

THE EMERGENCE OF CITY ALLIANCES AND FRONTS: TOWARDS NEW FORMS OF LOCAL GOVERNMENT INFLUENCE?

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I. Introduction

CIDOB's seminar *Rethinking the ecosystem of international city networks: Challenges and opportunities* held on July 3rd 2018¹ focussed on the "ecosystem" of city networks to examine this form of collaboration between local institutions, which is undoubtedly one of the clearest and most striking expressions of the progressive internationalisation of local governments (LGs).

To complement the work done in the seminar, this paper seeks to bring to light certain emerging forms of relations between LGs, which I will call "strategic alliances" of cities or "fronts". Although they share certain features with networks, these alliances exhibit particular characteristics that distinguish them from the familiar networks, both in their goals and their modes of action. To address this phenomenon, I will examine their genesis and distinguish two types of front.

II. The first kind of front: cities mobilising against a state or international policy

First of all, a front's creation may result from the repudiation of a policy that a state or international body is seeking to impose. The most notable recent examples of this are the US LGs that have opposed Donald Trump's migration policy (Sanctuary Cities) and the cities and federated states that have refused to abandon endeavours to fight climate change despite the US withdrawal from the Paris Agreement. In both cases, the transversal resistance of a large number of cities and territorial governments arises in opposition to national government decisions.

The same kind of reaction – beginning at local level –arose in Europe against the European refugee policy, bringing about the so-called "Refuge City" movement. Stimulated by a highly active citizens' movement, a number of cities have declared themselves ready and willing to receive significant numbers of people fleeing from war. They oppose the European Union's closing of borders and transferring of responsibility for the problem to countries such as Turkey and Libya, and stand up to

1. https://www.cidob.org/actividades/temas/ciudades_globales/rethinking_the_ecosystem_of_international_city_networks_challenges_and_opportunities

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Cities are losing interest in merely occupying “a seat at the global table” (and thereby legitimating state-set global agendas) and seek, on the other hand, to exert direct influence to change the content of the agendas, and thereby highlight the different strategies and rationales that arise from the practice of local public administration

national governments (NGs) that do not apply the minimum agreements on refugee reception.

Other examples of this kind are beginning to emerge. In Spain one example is the front of cities opposed to the so-called “*regla de gasto*” expenditure rule established by the People’s Party government, which imposes drastic limitations on LGs’ spending capacity, even when their accounts are in surplus. This economically absurd rule worsens the chronic deficits in local finances and strengthens NG power. In this case, cities are not fighting against a national policy that is sectoral in nature, but against one of their endemic structural problems: excessive centralisation of public resources.

It should be underlined that the different examples mentioned illustrate the progressive awakening of a deep opposition between the rationales of nation-states and of LGs. This issue, which has significant political and strategic implications, is undoubtedly one of the mainsubjects the municipalist movement will have to address in the near future.

It does not fall within the scope of this paper to develop this issue in its full extent. But at the risk of simplification, it may be pointed out that, while states have competences that focus on issues of geostrategic control, power and competition over global resources, LGs principally deal with issues linked to the organisation of human settlements and the coexistence of people in a territory.

These differences in perspective and competence between the two levels of administration explain why the agendas established by states revolve around issues of security, control of the movement of people, international trade, flows of finance and other “macro” issues. “Local” issues, on the other hand, such as housing, social inclusion, the provision of basic public services, managing diversity, citizen participation and other subjects that fill the day to day of local institutions are lesser priorities.

Increasing awareness of this gap means cities are losing interest in merely occupying “a seat at the global table” (and thereby legitimating state-set global agendas) and seek, on the other hand, to exert direct influence to change the content of the agendas, and thereby highlight the different strategies and rationales that arise from the practice of local public administration.

These reflections, which should be explained and developed in another framework, lead us to identify a second kind of cities front, which is emerging from “local” problems.

III. The second kind of front: cities mobilising against a common risk

Beyond cities’ possible resistance to specific policies imposed by other administrative levels, a second situation that may provoke the creation of a cities front is the realisation of a serious and imminent risk posed by certain phenomena that affect them directly. The trigger factor here is not an external fact, but emerges from within the cities themselves and is directly linked to citizens.

A clear example is the recent mobilisation of a significant group of cities to attempt to stop the speculative practices of financial capital in the real estate field, which culminated in a political declaration presented by United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG) at the High-Level Political Forum held at the United Nations headquarters in 2018. That document warns of the threats affecting urban housing and the rights of citizens to continue living in their city and asking states to give more competences and resources in this field to local institutions.

This emerging front focuses on the defence of housing. It proposes to resist what the signatory city administrations consider to be a genuine aggression against urban life provoked by the uncontrolled activity of large international investment funds, which ignore the social and human meaning of housing and reduce it to the status of a good used for speculation and gentrification, which profoundly alter the lives of neighbourhoods and threaten citizens' rights.

The value of this example is that it should be considered the precursor of other fronts that may arise at any time in opposition to the multiple perverse effects of economic and financial globalisation and the application of neoliberal policies on the human, social and productive fabric at global level. Indeed, the free movement of capital and states' loss of power – or their submission to the dominant rationale – leave territories at the mercy of many other disruptive and destabilising phenomena, such as:

- a) Embrittlement of the productive fabric – due to the growing penetration of large multinational companies – which prompts frequent and abrupt delocalisation, along with the crisis of local-level activities with roots in the territory;
- b) Tourist saturation at international tourism hubs, with negative effects on the quality of urban life and the right to the city of inhabitants, due to the lack of regulation and control of this activity;
- c) Local territories competing with one another as part of a global cities market oriented to attracting foreign resources via the granting of a range of facilities and advantages to international investors to the detriment of inhabitants;
- d) Increased social inequalities and divisions in the city through induced phenomena such as gentrification, mass unemployment, social exclusion, urban violence, gender discrimination and drugs, etc.;
- e) Growing issues with coexistence and the problems of social exclusion linked to mass emigration and refugee flows;
- f) Accelerated privatisation of basic public services (water, health, education, etc.) and of many urban activities of a collective nature (security, transport of people, freight delivery, etc.);
- g) Pressure from large technological operators to invade the markets cities potentially represent for their products;
- h) Corruption in local management fuelled by profits linked to urban growth, land requalification, public purchases and trading in influence, etc.;
- i) Atmospheric and noise pollution due to the submission of LGs to the interests of certain sectors such as private car manufacturers.

This indicative list does no more than point out some of the main problems facing cities to which they cannot respond individually due to a lack of resources and recognised competences.²

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2. *To these subjects might be added, transversally, the need to find new forms of local governance, to improve the quality of local democracy and to achieve effective citizen participation to overcome the crisis in the current political representation system.*

It should be specified that we have not included the more technical issues each city must address in this list that do not necessarily have the same political and strategic ramifications such as water purification and management, waste handling and recycling, urban mobility and other classic recurring issues of local administration. It must be recalled that at this more technical level, the thematic networks can provide valid responses by detecting good practices and promoting horizontal exchanges between cities. But this line of work – which is necessary – normally lacks the capacity to tackle the general causes that explain these phenomena and mean they are repeated in almost all the world's cities and therefore challenge the LGs as a group. Clearly, the key points we have indicated above demand more strategic and “political” responses than mere horizontal exchanges between cities.

IV. Three decisive factors in creating a front

Setting out from the above examples, three factors can be highlighted that are usually present in the emergence of strategic city alliances: The first is the realisation of a serious problem that directly affects local life and requires an urgent response. As shown above, such a problem may be caused by the imposition – by the national government or international bodies – of a specific policy or the worsening of certain phenomena that threaten cities' social and political balance. That is why fronts arise, in many cases, in a reactive manner, out of a feeling of aggression and a defensive position expressed by LGs.

The second factor lies in the existence of a common political will – and a degree of trust and complicity – between the LGs that form the initial core of the protest. This does not, of course, mean strict homogeneity in terms of political parties, but relatively similar political and strategic foundations allow a common stance to be quickly adopted, without having to go through long processes of analysis, reflection and consensus-building. In this case, the capacity to react immediately to problems and aggression is the fruit of long, prior work of rapprochement and the building of common platforms between like-minded LGs and the demonstration, at the same time, of a recognised leadership that allows the mobilisation and search for instruments to be speeded up.

Third, and connected to the previous factors, the finding is underlined that on many occasions the creation of a cities front is supported by social movements, citizens' groups and civil society organisations that mobilise around the government and prompt it to seek partners and allies to attempt to resolve urgent local problems through specific actions in the international sphere.

V. Where are city alliances headed?

Faced with the mentioned problems and challenges, the policies of change introduced at the local level in Europe tend to revolve around subjects with established political content, such as:

- The desire to change the city model and place it at the service of inhabitants;

- The effective participation of inhabitants in decision-making and the empowerment of neighbours (“re-neighbouring” the city);
- The fight against real estate speculation through the promotion of social housing and rent control;
- The remunicipalisation of privatised basic services;
- The policies of reunifying the urban social fabric and reducing urban and social differences between neighbourhoods;
- The fight against the different forms of exclusion and discrimination in the city (gender-based violence or against LGBTI groups, etc.);
- The active policies of reception and integration of migrants and refugees;
- The imposition of rules on transparency and accountability;
- The clean-up of the public procurement policy, with the introduction of ethical and political conditions;
- And the decoupling of municipal institutions from the interests of large companies (open source software, etc.).

This list, provisional and incomplete, sets out just a few of the possible focuses of cities’ joint struggle. At the moment, these attempts are generally presented in a localised manner, city by city, according to the political will and objectives of each local government. Nevertheless, some mayors sense that this systemic fight absolutely requires an international dimension and support from or effective collaboration with other cities. Hence, all these lines of political transformation, which emerged and were promoted at local level, are liable to generate the creation of new cities fronts and provide them with consistency in the short and medium term.

VI. Unique, more flexible forms of organisation

Considering everything mentioned above and based on the first examples of cities fronts, we may conclude that the tools arising from these new dynamics differ substantially from established forms of city networking and city networks. These incipient forms possess a series of singularities that I highlight below:

- In order to act, the front does not consider it necessary to have previously recognised representativeness or to bring together a specific number of LGs;
- Indeed, it seeks to act out of political, social and ethical legitimacy, without at any time seeking formal representativeness or attempting to express a unified or agreed position on behalf of the LGs;
- It is sufficient for a smaller group of leading cities to be formed that manages to mobilise to formulate proposals or demands and trigger joint actions;
- The group’s aim is not expressed in terms of general demands, such as, for example, local autonomy and the right to the city, but in the form of action that focuses on a specific issue on which influence is sought;
- The cities front does not intend to establish itself as a permanent institution, but to act as a temporary alliance whose only *raison d’être* is to denounce and garner influence in relation to the central issue;
- The initial core group of cities may transform or grow over time. Electoral changes or the general political situation may make the composition of each alliance vary over time, as these organisations are

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essentially defined by their objectives;

- The composition of each front tends to be different. They are essentially ad hoc alliances that crystallise around a specific demand or a message to be spread. The main driving force and effective leadership may differ according to the issue raised;
- The creation of a cities front is not necessarily limited to the institutional sphere. Support is usually given (or sought) from citizens' platforms and civil associations;
- Efforts are made to design unique, innovative solutions, which have a clear meaning, are highly media friendly and conspicuously ground-breaking.

In particular, efforts are made to make the issue prominent in the media and on social networks, acting in a coordinated way with the civil society and social activism organisations that mobilise around this issue.

When this work has borne fruit in various cities and the LGs are ready to act with the support of citizens, the time comes to demonstrate that a group of cities can organise itself to tackle it. The aim is to oblige states, international bodies – and also city networks – to take up positions, and to attempt to provoke changes in legislation and in the division of competences between the different levels of the administration to grant better effective power to the LGs. Specifically, attempts are made to roll back the neoliberal rationale in one specific aspect and field.

VII. Cities fronts and established forms of city networking: Opposition or complementarity?

The LGs involved in these new processes often feel that “traditional” forms of local government international action – both the networks and the mechanisms of global influence – do not respond to their needs or problems and cannot provide effective support or responses in the short and medium term.

Indeed, thematic networks arise as good tools for *exchange* between LGs, but not as instruments of structural *change*. They have played a key role in creating relationships between cities in different countries, creating a culture of horizontal exchange between them, identifying and spreading good practices and stimulating the improvement of local public policies. They have therefore more than fulfilled the role they initially proposed for themselves, which is surely the reason for their success and multiplication. Nevertheless, the absence of a clear political and strategic definition and the desire to bring together the largest number of cities possible has produced significant internal heterogeneity and often led these networks to limit themselves to technical and sectoral change without attempting to promote major changes of policy or working models in their field of activity.

On the other hand, though the influence-seeking activities the representation networks promote to achieve the recognition of the LGs as international actors have secured certain positive advances, they have been slow and sometimes limited to issues of a formal nature. Indeed, the idea that to gain influence over the problems that concern cities it was necessary first to acquire access to international forums and the

spaces that belong to the global governance system produced a very long-term influence strategy with uncertain effects. Global agendas are designed by states according to their interests and are far from being able to truly reflect local problems.

These observations show that traditional forms of international action are not really suited to occasions when LGs need urgent joint action or when the seriousness of the problem they suffer requires profound change in established rules or international governance mechanisms. One can thus see how three spaces are gradually sketched out that are probably complementary.

The first is that of the networks, whose main functions are to encourage relationships between cities at international level, horizontal exchanges between them and the improvement of local public policies in certain sectors. The second – still in construction – is that of the cities fronts and alliances, which aim to place immediate pressure on NGOs and international bodies to resolve certain serious problems or to abolish specific policies. As has I have shown, this is a space of direct political influence that highlights the potentially conflictive relationship between cities and national governments. The third space is the global activity of networks that, in order to represent cities as a group, attempt in the medium and long term to gain recognition as international actors and to be able to formally express themselves within the global governance system.

The new emerging space of cities fronts and alliances is destined to gain importance in the near future. It does not exclude the other forms of actions, but neither does it prioritise them or consider them a necessary starting point. It is the awareness of a political urgency to resist the aggressions that threaten the social and civic fabric that leads cities to seek these new forms of action. Out of this need and to this end, the voice of cities and citizens seeks to gain access through direct action intended to shake up the existing institutional framework and accelerate global changes.

Hence, this type of activity, which is more political in nature, supplements the existing forms of action and allows the possibility to be glimpsed that key issues of local life may be recognised as priorities and thereby transform international agendas.

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