

notes

internacionals

CIDOB

198
MAY
2018

RETHINKING GLOBAL CITIES THROUGH INTERNATIONAL MUNICIPALISM AND THE RIGHT TO THE CITY

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We live in the *era of cities*: more than half the world's population lives in urban areas and forecasts suggest that this trend will increase over the coming decades. We also live in the era of globalisation: the world today is inevitably interconnected and subject to interdependencies that oblige us to think and act outside the conventional theoretical and political frameworks.

The urbanisation of the planet is happening at an unprecedented rate. While only seventy years ago the global urban population was around 20%, now more than half the world's population is concentrated in cities and metropolitan regions. And this trend is likely to continue growing, reaching two-thirds of the global population in 2050.

In some geographical settings, this new reality has made obsolete the modern categories used to describe urbanisation, such as city and metropolis. These days, the urban reality is also articulated in extensive nodes that form *megalopolises*,

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Now that the right to the city resounds more strongly than ever around the world as an alternative to the hegemonic urban model, it is essential to observe what paths the different actors championing it take.

In Asia, for example, the Chinese cities of Hong Kong, Shenzhen and Ghaungzhou constitute a mega-region of 120 million inhabitants. In Africa, the urban corridor formed of Ibadan, Lagos and Accra connects four countries (Nigeria, Benin, Togo and Ghana) over 600km and constitutes the economic engine of West Africa.

Urbanisation is a global phenomenon these days and globalisation, in turn, is expressed with all its force in cities, to the extent that their configuration and development are conditioned by the prevailing models of the speculative economy, by the technological revolution, by internal and international mobilities, by the effects of climate change and by the failure of the classical forms of government to adapt, at international as well as national and local levels.

The emergence of global cities and some of their main challenges

Some of these urban territories have been in a position to become cities of great attractiveness: they host the headquarters of governments, businesses, civil society organisations and universities; they concentrate production, services, capital and infrastructure; they attract investment, workforces and talent; they see leaderships and political and social movements proliferate; and they are the settings for sports and cultural events and trade fairs and congresses. They are global cities to the extent that they are not only connected to their surroundings, but also to the whole world.

The concept of the “global city” was coined by Saskia Sassen (2001) in her book *The global city: New York, London, Tokyo* in 1991, and though far from the only attempt to categorise the urban phenomenon, it is undoubtedly the proposal that has had most impact.¹ Sassen emphasises some of the impacts of globalisation in cities, particularly the configuration of globally interconnected urban hubs that act as potent poles of attraction for the private sector and for professionals in the fields of finance, technology and innovation.

Beyond these factors, other defining elements of global cities should be kept in mind. The same urban territories that have

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become poles of attraction are also the expression of the *dissolution of the modern city* as a consequence of their diffuse, multiscale and fragmented nature. In other words, they are territories that combine classic urban areas with enormous zones of dispersed urbanisation where it is increasingly difficult to tell where the city begins and ends.

With their lack of meeting and sociability spaces, these territories are also an expression of the “not-city”. The streets cease to be elements of interaction and become mere material supports for functional use (they are used for parking, to circulate or to separate spaces). And the existing public spaces remain void of content because their everyday use by residents has often been replaced by mass and sporadic consumption by individuals carrying out professional, leisure or merely transit activities.

This urban model, which has come to dominate worldwide, has had an especially high cost for the poorer sections of society. These groups find themselves obliged to settle in areas that have worse access to facilities and services, which reduces their indirect income. These same groups are also those that most suffer the effects of climate change, whether

because of the impact of natural disasters in areas that are densely and precariously populated, or because high temperatures, difficulty accessing water and the rising sea expels “environmental refugees” to informal settlements in cities. What is more, the social inequalities at the root of these problems generate growing social unrest that is expressed especially intensely in cities.

To this social cost the political cost must be added, because the democratic government of these broad territories presents diverse challenges due to their extension and demographic volume. Problems are also posed by the fact that the current global cities are often administrated by different political units that do not always work in coordination or have the political competences and financial resources to act effectively. Hence the importance of establishing multilevel governance mechanisms that allow greater coherence to be given to public policies and to address at an institutional level any possible political differences between spheres of government, whose priorities do not always overlap.

Rethinking global cities therefore involves reflecting on how the different cities in the world face these challenges.

New perspectives on global cities from CIDOB

CIDOB’s Global Cities Programme proposes to approach the study of global cities from a double perspective. The first looks at the international projection of cities and the configuration of a new international municipalism committed to cities transcending borders and generating alliances between them in order to share solutions and influence global agendas. The second addresses the concept of the “right to the city” as a paradigm that articulates a new relationship between the city and citizens.

International municipalism

International municipalism is not a new phenomenon. The first platform for local governments – the International Union of Local Authorities – was founded in 1913. But the consolidation of cities as recognised actors on the international stage did not take place until the last years of the 20th century and the first of the 21st. The urban phenomenon is enjoying great prominence at global scale, linked to the growth in urbanisation processes. Cities demonstrate that globalisation has significant impact on the public policies they develop and have become aware of the need to strengthen the bridges of collaboration between them to share lessons learned and solutions. Urban challenges are acquiring a global dimension and to be more efficient the responses provided in the new generation of international agendas need cities’ voices.

This reality poses a series of challenges that must be analysed.

First, the consolidation of cities on the global stage has no clear reflection in global governance structures, especially in the United Nations sphere, which still responds almost

1. Some of the proposals developed in past decades include concepts such as the following: world cities, smart cities, ordinary cities, creative cities, wise cities, etc.

exclusively to nation-states as monopolistic actors in international relations. Many voices demand root-and-branch reorganisation of governance structures worldwide. This reorganisation would serve to democratise its functioning, to modulate the weight of national governments and would open the door to other actors such as cities and civil society actors.

Some symptoms, albeit extremely tentative ones, suggest the stage is shifting. The creation of new mechanisms of direct dialogue between the United Nations and the major groups – among we highlight the local authorities – may be one. Another might be the renewed boost given to the World Assembly of Local and Regional Governments as a representative of the voice of local governments when pursuing the New Urban Agenda. But as national governments are extremely reluctant to lose spaces of power and any reform requires their consent, the task looks difficult.

But while waiting for reform, cities and the platforms through which they act must continue perfecting their capacity to influence global agendas. Great advances have been made: the existence of Goal 11 of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) focussed on sustainable cities is a good sign of this. But there is a long way to go and many spaces to open up. The presence of cities in the processes of implementing the Agenda 2030 is still minor and the lack of concreteness of the New Urban Agenda does not invite optimism. On the one hand, city governments have no voice on certain “hard” agendas on which they supposedly do not have competences, such as those relating to international trade and the control of migration flows, but which have a clear impact on the policies they implement. On the other, the growing visibility of the urban reality on global agendas is a great opportunity to demand improvement in the juridico-institutional settings (enabling environments) in which cities operate. The localisation of global agendas cannot be performed if city governments do not have clear competences, appropriate governance mechanisms – metropolitan, multi-level and multi-actor – and sufficient resources. The resources necessary for implementing the 11 SDGs equate to two-thirds of the budget agreed for implementing the Agenda 2030 (Revi, 2018). It is only a partial indicator, but one that provides evidence of the magnitude of cities’ needs.

Improving cities’ processes of political influence on global agendas also means improving the functioning of the platforms through which they operate. The centrality of the urban reality at regional and global levels has led in recent years to the proliferation of city networks. The current ecosystem of networks is wide and complex. It is made up of networks with a traditional basis, in other words those formed only of local governments, such as United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG), Local Governments for Sustainability (ICLEI), and another kind of platform of more heterogeneous composition and larger resources, such as Cities Alliance, in which United Nations agencies interact with national governments, local governments and civil society, as well as the

platforms promoted by large philanthropic organisations such as the C40 (Bloomberg Philanthropies) and 100 Resilient Cities (Rockefeller Foundation).

The breadth, heterogeneity and complexity of the ecosystem of networks present questions and challenges. How can coherent action in the networks be guaranteed so that diversity does not work against effectiveness? What mechanisms should be set up to ensure proper coordination and efficient dialogue with the other international operators, particularly international bodies and governments, but also civil society, the private sector and universities? What role should multi-actor networks and those promoted by philanthropic institutions play? How should the governance and representativeness deficits in the latter be addressed?

In their day to day, cities have great capacity to define innovative solutions to the problems they suffer. They define policies, often with scarce resources, which can be applied in different geographies. Replicating these solutions through bilateral or multilateral knowledge transfer mechanisms (networks or other platforms) and exchange of experiences is essential. Analysing how to optimise the functioning of the mechanisms of transfer, exchange and learning and, if possible, promoting tools for benchmarking urban solutions and encouraging alliances with other actors – whether they be

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universities, knowledge centres, the private sector or civil society organisations – could contribute to improving the public policies promoted by cities and the services they provide.

Capitalising on the policies that are at the heart of city models and sharing value-added elements is an efficient way for cities to achieve projection and look after their reputations. It is an efficient way to go far beyond the marketing and brand-definition campaigns that preoccupy cities so much. Barcelona has captured the world’s interest by managing to project a model of a cohesive, compact city with a good quality of life; Medellín has done the same by championing its processes of recovering public spaces and changing, in just a few years, from being one of the most dangerous cities in the world to being the most innovative in Latin America.

Appealing to international municipalism is appealing for cities to keep advancing in their empowerment as actors able to produce changes in the international system, giving it roots and bringing it closer to citizens’ real needs. To do this, it is necessary to analyse, from a critical perspective, the challenges ahead and propose ways to define efficient solutions. In this context, knowledge will be crucial.

The right to the city as a new urban paradigm

The harshest side of global cities, as mentioned above, is closely related to the consolidation of an urban model with

neoliberal foundations, which has had serious consequences in terms of spatial segregation, social exclusion and environmental crisis. The contestation over this urban model led to the theoretical formulation of the right to the city in the context of the urban protests in France in May 1968 (Lefebvre, 2009).

In Latin America, and particularly Brazil, the right to the city was turned at the end of the 1980s into an important political cause that articulated the voice of a diverse group of actors from civil society who demanded urban reform. Beyond the Brazilian experience, countries in the region such as Argentina, Bolivia, Colombia, Ecuador, Mexico and Chile have to greater or lesser degrees picked up elements of this narrative and incorporated them into their legal and political systems, both in the local and national fields.

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From the international point of view, various activists from the anti-globalisation movement have also echoed this concept since the first edition of the World Social Forum (Porto Alegre, 2001). This interest produced fruits such as the World Charter on the Right to the City (2005) and, almost a decade later, the creation of the Global Platform for the Right to the City (2014).

In brief, the narrative emanating from these experiences understands the right to the city as a new urban paradigm based on the principles of global justice, equality, democracy and sustainability. The idea of the *city* on which it rests is broad because it refers not only to large urban areas, but also includes villages and human settlements that constitute a political community. Hence it takes in not just purely urban spaces, but also the rural or semirural environments that make up a particular territory.

The right to the city is also connected with classic human rights because it defends the need to implement them jointly in the urban territory, in line with the principles of universality, indivisibility and interdependence. It also means recognising the social function of the city, fighting against socio-spatial discrimination, guaranteeing quality public spaces and promoting sustainable and inclusive urban-rural links. From a legal point of view, it has been defined as a collective and diffuse right: collective because it belongs to the group of inhabitants of a specific territory based on their common interest in participating in building and enjoying their surroundings; diffuse because it belongs to the present and future generations.

The social and political energy the right to the city has generated in Latin America and within the anti-globalisation movement has contributed to this narrative being popularised among certain groups in other countries around the

world, such as South Africa, the United States, Germany, Spain and Turkey. It has also attracted the attention of various civil society actors, such as local governments, global municipal networks, academia and the United Nations. While it is true that this plurality of agents and geographical environments has contributed to spreading the right to the city around the world, it has simultaneously provoked the multiplication of the meanings of the term according to the political agenda of each. As a result of these different uses and appropriations (some more emancipatory than others), a notable conceptual ambiguity has arisen around the right to the city and what it means in practice.

An example of this phenomenon occurred recently in the setting of the negotiation process over the New Urban Agenda approved at the United Nations Habitat III conference (2016).

After an intense period of political discussion, the text explicitly summarised the right to the city but not in all its complexity and, above all, with a major lack of internal coherence: while it does include the concept and recognises one of its most groundbreaking central axes – the social function of the city – the text also supported the mantra of “sustainable economic growth”. A systematic reading of the New

Urban Agenda shows that in reality the latter idea is the one that is most developed and, consequently, the one that has ended up taking priority. So, faced with a clash of interests between a pro-growth and a social agenda, the New Urban Agenda's position is clear.

It will be necessary to see in what way governments, especially the local, advance towards the implementation of the New Urban Agenda and whether they decide to move in the same direction or not. It will be vital to observe this process, above all bearing in mind that the voice of local governments in Habitat III strongly promoted the right to the city in the framework of the Global Platform on the Right to the City. It isn't the first time city governments have committed to advancing this narrative. In the year 2000 the European Charter for the Safeguarding of Human Rights in the City was adopted, promoted by the movement “Cities for Human Rights”, the first article of which was dedicated to the right to the city. Some years later, UCLG adopted a similar text, but with global scope, the World Charter on the Right to the City (2011), which also established the right to the city as the first right in the text. Similarly, despite certain good practices linked to the European Charter (Barcelona, Terrassa, Saint-Denis, Nuremberg and Loures, among others), there is still a long way to go. The few studies made on the subject show how municipal human rights charters tend to be more like declarations of intentions than frameworks on which concrete policies are designed.

Now that the right to the city resounds more strongly than ever around the world as an alternative to the hegemonic urban model, it is essential to observe what paths the different actors championing it take. It will likewise be necessary to rigorously analyse the different political implications and approaches of each. More mature experiences in settings as diverse as São Paulo, Mexico City, Durban, New York, Ham-

burg, Barcelona and Istanbul must also be explored in detail. They have been carried out from different perspectives – involving institutional policy, social mobilisations and culture – and their analysis will provide a snapshot of great interest for defining roadmaps to help advance the right to the city in other cities.

A research agenda with added value

CIDOB's new Global Cities Programme will go deep into the analysis of global cities from this double perspective. International municipalism and the right to the city will be the double axis on which we will work on the concept of the global city and revise the paradigms that are associated with it. We will do this by attempting to place new elements of debate and reflection on the table.

We will build a research agenda that aims to propose innovative solutions to the real challenges cities share.

The right to the city is understood as a new urban paradigm based on the principles of global justice, equality, democracy and sustainability.

Cities have significant transformative power, they can contribute to revising models and paradigms that have shown they do not work. They are a fundamental part of the solution to the challenges the planet faces, but they need ideas and knowledge. We propose a research agenda with a wide, independent perspective that takes into account what happens in the cities of all parts of the world and moves closer to solutions without burdens or inherited prescriptions. A research agenda with added value.

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