



Chapter 27: Cities as Global Organisms

Oliver Hillel and Manuela Gervasi

Many have used the analogy that cities evolve much like living organisms in a planetary ecosystem, with mechanisms for competition but also for cooperation, mutualism, and symbiosis. If we consider that humanity's footprint on the planet is increasingly shaped by urban processes – and the perceptions and decisions made by urban citizens – and if we apply the analogy above, it makes sense that those “urban organisms,” these consumption centers and laboratories of innovation, should play a commensurate, central role in informing and influencing decision-makers at the global level. The UN, for instance, is, and will continue to be, the planetary-level consensual instrument that we have to prioritize investments and actions towards sustainable human settlements and urbanization.

Yet, when we look at the influence of local authorities and other local policy- and decision-makers in the agenda and investment policies of the UN and international institutions charged with global governance, we are still largely confronted with a loosely organized and under-coordinated scenario, in spite of a few encouraging initiatives. Our global governance systems are still not successful enough in giving room to, and coordinating the specific contributions and common interests of, our urban centers, which increasingly compose the world's central nervous system – with our “sensory equipment” of the UN processes; our political, financial, and technical “muscles”; and our overall institutional “skeleton.” There are also huge gaps in this nervous system's “central learning processes” – that is, in the production and distribution of knowledge on how best to promote and support, within the diversity of approaches across the globe, the coordination of governance efforts across different levels of government for sustainability.

Much progress has happened in the last ten years. At the Convention of Biological Diversity, when the coordination with subnational and local authorities first came up for deliberation in 2008, some delegates were concerned about the cost of additional demands of support from their numerous categories of subnational and local governments, and also by the political uncertainties linked to working with different levels of governance and their complex networks of influence. As the initiative matured, however, most realized that

no additional resources were needed per se – in many countries, processes of articulation were already in place, and just needed to become more effective. For others, it was mostly a question of working with those subnational and local governments that were already leading, or interested, in the topic, and facilitating their encouragement to others. Today, on one hand, most parties report that they provide relatively low-cost guidance and technical support to subnational and local governments, and formally involve them in biodiversity strategies and actions plans, policies, and programmes; and on the other hand, many bottom-up approaches in which cities are leading in innovative global policies are developing around the world.

Local and subnational governments are supporting UN-Habitat within a Global Task Force in the Post-2015 Development Agenda and the New Urban Agenda. Many representative bodies and associations of cities are active in the UN, as well as in the international and regional arenas, and there are networks of cities and their mayors sharing lessons on collaborative processes to solve common problems.

Still, the current level of cooperation is limited when it comes to mechanisms that allow for global comanagement of programs, large-scale allocation of investments, and effective cooperation in knowledge generation and setting of targets. We need to expand these efforts towards another evolutionary leap. Let UN member countries explore innovative forms of cooperation with their subnational levels of government, each according to their circumstances – including at the global level. The International Labour Organization, for instance, is governed by a tripartite model where governments, representative bodies of businesses, and representative bodies of employees define joint agendas, each according to agreed mandates. The experience of municipal participatory budgeting can also be a source for inspiration for novel decision-making procedure at the global level.

We need organic, multilayered, and self-regulating governance systems for resource use, and we need sound scientific advice on how to set them up. For the UN's science-policy interface to produce the needed solutions, we need the engagement of scientists as well as policy-makers, to find ways for the UN to function as a global assembly of local governments.

The UN's New Urban Agenda and other outcomes of Habitat III, particularly the partnerships being prepared for action, are a great start. The full participation of knowledge producers as “neural systems” of our global urban planetary organism is required to translate needs and information across the science-policy interface. These academics, specialists, and knowledge-producers need to be aware of and be willing to influence the global politics of knowledge to help all levels of government to cooperate more closely, or they will miss the opportunity to make an enormous difference.