

Metropolis Report

The place of Metropolitan Spaces in the Future of Multilateralism

Introduction

To mark the 75th Anniversary of the United Nations, the UN Secretary-General has launched a worldwide conversation on the role of global cooperation in building a better future. This consultation is a milestone for further understanding what citizens and stakeholders from around the world think about the future of multilateralism and its role in managing global trends.

At the request of the United Nations, UCLG committed to publishing a report on how local and regional leaders see the challenges ahead, what the organization imagines for the future, and how we can build a networked, multilateral system that can meet these aspirations.

In order to answer these questions, Metropolis, with support from Barcelona City Council, organized an online discussion that was attended by more than 100 people, titled “The place of metropolitan spaces within the future of multilateralism”. Guest speakers included:

- Laia Bonet, Barcelona City Council Deputy Mayor for Agenda 2030, Digital Transition, Sports and Territorial and Metropolitan Coordination
- Emilia Saiz, UCLG Secretary General
- Henri-Paul Normandin, Director for International Relations for the City of Montreal and former ambassador of Canada to the UN
- Ana Falú, Chair of the UN-Habitat Advisory Board, UCLG Ubuntu Advisor and former Regional Director of UN Women - Americas and the Caribbean. Emeritus Professor at UNC – Argentina
- Aromar Revi, Director of the Indian Institute for Human Settlements and UCLG Ubuntu Advisor
- Paola Arjona, Technical Director of AL-LAS
- Agustí Fernández de Losada, Director of the Global Cities Programme at CIDOB
- Octavi de la Varga, Metropolis Secretary General

This report is structured into four sections based on different topics, and the result will be sent to the UN:

- Current trends and challenges in 2020
- What can we expect?
- The world in 2045
- The structural shift we expect

Current trends and challenges in 2020

The consultation was carried out at a time when the COVID-19 pandemic had already expanded across the globe, with its primary impact on people living in urban spaces. It has highlighted, in great detail, **the complexity, overlap, and interdependence of pre-existing city dynamics**, including urban, social and economic inequality, gender disparities, and access to health services, to name a few.

It is irrelevant that some of these dynamics are the result of global trends—local authorities have, in every case, been at the frontline of providing a response, as they have every time an urban-focused crisis appears. Given that there is a broad spectrum of **multilateral institutions designed to help cities provide an effective response to an increasingly complex scenario, the authorities have managed to respond in line with local needs.**

This pandemic has shone further light on the **deep inequalities (social, economic, participatory and environmental) that exist at every level of our cities and metropolitan areas.** The consequences of these inequalities have sometimes been so severe that they have threatened the most basic human rights. Although the debate about urban and regional inequalities has gained ground in the public sphere over the last few years, the current pandemic has accelerated and enhanced the discussion, pushing governments to provide immediate answers to enormously complex problems that have not stopped growing over recent decades.

The perception that multilateral institutions do not have effective and practical answers to local challenges has given more weight to the pre-existing debate surrounding the role of these institutions. **In some cases, this perception has also been used to argue that multilateral institutions can be a threat to local and regional power.** On this point, it is important to highlight that this debate is not new and has instead been amplified by the pandemic.

Adding to the tension between the local and global scale, we should also highlight the **threats to democracy that have emerged in the form of populist movements at every level**, offering simplistic answers to an increasingly complex reality. The role of metropolises as spaces for dialogue between different local realities and interests can help deactivate those movements.

What can we expect?

The deceleration or halting of the decentralization process seems to be a common element across most regions, although there are significant differences as to the scale of this change. Local and regional governments, based on their experience as first responders to the needs of their citizens, see this as a risk to their autonomy and to their capacity to provide effective and immediate solutions.

Against a backdrop of recentralization, multilateral institutions can play a central role in facilitating the dialogue between local and central governments. However, the presence of these institutions on a local scale is, most of the time, not enough to influence their decisions and initiatives. That is why we expect to see **further actions by local governments looking to have a real impact in multilateral institutions, not just a token presence.**

Cooperation between cities has increased in recent years, and is now the fastest and most effective strategy to share projects and knowledge. This direct cooperation has shed light on the difficulties that central governments have with the same process. The consultation showed a common consensus that we will need **spaces to strengthen city-to-city collaboration, and that multilateral institutions can play a central role in the construction of spaces** in which metropolises, given their scope of action in terms of territorial, population and political representation, are called on to become core actors.

Another key topic that has also been raised by the pandemic is the issue of financing models in local governments and how the mid- and long-term effects of this crisis will be paid for, along with pre-existing social and economic challenges. To tackle this issue, **government financial models and structures should be updated and adapted to an economy that is globally interdependent and interconnected, without losing autonomy or opportunities.** To facilitate this, multilateral organizations, as global actors, should be called upon to play an important role in this change.

The world in 2045

The pandemic has increased the urgent need for a broad and inclusive debate about human rights, and how, more than 60 years after their official acknowledgment, they could be updated and adapted to the current reality of our cities, which are more interconnected and interdependent than ever. In this process, digital rights and the right to the city must be discussed, keeping in mind, as this crisis has shown, that local governments are at the frontline of their implementation.

In 2045, **cities and metropolises can expect a world where they have proper recognition on a scale at which most rights can be ensured and implemented.** This does not mean that they will replace states in global discussions, rather that they will have more than one (often symbolic) seat at those debates, a new voice, and a relevant vote on the decisions taken.

By 2045 we can also expect bigger, more functional and more diversified spaces where cities and regions can share their needs, opportunities, expertise, as well as their challenges. These spaces should have the objective of coming up with collaborative answers adapted to local needs, and the capacities to achieve global goals.

The structural shift we expect

A substantial structural shift would be **a more feminized multilateralism, in which the other 50% of the population is fully integrated in the decision-making process**. This cannot be achieved at only a global or local scale; on the opposite, it requires that both local and global decision makers recognize the existing and unsustainable gender gap present on every level.

The role that local governments are asking for on the global scene and with regard to multilateral organizations seems quite clear: **recognition of their roles as “frontliners” and implementers of the most basic human rights**, in addition to the rights that have emerged over the past few decades, such as digital rights.

Governments are aware that it is no easy feat to introduce thousands of institutions to any structure, but there is recognition that **metropolises, given their dimensions, political power and impact on people, can and should have a central and active role in the much-needed redesign of multilateral institutions**.

The structural shift of multilateral institutions should also include adjustments to increase their recognition as valid institutions among citizens, **designing structures that allow them to partially share the legitimacy that local governments have among their citizens**. An effective way to achieve this “transfer” of legitimacy is by facilitating direct contact between the local governments and the decision centres where the policies and investments are discussed.

This structural shift cannot be achieved from inside multilateral institutions alone. The collaboration and interest of local and regional governments are crucial to achieving this goal, and to do so, **global agendas will need to be incorporated into local plans and strategies**. As part of this process, metropolitan structures can facilitate the translation of global goals into local ones, given their scope on an intermediate scale, operating between local and national authorities.

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