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# HOW TO MOVE TOWARDS COMPLEMENTARITY BETWEEN NETWORKS

- ENTANGLED: A REFLECTION ON THE CURRENT STATE OF THE ECOSYSTEM OF LOCAL GOVERNMENT NETWORKS

*Octavi de la Varga Mas*

- THE FUTURE OF CITY NETWORKS

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*Marina Canals*

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*Xavier Tiana*

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### Octavi de la Varga Mas

*Secretary General, Metropolis*

The use of the term “local government network” has become generalised in recent years, regardless of operating model, institutional framework or organisational structure. It has become a common term for referring to the work spaces formed by local governments, whether for political influence, learning or the development of technical projects. And it is to this broad (non-scientific) sense that I will refer in this article when speaking of local government networks, which are present at all levels: regional, state and international.

One of the academics to analyse this process most recently, Michele Acuto, highlights the continual creation of local government networks over the last hundred years of the municipalist movement (Acuto and Rayner, 2016). He also points out that 29% of local government networks are international in nature, a figure that rises to 50% for those created since 2001 (Acuto et al., 2017).

To a certain degree, this should come as little surprise given that the development of the new generation of global agendas (the Aid Effectiveness Agenda; the Paris Climate Change Agreement; the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction; the 2030 Agenda; the New Urban Agenda) incorporates local governments. In many cases they become the key actors for achieving tangible results at territorial level. This has led cities to strengthen the work of existing networks and/or to promote the creation of new ones – in order to influence their design from the start, or to monitor their implementation and the capacity and instruments they produce for their operation.

On the other hand, the previous process brought about a movement called “A seat at the global table”, promoted by the Euro-Latin-American Cooperation Alliance among Cities (AL-LAs). This initiative calls for the full recognition of local governments as international governance actors. And certainly both the academic world and international agencies are to a degree opening up to the recognition of local governments and their networks as actors in the global system.

It is a great paradox that at this moment of opportunity for local governments in the international arena, we may be witnessing the overburdening of the ecosystem of international city networks. Networks currently have the opportunity to carve out a place for themselves in international governance: they are becoming important instruments for channelling international action (through strategies for political influence), and they have become central to the successful implementation of global agendas (it is notable that the New Urban Agenda mentions city networks and local government associations as facilitating instruments for achieving its objectives). And yet the signs are starting to show of exhaustion and ineffectiveness that call for the revision of the traditional working models.

Some of the factors behind this situation are:

- The explosion of new networks, added to the already existing ones, has required new spaces to be created for articulating the diversity of efforts to tackle global agendas. This is the case of the Global Taskforce of Local and Regional Governments (GTF) in which most international networks – both regional and global – participate.
- The participation of the same local governments in a multiplicity of networks which, despite having heterogeneous geographical reach and forms of membership, end up addressing the same subjects or focussing on the same agendas (the case of Latin American cities is paradigmatic).
- The appearance in recent years of networks supported by philanthropy (such as C40 and 100 Resilient Cities). This has introduced new levels of funding and activities with great communicative impact that contrast with the traditional membership models in which members pay fees and take decisions by consensus (such as United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG) and Metropolis).
- Certain important cities do not view network participation as an international strategy tool. This means certain leaderships, instead of channelling proposals through the networks they form part of, set them up directly. They subsequently attempt to work out how to fit them into the networks in a more reactive way and as a legitimising instrument.
- The dynamic of so-called global cities that have the power to lead processes by themselves, without the need to rely on networks.
- The multiplicity of spaces for local governments to meet and debate. They tend to address the same issues and seek to become the global coordinators of mayors' voices around the world: the World Assembly of Local and Regional Governments; the United Nations Advisory Committee of Local Authorities (UNACLA); the Local and Regional Authorities Forum within the framework of the UN High-Level Political Forum (HLPF); and the Global Parliament of Mayors (GPM) are some examples.

The holding of a large number of annual meetings organised by each of the networks and other actors that continually demand the presence of locally elected officials. By way of example here are some of the most notable events from 2018: the World Urban Forum (Kuala Lumpur, February), C40 Women4Climate (Mexico City, February), UCCI Assembly (San José, Costa Rica, April), UCLG Executive Bureau (Strasbourg, May), ICLEI General Assembly (Montreal, June), Forum on Global Cities (Chicago, June), Local and Regional Governments Forum (New York,

July), the Annual Meeting of Metropolis (Johannesburg, August), Global Climate Action Summit (San Francisco, September), AL-LAS Anniversary (Mexico City, September), the Post-Habitat III Conference (Quito, October), Urban 20 (Mexico City, October), UCLG World Congress (Madrid, November), II World Forum on Urban Violence (Madrid, November), Africities (Marrakesh, November), 11th Ibero-American Forum of Local Governments (Madrid, November), Smart City Expo World Congress (Barcelona, November), XV International Association of Educating Cities Congress (Cascais, November), XVIII OIDP (Barcelona, November), Global Mayors Forum (Guangzhou, December), Mayoral Forum on Human Mobility, Migration and Development (Marrakesh, December), Mercociudades Summit (La Paz, December).

Workspaces made for and by local governments are essential, particularly at a time when the future of humanity is played out in cities. This is where networks, broadly speaking, are the framework for generating knowledge, seeking shared solutions, articulating the voices of the great plurality of local governments and/or developing transnational projects, among others.

Nevertheless, we are faced with inevitable limitations. The capacity of mayors to be present at all forums and meetings is limited. Further, the desire of certain cities to raise issues at the international level, which are not directly included in the global agendas adopted by the international community, or to address them from a different angle, also has limitations. Increasing investment of time and human and financial resources, which are necessary but scarce, must also be borne in mind. It is important in this context to remember that the networks are at the service of the local governments that form them and that their agendas should be developed and promoted by cities' highest officials. Generosity is therefore necessary, especially between networks with shared foundations and values, in order to:

Seek new forms of joint work.

- Design new organisational frameworks and structures adapted to current dynamics (not a matter of fusing or absorbing networks).
- Readjust the various consultation forums and their aims.
- Redefine how the relationship between networks and mayors works.
- Align the different agendas of each network to provide continuity to the narrative developed by elected officials.

Produce strong meeting occasions that promote economies of scale, mobilise different actors without overlaps and have greater impact (in line with the dynamic UCLG and Madrid City Council proposed by organising the UCLG World Congress, the II World Forum on Urban Violence and the 11th Ibero-American Forum of Local Governments in the same week).

We are surely living through one of the most interesting times in global-level municipalism. Now more than ever, local governments are called on to play a key role in supporting the planet's sustainability and human prosperity, and international networks of local governments have the obligation to disentangle themselves in order to be able to support them efficiently and have major impact.

## References

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