experiences, and knowledge transfer. Networks manage knowledge and innovation, capacity building programmes and produce public policy documents that are useful for local administrations. Furthermore, they contribute legitimising and capitalising on experiences whose international relevance can be seen locally as a sign of validation.

Some networks have become excellent platforms where cities can approach an array of other international partners and access urban programmes and projects. Some, for example, offer programmes funded by global actors like the European Union, the World Bank, and regional development banks. They engage in initiatives with multinational corporations or philanthropic organizations that are active in the urban sector, universities, research centres, and even the global media. Having access to these resources is important for many cities who on their own, would not have access to such opportunities.

Management of the COVID-19 pandemic has given considerable visibility to the work of networks as means for the transmission and replication of urban solutions in critical areas like health, climate change, digitalisation, migration, and attention to the most affected sectors of the local economy and the most vulnerable groups.

Networks have shown considerable dexterity and flexibility in adapting to extremely complex situations. Platforms like Cities for Global Health, launched by Metropolis, UCLG, and the AL-LAs Network, or Cities on the Frontline, supported by the World Bank and Resilient Cities Network are examples of this. It should be noted that some of the networks perceived as the most effective, have managed to excel thanks to the considerable amounts of funding they receive from the corporate sector or private philanthropy. Nevertheless, although they have great capacity to provide technical assistance and resources to cities, these networks frequently lack the democratic legitimacy of the traditional networks, which were originally conceived, created, and governed by the city leaders themselves rather than by companies, banks or foundations.

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It should also be noted that many cities draw attention to the importance of multilevel work and coordination with national authorities when participating in global agendas related to sustainable development. Most recognise, to a greater or lesser extent, the relevance of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development as a framework of universal reference. Nevertheless, some cities observe that the alignment of traditional networks with UN agendas does not always respond to local priorities. The struggle for international recognition and the ability to influence such agendas requires enormous efforts, time and expertise that cannot always be found in cities. For some observers, this work is perceived as remote, highly symbolic in nature and of little if any impact.

Finally, while the added value of each network will depend on the interest each city puts into it, cities often shy away from cancelling a membership. Departing from a network is perceived as an undiplomatic or impolite gesture towards the other members, even when paying membership fees is sometimes difficult to justify to citizens and local councils. This means that many cities prefer to remain passively in a network without devoting time or energy to it, which leads to a sort of *status quo* that is unsatisfactory for everyone.

Fatigue, dispersion, and saturation: a tense ecosystem

The ecosystem of international city networks is widespread, diverse, and complex. Recent studies calculate that more than 200 city networks are currently operating at international scale (Acuto and Leffel, 2021), and the number is rising. Gathered around

this ecosystem are networks ranging from the earliest initiatives of mayors and local authorities, which were created at the beginning of the 20th century, to the more recent multi-stakeholder networks in which both public and private institutions participate.

Even if this is a realistic example of the many types of international municipal expressions existing worldwide, this profusion of networks is now stressing the ecosystem. Tensions arise from a dispersion of efforts in a context of scarce resources; from saturation deriving from an overwhelming offer of services; and in the absence of effective responses to the most pressing problems faced by cities (Fernández de Losada, 2019). Networks compete against each other for representativeness and deploy a very large and frequently redundant offer of products and services that is not always adapted to the needs and real aspirations of cities.

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networks. It is evident that there is a major gap between the way the network secretariats work and the reality in cities. Networks not only provide but they also demand resources, especially in terms of time and budget while cities tend to be normally ill-equipped to handle their international affairs.

There are several reasons for this gap. Firstly, a large number of professionals working in the networks lack direct experience working in a city's administration, so they tend to be unfamiliar with the often slow and bureaucratic dynamics and internal processes. Secondly, many networks work as if the competences, responsibilities, and resources available to cities in different geographies were all the same, without distinguishing between large, medium, and small cities, levels of local and regional government, and their representative associations. Trying to provide one-size-fits all solutions is complex and does not allow for effective interventions capable of driving real transformation. In general, networks limit themselves to finding a minimum common denominator among cities with very disparate realities, which then results in limited impact at the local level.

Furthermore, regional networks are perceived as being less disperse and more effective. Barcelona, Milan, and Vienna consider their participation in Eurocities as a priority to the extent that it is a channel to influence the European Union, whose politics have a real impact on their legal and financial local reality. Participation of cities in European recovery funds is a clear example of this (Boni and Zevi, 2021). Likewise, Barcelona, Montreal, and Bogotá prefer projecting themselves and strengthening ties with cities with whom they have forged historical, cultural, social, and economic bonds. This explains their involvement in platforms like CIDEU, UCCI, and AIMF.

However, alliances prioritised by mayors cannot only be described by the type of city, since they are also influenced by non-partisan personal political affinities, which are not necessarily found in the large, institutionalised networks.

Pragmatism and temporary coalitions: the pop-up networks

One significant finding that resulted from the interviews is that cities are showing a clear tendency towards pragmatism. Faced with so many networks, they have become opportunistic, using a network only when needed and prioritizing those networks from which they can obtain specific results.

In this situation, cities are forming informal coalitions or alliances to deal with concrete specific issues, thus avoiding the established networks (Malé, 2019). It seems that a coalition formed around one specific political objective can be much more useful in serving the interests of a mayor, as well as being more responsive and effective. These spaces of *ad hoc* collaboration are becoming ever more common among local authorities who know each other, share concerns or problems, and wish to initiate activities in the short term while avoiding the lengthy, bureaucratic institutional procedures of the formally constituted networks. The initiative Cities for Adequate Housing, which brings together Barcelona, Paris, London, Vienna, Montreal, New York, and Medellín is one example of this kind of collaboration.

This phenomenon is relatively new and has been reinforced by the possibilities offered by the new technologies and by the fact that during the pandemic local authorities learned to work together more efficiently from distance (even with such simple modalities as a WhatsApp group). These temporary

networks, or "pop-up networks", are attractive and useful in as much as they are born, they get the job done and they disappear. This type of work seems to be a new frontier since it responds to the need of local governments to act effectively, with results that are visible to the population in very short periods of time.

Less bureaucracy and more impact

Criticism against the overly cumbersome and bureaucratised governance structures of city networks is increasing. The city representatives interviewed commented that some networks devote too much time and energy to their internal operations, for example, focusing on statutory issues, protocol, budgetary decisions, and electoral procedures for positions of political responsibility. They also drew attention to the need for networks to encourage collaboration and consensus rather than competition amongst their members. Putting mayors to compete for positions and titles within a network is considered as inappropriate since, rather than strengthening the group, this only weakens it, dividing its members, and causing conflicts among them. Attention is also drawn to the excessive influence of some secretariats and their staff, whose continuity sometimes becomes the leitmotif of the network permeating strategic decisions. There is clear consensus among the interviewees around the need for networks to be headed by mayors, who should be the ones deciding the political agenda and strategic positioning.

One interesting point mentioned by the interviewees is the tendency of some networks to what one called "endogamy". They criticise that the meetings and events they organise tend to be gatherings for the same group of people, who are usually convinced about the subject, are not very open to disruptive innovation, and are highly resistant to change. Concern was expressed about the absence of divergent voices and representatives from other sectors beyond the cities' departments of international relations. All of this has direct consequences on the debates taking place, the political agenda, and the action plans.

However, the most problematic issue, and the one that is most negatively affecting the overall ecosystem of city networks is the absence of specific, tangible results and impact. Cities are rarely able to measure the benefits resulting from their participation in a network, especially when it comes to measuring the

improvement in the quality of their public policies and citizen wellbeing. When faced between participating in a network focusing on city representation in multilateral institutions or one offering concrete solutions to specific problems, cities increasingly tend to give priority to the latter.

There is general agreement that the work of city networks is a long-term affair and that results are not likely to be noticeable in the short term. However, there is an urgent need for more accountability and learning from strategies thus far promoted if progress is to be made towards a more efficient ecosystem better attuned to the interests of cities. It is true that the main networks are increasing their efforts to evaluate their performance, either voluntarily or because required by donors. However, this is not a simple task since there

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is still no clear framework of reference or established methodologies with reliable indicators and sources of data and information (Galceran-Vercher et al., 2021).

Final note: how to realize the full potential of a city network?

Trying to put in order the ecosystem of the international city networks would be a limited and not very realistic exercise. Albeit with tensions, this is a rich, diverse space with room for the various expressions of international city activism. However, it is now essential to explore new formulas that can help the networks achieve their full potential.

There has been much discussion about the need to improve coordination between the various networks to reduce dispersion and repetition. Many agree on the need to strengthen collaboration through supporting mechanism like the Global Taskforce of Local and Regional Governments and the Cities Race to Resilience initiative. Nevertheless, in addition to better coordination and complementarity among the city networks, there are other tasks that need attention. It is important that networks strengthen the political leadership and visibility of mayors making sure they are the ones setting the agenda.

Furthermore, traditional networks must reduce their bureaucratic work, be open to new stakeholders and new agendas, and become more useful to cities by offering them tangible results.

A crucial issue is that cities do not necessarily need to be represented by networks. They otherwise expect networks will help them achieve tangible results and measurable impact improving their local public policies and the well-being of their populations in the short and medium term.

Nevertheless, in order to make progress in this direction it will be necessary to work with a framework of reference that includes indicators linked to reliable sources of data and means of verification that are adapted to local realities and contexts. This is not an easy task, but it is a very necessary one. It is a challenge that must be faced not only by the network secretariats but also by the cities themselves, as the main actors capable of driving this transition from within.

This will require considerable effort and commitment by city leaders. Networks will need to mobilise resources, technical capacities, and knowledge, as well as great determination to overcome all kinds of resistance. In sum, considerable generosity will be required to guide the ecosystem towards a working model that is more connected with the needs, aspirations, and interests of cities and their communities, which are highly diverse and constantly changing. In essence, the *ideal network* of cities would be one that not only succeeds in addressing the citizen's most pressing problems, but one that is also capable of demonstrating it.

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The "ideal network": check list

Dialogue with our interviewees has allowed us to imagine an "ideal network" of cities. This is a subjective assessment which has no intention of being prescriptive. It simply presents some ideas to contribute towards the construction of a more effective and useful city network, one that would respond to the needs, interests, and aspirations of its member.

Thus the "ideal network" is one that:

✓ *Has a relevant agenda*: advances specific solutions to real problems; is well informed about the needs, resources, possibilities, and capacities of its members when responding to challenges and strategic priorities.

✓ *Is sharply focused*: with a clear thematic emphasis, dealing with priorities that have been agreed upon in depth, avoiding dispersion of efforts to address too many issues superficially.

✓ *Is perceived as useful*: by offering a space for attaining tangible results such as establishing projects of cooperation with other cities and stakeholders, influencing international agendas, as well as providing access to knowledge, solutions, technical assistance and funding for the implementation of public policies.

✓ *Provides a space for sharing and cross-learning*: making it possible to systematise and take advantage the expertise of its members, being capable of identifying synergies and thematic coincidences between its members, and organizing direct cooperation initiatives between them.

✓ *Has a light non-bureaucratic governance*: with readily adaptable internal organisation and simple, clear procedures; flexible and sensitive to local contexts, and the particular circumstances of its varied members.

✓ *Engages in complementary activities*: compatible with what other networks are doing, avoiding overlaps, competition, and duplication of actions.

✓ *Responds to political leadership*: where direction is marked by political leaders rather than by technical secretariat staff, funding opportunities or donor priorities.

✓ *Is very professional*: with secretariats consisting of professional staff who have first-hand experience working in city government.

✓ *Is open and inclusive*: with a variety of voices representing city governments in addition to international relations staff; open to interaction with other levels of government, civil society organisations, academia, the media, and the private sector.

✓ *Guarantees its sustainability*: has sound finances and an efficient, transparent internal administration that allows it to remain independent and autonomous from sponsors and funders in the long run.

✓ *Is accountable and impactful*: aiming to improve public policies and the quality of life of citizens.

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