TOWARDS NETWORKED GOVERNANCE SYSTEMS FOR DEVELOPMENT

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For more than 400 years, nation-states have been the legitimate subject of global governance, with distinct achievements such as the United Nations or the European Union. Today, the increasing complexity of global challenges makes it impossible for national governments to address these issues alone. Today's global governance arrangements need to favour flexibility over rigidity, consider voluntary measures over binding rules and privilege partnerships over individual actions. Considering real and perceived democracy deficits and the rapidly changing geopolitical context, it is an imperative for global governance arrangements to constantly adapt by readjusting strategies and approaches to solutions and develop new tools and measures to deal with issues.

Recently, networked forms of governance have been increasingly applied as they allow for more flexibility and participation in the overall governance processes. These flexible global governance arrangements need however to be subjected to rigid democratic political accountability. Multiple spheres of governance – local/sub-national/national/regional/global – must mutually support the democratisation of decision-making at all levels. They must be designed to be sensitive to citizen and societal demands and be conceptualised as a form of organisational alliance in which relevant policy actors are linked together as co-producers in such a way that they are more likely to identify and share common interests. This creates synergies based on trust, shared knowledge, reciprocity and mutuality. Such processes will allow more and more spaces of cross-sector connection to emerge – either at the individual or group level – and inform citizens and promote their active participation in public affairs. This will have significant implications for policymaking and implementation, and, to that end, development.

In 2015 the world community defined Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) for all. Since then it has been adapting its respective global governance arrangements. The newly introduced principle of universality, as well as the 2030 Agenda's focus on multilevel governance arrangements, obliges all counties and territories to implement the goals and work jointly in a global partnership for achieving the SDGs. This is a true paradigm

shift and an opportunity to rethink governance systems, including those for development cooperation: from traditional development cooperation, where Development Assistance Committee (DAC) members provide aid to developing countries, to including newly emerging powers and, more fundamentally, to shifting towards a networked governance approach that transcends levels as well as formerly valid categorisations of traditional and non-traditional development actors. Local and Regional Governments (LRGs) and specifically their networks – in all their manifestations – are emerging as one of the most relevant of these new actors. This means a large leap forward from traditional decentralised cooperation projects to an integrated networked way of cooperation, where the development cooperation logic and principles shall be replaced by a networked way of cooperating across actors, levels and sectors. The action of cities and regions will not replace the role of nation-states within the 2030 Agenda, but it can help overcome the conceptual prison of solely nation-state-centred international relations and governance systems.

The 2030 Agenda is an attempt to strengthen multilateralism in a world where "multipolarity without multilateralism" is becoming more and more fashionable. The civilising, universal and indivisible 2030 Agenda places human dignity and equality at its centre and, consequently, demands the broadest participation by all actors, including states, civil society and the private sector. Public institutions at all levels are central to implementation, as they formulate, implement, monitor and review the policies and laws that give life to the SDGs. Parliaments (national as well as local) also have a critical role. Not only can they legislate to implement the SDGs, they also exercise oversight over budgets and can hold the executive to account. The accompanying – perhaps "glocal" governance systems – need still to be finalised, with LRG networks taking on a catalytic role.

Much is said about the importance of political leadership in making the 2030 Agenda a reality. If we want to change the current global governance system to allow LRGs and their networks to assume this catalytic role, it is important to remember that the United Nations is an association of nation-states: changes can therefore best be promoted and piloted through UN member states. One way to push for a more strategic role of LRGs in these new global governance arrangements (we are still talking about many often-overlapping systems) would be to capitalise upon the political leadership of likeminded nation-states. LRG networks could put more emphasis on lobbying national governments, thereby complementing their direct efforts with the UN System.

In the realm of achieving the 2030 Agenda various global governance regimes are currently being put in place; all are meant to finally contribute to the greater good of universal sustainable development. International agendas are very meaningful for forging alliances, mobilising around certain topics and putting issues up for international debate. However, the world community is struggling when it comes to translating these debates into concrete and harmonised action. This trend is also mirrored within LRGs and their networks. The tendency towards the fragmentation and potential silo-ing of matters could lead to several parallel tracks, with international organisations and foundations creating and funding their own thematic city networks. Consequently, the international ecosystem of city networking can be hard to navigate not only for international organisations but even for LRGs themselves.

One way to engage with these complexities is to develop more flexible and less hierarchical global governance arrangements for development. International organisations and city networks need to revise their ways of operating and collaborating. The management of a networked environment requires a whole set of competencies and capabilities, separate to and beyond those expected of hierarchical governance arrangements. Problems of higher complexity require networks of greater heterogeneity and demand a certain level of social capital to enable effective collaborative processes. Only high enough levels of trust between partners and well-targeted incentives for cooperation will allow these new systems of governance to be built. These two issues are worth focusing on in the future.

In response to these challenges, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) is currently revising its way of functioning as well as its anchorage within the overall UN development system. It strives to better respond to complex systemic or structural challenges across the three dimensions of sustainable development. To do so UNDP will promote national and sub-national SDG platforms that will create value by facilitating mutually beneficial exchanges between interdependent actors, utilising network effects to discover, develop and apply integrated solutions to big systemic challenges.

Similarly, city networks might need to readjust their ways of collaboration among members and with external partners to be able to influence and finally make better use of such new global governance arrangements. On the one hand, the catalytic international policy advisory and lobbying functions need to be closer linked to the actions and demands of individual members, multilateral ways of engagement need to be promoted across levels and geographical segregation needs to be reconsidered. On the other hand, international organisations can learn a lot from city networks as they are already closer to a networked reality than the more monolithic UN organisations.

If we want to address increasingly complex global challenges, we need to strive for a networked way of engagement, favouring inclusive relationships that allow a wide array of diverse institutions and actors to meaningfully contribute to the SDGs. We all need to understand that individual and unilateral or multipolar actions will not be able to address the complex and systemic development challenges. Today we have a shared vision and common values – all encompassed in the 2030 Agenda. What we need is a more strategic alignment between network actors, thus facilitating the achievement of collectively desirable outcomes. UNDP, in close cooperation with the overall UN System, strives to facilitate and enable such networked governance systems for development in the future. Local and Regional Government networks are crucial partners in this endeavour.

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