

## MUCH TO OFFER AND DO: The call for action of the U20 cities in Jakarta to the G20

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*Forty-four mayors from some of the most politically and economically powerful cities adopted a common position for the G20 Summit in November in Bali. Gathered under the initiative of the U20 in August in Jakarta, the mayors offered their collaboration and called for action in key areas such as recovery, energy transition, and job market. As governmental actors in an urban world, cities have much to offer and do. Yet they are also embedded in an international system that is defined by nation-states.*

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**T**he rising relevance of the G20 is one of the clearest indicators of the expanding perception of the United Nations as a ‘slow mover’ in the face of today’s increasingly complex challenges. With its member states representing more than 80% of the world’s GDP, the G20 is an intergovernmental platform that is contributing to redefine the current architecture of global governance. Since late 2017, cities have a formal institutional space to engage with the G20. The initiative of the Urban 20 (U20) is an acknowledgement of the demographic and economic centrality of cities in the current ‘urban age’. It is further a recognition of the effort of cities to join forces through networking alliances to make a space for themselves in the international system. It is against this backdrop that, with the governors of Jakarta and West Java as co-chairs, and convened by the city networks C40 Cities and United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG), mayors and governors from cities such as Los Angeles, Rotterdam, Tokyo, and Tshwane gathered in late August in Jakarta for the U20.

As one of the 10 Engagement Groups of this edition of the G20, along with stakeholder communities such as civil society, business sector, or think tanks, the U20 has sought to inform the discussions held by their national counterparts in Bali later this year. It has done so by offering a collective voice grounded on the local expertise of cities and their contribution to the very global challenges discussed by the G20 heads of state. It has called the G20 to collaborate around key areas such as: economic and social recovery, including investing in health systems, social protection, and housing; energy transition and sustainable mobility, including committing to the global phase-out of fossil fuels; and equitable access to the job market, including providing education and training on the future of work.

Yet, contrary to the underlying logic of the Engagement Groups revolving around the contribution of non-state expertise to the policy-making process of the G20, the cities within the U20 are governmental actors in their own right. They are politically responsible for their communities and are often backed up by democratic mandates. In this sense, the U20 cities have much to offer and do.

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It should be first noted that the U20 shows the commitment of the international municipal movement to multilateralism in its multiple institutional configurations. As new actors emerge in the increasingly complex architecture of global governance beyond the (still central) role of the UN system, the U20 signals an additional front through which cities seek to raise the status of the urban dimension of contemporary challenges. It is an institutional space that has the potential to extend bridges between local perspectives and solutions and the geopolitical agendas of the world's twenty largest economies. This is the spirit underlying the call of the U20 mayors to increased public funding and direct investment in policy areas where cities can make a difference, such as climate action, social cohesion and equality, and inclusive economic recovery.

However, the agenda that emanates from the U20 is still conceived as a response to, and an attempt to influence, the agenda defined by the heads of state of the G20. After all, the call for action identified by the U20 mayors in Jakarta revolves around 3 key areas –health and housing, energy transition and sustainable mobility, and education and the job market– that mirror the 3 priority issues identified by the nation-states within the G20 –global health architecture, sustainable energy transition, and digital transition. In this sense, the call for action presented by the U20 reflects key challenges and transformative actions for cities, while at the same time it offers the collaboration of leading cities to an agenda that is defined by the interests of nation-states.

Yet the main problem, whether with the UN or the G20, is that our international system is still deeply influenced by the prerogatives of the nation-state. In parallel to their efforts towards increasing their formal recognition and capacity to influence state-centric global policy-making, cities need to continue working tirelessly on the ground to tackle proactively some of the most pressing transnational challenges of our time. Throughout this effort, they must also stand united to mitigate the interfering geopolitical interests of nation-states that are detached from the local communities that city governments need to attend to.

The U20 in Jakarta foregrounded the actual contribution of city diplomacy to an increasingly turbulent world. The fundamental strength of the call for action of the U20 lies in the legitimacy and effectiveness of cities as governmental actors. It further stems from the capacity of cities to join forces through networking endeavors and contribute to global governance. The opportunity for the U20 mayors resides in the difficulty of the G20 heads of state to act as a united group committed to highly necessary bold action. Precisely during the days when the U20 mayors gathered in Jakarta and adopted a common position, the G20 officials meeting in Bali for climate talks were unable to adopt a joint communiqué as a consequence of their disagreements on climate targets and references to the war in Ukraine.

To shift from rhetoric to politics, the U20 could focus on a narrower set of actions tied to measurable commitments around collaborative efforts among cities so as to increase their public accountability, further contributing to enhancing their dialogues with citizens. The Global Covenant of Mayors, the largest global alliance against climate change with commitments from over 12,000 cities, is such an example of collective effort tied to reportable actions. In a different but related way, the increasing numbers of Voluntary Local Reviews assessing the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in cities from across the world are a testament to the expanding contribution of cities to the 2030 Agenda at the local level.

As 70% of Indonesia's population will live in cities by 2045, this edition of the U20 was the emblematic representation of the challenges and opportunities that lie in a world that is, and will increasingly be, urban. The U20 mayors in Jakarta sent a message of unity about their collective commitment to the G20. We will see in November how the call of "local multilateralism" is received by the nation-states gathered in Bali. While skepticism is high, we do hope that the heads of state prove us wrong and understand the fundamental contribution of cities in such a turbulent world.