THE FUTURE OF CITY NETWORKS

Anna Lisa Boni

Secretary General, Eurocities

I t has become widely accepted that the twenty-first century will be an urban century. In recent decades, cities' ability and desire to cooperate with their neighbours and internationally, coupled with mass urbanisation across the globe, has reinforced the global power of cities. Following these trends, the number of city networks at European and global level has increased over time and they have become so numerous that cities have gotten to a point where they must make choices.

Each city network has its own specific story and profile and each considers itself "indispensable". So now is a good moment to have a debate about the ecosystem of city networks and the context in which they operate. Do different city networks replicate one another? Do they complement each other? Is it meaningful to identify synergies or similarities? What do we want from this debate, and which direction should it take? Let's take a look at some of the issues on the table.

Before comparing the services and benefits city networks offer to their members – which tend to be the main criteria for joining – it is necessary to take a look at their underlying culture, mission, value base and business model. At first glance, it is tempting to look for similarities or duplications, but when one begins to analyse the many differences between networks, this exercise becomes very complex.

We must make sure that we are comparing like with like. Do we want to look at national, regional (e.g. European) or global networks? The European region is somewhat saturated with networks. But their scope and missions differ. Some are purely thematic networks, others have national networks as members, others are proud of their direct membership affiliation, and others are geographically organised. Most of these networks are composed of cities and supported by cities. Their value base and culture is one of peers and of collective ownership of the organisation, its means and governance. At the same time, in the global arena, new city initiatives and networks are emerging with a new business model that is linked to active support by individual philanthropists or foundations. To cut a long and complex story short: it's a crowded market place. That's why at Eurocities we recently conducted a mapping exercise of similar

networks which is part of a wider effort to develop our future strategy and vision.

Over the past years Eurocities has grown both in membership and influence. We have welcomed new cities to our network and we can look proudly upon our work, for example in achieving an Urban Agenda for the European Union. We are a well-organised association with a large membership, actively engaged across a whole range of the key policy issues confronting Europe's urban areas, and increasingly recognised as a valued player among European institutions.

Yet, for the future it is important to ensure that Eurocities is able to adjust and adapt to fast changing times. In a world that is evolving at great speed, the challenge for Eurocities is how to respond and ensure that the needs and views of Europe's major cities are increasingly heard and heeded in the coming decades. One of our unique features is that we work across many sectors and on a wide range of interconnected issues that cities have to deal with. We have a different value system and business model to some of our "fellow" thematic networks that focus on a narrower set of challenges.

No doubt, it is easy to find areas of overlap when examining the ecosystem of city networks. But the search for artificial synergies and attempts to try and rationalise or downplay this ecosystem are not always very productive. The main point is that the efforts of all city networks contribute to making the voice of cities heard in the world, and this is still needed. The world is in need of inspiration and cities can provide new solutions to the global challenges we face.

Another aspect to consider is whether the lack of complementarity between various networks affects their credibility in the eyes of European institutions or other power brokers. I don't think so. Very often, it is larger institutions that contribute to the plethora of networks by setting up their own city initiative or expert group that does not build on the achievements and capital of existing networks.

City networks are already well placed to help achieve shared goals and to mobilise and utilise resources. In our own work with European institutions, I observe that once these institutions acquire a better understanding of the ecosystem of networks they are able to work with us more closely as partners on an equal footing. Working with us they can receive far better support that is backed by local evidence of how policies impact people than if they work independently or through national governments.

A final important aspect to consider is whether city networks should be more specialised around sectors. At a time of increasingly multidisciplinary challenges, the answer in my view is no. Specialisation is good, but it reinforces "silo approaches" to policymaking that public institutions at all levels are trying to overcome. The complexity of today's reality needs a more joined-up approach to policymaking that works across sectors and levels of government.

To conclude, mayors are busy people and it is in their interest that city networks create more synergies. Besides organising high level meetings in

their own cities, mayors receive several invitations a month, if not a week, to participate in meetings of city networks. Unless we invent a cloning machine for mayors, we'll not serve the global municipalist agenda by organising competing events. Would there be scope to convene joint summits in a spirit of real partnership and cooperation without one city or one city network trying to outshine others? Because in the end we all work for the same cause, don't we? Our shared goal is to make cities more sustainable and better places to live, work and play for everybody.

ANNA LISA BONI