EMPOWERING CITIES IN A REFORMED MULTILATERAL SYSTEM

- THE ROLE OF CITIES IN A REFORMED UN: TOWARDS THE INSTITUTIONALISATION OF THE WORLD ASSEMBLY OF LOCAL AND REGIONAL GOVERNMENTS

  Marta Galceran-Vercher

- IS SOMETHING BETTER THAN NOTHING? MULTI-LEVEL GOVERNANCE AND THE EUROPEAN COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS IN EU POLICYMAKING

  Andrea Noferini

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The United Nations (UN) marked its 75th anniversary at a time when the coronavirus pandemic and other global crises were underscoring the fragility of multilateralism as the guiding principle of global governance. The Secretary-General acknowledged a few months ago that in the 21st century we cannot continue to accept a dysfunctional global governance system made exclusively by and for national governments. António Guterres proposed moving towards "a networked multilateralism" built in collaboration with civil society, the private sector and local governments. It would be a multilateralism based on "[s]hared values, shared responsibility, shared sovereignty, shared progress".[1] In this context, the organisations that make up "international municipalism" eagerly joined the UN75 global conversation and put forward bold demands for greater recognition.

These claims and aspirations are nothing new. In fact, reforming the multilateral system to make it more encompassing and permeable to cities' interest has been on the agenda of international municipalism since its inception. As far back as 1920 the International Union of Local Authorities (IULA), predecessor of United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG), sought permanent participation in the League of Nations (LON) (Gaspari, 2002). The demands met little success and both the LON and its successor, the UN, ended up structuring a fragmented relationship with cities' representative bodies that is similar to its treatment of civil society.

Admittedly, there has been some progress in the past three decades to formalise the role of local governments in global governance structures, especially within the UN system (Garcia-Chueca, 2020). An important milestone in this regard was the recognition in 1992 of local governments as one of the Major Groups that should be involved in implementing global sustainability agendas. Another significant landmark was the second United Nations Conference on Human Settlements (Habitat II) in 1996, which was attended by more than 500 mayors and municipal leaders who managed to participate in the deliberations. More relevantly, during Habitat II local governments associations for the first time convened the World Assembly

of Cities and Local Authorities (WACLA), which served as a formal mechanism for providing input to the Habitat II negotiations.

Since that time, UN-Habitat has become a crucial platform for advancing the municipalist agenda, which has in turn brought about a change in mindset towards the role of cities in formulating global agendas. Some of the most noteworthy examples are the creation of the UN Advisory Committee of Local Authorities (UNACLA), which has served as an advisory body to the Executive Director of UN-Habitat since 2000, or the revision of the rules of procedure of the agency's Governing Council.

More recently, the Global Taskforce of Local and Regional Governments (GTF), a coordination mechanism promoted by UCLG around which the main associations of local governments have coalesced, has successfully influenced some of the most recent intergovernmental processes. As a result of such advocacy efforts, the Paris Agreement and the UNFCCC Climate Action Agenda recognise the need to involve cities; local governments were invited to participate in the deliberations over the adoption of the New Urban Agenda (NUA); and one of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) has an unequivocally urban dimension.

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But despite these arguably municipalist victories, cities' impact on global discussions remains more symbolic than real. In most cases, they are invited to participate as mere observers or implementers of the major agreements but have little effective involvement in decision-making and lack the capacity to influence the agenda. Further, when looking at the initiatives put in place to grant them access and participation rights, one should clearly distinguish between the UN institution (i.e. the bureaucracy and the secretariats) – interested in forging partnerships with non-state actors as means of implementing the organisation's mandate – and UN member states (Ruhlman, 2015). This distinction is important, because the latter have always been reluctant to transfer any morsel of power to local authorities in fear of eroding national sovereignty.

Hence, the main global city networks continue to call for "a seat at the global table" (Salmerón Escobar, 2016), which would involve a structural shift in how the UN and its members relate to local governments. Certain concrete proposals exist for remodelling the system in this direction, such as upgrading the current consultative status with ECOSOC to permanent observer status before the UN General Assembly; the creation of a new agency that would give more visibility to cities and urban issues within the UN (something like UN-Cities or UN-Urban); and the establishment of subsidiary bodies of consultative nature with some UN agencies, which could be inspired by the European Committee of the Regions. To be sure, some have more potential than others, and the current context of UN reform could help accelerate such changes. In order to understand them further, the remainder of the chapter provides an overview of some of the current mechanisms and limitations of cities' participation within the UN system, focusing on the institutionalisation of a World Assembly of Local and Regional Governments (WALRG), and discusses the challenges that lie ahead.

58   THE ROLE OF CITIES IN A REFORMED UN: TOWARDS THE INSTITUTIONALISATION OF THE WORLD ASSEMBLY OF LOCAL AND REGIONAL GOVERNMENTS

MONOGRAFÍAS CIDOB •81• 2021

I. From consultative status with ECOSOC to permanent observer at the UN General Assembly

Formally, cities' participation in the UN is articulated through local government networks like UCLG and ICLEI, both of which have consultative status with the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) and act as focal points for the whole urban constituency on a rotating basis.[2] Such recognition entitles them to attend the events and working sessions of ECOSOC-related agencies and commissions, where they may make written and oral statements and organise side events, along with basic (although surprisingly restricted) privileges, such as receiving passes to access UN facilities (UN-DESA, 2018). This access makes it possible for mayoral delegations to participate in multilateral summits such as the Conference of the Parties (COP) to the UNFCCC and the High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development, as well as being involved in intergovernmental negotiations such as those over the 2030 Agenda.

Nevertheless, this has repeatedly been criticised by international municipalism as insufficient and inadequate recognition. First, because consultative status was initially intended for NGOs and therefore does not recognise local governments as governmental actors (or their networks as intergovernmental actors, for that matter) but as civil society entities. Today, 5,725 entities currently have consultative status.[3] And secondly, because this categorisation significantly restricts cities' real capacity for political influence in global discussions, as it does not grant them direct access to the General Assembly, which is the main deliberative, policymaking and representative organ of the UN. As a result, city networks are forced to negotiate participation rights with each of the different UN agencies separately, which may explain the proliferation of memorandums of understanding between them.

Given these limitations, associations of local governments have been calling for permanent observer status for decades (UCLG, 2013). This would allow cities' voices to be heard in the General Assembly's sessions and resolutions, and is therefore seen as an important step forward. Furthermore, cities and their organisations could maintain a permanent mission at UN headquarters, which would enhance their contacts with national delegations and provide opportunities for political advocacy. Sometimes effective diplomacy is merely a matter of being in the room where decisions are made (or as close to it as possible). But what are the real chances of achieving such an advanced level of recognition?

Until recently, permanent observer status was reserved for non-member states (e.g. the Holy See and Palestine), intergovernmental organisations (e.g. the African Union or the OECD), and entities such as the International Committee of the Red Cross. In other words, bodies formed and supported directly or indirectly by national governments. However, that changed in 2016, when the International Chamber of Commerce joined this select club. Some saw a future opportunity for cities in this move, and the reasoning seems clear: if the world's largest business organisation can acquire this status, why shouldn't local governments be entitled to similar recognition? But as it remains a route that requires the unanimous approval of all members of the assembly, it is worth recalling that many countries still see cities' growing global assertiveness as a threat to their national sovereignty.

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2. For further insights, see the governance paper of the Local Authorities Major Group, available online. [Accessed: 20 September 2020]: https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/7384LAMG%20governance%20paper%20for%20HLPF%20Working%20Group_final.pdf
3. For a list of entities with consultative status, see: https://esango.un.org/civilsociety/displayConsultativeStatusSearch.do?method=search&sessionCheck=false

MARTA GALCERAN-VERCHER

II. The need to speak with a single voice

Beyond the above-mentioned limitations, efforts to establish a structural participation mechanism for cities within the UN system have also been hindered by the question of the representativity and accountability of the associations claiming to speak on behalf of local governments. In point of fact, similar considerations would apply to any other stakeholder constituency (i.e. women, youth, business, etc.), as highlighted by recent works on stakeholder democracy (Dodds, 2019) and multistakeholderism as a new global governance practice (Raymond and DeNardis, 2015; Gleckman, 2018). This is not a trivial matter, since for at least the foreseeable future, a scenario of individual cities engaging and reporting progress directly to the UN does not seem feasible.[4]

Indeed, irrespective of the type of recognition awarded, be it consultative or permanent observer status, whenever local governments are given "a seat at the global table", there is generally *only one* seat for them. That means that whatever oral intervention or written comment is submitted to any UN meeting or intergovernmental process, it has to be made through a single interlocutor, speaking on behalf of the whole constituency. Speaking with one voice is undoubtedly challenging, not least because the ecosystem of city networks is a fragmented and highly complex one in which the leading organisations are frequently vying for funding, resources, members and access to political forums (Fernández de Losada and Abdullah, 2019).

Despite this competitive environment, the larger global networks (i.e. UCLG, ICLEI, C40) have understood that "networking with networks" should be made an essential element of their diplomacy efforts if they are to successfully expand their global reach and influence (Abdullah and Garcia-Chueca, 2020). From a symbolic point of view, offering an image of unity is of even more paramount importance. Indeed, without genuine cooperation that includes the co-creation of a truly shared global agenda for local and regional governments, city networks can claim to speak, at best, only on behalf of their member cities, but not in representation of the whole urban constituency. Strategy-wise, cooperation also serves to lend legitimacy to the agenda-setting efforts of these associations, which explains why the Global Taskforce of Local and Regional Governments emerged during the post-2015 international process, when the role for local governments in sustainable development was being discussed (including the negotiation over SDG11, the so-called "Urban SDG") and the stakes for the urban community were therefore too high to fail.

III. The role of the Global Taskforce and the World Assembly of Local and Regional Governments

Just as the Earth Summit in 1992 and Habitat II in 1996 catalysed the unification process that culminated in the foundation of UCLG in 2004, the Post-2015 Development Agenda Process and Habitat III once again created the need for cities and their networks to coordinate joint inputs and responses. The rationale was that cities and their networks would be much more efficient in their advocacy efforts if they addressed their messages as a unified constituency. Hence, the GTF was established in

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4. A notable exception here is the submission of a Voluntary Local Review (VLR) by New York City during the 2018 High Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development (HLPF). This was a truly individual initiative, as city networks were already reporting the progress made on the implementation of Agenda 2030 by all LRGs worldwide through the SDG localisation report. Other cities, such as Helsinki (Finland) and Bristol (UK), are following NYC's steps, turning this individual initiative into a collective one.

60
THE ROLE OF CITIES IN A REFORMED UN: TOWARDS THE INSTITUTIONALISATION OF THE WORLD ASSEMBLY OF LOCAL AND REGIONAL GOVERNMENTS

MONOGRAFÍAS CIDOB •81• 2021

2013 and was, in turn, instrumental in relaunching the World Assembly of Local and Regional Governments in 2016.

Operationally, the GTF was set up as the technical coordination and consultation mechanism for the major international networks of local governments to undertake joint advocacy work relating to global policy processes, particularly those connected with sustainable development. Interestingly, this initiative was conceived following the very same logic that brought UCLG into being some decades ago, which can be summarised in the following twin aims: (1) to unify the voice of local and regional governments (LRGs) worldwide before the international community; and (2) to create a space from which to build LRGs' joint positions and organise their advocacy strategy at the global level. Ultimately, it aspired to present local governments as a unified constituency in order to improve the chances of making the most of this *single seat* eventually afforded to them at the global table.

Yet, the GTF was not devised only as a technical mechanism, but also as a political one. Indeed, among its functions is the authority to convene the World Assembly of Local and Regional Governments, which is presented to the international community as "the political voice" of the urban constituency (UCLG, 2019: 23). More relevantly, the United Nations recognises the WALRG as the formal mechanism for following up and reviewing the implementation of the New Urban Agenda at the local level.[5] This means that, formally, whenever the WALRG is convened, the declarations issued should be taken into consideration as the formal input of the LRG constituency into the implementation of the NUA.

Today the Global Taskforce is made up of 25 global and regional networks, including C40, ICLEI, the Global Parliament of Mayors and UCLG, the latter being the coordinator and facilitator of this initiative. It should be noted, however, that the level of involvement of these associations has evolved over time. For instance, C40 was initially quite reluctant to join this coordination mechanism, which was seen as a UCLG-dominated space. Yet, today, collaboration between the different networks seems to be much more robust. A clear illustration is the report on the local implementation of SDGs that is presented annually during the High-Level Political Forum and which despite being led by UCLG usually receives significant input and contributions from the other networks. Another example is the ongoing collaboration between C40 and UCLG to convene the Urban 20 initiative.

IV. The challenges ahead

In sum, there has been some progress and promising initiatives have materialised in recent years aimed at reforming the UN to make it more inclusive towards local governments. Also, research has shown that at least at the discursive level, the acknowledgement of cities as decisive actors has improved in most UN frameworks (Kosovac et al., 2020). Still, there is a long way to go and the challenges ahead are significant, particularly with regards to translating a strictly nominal and rather symbolic recognition into effective and tangible influence in global governance outputs.

Cities and their networks would be much more efficient in their advocacy efforts if they addressed their messages as a unified constituency. Hence, the GTF was established in 2013.

5. General Assembly resolution 71/256. New Urban Agenda. Resolution adopted by the General Assembly on 23 December 2016, A/RES/71/256, paragraph 169, page 29.

MARTA GALCERAN-VERCHER

Institutionalising the WALRG would require rethinking its current governance scheme, especially its level of representativity and the role played by city networks.

To start with, prospects for obtaining permanent observer status with the General Assembly do not look bright, despite this being one of the core demands local authorities have once again brought to the fore over the course of the UN75 consultations. Also, it remains to be seen whether such status would bring any substantial change, as at the end of the day, voting power would remain with member states. The consolidation of the World Assembly of Local and Regional Governments is surely a remarkable step forward, and its acknowledgement in the New Urban Agenda should be cherished. However, the WALRG has yet to obtain recognition by UN agencies other than UN-Habitat, let alone adquiring formal UN status before the General Assembly. Until that time arrives, its declarations will remain non-binding and therefore more symbolic than effective. Further, institutionalising the WALRG would require rethinking its current governance scheme, especially its level of representativity and the role played by city networks.

As has been argued, the competing and overcrowded ecosystem of city networks makes it hard for local governments to speak with a single voice. Yet, it is not only a matter of having too many organisations all claiming to be the most effective and legitimate advocate of local governments. Instead, the issue of representativeness is profoundly rooted in the very nature of the category of "local and regional governments" itself. Indeed, the urban voice is not and will never be a homogeneous one, but rather diverse and rich in nuances. The interests and challenges of large metropolitan areas have little in common with those of small and medium-sized cities. Aspirations to build a single shared agenda that fits all shapes and sizes can therefore appear unworkable. Cities and regions belong to different levels of jurisdiction, and a single assembly could never hope to represent them both satisfactorily. The European Committee of the Regions suffers from this very structural flaw. Perhaps a bicameral system of representation could be a way forward in achieving greater levels of representativity and relevance.

Likewise, most proposals for a reformed UN attach great importance to networks of local and regional governments and their role in orchestrating joint positions out of a cacophony of urban voices. While their salience as conveners and mediating agents between the local and the global reality can hardly be disputed, other aspects should be appraised before uncritically assuming that this is the best system of organising the interests of local governments globally. For instance, power dynamics that operate within these organisations are still poorly understood. In particular, how they are governed, who sets the agenda and – increasingly importantly – what role partners (i.e. corporates and civil society organisations) play. This is all the more relevant as we seem to be transitioning towards multistakeholder schemes of governance (see Garcia-Chueca and Zárate in this volume). More research is needed into the agency of these organisations' secretariats and their influence in shaping how members prioritise governance objectives and interventions (Lecavalier and Gordon, 2020). This is not a minor point, as the interests of these secretariats may not always be aligned with those of the diverse membership they claim to represent.

Last but not least, perhaps it is time to decouple the debate on the role of cities in global governance from the debate on how to improve their recognition *within* the UN. For one thing, the number of "global tables"

62   THE ROLE OF CITIES IN A REFORMED UN: TOWARDS THE INSTITUTIONALISATION OF THE WORLD ASSEMBLY OF LOCAL AND REGIONAL GOVERNMENTS

MONOGRAFÍAS CIDOB •81• 2021

at which local governments must aim to exert influence has multiplied and the UN no longer remains the sole body in charge of global governance. This calls for city networks to diversify their efforts in order to make cities' voices as necessary in spaces like the G20 as they are in any intergovernmental process sponsored by the UN. The consolidation of the Urban 20 initiative attests to this trend. But the pathway for cities *within* a system made by and for national governments may always be limiting and shortsighted. Local governments should not pursue recognition for the sake of recognition, but ought to aspire to create global impact instead. And if this cannot be attained *within* the system they strive to reform, other pathways *without* the UN may need to be explored.

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64

THE ROLE OF CITIES IN A REFORMED UN: TOWARDS THE INSTITUTIONALISATION OF THE WORLD ASSEMBLY OF LOCAL AND REGIONAL GOVERNMENTS

MONOGRAFÍAS CIDOB •81• 2021