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I. Introduction

International municipalism is not a new phenomenon, but its recognition remains an ongoing process. During the last decades, increased urbanisation rates (up to 50% in 2007: see UCLG, 2016), the rearrangement of decentralisation frameworks in many countries and the new role of local authorities as engines and guarantors of local development have established cities as important political protagonists.

The beginning of the new millennium was characterised by two diverging but complementary trends. On the one hand, networks advocating for the recognition of cities as pivotal political and diplomatic actors tended to merge to strengthen their position vis-à-vis states and the United Nations. On the other, new thematic networks fostering peer-to-peer learning, pilot experiments and knowledge exchange started to grow and multiply at both national and international levels.

As Marx recognised (2008), city networks have received little attention as a meaningful research topic, despite their growing relevance for the formulation of best practices and the debates about climate change and multilevel governance (Taylor and Derudde, 2015; Le Galès, 2002). The issue certainly deserves further attention, especially since interdisciplinary perspectives such as Actor-Network Theory have enriched International Relations and Political Science (Acuto, 2014; Cudworth and Hobden, 2013). Analysing city networks from this perspective could help disrupt traditional political binaries (democratic/autocratic, rural/urban, etc.) and enrich the understanding of their continuous shifting and “material-semiotic” nature (where relations are simultaneously material – between things – and semiotic – between concepts they work on), as well as the effects of technological agency on them (Barrinha and Renard, 2017).

We start by observing how important – at least in the rhetoric of many city networks – the declared need to open urban decision-making processes to citizens now seems to be, paying attention to inclusion, enhancement of differences and the demodiversity of social actors. The overview of city networks from this perspective will act as a prism

In the rhetoric of many city networks the declared need to open urban decision-making processes to citizens seems to be gaining in importance

Social Forum (WSF) brought together informal networks of local and regional authorities that placed great emphasis on taking citizen participation seriously, linking it with broader concerns of social inclusion and poverty reduction policies

for reading larger dynamics of evolution in the panorama of city networks, their organisational structure, governance models and decision-making processes. We will mainly focus on multilateral networks of pluri-continental scope, using different examples as “mirrors” to better understand certain issues.

II. Which networks prioritise citizen participation?

In the last decade, demands to open territorial and urban decision-making processes and policies to the direct involvement of citizens has grown fast, making the word “participation” a buzzword whose meanings are often ambiguous and diluted (Allegretti, 2017). City networks tend to view participatory practices as a cross-cutting methodology of action, rather than a goal in itself. However, at the start of the new millennium, global events such as the World Social Forum (WSF) brought together informal networks of local and regional authorities that placed great emphasis on taking citizen participation seriously, linking it with broader concerns of social inclusion and poverty reduction policies. They generally had a short life span, as was the case for national networks such as the Italian Rete del Nuovo Municipio, created during the WSF and shaped as a multi-actor space to allow the participation of cities, universities, NGOs and individuals, with differentiated fee policies (Allulli, 2006); and the Red Estatal de Presupuestos Participativos in Spain. Both died around 2011, following local elections in which centre-left parties suffered a strong defeat. A similar destiny struck the Red FAL (Forum of Local Authorities for Social Inclusion and Participatory Democracy), created at the Porto Alegre WSF in 2001, whose demise coincided with the 2011 WSF in Dakar. The network, with few activities during the year and an informal structure (in which different members had asymmetric resources), was always weak, even in the perception of its active members (Allegretti and Marx, 2009).

The three above cases were all shaped as “multi-actoral” and “hybrid” networks (Cattan, 2007; Perulli et al., 2002), whose activities mixed advocacy and peer-to-peer exchanges of practices, adopting principles of action-research. They all tried to open a space for dialogue with civil society and research institutions, hoping their presence in internal governance could guarantee their functioning in periods of political changes. Shaped as “networks of ideological affinity”, politically oriented and often “exclusionary” of different visions, their persistent fragility was especially due to their politically unbalanced nature, which made their members hyper-sensitive to political changes in their home countries. The continued low recognition of cities as agents for political diplomacy did not help: in fact, membership payments and travel costs for participation in annual reunions were difficult to justify (Marx, 2008). However, their stories have been useful – as a caveat – for other late-comer networks such as RAP, the Portuguese Network of Participatory Municipalities. Created in 2014 in connection with article 2 of the Portuguese constitution (which considers the promotion and deepening of participatory democracy *not just a means, but a mandatory goal of the State of the Rule of Law*), opened membership up to local institutions of every political colour, welcoming other types of actors as “observers” or collaborators in specific activities.

Some of the thematic networks that emerged from the WSF and its atmosphere of dialogue and collaboration between local governments and social movements escaped decline by reinventing their structure and they survive today. The FAL set the impulse for creating the Committee on Social Inclusion and Participative Democracy of United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG).¹ Another, more paradigmatic example is the story of the FALP (Forum of the Peripheral Local Authorities). Conceived in 2001 and formally shaped in 2003 within the WSF framework, it originated in a highly ideological environment. However, FALP was able to gradually reinvent itself and open up to a wider range of cities than those initially involved, taking advantage of the consolidation of metropolitan areas (and changes in their governance structures) in the last decade. In 2006, the FALP took on a more formal structure, giving birth to UCLG's Committee on Peripheral Cities,² which is committed to rethinking notions of centrality, marginality and distribution of powers in relation to the goal of increasing citizen participation in urban governance.

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In the last decade, other project-bound and thematic city networks have made participation a central concern, including Cities of Tomorrow (co-funded by the Bertelsmann Foundation in early 2000), Participando (linked to an URBACT project coordinated by Rome)³ and networks promoted by the European Union's URBAL programme, which supported cooperation between European and Latin American cities (especially networks 9 and 10 on participatory budgeting, local finances and urban planning).⁴ As these networks did not survive beyond their specific funding schemes, they can be described as "comet networks", characterised by a "push" approach, which planned strategies and actions on the basis of pre-defined topics (Hopp and Spearman, 2004). By contrast, other "comet networks" that placed particular emphasis on participation emerged from "pull" dynamics, often as informal single-issue platforms that responded to "urgencies" or "emergencies" and took a reactive approach. The most prominent example is the Network of Local Authorities for the Promotion of Public Services,⁵ created in 2004 amid protests against the privatisation of public services promoted by the AGCS/GATT (General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade) and the Bolkestein Directive. It was dissolved following the approval of the Services in the Internal Market Directive 2006/123/EC. Other contemporary networks of this type, born out of "political urgency" and bridging social movements and cities, are SET: Red de Ciudades del Sur de Europa ante la Turistización (Network of South European Cities against Turistification), Cities for Adequate Housing, City of Sanctuary and Fearless Cities. The latter presents itself as a "global municipalist movement ... radicalizing democracy, feminizing politics and standing up to the far right".⁶

An exception to these dynamics is the International Observatory on Participatory Democracy (OIDP), created in 2001 as a result of an URBAL project, which has 1092 members (including 512 local governments and 41 local government associations),⁷ and which recently started close collaboration with United Cities and Local Governments. OIDP is a *conjunction ring* that brings together networks that value citizen participation as indispensable for a certain political/ideological progressive vision, as well as networks for which participation is a methodology for an approach to development oriented at goals of efficiency, efficacy and sustainability of public policies and terri-

1. https://www.uclg-cisdp.org/sites/default/files/Working_Plan_2008_2010.pdf
2. <https://www.uclg.org/en/organisation/structure/committees-working-groups/peripheral-cities>
3. See the "European handbook for participation": <http://urbact.eu/files/participando%E2%80%93european-handbook-participation>.
4. <http://www2.portoalegre.rs.gov.br/urbal9>
5. http://www.brianzapopolare.it/sezioni/economia/20051023_risoluzione_liegi.htm
6. <http://fearlesscities.com/>
7. All data from November 15th 2018.

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torial management. Its creation as part of an EU- funded project of cooperation among cities (with other social institutions admitted as external partners) marked its nature. Its members are mainly EU and Latin American cities,⁸ NGOs (300) and research centres (113). Yet, its annual best-practice award has attracted cities from more than 92 countries. Still not formalised into a juridically recognised body, ODP is today a multi-actor network that depends largely on support from Barcelona and the cities that host its annual meetings. While it does not offer services to its free-of-charge members, it collaborates with other networks (e.g. UCLG, Educating Cities, Participedia) in the organisation of peer-to-peer learning events that are open to different actors. At present, its juridical formalisation and the possibility of introducing membership fees are under discussion. They could dramatically reduce the number of active members and end the discussion of participatory democracy, which is often felt to be a “minor issue”.

Since the 2008 financial crisis, dialogues between the above-mentioned networks and international platforms that connect different actors around the “Right to the City” and human rights advocacy have intensified. This perspective, from which the “weak topic” of participation can be reframed and strengthened, was promoted by platforms that united cities around the promotion of “Human Rights in the City”,⁹ the formulation of the European Charter for the Safeguarding of Human Rights in the City,¹⁰ and the Charter-Agenda for Human Rights in the City.¹¹ Examples include the FALP and the activities of Human Rights Cities which are linked with the UCLG committee on Social Inclusion, Participatory Democracy and Human Rights (CISDP-DH).¹²

Participation has been an important issue in a series of platforms (often not even called “networks”) consolidated over several decades around single issues, as in the case of the mono-actoral network of Healthy Cities, a long-term international development initiative started by the World Health Organization in 1986 that today involves 1,000 cities worldwide and almost 30 national subnetworks (Tsouros, 1995; Boonekamp et al., 1999). Another single-issue network with citizen participation as a central focus is the Creative Cities Network (UCC) created by UNESCO in 2004, which now has 180 members in 72 countries.

Today we can distinguish between two major types of networks:

- those we could call “heavy networks”, usually formalised as juridical entities, with stiffer structures and clearer and more accountable governing procedures, homogeneous membership (generally limited to representatives of administrative entities) and which attempt to rely mostly on self-funding through membership fees;
- “lighter networks”, often informal, that tend to communicate through less expensive technologies (Facebook or Twitter accounts, webinars, etc.), have more flexible structures, governing bodies and procedures that are more “misty”. Their sturdiness and duration are fuelled by asymmetries among participants (relating to different capacities to invest resources and weighting in the network’s functioning), which increases their risks of fragility and volatility in the case of changes of political geography in members’ countries.

8. The first annual meeting in Africa took place in Matola (Mozambique) in 2016.

9. See, for example: <http://www.righttothecityplatform.org.br/>

10. <https://www.uclg-cisdp.org/en/right-to-the-city/european-charter>

11. https://www.uclg-cisdp.org/sites/default/files/CISDP_Carta-Agenda_ENG_0.pdf

12. <https://www.uclg-cisdp.org/>

Obviously this division cannot perfectly cover all existing cases, as experience and ICT technologies tend to favour hybrid/mixed formats of functioning, and variable geometries that include flexible “light” spaces within a globally “heavy” structure. United Cities and Local Governments represents this complex typology well. Its creation in 2004 – a joint-effort by larger “generalist” networks (the International Union of Local Authorities, United Towns and Metropolis) – marked an important inflection point in the evolution of city networks. Conceived as an “umbrella organisation” (both for individual cities, local and regional governments, and their national associations), UCLG favoured a soft transition in the geography of city networks. It allowed networks to be kept alive that were active in relation to regional institutions (e.g. CEMR - the Council of European Municipalities and Regions, Eurocities, The Congress of the Council of Europe, MedCities, FLACMA - La Federación Latinoamericana de Ciudades, Municipios y Asociaciones Municipalistas, or Mercociudades), as well as networks with thematic focuses and other transregional leagues linked to new funding schemes or the colonial legacies of certain countries.¹³ Its welcoming structure (with both territorial-based and thematic clusters) stimulated and facilitated the convergence of previously existing informal networks (e.g. FALP or Human Rights Cities) but could not prevent a sort of “bureaucratic stiffness”. Within this complex structure (where rigidity and fluidity of flows seem to live together in relative harmony), citizen participation is an important cross-cutting issue, as well as a thematic focus of some of its committees, which offer important spaces for peer-to-peer learning between local authorities, as well as organising open events where cities and regions dialogue with other actors from civil society which – in the formal structure – only seldom enter as observers or consultants.

III. A new generation of city platforms on the global stage

In the last decade a new group of actors has emerged on the international stage whose role and visibility was dramatically increased by the Paris Convention on Climate Change (2016), the Habitat III Summit (2016) and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (2015). This new generation of city platforms – which mainly focus on localising the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) – have two main factors in common: (1) given their multi-actor make-up they can barely be defined as city networks; and (2) their thematic orientation and functioning structure are usually defined by their private funders, often philanthropic foundations later joined by other powerful organisations, including international institutions from the Bretton Woods or UN systems, private enterprises and – more rarely – knowledge-based actors. Prominent examples of this new generation include the BMW Foundation, which maintains the Responsible Leaders Network, and 100 Resilient Cities (100RC). The latter, created in 2013 by the Rockefeller Foundation, expanded through a tight selection of city applicants, looking for innovative mayors that act as catalysts for change and have a history of building partnerships with a wide range of stakeholders.

Another example is the C40 Cities Climate Leadership Group (C40), an alliance of 96 large cities created informally in 2005, which is characterised by a complex variable structure. C40 became an incubator (or

13. Réseau des villes francophones, Commonwealth Local Government Forum, Forum of Local Authorities of Portuguese Speaking Countries, as well as more restricted networks as UCCI - Unión de Ciudades Capitales Iberoamericanas or UCCLA.

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umbrella) for 17 thematic networks (covering mitigation, adaptation and sustainability topics), including the “Compact & Connected” Cities Network funded by the Ford Foundation. In its concern for climate change C40’s work overlaps with other historical networks like ICLEI (Local Governments for Sustainability) created in 1990, or the Cities Alliance, created in 1999. Cities Alliance is the oldest of the new city platforms. It constitutes a global partnership of organisations from different sectors, including bilateral and multilateral development agencies, governments, NGOs, international associations of local authorities, foundations, private sector companies and knowledge institutions.

If the new platforms and partnerships are sometimes viewed by older and more traditional networks as competitors, this is due to three main reasons:

- the centrality of powerful private actors leads to suspicion that *hidden agendas* exist beyond their commitment (e.g. a monopoly or unfair competition in the provision of services and technologies to member cities);
- that participants are generally chosen “on invitation”;
- the appearance of new platforms and partnerships is leading to a renewed fragmentation of the ecosystem of city networks, undermining local authorities’ efforts to show cohesion in fighting to be recognised as indispensable in achieving the SDGs, international diplomacy and multilevel governance.

From the perspective of the new platforms, networking among cities is more a means to achieve other goals. However, one might assume that their commitment to improve accountability and democratic procedures has the potential to improve dialogue between cities and citizens. Yet, when examined more closely, the new platforms do not seem interested in providing direct channels of communication with citizens. Although citizens are the beneficiaries of policies and training actions, these are usually formulated by the platforms themselves (only in limited cases are they co-designed or co-managed by citizens). Further, while civil society at large is present in some managing structures, its representatives are limited to well-organised, powerful actors from the private and knowledge sectors and NGOs. No democratic innovations like citizens’ panels or similar tools based on random selection have been experimented with. The leading approach seems linked to representation: mayors tend to be the representatives of their cities (in some exceptions, vice-mayors or councillors are named on the managing boards), and visible organised actors from the private sector and civil society somehow “represent” citizens (even if they have no bottom-up mandate for that).

That said, compared with older networks where cities are the main actors and the only ones admitted to sit on the governing board, the governance structure of the new platforms is richer in demodiversity. In networks sponsored by philanthropic foundations, cities are only one actor among others – including political and social leaders – so that hybrid participation could in theory extend from their activities to their managing structures (although this is rarely the case). Gender mainstreaming can exemplify this potential: in the new platforms, where the representation of cities (through their elected mayors) is not strictly necessary, the composition of board members can be more easily

decided by criteria of equality that guarantee a gender, age and ethnic balance, as well as a balance between member cities from the northern or southern hemisphere. By contrast, the governing structures of traditional networks reproduce political inequalities, because the mechanism of choosing cities and the prevalence of middle-aged men at the top of most public administrations, making even “affirmative action” difficult.

The accountability of governing structures and rules of election do not differ much between the two generations of networks. In both, there are alliances whose governance rules are misty and others that clearly expose all their procedures for naming management boards (e.g. UCLG) and take care to make very detailed reporting, as happens with the meetings’ minutes and proceedings that are consultable online on the Cities Alliance website.¹⁴

In the new generation of platforms, the available resources to advance innovations and disseminate best practices in specific human settlements could represent an opportunity to enlarge the diversity of local authorities and typologies of cities at the forefront of networks. Yet, such diversity remains an unexplored challenge. Just like the more consolidated networks, new alliances tend to privilege the visibility of large cities in their governing bodies: huge cities and metropolitan areas – which have more resources for diplomatic missions and continuous commitment – are given centre stage. While their mayors and image are more visible and easier to communicate, the new alliances offer them added visibility and more resources for innovating policies, often asking for a continuous commitment of their top-ranked officials in the networks’ main activities in exchange.

Further, smaller cities, especially rural ones, can benefit from some projects of the new platforms and be a “target” of their activities. However, smaller cities are rarely invited to be at the forefront of the governance of the new platforms: their visibility often continues to be confined to “dedicated networks”, such as those on peripheral cities or intermediary cities. This trend – which tends to confine innovative practices in small cities to the level of national networks¹⁵ – is a missed opportunity for enriching the world panorama of innovative policies as well as for valuing the real diversity of living environments. Further, it fails to recognise that “urbanity” is not a homogeneous feature (many rural, open and low-density spaces exist even inside compact cities), and that the diffuse hybridity of living settlements could be an important resource for sustainability. Avoiding terms like “city” and “urban” in the names of networks could be a start. In fact, the debate on the “Right to the City” provides a caveat: that such terms can be misunderstood or felt as an “excluding barrier” in many contexts (Meyer, 2009; Garcia and Allegretti, 2014).

Summarising, the main specificities of newcomer alliances (often having a decade of experience) are linked to the variable geometry of their funding structures and partnerships, as well as to the importance they give to innovative experiments, dissemination of best practices and collaboration with technical experts and the private sector. Their presence undoubtedly enriches the range of actors on the global scene, with this variety sometimes being represented in their governance structures. Thanks to their hybrid nature and lack of the bureaucratic stiffness that

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14. <http://www.citiesalliance.org/Meeting-Reports>

15. In Italy, the so-called “Riace model” (for revitalising small settlements abandoned by inhabitants through the activities of immigrants and refugees) has been defended and emulated by small cities’ networks such as La Rete delle Città in Comune or La Rete dei Comuni Solidali. Other experiences – in the defence of cultural and environmental values – could be: “Associazione dei Comuni Virtuosi”, “Rete di città libere dai Pesticidi” or “Associazione Borghi Autentici”.

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cages older networks, they can allow for more demo-diversity among their members and rebalance some inequalities visible in traditional alliances, like the representation of women in governance structures.

However, their potential is halved by several weaknesses:

The accountability of governance is rarely increased in relation to pre-existing networks, although it is made more urgent by the richer plurality of member/partner typologies, which can raise new ethical ambiguities and conflicts of interest.

The dialogue between networks and citizens is not improved. If the centrality of citizen participation in public policies is a “mantra” of almost any action aimed at increasing sustainability and resilience of urban development and managing strategies, the new networks seem to have no strategy of communication with citizens, except for the mediation of individual cities in their territory. Citizens are seen as beneficiaries of policies and projects, but not as actors that can improve the governance of city networks or the ideas of technical experts.

These global partnerships tend to privilege large, visible cities, missing out on the opportunity to invest private funds in innovations that can directly benefit small- and medium-sized cities, give more cohesion and strength to their alliances, and value the diversity of human settlement typologies. The same unfulfilled potential characterises the dialogue between urban areas and rural territories and different levels of supra-municipal government.

IV. An open window on the future

From the above we can conclude that in both generations of platforms, citizens barely exist as targets of the communication of city networks, unless their aggregations attain the status of powerful global stakeholders. One of the few exceptions is the Responsible Leaders Network sponsored by the BMW Foundation. However, this is not enough to rescue the centrality of citizens’ involvement that the consolidated generation of networks has been unable to promote (not even the International Observatory of Participatory Democracy!). From this perspective, there is no difference between the more consolidated mono-actoral networks and the new generation of hybrid global partnerships. By choosing not to experiment with new types of “affirmative action” that could give more visibility to weak actors with limited access to resources and small territories on the international stage, new city networks have failed to fully play their role of innovators. Is this lack of courage part of a cost-recovery strategy for invested resources (albeit in terms of visibility for the sponsored cities)? Or is the “megalopolitan” part of the inhabited world still considered so much more important that it continues to lead to very uneven action at the administrative and governance level of city networks? That said the new global networks play a positive role as catalysts feeding a new energetic environment of emulations and challenging consolidated networks to renew their recruitment strategies, increase the demodiversity of their governing bodies, modernise their outreach techniques and augment the spaces devoted to peer-to-peer learning.

The dysfunctionality of new forms of competition among more traditional networks and the new hybrid generation of sponsored networks is for now just a threat, but if this threat becomes real it will severely weaken the international municipalism movement. By contrast, their pro-active collaboration could strengthen the movement. Forms of collaboration between the two generations of networks already exist. Examples include the joint programmes of C40 with ICLEI or the Cities Alliances; the Covenant of Mayors twinning programme established for cities, regions and provinces by a partnership with the new EU Covenant of Mayors for Climate and Energy (2008), a platform of 7,755 cities; and the consolidated networks of Eurocities (1986) and Energy Cities (1990) which today represents over 1,000 cities in 30 countries. As the environmental domain well exemplifies, “urgent” urban issues certainly help to make the two generations collaborate proactively, and could also help find creative ways to rescue some advantages of the above-mentioned “comet networks”, whose main virtues were informality and the strong capacity for dialogue with civil society (and especially radical social movements).

Another urgent urban issue that several world cities are struggling with is the problem of housing shortages linked to mass touristification and land speculation. In response to this problem Barcelona City Council drafted a “Manifesto of Cities against Gentrification” in early 2018,¹⁶ which was subsequently presented at UCLG’s New York Executive Bureau in the framework of a UN High-level Political Forum under the title “Cities for Adequate Housing - Municipalist Declaration of Local Governments on the Right to Housing and the Right to the City”. The special session (which had the support of the UN Special Rapporteur on Adequate Housing and the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights - OHCHR) paved the way for the creation of a network of large cities concerned with housing issues, which signed the declaration¹⁷ and cohered around a dedicated website.¹⁸ UCLG supported the network with a campaign promoted through a new flexible tool called “Wave of Action”,¹⁹ and has now created a new Community of Practice on Housing²⁰ that hosts joint discussions on how to implement the declaration and realise the right to housing in different contexts.

In the long term, the declaration implies a global call to action, mobilising multi-stakeholder networks committed to declaring the central role of cities and their representatives to enforce the right to housing. The events that followed the declaration, and its insertion into the activities of first-generation networks, show that we are in a phase of transition in which both consolidated and new networks are changing their skin and organisational forms simultaneously – in a relationship of mutual learning – in order to strengthen the capacity of cities to localise the 2030 Agenda, and to act as “effective” producers of meaningful policies in the face of global multilateral institutions.

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