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*Humanity is not only living through a stage of changes, but also an authentic change in stages. Individuals must educate themselves for the sake of their critical adaptation to and active participation in the challenges and possibilities opening up as a result of the globalisation of all economic and social processes, so that they can intervene, through their local world, in a complex international scenario, and in order to remain autonomous subjects in the face of a flood of information controlled by economic and political power centres (Preamble of the Charter of Educating Cities, 2004).*

**G**lobalisation has brought about an acceleration of time and a shortening of distances. We do not live in citadels anymore but in an interconnected world. In this changing context local governments have also had to adapt to and learn new ways of dealing with new and old problems.

As the closest administration to citizens, local governments have to respond fast and efficiently to new situations and this has brought along with it new ways of organisation and governance. Local governments have understood the benefits and opportunities of managing their matters and challenges in networks of different kinds and scopes. Learning from others' best practices saves time and resources. It is hard to imagine a world without networks, and local governments are no exception. This phenomenon is not new. During the twentieth century, cities invested resources to develop networks and to open dialogue both within their territories and at the regional, national and international levels. However in the past decades there has been a considerable increase in the number of cities, departments and city officials involved in international networks.

The need for spaces to share knowledge, to examine one's own practices, to build partnerships and establish contacts and to protect the common good has led to the creation of a wide variety of formal and informal networks. Some networks focus on specific urban challenges that correspond to the strategic needs and priorities of their founders and promoters. Other networks focus on a specific geographical area

or they establish specific membership criteria, such as size, population and economic indicators. Still others opt for a broader general approach to urban governance issues. But despite their differences, all these networks seek to respond to specific challenges and opportunities and to become useful “tools” with contextual relevance for local governments.

On the one hand, this broad spectrum of networks demonstrates that cities have come to value spaces of exchange that foster collaborations between them. On the other hand, it shows that different cities have different needs and priorities and that they view today’s global challenges from diverse perspectives.

The growth of urban populations worldwide has also positioned cities as key players in the formulation and achievement of the Global Agenda. It is with good reason that global institutions, including UN agencies, the World Bank and the European Commission are increasingly relying on cities to tackle the main challenges that affect humanity (sustainable development, poverty, violence, health, housing, etc.) and to progress in the achievement of their goals.

Through the proximity to their territories and citizens, local governments generally have more direct and reliable information about local circumstances and are closer to the needs of the people. Compared to nation states, they work on a much smaller scale, which gives them more flexibility and greater capacity to manoeuvre the challenges we face in this rapidly changing world. It is for this reason that UN agencies have often encouraged the creation of city networks as a way to respond to their goals in a more agile way that is complementary to the work of its member states. In turn, cities have been keen to work more closely with these agencies and to host UN meetings or their headquarters and branches.

It is important to note that participation in international networks is not restricted to big cities: small and medium-sized cities can also become involved. In fact, the latter benefit more from actively participating in networks because it is a way to protect themselves from some of the effects of globalisation, and a way to gain visibility and recognition, to raise their self-esteem and confidence, and to expand their network of relationships and contacts.

Although mayors from large cities can play a powerful role when it comes to setting urban trends in city governance, smaller cities should not be neglected. Like large cities, they are in a position to generate extremely valuable good practices that can significantly improve the quality of life of a large part of the population. We should not forget that while one in eight people live in the world’s 33 megacities, close to half of the world’s urban dwellers reside in smaller settlements with fewer than 500,000 inhabitants.

Given today’s large quantity of city networks, we are faced with a situation in which many cities participate in multiple networks and in which a range of networks deal with similar issues. The downside of this proliferation of activities is that it can result in an overproduction of reunions (e.g. congresses, seminars, meetings, etc.) and outputs (e.g. declarations, charters, policy papers, etc.) that are not always coherent in their

messages and goals. Further, this proliferation of activities is particularly problematic for cities from emerging countries that do not have the necessary resources to participate in several networks or to attend meetings around the world.

We would assume that the more a city is engaged in networks the better. However, this is a simplification of what it should really mean to become a member of a city network. Joining a network is much more than paying the membership fee. It is attending the meetings, sharing knowledge, developing strategies and implementing projects. In the past, the international relations offices of city governments were usually responsible for the coordination and follow-up of a city's engagement in the different networks. By contrast, today the networking culture has been deeply internalised by the entire structure of local governments. Each department wants to build its own international relations.

But, at the same time, joining a city network provides cities with the opportunity to reflect on common challenges, to set shared goals and develop shared strategies and to influence policies. It is through this kind of empowering participation that networks can have a transformative impact on their member cities. If this is not the case, there is the risk of the membership being reduced to a "label" with which a city can associate. This can be useful from a city marketing perspective, but it involves no strategic outcome for the citizenry. Therefore, the true importance of being a member of a city network lies in the process of participating in its internal processes, not in the mere act of joining a network.

In this sense, the International Association of Educating Cities understands city networks as schools of democracy; spaces that enable cities to have their voice heard and to develop their own values and opinions, while listening respectfully to other viewpoints. City networks are spaces that offer multiple perspectives and solutions to similar problems. They can contribute to developing a better understanding of specific challenges and contexts and thereby they can help cities to improve their own practices and to make more informed choices. This is important in a time when cities are facing crucial challenges that are bringing changes to the urban environment and in a world where interests and privileges need to be shared better. The possibility to influence and shape the conversation is an opportunity that cities cannot miss. Yet, when choosing which network(s) to participate in, cities need to make sure that the interests of their citizenry prevail over private profit (which is often disguised within networking jargon).

In order to avoid overlap and duplication, some city networks are opting to specialise and focus on specific issues, such as education, the environment, mobility, urban planning, etc. Thematic specialisation has the advantage of allowing for the development of a deeper understanding of a specific issue; and, when the learning approach and knowledge sharing are effective, the network becomes a powerful tool to influence and advance desired outcomes. That said, the challenges faced by cities today are highly complex. Take social cohesion, for example. It can be addressed from an employment perspective, as an urban rehabilitation or an educational policy issue, among others. All these strategies maybe part of the solution. But focusing on just one of them in isolation will not deliver effective or durable outcomes. Therefore, intersectorality

and convergence become necessary in order to find the right balance between a more focused and a broader perspective. This demands a huge amount of dialogue between city networks. They need to share their agendas and jointly find (or build) windows of opportunity that may catalyse the processes of change. Such alliances do not necessarily have to be structured as a network, since they are only required for specific purposes and limited periods of time. But they will definitely have to rely on the trust and generosity of all the parties involved.