

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

Agustí Fernández de Losada

*Senior researcher and director of the Global Cities Programme,
CIDOB (Barcelona Centre for International Affairs)*

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-

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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/>

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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.

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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.

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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.

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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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