

THE EMERGENCE OF NEW CITY PLATFORMS ON THE INTERNATIONAL STAGE: THE IMPERATIVE OF RECONFIGURING THE ECOSYSTEM OF NETWORKS

Maruxa Cardama

*Secretary General, Partnership on Sustainable Low Carbon Transport;
former Senior Policy Specialist at Cities Alliance-UNOPS*

Decades of pioneering municipalism, the progressive recognition of the transformative potential of urbanisation and the gradual empowerment of cities and regions as major players in the national and international arenas have witnessed the blooming of organised networks of local and regional governments. The panorama has dramatically evolved since the municipalism movement began in the 20th century. Today we are witnessing an increasingly varied and complex ecosystem of city and region networks. In this convoluted environment, it is often hard to grasp the ultimate *raison d'être*, the distinctive results and the governance and accountability mechanisms of individual networks as well as of the municipalism movement as a whole. In order to fully understand the great challenges and opportunities of the current ecosystem, it is essential to open spaces for bold interrogation by voices both within and outside the system that are questioning its strategic development. For, ultimately, without a reconfiguration of the system that addresses its critical challenges and the viability of individual networks the municipalism movement is at risk in the long run.

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I. One thousand flowers blooming: Efficacy and efficiency

The phenomenon of networks is not new. Cities and regions have self-organised into networks since the early decades of the 20th century; formally joining forces to raise awareness about their needs and assets, defend their interests, find solutions to common challenges, learn from like-minded peers, and generate a critical mass that can put pressure on national governments and multilateral organisations to facilitate spaces of dialogue. Through these networks, cities and regions have also proudly upheld their ambition for international projection, and successfully advocated for their engagement in the definition and implementation of global agendas.

The proliferation of city networks over the past decades has evolved in parallel to a series of trends with profound geopolitical repercussions. Key developments include the crescendo of multilateral processes towards global agendas; the consolidation of regional integration processes; the

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questioning of the nation state; the strengthening of international municipalism; and the growing understanding and recognition of urbanisation as a major demographic trend with lasting socioeconomic and environmental impacts.

The very significant increase in the number and variety of city networks, particularly in the last fifteen years, has unfolded in a predominantly organic manner and, at times, as a political response to the national, regional or international politics of a given context. This evolution has resulted in a profound transformation of the so-called ecosystem of networks.

While this transformation need not be a problem in itself, what is problematic is that the interaction between networks is not always as synergistic as needed and the impact of the whole ecosystem is not completely coherent with the spirit of the municipalism movement.

The inconvenient truth is that, more often than we like to admit, outsiders struggle to decipher which networks they should approach for membership or collaboration. At the same time, insiders can hardly follow the overlaps between the missions, membership composition, work programmes and flagship events of the different networks. The distinctiveness of each network's mission, objectives and specific outputs often gets blurred in duplicative approaches. The dispersion of efforts and the limited shared narrative and coordination across networks around major cross-cutting issues weaken the collective impact and, at times, create confusion among the targeted national or international interlocutors. In the interest of individual and collective efficacy and efficiency, the missions and mandates of networks need to have an enhanced spirit of complementarity and coordination.

Parallel to this individual analysis, it will be necessary to take a step back and interrogate the *modus operandi* of the ecosystem of networks in its entirety. Such an interrogation involves raising complex and intertwined questions that demand an upfront and open-minded discussion as well as a fresh outlook. Is the trade-off between diversity and overall efficacy of action and impact unavoidable? What mechanisms and forums need to be developed to foster coherence of action between the different networks? What is the role of actors external to the ecosystem in all this? Further, is the growing number and variety of networks a response to actual needs – and if so, whose needs? Or, is it a *be-careful-what-you-wish-for* scenario? Is it the victory of long-time municipalism activists or an attempt to control the movement by external forces? Is it a guarantee of technical specialisation and depth or a deafening cacophony? Does it occur in synergistic coexistence or does the law of the jungle rule? Those of us who have proudly participated in and promoted the networks movement for decades and who are familiar with its successful trajectory and struggles know that simple *yes* or *no* answers to these questions would not do the movement justice.

II. An ecosystem squeezed between the risks of implosion and external manipulation

Among the matters that need facing collectively and for which a collective narrative is required are those around the notion of “ecosystem”.

A quick search of Wikipedia reminds us that “ecosystems include interactions among organisms, and between organisms and their environment”. As we examine the interactions between the networks in the ecosystem, it is worth noting that lately one frequently hears city representatives express their frustration about the saturated calendar of *high-level, world or global* conferences, congresses, summits, assemblies and a long etcetera of flagship events that are organised by the different networks their city belongs to.

We could limit our thinking to some immediate answers to this frustration; for instance, recommending to the world secretariats of the largest international networks that they step up efforts towards enhanced coordination in events programmes. However, I would argue in favour of also calling on the individual and collective responsibility of the member cities/regions that give life to these membership-based creatures that are the networks. Could we say that, nowadays, the average city/region which decides to join a network has a mid-term strategic plan for doing so? Despite the decades of city network proliferation on average I do not think we can. It is still common to see cities and regions from varying latitudes and development levels assess the strength of their internationalisation strategy or their capacity-building plans in merely quantitative terms – i.e. the number of networks they are part of – with no similar attention given to analysing the strategic objectives of each membership. Could we say that, nowadays, the average city/region which decides to engage in the governing mechanisms of a given network is moved by reasons exclusively linked to the collective mission of such a network? I am sure many are, but I am not sure this applies to all the cities/regions that end up fulfilling a governing role in a given network.

In a membership organisation, members gain as much as they invest. It is of vital importance for a city/region to be strategic and also honest and realistic about its expectations, ambitions and contributions when joining networks. And it is vital that the governance of these networks is ruled by strict standards of service to the common mission and democratic accountability.

As we examine how this ecosystem of networks is doing in terms of interactions between the networks and their environment, we should note that – deterred by not understanding who does what, or who to fund for a specific type of work, or how collaboration between networks takes place – national governments, multilateral entities, philanthropies, private sector actors and academia increasingly choose to bypass the networks. Instead they work directly with cities and regions. Often, they do this on the basis of random criteria and samples that defeat the purpose of better understanding how to unleash the potential of local and regional government action. In other instances, this bypassing of networks to work directly with cities and regions responds to the logic of *divide and conquer* by pulverising the *critical mass* factor.

In any ecosystem, species come in different sizes and fulfil different roles across the chain of functions that underpins the viability of each and every organism. So-called *umbrella species* are selected for providing conservation-related decisions. Protecting them typically contributes to indirectly protecting the many other species in the same habitat. Things have become rather complex in the ecosystem of networks on this front.

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The traditional large networks consisting solely of local and regional governments, which conventionally occupied a big, prominent space in the ecosystem, have witnessed the arrival of *another kind of big* with significant individual convening power and ability to attract resources, both financial and human, at considerable scale. These are *new* networks or initiatives propelled by philanthropy and formed by megacities and/or global cities; as well as *new* networks with a heterogeneous membership base of governments at all levels, civil society and United Nations system entities. The community of networks is not always able to answer questions about the contribution of these *new* networks to the *traditional* ecosystem and their overall complementarity with a shared vision.

The intense focus on so-called *umbrella species* has resulted in unintended consequences, for instance the (at least partial) neglect of secondary cities. This neglect has extended to the limited tailor-made attention to the capacity and resources needs of secondary cities and the disregarding of their potential in building the system of cities that is unquestionably needed to scale up transformative solutions and overcome inequalities within countries. Ironically, more recently there have been additional turns of the screw of this unintended consequence that contribute to further saturating the networks ecosystem and add up to the list of external factors putting pressure on it. As this neglect for secondary cities gets gradually acknowledged new networks, initiatives and platforms focused on this typology of cities pop-up. International consultancy firms have also begun to seize the business opportunity and a long list of multilateral entities with more or (often) less extensive track records of urban experience seek to work with and in secondary cities.

Wikipedia also tells us that “ecosystems can be of any size but each ecosystem has a specific, limited space”. An argument widely shared by all networks is that cities are laboratories of integrated and multi-stakeholder solutions to address the inextricably interlinked social, economic and environmental aspects behind urban and territorial development. Peer-to-peer exchange and learning, as well as support for replicating practical solutions, are among the key services regularly offered by networks to attract local and regional governments. Still, the ecosystem is falling short on optimising the potential that a synergistic interaction between *traditional* and *new* networks provides for in terms of greater integration and smart partnerships with other stakeholders from the private sector, the field of knowledge production or civil society organisations.

Ecosystems are controlled by both internal and external factors. In recent years, philanthropic institutions, bilateral development agencies and multilateral entities or funds have gained increasing influence in the ecosystem of networks and its internal dynamics. They have also established multiple platforms and initiatives related to cities outside the networks ecosystem which enjoy strong profiles, marked dynamism and robust resources while possessing less clear governance and accountability structures than the so-called *traditional* networks. With the inclusion of a stand-alone goal on cities and human settlements (SDG11) in the 17 Sustainable Development Goals that guide the 2030 Agenda and increased recognition of sub-national action in climate change adaptation and mitigation we can only expect these trends to achieve new heights.

It is important that the community of networks can identify, interrogate and communicate the consequences – both negative and positive – of these external influences. This will equip the community with a knowledge base from which to curate informed, bold and constructive interaction with philanthropy, bilateral development agencies and multilateral entities or funds concerning the role of each actor in enabling local and regional action towards sustainable human development.

What does it mean nowadays to further democratise the governance of both *traditional* networks and *new* networks or initiatives to make them more transparent and accountable? And to whom should each type of network be accountable? Is it possible to define a distinct but complementary role between *traditional* local government-based networks and *new* multi-stakeholder-based or -oriented networks? And if so, what is the shared narrative that can be used to define this? What can the differences between these two types of networks mean in terms of the strategic development of the networks movement in the coming decades? These are some of the questions that remain open to debate. It would not be possible or smart to address them only from within the inner circles of the networks ecosystem.

III. The contemporary *raison d'être* and the new frontiers of the ecosystem

Science has proven that ecosystems are dynamic per se. It is certainly not desirable to spend energy putting a cap on the number of networks that see the light of day. And it is probably pointless to expect that we can plan the development of every single network. However, I believe that the aspects addressed above constitute a wake-up call for the networks movement and imply the need to reconfigure its ecosystem.

Guided by the individual and collective success stories and learning accumulated over decades by the different networks, it is crucial to identify the strategic evolution and the new parameters that define the contemporary *raison d'être* of both the networks movement as a whole and each existing network individually. From these fundamental aspects, we will be able to openly debate, gain understanding of and communicate the contemporary taxonomy of networks, the distinct contributions each makes and the interactions between them. It could be argued that almost any classification would be reductionist and distort the complex reality. Less arguable are the risks behind sticking our heads in the sand or limiting the ability of the networks movement to redefine itself and self-organise from the maturity of its achievements.

Over decades, city networks have, among other success stories, offered thought leadership and coordination mechanisms whose terrific impacts have embarrassed and even challenged the results obtained by national governments and multilateral entities. Additionally, city networks have provided the platform for the actual participation of local and regional governments in the negotiation and consultation phases towards international agreements. With the strategic critical mass obtained through these networks, the realities, assets and needs of local and regional governments are being increasingly reflected in international and national agendas.

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Thanks to the shared vision of the municipalism movement and the collective efforts of networks, finally it is widely understood that cities and regions must have a seat at the international and national tables that debate global/national challenges and seek concerted global/national roadmaps for local impact. City and region networks can be essential to the immense work that lies ahead. To do this, they must rekindle the pioneering and adventurous essence of the municipalism movement that inspired them. Key to this rekindling will be not to yield to the siren calls of those expecting networks to operate in a fortress secluded from other actors; resisting any temptation to emulate forums of national government or multilateral entities in *grandeur*; and thriving amid dynamic efficacy and healthy competition for innovative thinking and action.

The interrogation of the new frontiers of the movement deserves exhaustive deliberation from within and outside the movement, but this is not the primary objective of this chapter. However, the networks “geek” in me gets a kick out of thinking about the great opportunities offered by the imperative of reconfiguring this ecosystem. The paragraphs that follow aim to throw some food for thought into the much-needed upfront and open-minded debate this chapter is calling for.

Radical ideologies, populism, xenophobia and inequality are intense forces that are rocking the foundations of democratic values and fueling the disconnect between institutions, governments and citizens from the local to the national and multilateral levels. The link between the work of networks and the matters that are close to the fears and joys of citizens needs further elucidating and enabling; the decay of democracy from local community life upwards needs counterbalancing; the human rights, solidarity and social cohesion values that are so intrinsic to the DNA of the municipalism movement need protecting. These overarching goals may guide us in finding some of the next frontiers for our movement.

City networks can play a thought-leadership and stewardship role, reminding us that the defence of democracy and the need to adapt its *modus operandi* in this convulsive 21st century is a global emergency that cuts across the east, west, north and south of the globe. City networks can contribute to preventing the negative forces mentioned above from impregnating institutional and political life with their narratives and these being accepted as the new dialectical normal. City networks can provide a trust space for defining a new democratic agenda for local communities anchored in a contemporary social pact between institutions, governments and citizens.

As unprecedented urbanisation rates shape the development of middle income, emerging and least developed countries and we increase our understanding of how urban livelihoods react to, adapt to and mitigate global challenges, there is wide recognition that synergistic and complementary action by different spheres of government is very much needed to overcome the most pressing challenges facing humankind in the 21st century. In the wake of paradigm-shift global agreements such as the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the Paris Climate Change Agreement, it is commonly agreed that the universal

Sustainable Development Goals and the global climate action roadmap must be *localised*. That means they must be translated into concrete actions for territorial development and positive impact on local communities. These global agendas will fail to deliver any real positive transformation for people and the planet if there is no empowerment of local and regional governments and ownership by citizens. There is also increased understanding that *localising* global agendas means giving local and regional governments a leading role in the process, as well as commensurate resources.

City networks have a crucial role to play in helping national governments, donor agencies, the private sector, philanthropy, academia and multilateral entities understand that the landscape of sustainable urbanisation across the globe requires a diversity of development models and pathways that is far from being identified and even further away from being fully enabled with adequate institutional, legal and financial frameworks.

An ambitious 2030 Agenda that leaves “no-one, no place and no natural ecosystem behind” can only be achieved with a new paradigm of intergovernmental governance, fiscal and financial systems based on the principle of multi-level governance and mindful of the overall decline in official development assistance. However, the international recognition of urbanisation and cities as drivers and agents of transformation so far is not reflected in global governance structures, such as the United Nations. Though the clear improvements over recent years in terms of sub-national government, other stakeholders and civil society engagement in global governance structures are unquestionable, the overall configuration remains trapped in a 19th and 20th century logic of nation-states.

Beyond the important task of maintaining the seat at the national and international tables, city and region networks can offer thought leadership for defining and operationalising such a new paradigm within both national contexts and multilateral spaces such as the United Nations or the multilateral development banks. Networks can also identify what internal changes the ecosystem will need to implement in order to effectively engage in the possible different scenarios of these new paradigms – because the current internal modus operandi of the ecosystem will not suffice.

In the quest for prosperous, just and environmentally respectful livelihoods and communities, local and regional governments are facing complex and integrated challenges that call on the responsibilities and abilities of many other actors. City and region networks will continue to provide crucial help in the identification of local government capacity and ownership gaps. At the same time, they can step up efforts towards concrete action between countries, cities and companies. They can champion the knowledge-policy-practice interface across knowledge producers, policymakers and practitioners. Networks can focus on the curation of safe spaces for positive social and institutional innovation or behavioural change in collaboration with social scientists. They can pioneer systems-thinking approaches that, while enabling cross-departmental collaboration and breaking silos in local administrations, also foster technical specialisation and depth.

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Since the establishment of the pioneering city and region networks in the first half of the 20th century, governments at all levels, multilateral entities and certainly the municipalism movement have harvested success stories and concrete results thanks to this network approach. The proliferation of an increasing number and diversity of networks has resulted in a certain cacophony and is taking a toll in the overall efficacy, efficiency, coherence and legitimacy of both the individual networks and their ecosystem. There is no need to fall into alarmism or to demonise either the original municipalism movement or the network approach. The time has simply come to invest adequate efforts into consciously understand and explain how the ecosystem of networks has evolved over the past decades; what can its strategic development be in the decades to come, and what would coherent reconfiguration look like? What is the contemporary *raison d'être* of the networks movement? Which of its old characteristics no longer exist and how can undesirable gaps can be filled? What opportunities and challenges – intended and unintended – do its new characteristics bring? How can different networks facilitate partnerships with other constituencies and stakeholders? What are the external actors that enable, influence or even distort the municipalism movement in the 21st century? How can the overall movement of networks (and each individual network) remain transparent and accountable in the face of the current turbulent socio-political climate? Addressing these questions collectively will not only consolidate the maturity of city and region networks as vehicles to facilitate a place at the national and global tables. It is also fundamentally linked to the long-term survival of a good number of individual networks and, ultimately, of the whole ecosystem.

In a sector which over the past decades has been intellectually nourished by a group of highly committed activists and fellow-travellers, it will be tempting to shoot the messenger. Remaining open to and encouraging reflections from other stakeholder groups outside local and regional governments and the secretariats of their networks will be crucial. We should seize the opportunity to discuss and organise a contemporary ecosystem of city and region networks in our own terms before other forces with less democratic and altruistic aims start doing it for us.