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The rising influence of urban actors

It is time to recognize cities as global actors. City networks are reaching across the globe and local city governments are collaborating on crucial environmental issues. Coordinating policy at a local level, they are increasingly taking the lead in tackling global problems such as climate change.

City governments are increasingly operating at an international level. They are responding to the negative impacts of globalization and taking up an independent global governance role to balance the economic forces influencing urban development. In December 2009, city delegations from around the world are gathering in Copenhagen for the UN climate change conference. Cities will lobby governments as they negotiate a new climate deal. They will also hold a parallel city summit. It seems that cities – their governments and their communities – are seeking ways to participate in global processes that have a knock-on effect *within* city borders.

Globalization has many implications for cities. Globalization affects cities everywhere. Globalization takes place *in* our cities: it has a *locus*, a place. Saskia Sassen, professor of sociology at Columbia University, USA, and the London School of Economics, UK, coined the term 'global city'. Her work reconnects globalization with 'place' and grounds it in urban locality. Sassen writes about a network of 'global cities' – London, New York, São Paulo, Tokyo and Amsterdam – where globalization processes are local and concrete, controlled by city-based multinational corporations and legal and financial services. Globalization has to take place in globally-*connected* cities, Sassen believes. The global city is the funnel for financial-economic globalization and a crucial hub in the global economy, by definition functioning within the global network of strategic sites.

Sassen asks: 'Why does it matter to recover place in analyses of global economy, particularly place as constituted in major cities? Because it allows us to see the multiplicity of economies and work cultures in which the global information economy is embedded. It also allows us to recover the concrete, localized processes through which globalization exists and to argue that much of the multiculturalism in large cities is as much a part of globalization as is international finance'.

By **Janne Nijman**, senior lecturer and researcher at the International Law Department, University of Amsterdam and research fellow at the Amsterdam Centre for International Law, the Netherlands.

Global city research initially focused on developed countries but with globalization it now includes developing countries. How is globalization impacting on developing nations? Does the global city idea apply to Cairo, Shanghai or cities in sub-Saharan Africa?

Global cities function as corporate sites from where powerful businesses control capital and labour flows. This provokes cities and their governments to advocate for (public) power, sustainability and justice within their borders. City governments are taking action: they feel empowered by their role within the global economy and react to the local impacts of globalization. Cities are gradually becoming *agents* of change within global governance structures.

The 21st century is the century of urbanization and the pressure on cities will increase. It seems certain that urbanization is integral to globalization. Today, over 50% of the world's population lives in cities; by 2030 this figure will rise to 60% and by 2050 70% will live in cities. Urbanization is a global phenomenon but is taking place more rapidly in Africa and Asia than anywhere else.

The key challenge of the 21st century, according to the UN, will be 'to make both globalization and urbanization work for all the world's people, instead of benefiting only a few'. For this to happen, cities will have to change their urban spaces, services and infrastructure and governance arrangements to accommodate a massive influx of people. As the latest global

Future figures

By 2025, the urban population in developing regions is expected to increase annually by 53 million (2.27%), compared with 3 million (0.49%) in developed countries. New megacities (over 10 million people) and hyper cities (over 20 million) will also emerge. Most new urban growth, however, will occur in smaller, often institutionally weak, settlements of between 100,000 and 250,000 people. Megacities are now appearing in developing countries and by 2025 the list will include Cairo, Dhaka, Jakarta, Karachi, Lagos and Mumbai. Mega and hypercities will be the city-states of the 21st century. In developing countries, urbanization usually goes hand in hand with extreme poverty: by 2030, over 2 billion people will be living in slums.

ANP / Different World of Photos

City planners hope to build this 600-metre-high ecosystem to feed the population of New York, USA.

report on human settlements from UN-Habitat argues, new forms of urban planning will be an indispensable tool for city governments. The 'market' philosophy that has pushed planning into the margins of urban governance cannot solve today's global problems: pollution, poverty, social instability and inequality, which are most acutely felt in the most densely populated cities. These challenges are acting as a wake-up call to cities and their governments to fight climate change and help achieve the Millennium Development Goals, to participate more actively and more independently in global governance structures. In short, to take control.

Decentralization is also contributing to cities' ability to carve out a niche for themselves within the global order. Local autonomy is a popular governance stance among European governments and international organizations such as the World Bank and UN. Cities and international organizations are advocating local autonomy, thereby strengthening local democracy and contributing to a gradual transformation of global governance structures. Cities all over the world, for example, have joined forces in the NGO, United Cities and Local Governments (see box right).

Cities take centre stage

Cities are redefining their role *vis à vis* global governance. This is increasingly visible in three areas:

- transnational inter-city relations
- interactions between local governments and global institutions
- international law.

Transnational inter-city relations

'International relations' are no longer exclusive to states. Major cities such as Amsterdam, Atlanta, Beijing, Kyoto, Johannesburg, New York, Pretoria, Seattle, Shanghai and Taganrog have established international relations or foreign affairs offices. Their responsibilities include trade missions, foreign investments, development cooperation, cultural exchanges and the city's 'foreign policy', as well as their relations with global institutions such as the UN, NGOs and city networks. Some have even set up missions abroad: the Yokohama-Mumbai liaison office represents the government of the city of Yokohama in Mumbai in order to support Japanese business there and to attract Indian investment to Yokohama.

The growing bilateral cooperation between cities builds on twinning or sister cities, particularly popular in China and Australia, because it supposedly accommodates the

United Cities and Local Governments

UCLG represents cities within global institutions, most notably within UN organizations. It has influenced UN-Habitat, in particular, to promote decentralization as a core element of good governance. UCLG, UN-Habitat and the Advisory Group of Experts on Decentralization (AGRED) were involved in drafting the guidelines on decentralization and the strengthening of local authorities to promote good governance at all levels and to strengthen local authorities. Decentralization paves the way for democracy and political participation and acts as a counterbalance to globalization. 'Cities and towns hold the potential to maximize the benefits and to offset the negative consequences of globalization', according to UN-Habitat. Global cities are standing up and claiming a role for themselves in multi-level global governance, in this rapidly globalizing and urbanizing world.

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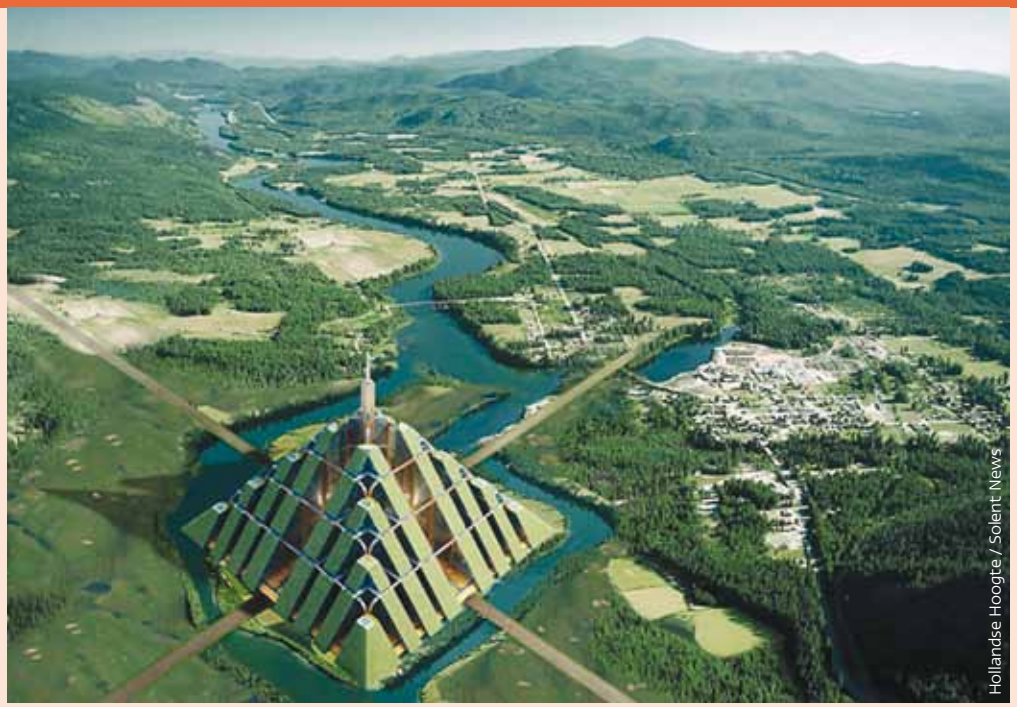

Dubai ordered the design of Ziggurat, a futuristic 100% self-sufficient city.

Confucian principle of *guanxi* – relationships as the basis for doing business – and facilitates market entry. Chinese cities (and Asian cities in general) are particularly active in seeking 'sister cities' for economically strategic alliances.

Wilbur Zelinksky, emeritus professor at Pennsylvania State University, writes of 'an emphatic positive correlation between number (and probably intensity) of twinnings and level of socio-economic development at both the intra- and international scale, as well as an apparent inverse relationship between size of place and level of local interest'. And for sustainable sister-city relations, it has been pointed out that 'municipal-community entrepreneurship' is needed, a mix of city government and (business) community action.

Cities are increasingly organizing transnational cooperation through multilateral city networks, notably in relation to climate change and sustainable development. Exchange of information and sharing best practices is an important objective, as is obtaining clout with regional and global institutions. The Asian Network of Major Cities 21 aims 'to strengthen Asian identity and enhance the importance of Asia in the international community by strengthening bonds and cooperation amongst major Asian cities... to enable major fellow Asian cities to mutually share their knowledge and experience of common problems ... to make it possible for the positive outcomes of these projects to be fed back to regions, citizens and companies... which will in turn contribute to social and economic development in Asia'. Likewise, Eurocities aims to influence and cooperate with EU institutions.

Local governments and global institutions

Global institutions and major cities collaborate closely on international law and global policy, bypassing the state. The World Health Organization – the 'network-maker' – in its Zagreb declaration of 2008, put out a plea for a city government representative to participate in member state delegations. And Cities Alliances is an organization in which cities represented by UCLG and bilateral and multilateral development agencies work together to eliminate city slums. UNICEF has developed the child-friendly cities initiative to help local governments take the lead in implementing the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and sets out how urban governance can conform to it.

UNESCO also works directly with city networks, including the Creative Cities Network, which focuses on cultural, social and economic development, and the International Coalition of Cities against Racism and Discrimination. The latter was launched in 2008 to bring together UNESCO's city networks and help them to implement international law and the resolutions and declarations of international organizations promising to fight discrimination. Such initiatives add to the growing evidence that international organizations view direct relations with cities and local authorities as crucial in implementing the global values and standards they are obliged to promote on a global scale. Without the active involvement of local authorities, this hardly seems possible.

In 2004, the Cardoso panel on UN-Civil Society Relations, proposed by Kofi Annan, the former UN secretary general, made a number of pertinent proposals. The UN General Assembly should debate a resolution 'affirming and respecting local autonomy as a universal principle'. It also proposed greater involvement by local authorities in UN processes. It suggested that the 'Elected Representative Liaison Unit (proposal 16) should liaise with local authorities and their new world association [UCLG] and disseminate lessons of good practice'. The panel considered the UCLG 'an important conduit for representing people at the local level in the system of global governance'. The panel also proposed that: 'the United Nations should regard UCLG as an advisory body on governance matters' (proposal 18). In this vision of global governance, local governments are understood as vehicles of democracy and 'good governance' in a rapidly globalizing and urbanizing world. Such explicit

support for local self-governance and the inclusion of local authorities in UN processes may empower city governments.

International law

Through their partnerships with international organizations, city governments are increasingly involved in implementing international standards, as seen above. They also influence international law-making processes to ensure they mirror local circumstances and local interests more faithfully. Climate change and environmental governance is a good example. Agenda 21 is the global action plan on sustainable development for the 21st century, agreed at the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro in 1992. It called on local governments to develop local agendas for sustainable development with and for local communities. Chapter 28 stipulates that without the participation of local governments, the Agenda's objectives cannot be fulfilled. City governments have observer status at the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change negotiations in Copenhagen in December 2009, and will try to influence the outcome and push states to agree on 'higher' goals.

'International local government law' is another example. International law is traditionally created by states and binding upon states alone. International standards for local governments are new. The UCLG guidelines, discussed above, aim to improve urban governance and drive the Habitat Agenda and Millennium Development Goals in cities through decentralization and local self-government. Drafted by UN-Habitat and AGRED, in close collaboration with UCLG, the guidelines were subsequently adopted by the governing council of UN-Habitat, a subsidiary of the UN General Assembly. Cities, as represented by UCLG, were therefore directly involved in creating a document of international law.

Cities are using international organizations to strengthen their autonomy in relation to the state, at the same time as asserting a position on a par with the UN and international processes of global governance. By collaborating at the global governance level they by pass the central state, with potentially far-reaching consequences for the global order as we know it today.

Global cities are nodes in a network of (economic) globalization – they are global actors competing within the international economy for investments, jobs and creative people. Their inputs, however, have shifted from an economic role to an increasingly political or administrative one. Bilaterally, cities are developing transnational relations with other cities. Multilaterally, in global city networks, they join forces, find solutions for global problems and work towards common goals. City networks, inter-city or based on partnerships with international or supra-national organizations, connect city governments. Cities are becoming actors, rather than the physical places from which the highly developed service companies of Sassen's 'global city network' command and control globalization.

Some may doubt this new role as a mere marketing ploy or view city governors' international trips as excuses for a holiday. An alternative reading, however, may perceive the political resilience of cities and the powerful contributions they can make. City governments communicating across international boundaries, exchanging information and best practice, and sharing common objectives are emerging as agents in their own right – adding significantly and innovatively to global governance.

It is time to recognize cities as global actors. City networks are increasingly reaching across the globe. Local governments cooperate in global networks on climate change or energy targets; they can also coordinate local policy developments and take the lead in tackling global problems. A new level of transnational, inter-city cooperation has emerged.

How does this work in practice? City governments implement global policy targets locally and play a crucial role in grounding global policy decisions and international law in reality. They are also independent global actors, increasingly involved in the 'bottom-up' creation of global policies and international laws.

The city's role in global governance is complex. The city presents and identifies itself as an actor responding to the city's position as a 'site' within the grid of the global economy. Cities generate political and moral standards that may counterbalance the economic role globalization has forced upon them. It is too early to tell whether they will succeed. Undoubtedly, though, the new role of city governments within global governance structures brings much-needed vitality and new opportunities to international life. ■

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Local–global partnerships

'Global and local matters are more intertwined than ever before. Where once many problems were the sole domain of national governments, today they can be tackled only by partnerships that involve central governments, the private sector, civil society and local authorities – and often international institutions, too. So we will need you to do your part both as local managers and as some of your country's most influential politicians. We will also need your national leaders and governments to give you the space to act. A state which treats local authorities as partners, and allows public tasks to be carried out by those closest to the citizens, will be stronger, not weaker.'

— Former United Nations Secretary General, Kofi Annan, speaking to mayors and local governors at the United Cities and Local Governments summit in September 2005.