CHAPTER 5

Inclusive Multilateralism: Cities Take a Seat at the Table

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Abstract

Multilateralism is challenged, in part due to great power rivalry. There is no substitute for states' willingness to engage productively in multilateral affairs, but while there is no silver bullet to reinvigorate multilateralism, "inclusive multilateralism" holds some potential.

Inclusive multilateralism entails the participation, in different ways, of other stakeholders: civil society, business and other levels of government including cities. The Declaration adopted by the UN General Assembly to celebrate the UN's 75th anniversary indeed calls for a more inclusive multilateralism; and in this context, the Secretary-General specifically identified cities.

Why are cities increasingly active in multilateral arenas? Because global issues are often local issues, and vice versa. Examples include climate change, the Sustainable Development Goals, migration, biodiversity and COVID-19. In all these areas, and many more, cities are, in effect, actors. And what they do – or don't do – matters globally. So, cities often manage, in various ways, to "get a seat at the global table" and, in addition to acting on those issues, they influence the agenda. Such involvement, by cities and other stakeholders, will likely contribute to the evolution of multilateralism in the years ahead.

Keywords

inclusive multilateralism – civil society – cities' agency – Sustainable Development Goals – climate change – migration – biodiversity – Conference of the Parties

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Introduction

Multilateralism is being challenged. From the United Nations to the G20, multilateral institutions and groupings are struggling to address today's global challenges, as states often fail to cooperate effectively for the common good in a context of great power rivalry.

There is no substitute for states' willingness to engage productively in multilateral affairs. Absent a silver bullet to reinvigorate multilateralism, "inclusive multilateralism" holds some potential.

Inclusive multilateralism essentially entails the participation in multilateral institutions and processes of actors other than nation-states: civil society, the private sector and other levels of government, including cities.

The declaration adopted by the UN General Assembly (2020) to celebrate the UN's 75th anniversary indeed calls for a more inclusive multilateralism. And in his remarks at the landmark event for the celebrations, the Secretary-General of the United Nations specifically referred to cities.

Why are cities increasingly active in multilateral forums? Because global issues are often local issues, and vice versa. Let us take a number of specific examples, starting with climate change.

Climate Change

On the one hand, states are called upon to assume responsibilities at the national and international level to take action in matters of climate – responsibilities that, experience has shown, they struggle to absorb fully. In any case, national governments know they are not omnipotent and that the involvement of all segments of society is necessary to achieve climate objectives. As for cities, they have a stake as their residents are negatively affected by climate change. They also, through their emissions, contribute to the global problem.

Hence, it becomes obvious that there cannot be success on the climate front without the mobilization and involvement of cities, among others. That is why cities not only act locally on climate, but also go global. A landmark event was the Climate Summit for Local Leaders at COP 21, in Paris in 2015. While it remained within the purview of states to negotiate the official outcome of the conference and emission targets, mayors were active both in committing their cities to ambitious action and in interacting with national leaders to do the same (United Cities and Local Governments 2015).

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We see here a defining characteristic of urban diplomacy: Cities are actors on their own, both individually and collectively,[1] and they also influence the multilateral system.

Cities are gaining increasing recognition in this dual role. It is very telling that cities had a seat at the United Nations Climate Action Summit, on September 23, 2018. The Mayor of Montréal, Valérie Plante, made an intervention on behalf of cities, which is not a common occurrence at this type of very high-level event usually reserved for heads of state and government. She declared:

> Cities are already committed and working actively to combat climate change. The Secretary General has set ambitious objectives for states to reduce GHG emissions. I can tell you that cities are ready to respond and even go further.[2]

Sustainable Development Goals

Let us take another example: the 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda and its 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), adopted by the United Nations in 2015. Due in part to the involvement of cities in the lead-up discussions through the Global Taskforce of Local and Regional Governments (2015), one of the goals, SDG 11, is specifically devoted to cities.[3] Furthermore, city involvement is critical to the implementation of several SDGs. Cities act on several development issues addressed by the SDGs, from water and infrastructure to poverty reduction and equity.

Hence, a movement to "localize" SDGs has taken flight, as cities go on to endorse and commit to implement the SDGs. What's more, in terms of interaction with and within the multilateral system, cities take part in regular reviews of the implementation of the SDGs, including through the annual ECOSOC High Level Dialogue. Cities such as New York, Buenos Aires, Helsinki, Cape Town and Guangzhou have gone a step further by submitting "Voluntary Local Reviews" of their implementation of the SDGs.

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1 In this case through international networks such as C40 (http://c40.org) and ICLEI (https://iclei.org).

2 Excerpt from her remarks (unpublished).

3 SDG 11 reads: "Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable" (UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs 2016). In 2016, the same Global Taskforce contributed to shaping a New Urban Agenda at the UN Conference on Housing and Sustainable Development (Habitat III) in Quito (UN General Assembly 2016).

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Migration

Migration is, of course, a global phenomenon. And where do migrants often transit or settle? In cities. While national governments manage national borders and migration rules, city governments inherit many responsibilities with respect to migration – from housing to social services, economic integration, inclusion, security and so on.

When the United Nations decided in September 2016 to develop a Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration, as well as a Global Compact on Refugees, cities embraced the opportunity and carved out a role for themselves in the elaboration of the two instruments. Building on work accomplished in previous years, cities developed a diplomatic campaign – including the submission of a position paper by Metropolis (2017) outlining their role, commitments and recommendations with respect to the compacts. This was followed by the Marrakech Mayors Declaration (5th Mayoral Forum on Human Mobility, Migration and Development 2018), and then by interaction with states as well as senior UN officials from the International Organization for Migration (IOM) and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR).

In the end, the compacts reflected some of the views put forward by cities. Noteworthy are the follow-up mechanisms of the two compacts, which include, in various ways, the participation of cities, and consolidates their continued involvement. Among others, a Mayors Mechanism was established in 2018 to formally link local authorities to the state-led Global Forum on Migration and Development (GFMD), alongside civil society and the private sector. The mechanism creates opportunities for cities to influence the GFMD discussions and provides them with opportunities for peer-to-peer learning and exchange to bolster innovative solutions. The Mayors Mechanism is jointly steered by United Cities and Local Governments, the Mayors Migration Council and the IOM.

In this context, cities continue to innovate locally. New York and Montréal, for instance, have provided a form of ID card to migrants, regardless of their status, to facilitate access to some essential municipal services. São Paulo has set up a Municipal Council of Immigrants. Los Angeles and Barcelona have taken action to protect migrants against human trafficking. Several cities have launched initiatives to facilitate labor-market integration.

Cities will certainly not replace national governments as the main actors of migration policymaking. However, they are more than local implementers of national policies. They are actors in their own right, sometimes in tandem with national governments as part of whole-of-government approaches, and other times at odds with national policies. In both cases, they increasingly have a voice and a seat at national and international decision-making tables.

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Biodiversity

One last example is that of biodiversity – an existential issue for humanity and for the planet. Many cities acknowledge the immense local and global impact of urban activity on ecosystems, as well as the importance of acting locally to preserve biodiversity. Further, coordinated by ICLEI,[4] cities have positioned themselves globally to contribute to the negotiations and implementation of international undertakings.

Here again, their role is increasingly being recognized, and Mayor Plante of Montréal presented their views at the United Nations Summit on Biodiversity, on September 30, 2020. She made clear that "cities, local and regional governments are ready to partner in an ambitious global agenda on biodiversity."[5]

The next milestone is COP 15, where participants are set to adopt a Post-2020 Global Biodiversity Framework. Cities and local and regional authorities have already outlined their positions, including through the Edinburgh Declaration (Scottish Government 2020), and take part in the negotiations. They also anticipate holding a Global Biodiversity Summit of Local and Subnational Governments as part of the event, as they did on previous occasions, to entrench their views and role in the Global Framework.

A New Momentum

As we can see from the above, cities are impacted by global issues. And conversely, what cities do – or don't do – at the local level matters not only for their residents, but also globally. The COVID-19 pandemic is an obvious case in point.

Hence, cities have increased their involvement in global affairs and in multilateralism, a phenomenon that is not new but which has definitely taken on a new momentum in the last decade.

This action is not limited to the United Nations. Mayors, for instance, put their views forward to the leaders of the G7 on the occasion of the Charlevoix Summit in 2018 through an open letter (United Cities and Local Governments 2018). Cities have also institutionalized, through the creation of the Urban 20 (2020), a formal mechanism of engagement with the G20.

4 Formerly the International Council for Local Environmental Initiatives, now known simply as ICLEI – Local Governments for Sustainability.

5 Excerpt from her remarks (unpublished).

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This is not to say that the multilateral system has fundamentally changed. States and their national governments certainly retain their prominent position and membership in multilateral institutions. Cities will have to continue to be proactive to consolidate their seats at various tables and to influence the agenda. But the gradual development of "inclusive multilateralism," alongside the recognition that "multi-level governance" is necessary to tackle the world's main challenges, is a development that holds potential. Pascal Lamy has coined the term "Polylateralism", to express this evolution (Groupes d'études géopolitiques 2020).

As a last example to illustrate this point, let us come back to the issue of biodiversity. In the lead-up to the United Nations Summit on Biodiversity in 2020, it became obvious that there was not enough support among member states to generate an official outcome document. In this regard, a coalition of leading civil society organizations, working with a number of states and other stakeholders including cities, decided to move ahead with a voluntary Leaders' Pledge for Nature (2020). In the end, 88 heads of state or government endorsed the pledge, which also received the official support of numerous other stakeholders – including cities. Such a voluntary pledge is not the same as a binding instrument, but it is certainly useful as a multilateral undertaking: it can mobilize action and influence the agenda.

As the traditional multilateral system and nation-states often stop short of delivering on expectations and living up to the challenges they face, new approaches through the involvement of other stakeholders, such as cities, are likely to reinvigorate multilateralism. Open and inclusive multilateralism is likely to pave the way for more effective outcomes as the world struggles to address today's global problems.

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