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WE NEED TO RETHINK THE GLOBAL GOVERNANCE MODEL IN ORDER TO BUILD A FUTURE FOR OUR COMMUNITIES

Emilia Saiz

Secretary General, United Cities and Local Governments

There is a critical shift in the current paradigm that we will all need to embrace if we want to put in motion the type of transformation required to reconcile sustainable, resilient, inclusive, just and peaceful societies. We will need to accept that development models conceived from the perspective of governments alone will no longer have the support of populations that are more global in mentality and ambitions than in their actual capacity to act.

The multilateral system, which is perceived to be in decline, is, however, still producing some of the most visionary and engaging agendas. One of these, the 2030 Agenda, is seen as the basis for a new global social contract. Yet, the credibility of the system is at stake and will be greatly damaged if we are not able to deliver.

We need to seize the unprecedented opportunity offered by the 2030 Agenda and its universal scope. We should redefine development, placing the bridging of inequalities at the centre of every single policy. To do so, a different set of actors will need to be seated at the decision-making table. Local actors, communities and their leadership are essential if we want to avoid further polarisation of our societies.

While visions will be increasingly global in this intertwined world of ours, agendas will need to recover the local dimension if we want people to have a sense of control of their own future, as well as the sense of security and accountability that goes with it. Strong, accountable local governments are an instrumental piece of this puzzle and can be true beacons of renewed democracy, solidarity and creative societies that care about the legacy they have received and the one they need to preserve for future generations.

This is also why the international action of cities and local governments should be understood not only as an important instrument for visibility and profiling in international investment indexes, but as an important step in defending the interest of communities in a world where market logics, international guidelines and trade agreements are forces that end up shaping our cities.

Revitalised international governance should definitely include representatives of local governments in the definition of international policies, and not only call upon them to implement when other spheres of government have failed.

This urban era should not be thought of as simply an era of global cities, but also from a much broader perspective that includes smaller and intermediary cities. Indeed, the specific weight and transformational potential big cities have is undeniable and should be clearly taken into account when addressing many of our pressing challenges. However, fostering a strong system of cities in which small and medium-sized cities are empowered and developed will be even more strategic in order to make the rural-urban continuum a reality and in order to guarantee sustainability.

All of the above is the reason the international municipal movement continues to struggle to secure a seat at global tables. Now, an additional question may be: What are those tables that we need to sit at?

With all of its shortcomings and, to a certain extent, all of its “broken promises”, the United Nations System remains the only global mechanism where universality, inclusion and accountability are somehow guaranteed. It is the space where global public agendas are set, and is therefore a space in which local leaders should be represented.

Local governments do not have the ambition to decide on every topic at the United Nations table, but we do have the rightful aspiration to provide inputs on issues that affect cities and communities, such as how to shape sustainable cities, what kind of national urban policies we should promote, what type of financing mechanisms we need for sustainable infrastructures, or what kind of governance systems we need for basic resources such as water management, as well as a long list of challenges that are not limited to city boundaries but that are of crucial importance for territories.

One could approach the problem in phases that would not represent a total overhaul of the system but rather a gradual transformation. It should be possible to open up seats for local governments at the inter-agency discussions on the implementation of the SDGs, and it should be possible to transform current advisory boards into compulsory consultation mechanisms, where draft policies are presented before being submitted for adoption. All in all, we would like local governments to have a specific chamber or colleague that can inform the UN’s Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) on urban and municipal perspectives *before* drafts enter into discussions by member states.

The danger of missing out on the energy that a constituency – such as the one that represents local and regional governments – has is that hundreds of thousands of local leaders might grow detached from global agendas. This carries consequences such as the loss of the global values that unite us around the principles of the United Nations Charter, with us, the people, at the centre. In another scenario, many of the UN policies outside of the Security Council could become irrelevant if civil society and local actors mobilise around other initiatives.

The century-old movement that United Cities and Local Governments is the inheritor of will continue its course in fostering exchanges, learning and defining joint positions for cities and local governments around the world.

Cities will continue to gather and deploy solidarity beyond geographical and political boundaries, sometimes to answer the calls of their communities and sometimes as the candid expression of the human potential that is being driven in cities and has shaped the many man-made miracles that have brought our generation to where we are.

In fact, global networks of cities, which are true voluntary membership organisations, have already set up a global mechanism of representation – the World Assembly of Local and Regional Governments – which is convened by the Global Taskforce of Local and Regional Governments and which ensures political representation worldwide beyond logos.

I can only hope that our articulated capacity to think and act can be put to use for the good of humanity, and that global governance will be strengthened through strong local governments to the benefit of a global citizenship. We already live this global citizenship as clients and users of global applications but there is still an urgent need to translate it into actual rights and the capacity to define our destiny.

