

CITIES AS A LEVER FOR CHANGE AMONG ENTRENCHED STATES

Considering the insufficient progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), cities offer the multilateral system a lever for change in an increasingly urban world. Yet despite notable steps forward, cities remain on the fringes of the Summit of the Future. The quarters most reluctant to welcome them could well take note of geopolitical tensions that are threatening to compound the United Nations' crisis of legitimacy.



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The Summit of the Future in the era of cities

The heads of state who gather for the Summit of the Future in September 2024 will do so against the backdrop of a world order even more fraught with geopolitical tensions than in 2023, the year initially proposed for the summit in **Our Common Agenda**, the report drawn up by United Nations Secretary-General António Guterres in 2021. Four years on, the Summit of the Future will take place on a global stage drifting further from the targets of reinvigorating multilateralism and accelerating the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) set in Our Common Agenda.

Looking ahead to the summit, the question arises as to which areas of the international political system could present opportunities for transformation and help to achieve the objectives identified by the secretary-general. In the last analysis, the founding principles of the United Nations Charter of 1945 (which the Summit of the Future seeks to reaffirm) have been overwhelmed by today's complexity of actors and dynamics that played only a minor role in the immediate aftermath of the Second World War. The underlying causes of the clearly insufficient progress towards the SDGs and the UN's evident crisis of legitimacy lie in the palpable

mismatch between the global governance needs of the 21st century and the institutional tools at our disposal. Far from simplifying extremely complex institutional problems, cities in fact are at once an emerging international actor this century and a lever for change.

To start with, we live in an increasingly urban world. If in 1950 urban dwellers accounted for 30% of the global population, in 2050 they will constitute 68% of the planet's expected 9.7 billion inhabitants. At the same time, thanks to an unparalleled spatial concentration of resources, cities are the main incubators of economic productivity and generate over 80% of global GDP. Drawing on this demographic and economic centrality, and in line with a diverse geography associated with decentralisation processes at state level, cities have forged close partnerships over recent decades. They have also come together to address issues that transcend national borders and the response capacity of nation states. A testimony to that is that cities, which are responsible for around 70% of global greenhouse gas emissions, are adopting emissions reduction targets that are generally more ambitious than the mitigation goals of their respective states.

Cities in official deliberations

Given this potential, it is hardly encouraging that cities fail to form part of the Summit of the Future's core architecture. Less heartening still is the scant acknowledgement of cities in the draft Pact for the Future, the final document that is to be negotiated and adopted by the participating countries at the gathering. The preliminary draft of the pact mentions local governments in the framework of organisations in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC), thus equating city governments and the political legitimacy underpinning them with non-governmental organisations (NGOs).

The first revision of the draft, released in May 2024, is something of an improvement. It calls for strengthening local governments' engagement in United Nations intergovernmental processes and requests the secretary-general to provide recommendations on the matter. The Secretary-General's Advisory Group on Local and Regional Governments has played a prominent role in this progress. Established in 2023 and working over a one-year period, it is made up of 15 representatives of subnational governments and five representatives of United Nations member states. Its secretariat is provided by the United Nations Human Settlements Programme (UN-Habitat). This advisory mechanism reflects the commitment to multilateral recognition of the various major transnational networks of cities united as a group in the Global Task Force of Local and Regional Governments,

which is responsible for appointing the 15 representatives of subnational governments in the advisory group.

Still, talks remain nowhere near recognition of formal and permanent observer status at the United Nations General Assembly that cities covet; recognition, meanwhile, that the international organisation has indeed granted to lawmakers and chambers of commerce, institutionalising greater political weight for these groups in official deliberations on the multilateral architecture. Partial advances aside, the clear stagnation of cities' work to increase their political representation in the main UN bodies is a reflection of the entrenchment of states in the defence of their prerogative over national sovereignty, the bedrock of the present international political system (Martínez, 2023).

Recognition policies

As António Guterres said in his address to the United Nations General Assembly in September 2023, we are living in a **multipolar world** that requires global governance institutions adapted to 21st century political and economic realities. Paradoxically, cities show a greater interest in strengthening and reforming an international political system centred on the primacy of nation states than many countries embroiled in geopolitical tensions that undermine multilateralism's capacity to respond collectively to the challenges of our time (Klaus, 2022).

As we observe the Summit of the Future preparations and note the main United Nations bodies' inability to rethink their institutional mechanisms and adapt to the dynamics and actors of an increasingly urban world, we might reflect on the implications of formal recognition for cities (or lack thereof) in the summit's core architecture and in the succeeding declaration of the Pact for the Future. For example, with respect to the insufficient progress towards the SDGs, of the 17 global objectives it is SDG 11, focusing on cities, for which we have **least data** regarding the monitoring of implementation. This lays bare the inability of intergovernmental processes and organisations to ensure national statistics offices can always rely on the essential collaboration of regional actors in cities (starting with local governments) for data collection. In view of this situation, is formal recognition by the UN system essential for boosting the contribution cities make to global governance? Given the fact that thus far this system has failed to reform for its own good, are there other institutional spaces where cities can increase their multilateral recognition?

THE CLEAR STAGNATION OF CITIES' WORK TO INCREASE THEIR POLITICAL REPRESENTATION IN THE MAIN UN BODIES REFLECTS THE ENTRENCHMENT OF THE STATES.

As the work of the Urban20 (U20) and the Urban7 (U7) platforms demonstrates, cities have identified multilateral spaces in the intergovernmental forums of the G20 and G7 whose deliberations have an impact on their day-to-day affairs. Hence the growing interest on the part of some of the major transnational city networks to influence their agendas. Neither organisation can boast the level of legitimacy of the United Nations as the universal institutional benchmark for global governance. But the quarters that form the core architecture of the Summit of the Future and the UN system most reluctant to embrace the opportunity for transformation that cities offer, could well take note of the possibilities that these new multilateral forums could open up in the future; and of the prominence it would afford them. A reflection that is all the more imperative given the geopolitical tensions that are threatening to compound the United Nations' crisis of legitimacy.

Bibliographical references

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