

Invited to the Party: International Organizations Evolve in an Urban World

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Executive summary

After World War II, dozens of international organizations (IOs) were created to structure international relations and alleviate causes of poverty and insecurity. Today, tectonic shifts in demography, technology, and diplomacy are testing these institutions, forcing them to adapt. In particular, the role and influence of cities on the international stage is growing, as urban leaders have made significant strides in making their voices heard on issues of international importance, from climate change to terrorism.

The research, governance, and partnerships of IOs have evolved to some extent. Most major international organizations now work on urban issues at the municipal and national levels, building local relationships and integrating policies vertically—which has complemented many cities’ work to organize their own collaborative efforts and to participate in and serve as leaders of the international dialogue. But many IOs are behind in adapting to the “century of cities” that is already underway, and their adaptations thus far have been largely ad hoc and subject to slow bureaucratic evolution.

This report offers several recommendations to help shape the integrity and relevance of IOs in this new urban world order:

- Use their access to national governments and departments to encourage and facilitate policy alignment at the national, regional, and municipal levels.
- Develop systems, including pipelines and liaisons, for local knowledge building and effective communication.
- Ensure their outreach engages with cities’ long-term strategic planning efforts.
- Facilitate access to municipal finance, including through private sector and state engagement.
- Gain insights from other IOs with urban expertise through formal processes and partnerships as well as informal engagements with diplomats and experts.
- Identify whether subnational engagement is encumbered by legal or statutory restrictions or, as is also often the case, capacity or resource limitations.
- Continue coordinating with cities’ and their networks’ established platforms to influence international agreements and produce immediate results.

If the world’s leading IOs are to remain relevant in this century of cities, they need to continue their evolution—and they need to get started right away.

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Introduction: An urban world order

In the years and decades after World War II, dozens of international organizations (IOs) were created to give structure and order to international relations and to alleviate the root causes of poverty and insecurity. Over the past 70 years, these multilateral organizations, along with treaty organizations and bilateral alliances, have done a great deal to shape global governance, and with it the rise of liberal economic exchange and the expansion of democratic governance.

Tectonic shifts in demography, technology, and diplomacy are now testing these institutions, forcing them to adapt. At the center of this evolution is the role cities play on the international stage. IOs' policies, investment strategies, and goals are increasingly focused on solving urban-related challenges, and a global governance system of urban networks and institutions has risen to give voice to city and state leaders in international matters—and yet, rarely do leading IOs include a formal seat at the decision-making table for city voices.

Most IOs have now recognized the important role cities play in meeting global challenges. The most pressing global challenges, many of which IOs are charged with addressing, cannot be solved without enhanced urban expertise and engagement. But structural shifts within these global institutions are rarely occurring in a coherent, intentional manner. Their adaptations have been largely ad hoc, a result of a slow progression of bureaucratic evolutions. With urban challenges demanding increased attention, and with city leaders and urban networks commanding increased capacity to influence, the world's leading multilateral institutions need strategic policies if they are to remain relevant in this century of cities.

The past and future of multilateral organizations

The United Nations (UN), formed in October 1945, has served as a hub of international engagement in the United States–led system since the end of World War II—essentially establishing a world order that includes the contributions of IOs. The UN Security Council, with its five permanent members and 10 rotating members, has served as the United Nations' power center, with the ability to authorize war and sanction UN member states. The UN General Assembly has served as the main arena for international debate and communication between nation-states. In addition to these main bodies, the United Nations operates several organs, agencies, and programs—such as the UN Human Settlements Programme (UN-Habitat), established in 1978 to focus on human settlements and sustainable urban development—that have come to inhabit a central role in diplomatic efforts and global knowledge building.

Beyond the United Nations, the IOs established by the victorious Allies—with the United States in the ostensible but disputatious lead—were economic and political in nature. At the center of the Bretton Woods system, the international monetary and exchange arrangement established in the 1944 Bretton Woods Agreement, sit the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank, which together seek to prevent the catastrophic economic failures of the 1930s and their attendant political extremisms. Over the course of the past 70 years, other institutions have developed to shape

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the global economic order. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) grew out of the Marshall Plan and provides a venue for policy debate and research for the world's most advanced economies. The World Trade Organization (WTO), meanwhile, provides a forum for negotiating and monitoring international trade agreements.

Overall, the institutions and norms of this order have done much to define the shape of cities around the world. They have provided the technocratic expertise necessary to support the economic exchange at the heart of the “global city.” They have facilitated the development and sharing of technologies that have altered how we look at cities. They have reinforced a period of relative peace and stability that has seen transnational violence diminish but terrorism and other forms of violence in cities increase.

This world order is now under immense strain. Indeed, world orders shift, emerge, collapse; they take on many forms; their change, historically, is inevitable. Autocrats in both the Global North and South undermine democratic institutions and multilateral institutions at the nation-state level. Populist surges in France, the United Kingdom, and the United States have called into question long-standing pillars of the post–World War II order, such as the European Union and NATO. “Donald Trump’s stunning electoral defeat of Hillary Clinton marks a watershed not just for American politics,” wrote Francis Fukuyama in the *Financial Times* in 2016, “but for the entire world order.”¹ Such events have forged a new rift between the world’s city-dwelling globalists and more protectionist populists.

But the post–World War II order was under stress long before 2016. In 2015, General Martin Dempsey, then the chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff, told Congress, “Today’s global security

environment is the most unpredictable I have seen in 40 years of service.”² A series of macro trends that date back to the end of the Cold War, if not earlier, has challenged the efficacy of IOs and the resilience of global norms. These trends—including new technologies, cyberthreats, emergent superpowers, terrorism, explosive economic inequality, and urbanization—are fundamentally reshaping the world order.

Moving sidewalks and tectonic shifts

As the National Intelligence Council’s *Global Trends 2030* report concluded, urbanization is one of the macro trends reshaping today’s world. More than 50 percent of the global population now lives in cities. That number will grow to more than 60 percent by 2030. By then, the world will have roughly 40 megacities of 10 million or more residents; put another way, 40 cities will have populations larger than Jordan, Libya, or Norway. A great deal of this growth is occurring in Africa and Asia, where the urban population is expected to increase from fewer than 500 million in 2015 to more than 1.3 billion in 2050.³

But demographics are only part of the story. Urbanization is a quantitative and qualitative phenomenon. It is both the growth of cities and the change within them.* From the vantage point of cities and IOs, tectonic shifts are testing both city governments and global governance institutions alike. Climate change and correlated challenges, from Hurricane Sandy to mass migration, are stressing urban spaces. Meanwhile, the “financialization” of the global economy has increasingly favored finance, global trade, and cultural exchange, with capital flowing out of old manufacturing centers such as Pittsburgh and Manchester and through international financial institutions headquartered in cities such as London,

* This was a working definition outlined by former UN-Habitat Executive Director Joan Clos for the New Urban Agenda discussions and negotiations.

New York, Paris, and Tokyo, into developing markets and new financial assets.⁴ Transnational terrorist groups, meanwhile, have made cities a target of violence. Between 1993 and 2000, the number of terrorist attacks in cities more than doubled.⁵ Over the first decade of the 21st century, this brand of urban warfare brought attacks in Amsterdam, London, Madrid, and beyond. They all targeted great pastimes of cities: the iconic marathon in Boston, live music in Manchester, café culture in Paris. In the face of these challenges, cities have been seizing and creating platforms for global action.

In a hyperconnected age, cities have become expert networkers. This networking isn't new; from the Hanseatic League of the 1300s–1500s to the sister cities of the post–World War II era, cities have long sought connections to advance their interests. But now more than 200 cities, big and small, actively network. The Global Covenant of Mayors for Climate & Energy, as an example, connects more than 7,000 cities and towns, some with as few as 2,000 people. Such networks enable mayors to overcome collective action challenges by sharing policies, issuing joint policy and political statements, and lobbying IOs.

Institutional adaptation

To address the challenges of our modern world, IOs must work with and within cities. The United Nations, UN agencies and programs, the World Bank, regional development banks, and other IOs have all attempted to adapt their bureaucratic structures, processes, programs, and expertise to the defining trends and challenges of the day. Their work has grown to encompass countering climate change, adapting to the revolution in information and communications technology, and meeting the challenge of new forms of violence. This work has also meant adapting to the demands of working in an increasingly urban

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world. Urbanists have been part of an extended effort dating back to the early 1970s to carve out a larger space for their expertise and politics at the most state-centric of international institutions. As a result, since the end of the Cold War, the bedrock post–World War II institutions—such as the OECD, United Nations, and World Bank—have become increasingly accommodating of urban expertise and perspectives.

IOs share features that set them apart from other international efforts.* A key feature revolves around the ability to balance geopolitics with local action and collaborate with non-IO agents—such as the Group of Twenty (G20) and NATO—that also influence international urban outcomes. A “general truth about cities,” writes Lewis Mumford in his midcentury classic, *The City in History*, is “their marked individuality, so strong, so full of ‘character’ from the beginning that they have many of the attributes of human personalities.”⁶ Just as cities have unique histories, politics, and dispositions, so too do IOs have histories, politics, and (bureaucratic) dispositions. The meeting of the two makes for a complicated landscape—and, with hundreds of IOs and thousands of cities, it's a crowded one.

This report examines how many IOs are approaching the challenge of urban expertise,

* International organizations (a subset of which includes those using the definition *intergovernmental organizations*) are most often defined as being composed of member states, though not necessarily exclusively, and, according to the International Law Commission, are “established by a treaty or other instrument governed by international law and possessing its own international legal personality.”

including through building comparable urban data and accessing local knowledge. It also explores the impact of that knowledge-building and the larger recognition of the urbanizing world on the organizational structures of IOs internally. Then it analyzes the efforts of IOs to work in cities, including ways in which they roll out programs and integrate with local authorities and local

civil society. The fourth section brings the city as political actor into clearer focus, offering a contemporary history of the way cities, mayors, and their networks have engaged (or ignored) IOs over the past two decades. Finally, we offer recommendations to help shape the integrity and relevance of IOs in this new world order.

International organizations referenced in this report

United Nations (UN)

The UN Charter was officially signed in June of 1945, and the United Nations now serves as the primary international forum for facilitating government dialogue and action on the top issues facing humanity, including social, economic, political, and environmental challenges.⁷ Since the late 1970s, the United Nations has also housed UN-Habitat, a program specifically focused on the challenges and opportunities presented by urbanization.⁸

North American Treaty Organization (NATO)

NATO was formed in 1949 as a political and military alliance to support democratic values and security in member states through a commitment to cooperation and collective defense.⁹ Since its founding, NATO has expanded membership and evolved in its function, including playing a growing role as an international arena for having an impact on urban outcomes.

Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD)

The OECD traces its roots back to the Organisation for European Economic Co-operation (OEEC), which was charged with implementing the Marshall Plan following World War II.¹⁰ Officially created in 1961, the OECD has since expanded to comprise 36 members and serves as a venue for policy research and debate for the world's most advanced economies.

International Monetary Fund (IMF)

The IMF was established in 1945 to promote stability and cooperation in the international monetary and financial systems. The IMF also seeks to facilitate international trade, strengthen employment prospects, and promote economic growth with an eye toward reducing global poverty.¹¹

World Trade Organization (WTO)

The WTO's predecessor organization, the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT), was created in 1947 to serve as the primary coordinating and rules-making body for the multilateral trading system. The WTO was ultimately created in 1995, expanding the GATT's original mandate from trade in goods to include services and intellectual property as well as new dispute settlement procedures.¹²



World Bank Group

Founded in 1944, the World Bank Group works with nearly 200 countries that are classified as developing or in transition through loans, advice, and technical assistance. The World Bank Group has grown to encompass five associated development institutions: the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development (IBRD), the International Development Association (IDA), the International Finance Corporation (IFC), the International Centre for Settlement of Investment Disputes (ICSID), and the Multilateral Investment Guarantee Agency (MIGA).¹³

Regional development banks

In the years following the creation of the initial Bretton Woods Institutions, a series of multilateral financial institutions emerged to provide financial and technical assistance to countries within a specific region of focus. The four regional development banks (RDBs) maintain specialized skills and capabilities to meet the needs of low- and middle-income countries within their sphere of geographic focus.

- ***African Development Bank (AfDB)***: The AfDB began operations in 1966 with the goal of spurring long term, sustainable economic and social development in its member countries by mobilizing investment and providing policy advice and technical assistance.¹⁴
- ***Asian Development Bank (ADB)***: The ADB opened in 1966 as a financial institution focused on supporting economic cooperation and development in Asia. Through loans, grants, and technical assistance as well as facilitated policy dialogues,¹⁵ the ADB has helped support huge social and economic gains among its member countries.
- ***European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD)***: The EBRD was established in 1991 following the collapse of communism in Eastern Europe with the mission of promoting private enterprise and entrepreneurship. Through its advice, technical assistance, and investments, the EBRD has established itself as a leader in supporting transitions to democratic and open-market systems.¹⁶
- ***Inter-American Development Bank (IDB)***: Since 1959, the IDB has been a critical provider of loans, grants, and technical assistance to Latin America and the Caribbean. Today, the IDB focuses on reducing poverty and inequality, strengthening infrastructure, and improving health outcomes in target countries.¹⁷

Building expertise and accessing local knowledge

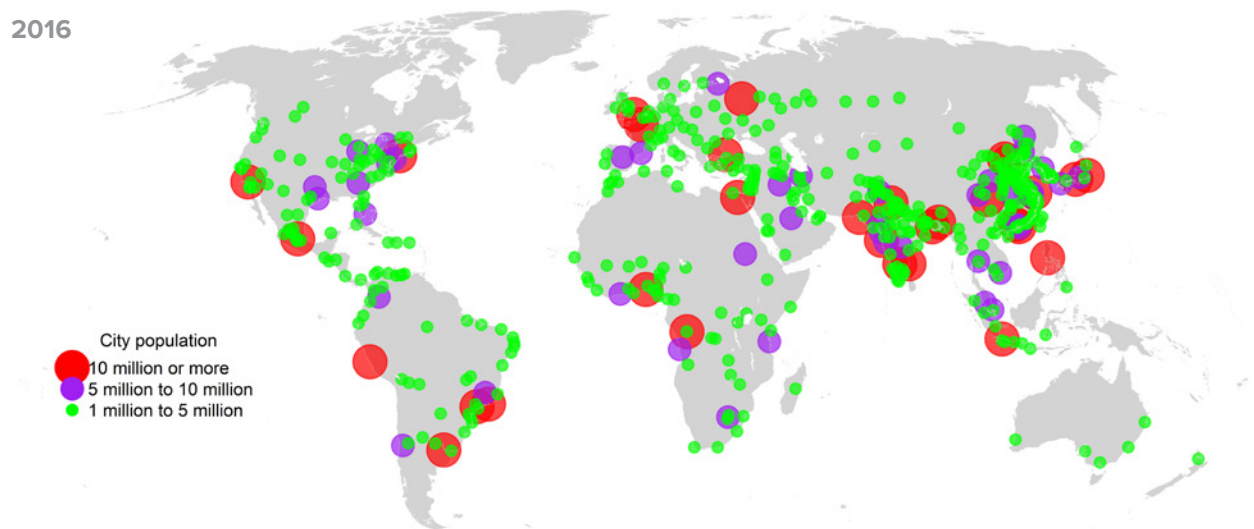
The sheer number and complexity of cities today present fundamental challenges to organizations seeking to operate in urban spaces. As seen in Figure 1, the coming decades will see a rapid

proliferation of cities of various sizes. Even for IOs, foreign ministries, and multinational corporations with global reach, the scale and dynamics of urban spaces are overwhelming. Nevertheless, over the past two decades leading IOs have been developing research approaches, bureaucratic processes, partnerships, and informal relationships to increase their urban expertise.

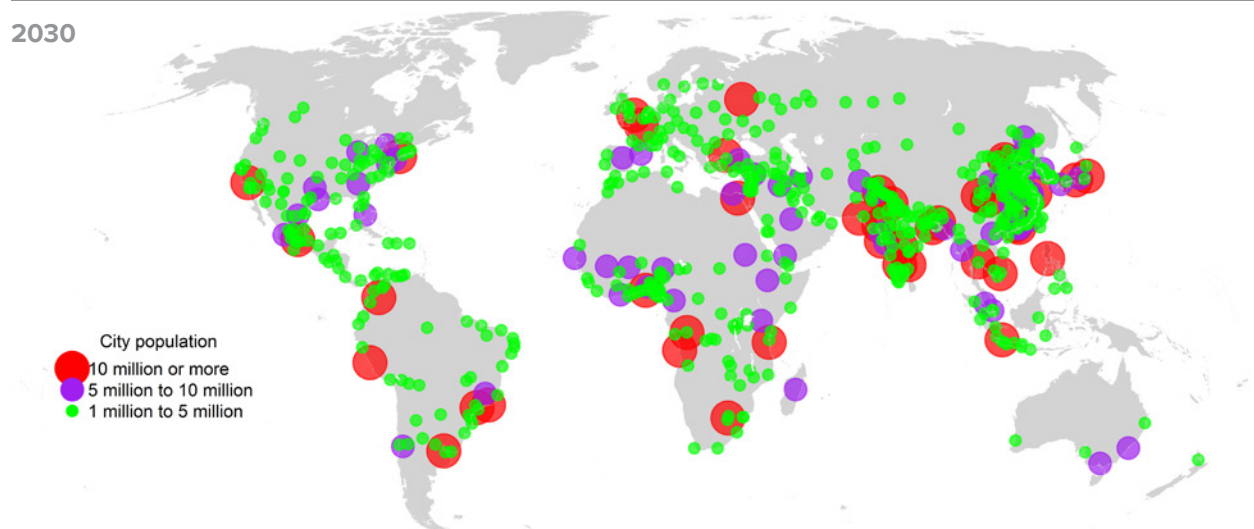
Figure 1

Cities with 1 million inhabitants or more, 2016 and 2030

2016



2030



Source: *The World's Cities in 2016—Data Booklet (ST/ESA/SER.A/392)*, by Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division, ©2016 United Nations. Reprinted with permission of the United Nations.

Big, small, and complicated

In its *Urban Operational Plan, 2012–2020*, the Asian Development Bank (ADB)—an international development finance institution established in 1966 and dedicated to promoting social and economic advancement in Asia—self-assessed rather bluntly: “There has been lack of operationally relevant sector knowledge available to both DMCs [developing member countries] and ADB staff. There has been too little ‘thought leadership’ . . . ADB needs to build its knowledge systems, better align staff’s skill mix with [the *Urban Operational Plan*] direction, and strengthen its knowledge partnership network with other professionals and institutions [that] can provide services or resources relevant to urban planning, project design, structuring, financing, and implementation.”¹⁸

For global institutions such as the ADB, other development banks, and leading IOs, four epistemological challenges stand out: unprecedented size and density in megacities, rapid urbanization of smaller cities, the limits of big data, and access to contextual knowledge.

Unprecedented megacities

First, there is the challenge of size in the form of megacities, the urban leviathans. In 2016, there were 31 megacities with populations above 10 million, a number expected to grow to 41 cities by 2030 (Figure 1).¹⁹ Approximately 1.5 million people join the global urban population every week, and 90 percent of these new urbanites live in African or Asian countries.²⁰ According to LSE Cities’ Urban Age research, Lagos is growing at 85 people per hour, Delhi at 79, Dhaka at 74, Shanghai at 53, and Mumbai at 51.²¹ Several metropolitan areas, such as Mexico City, São Paulo, and greater Tokyo, are home to more than 30 million residents. The Chicago Council on Global Affairs’ report *100 Top Economies* highlighted that the economic activity of many of these cities exceeds that of some large

countries. The gross domestic product (GDP) of New York, for instance, exceeds that of Australia; the GDP of Shanghai exceeds that of Vietnam.²²

The economic depth and productivity of large cities is often matched by dense, overlapping, and opaque networks that make them difficult settings for security operations. The United States and its allies learned this firsthand during the 2000s in Iraq (Baghdad is slightly smaller than a megacity) when the complexity and density of urban space required that US forces often encircle cities rather than enter them directly. A 2014 report of the Chief of Staff of the US Army’s Strategic Studies Group, *Megacities and the United States Army: Preparing for a Complex and Uncertain Future*, concluded that “it is highly likely that the megacities will be the strategic key terrain in any future crisis that requires U.S. military intervention.” However, large cities, with their metabolic complexity, are difficult to know, let alone operate in. The report acknowledged as much: “A gap exists in the Army’s doctrinal understanding of large cities.”²³

Rapid expansion of smaller cities

Secondary and tertiary cities present a different challenge of scale. In 2010, according to the Marron Institute of Urban Management at New York University, there were 4,231 cities with more than 100,000 people, a number that has certainly grown.²⁴ Close to half of the world’s urban dwellers reside in relatively small settlements of fewer than 500,000 (Figure 2).²⁵ The fastest-growing cities in Asia and Africa number fewer than 1 million residents.²⁶

The sheer number of growing cities presents an overwhelming challenge to IOs seeking to understand the scope of the issues.

Figure 2

World's population by size class of settlement, 2016 and 2030

	2016			2030		
	Number of settlements	Population (millions)	Percentage of world population	Number of settlements	Population (millions)	Percentage of world population
Urban		4,034	54.5		5,058	60.0
10 million or more	31	500	6.8	41	730	8.7
5 to 10 million	45	308	4.2	63	434	5.2
1 to 5 million	436	861	11.6	558	1,128	13.4
500,000 to 1 million	551	380	5.1	731	509	6.0
Fewer than 500,000		1,985	26.8		2,257	26.8
Rural		3,371	45.5		3,367	40.0

Source: *The World's Cities in 2016*—Data Booklet (ST/ESA/ SER.A/392), by Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division, ©2016 United Nations. Reprinted with permission of the United Nations.

Just as the Council has noted the vastness of megacity economies,²⁷ the McKinsey Global Institute has argued that approximately 600 cities—many of them secondary and tertiary—drive global economic growth.²⁸ This rapid urbanization is occurring in cities largely unprepared to manage immense growth and will present a series of new challenges. PwC's Megatrends found that more than 60 percent of Africa's urban dwellers live in informal and unplanned settlements and that 41 percent of the urban population in sub-Saharan Africa does not have access to electricity.²⁹ According to the World Bank, "The waste from cities alone is already enough to fill a line of trash trucks 5,000 kilometers long every day." And this waste is expected to increase rapidly—as is the cost of dealing with that waste.³⁰ As these examples demonstrate, the sheer number of growing cities presents an overwhelming challenge to IOs seeking to understand the scope of the issues.

The limits of big data

Many are optimistic that the solutions to myriad challenges will be delivered through new technologies. The smart cities market may well exceed \$1 trillion by the mid-2020s,³¹ while automation and the Internet of Things mean cities and associated partners and service providers will have access to large new sources of data. For IOs and other global actors, it would be especially valuable if this data were public, programmable, and comparable across cities.

As Citymart and other procurement experts have noted, however, data around even the most fundamental and important of processes are often not public.³² And even where data are available, comparability remains a major roadblock. The Habitat Commitment Index, produced by a team of researchers at the Global Urban Futures Project, has sought to track urban progress on international

agreements by using city-level data from 178 cities rather than national averages. “There are not enough reported data,” the team concludes, “to allow a meaningful comparative assessment between cities. Given the current availability of city-level data, a global comparative assessment of the progress in the implementation of the NUA [the New Urban Agenda] and the city-related SDGs [Sustainable Development Goals] cannot be done.”³³

Big and complex, small and scattered, the global urban world is anything but uniform.

Access to contextual knowledge

Big and complex, small and scattered, the global urban world is anything but uniform. Sweeping demographic projections hide an array of mismatched data, hidden networks, and power centers. For IOs such as the United Nations and the World Bank, accessing such knowledge and enabling access to it, while difficult, is crucial to both the legitimacy of initiatives and success of long-term investments.

However, even where city-level data is widely available and comparable, contextual knowledge on a city’s unique situation may be missing. In *Seeing Like a State*, James C. Scott describes the problems in knowledge and approach that often plague large planned projects, including planned cities such as Brazil’s capital, Brasília.³⁴ While such projects might have access to current research and newly available data, they often struggle to identify and make use of localized, informal knowledge.

Keller Easterling calls the “disposition” of a city, building, or piece of infrastructure its “propensity within a context.”³⁵ Is a city or neighborhood sitting on edge and more volatile than would seem at first

glance—such as Tottenham, London, before the 2011 riots in England—or perhaps more inclined to communal activity during a crisis—such as Lower Manhattan during the aftermath of Hurricane Sandy in 2012? Such knowledge is expensive, idiosyncratic, hard-earned, and not easily scaled. In other words, it is exactly the type of knowledge large, global organizations struggle to access.

Data, diagnostics, and diplomacy

The challenge IOs face in terms of accessing knowledge and gaining expertise is not for lack of effort. A huge number of initiatives by UN agencies, regional development banks, and other IOs are focused on building better knowledge of urban spaces. And in certain instances—as with the OECD—IOs are, in fact, on the cutting edge of new research.

Overall, international institutions are adopting a number of approaches to building knowledge, including collaborating with UN agencies; developing innovative data-collection partnerships in the field, including with nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and with cities’ governments themselves; and facilitating expert contributions to formal multilateral negotiations that shape the international development framework.

Collaborating with UN agencies

The United Nations holds a unique and unrivaled position in the realm of global statistics. Many of the bedrock statistics that inform global development, economic and security analyses, and agendas were developed as part of, and are often maintained by, the United Nations or its agencies. International standards around GDP, for instance, were accepted and disseminated under UN auspices in the wake of World War II.³⁶ Climate-change data, meanwhile, is built globally by the working groups of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, a body administered by the UN Environment Programme

and the World Meteorological Organization. UN-Habitat maintains the Global Urban Observatory, “a specialized statistical unit in charge of global monitoring of the Habitat agenda and other agenda with an urban linkage,” as well as UN-Habitat’s recently launched City Prosperity Initiative.³⁷ Such data inform normative training and everything from monitoring the SDGs to UN-Habitat’s *State of the World Cities* report.

Nonetheless, despite myriad urban reports by the United Nations and other IOs, as well as city-ranking lists, the increased connectivity of cities

and their activity on the global stage has made clear that enhanced data efforts are necessary. Consider the global momentum of cities combating climate change. Despite the commitments of nearly every country in the world to keep global average temperatures from rising 2°C over pre-Industrial Revolution levels, until recently cities did not have an agreed-upon, comparable standard for reporting emission inventories. This changed at the 2017 UN Climate Change Conference (COP23) in Bonn, Germany, where the Global Covenant of Mayors for Climate & Energy—a network linking more than 7,000 cities and towns around the

How many people live in your city?

At United Nations Conference on Housing and Sustainable Urban Development (Habitat III) in Quito, Ecuador, in November 2016, the European Union, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), and the World Bank announced “a voluntary commitment to develop a global, people-based definition of cities and settlements.” In 2017, the Food and Agriculture Organization, a specialized agency of the United Nations, also joined the commitment. The partners are aiming to present a definition based on “degrees of urbanization”—something close to density—and the EU-OECD “functional urban area” concept, which looks not just at municipalities but also metropolitan areas, agglomeration, and the links between urban area, suburbs, and rural areas, at the 50th session of the UN Statistical Commission in 2019.

According to the definitions being developed by the partners and led by a research team at the European Commission, many current calculations around national and regional urbanization levels are significantly over or underestimated. Initial findings suggest, for instance, that rather than being close to 90 percent urban, per current UN estimates, Denmark is closer to 50 percent. Meanwhile, while the United Nations’ *World Urbanization Prospects* estimates that Africa is roughly 40 percent urban, the EU team estimates it closer to 80 percent.

More precise definitions of “urbanization” and “functional urban areas” could enable better monitoring of the United Nations’ sustainable development goals (SDGs) and support the implementation of the New Urban Agenda, but the potential implications stretch far beyond those two agreements. Many countries, including the United States, conceive of development issues (such as extreme poverty and food security) as rural challenges and build programs accordingly. New figures on an urbanized world could affect these development approaches at the national and multilateral levels.³⁸

world—announced a new global standard for cities to report greenhouse gas emissions inventories.³⁹ With the Global Covenant of Mayors acting as the secretariat, thousands of cities will now be able to report and compare climate data. The initiative’s architecture plays to the unique advantages of the respective partners: the link to the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change lends international credibility and the potential for amplification, while the city network facilitates the engagement of the cities and towns themselves.

Developing innovative partnerships in the field to collect data

As is the case with the Global Covenant of Mayors carbon emissions initiative, comparable global data can help build the case for local engagement while also monitoring collective efficacy of policies and initiatives. As such, more and more IOs are participating in partnerships focused on data collection. The World Bank and several regional development banks, such as the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB), have also developed diagnostic tools to guide data collection at the local, national, and international levels. Rather than offering a global snapshot, these diagnostic tools are designed to set the course for local action itself. They are also designed to be usable in the field and deployed at scale without significant resources.

For example, as part of its Emerging and Sustainable Cities Initiative (ESCI)—which started with five pilot cities, expanded to 40 cities by 2014, and ultimately reached 71 cities—the IDB developed a rapid diagnostic tool to build city knowledge and guide loans and projects. The multiple stages of the initiative’s knowledge-building and implementation tool provided useful perspective. The initial diagnostic stage included quantitative analysis (based on 120 indicators from secondary sources), qualitative analysis by technical

experts, and risk and disaster mapping.⁴⁰ The rapid diagnostic tool ultimately produced high-resolution mapping available to all residents and researchers, as well as open-source data. The process averaged around 12 months. Much of the knowledge was built through local engagement, including through partnerships with local universities. Meanwhile, risk and hazard assessments often called on multisectoral collaboration across city departments that had previously been stovepiped.⁴¹ The process and tool thus accessed local knowledge but paired it with technical expertise from the IO.* The diagnostic process ended with the development of an action plan and transitioned to a process of identifying funding sources and priority interventions. Even a “rapid” diagnostic tool that had access to local partnerships and city leadership required extensive and ongoing engagement from technical experts and local authorities. A 2016 internal report on the ESCI’s knowledge-building efforts by the IDB’s Office of Evaluation and Oversight (OVE) concludes, “The success of the initiative in generating and disseminating knowledge and in building partnership is noteworthy. The model for knowledge generation and dissemination, combined with the culture of information openness and transparency, was particularly valuable and novel.”⁴² Importantly, the IDB, as well as the World Bank and other IOs, has made sure that knowledge-building efforts—for loans, programs, and even internal education—are publicly accessible.⁴³

Such knowledge-building efforts are in no way limited to development-focused IOs. Other international institutions, including the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe and alliance organizations such as NATO, have undertaken planning exercises that involve the convening of, or outreach to, experts. From 2014 to

* This pairing is extremely similar to that advocated for by David Kilcullen in *Out of the Mountains: The Coming Age of the Urban Guerrilla* (London: C. Hurst & Co., 2013).

2017, for example, NATO organized and conducted a war game focused on urban security challenges, featuring intelligence as well as policing and strategic communications.⁴⁴

Contributing to formal expert multilateral negotiations

The agreements and agendas that shape the work carried out by IOs are often settled, or at a minimum outlined, in the arena of international politics among nation-states. Even the scientific reports delivered by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, for instance, are translated into diplomatic language and subject to debate. As such, the negotiations around international agreements and accords provide further avenues for the integration of urban knowledge into IO work. They are meeting places of geopolitics and sectoral expertise.

While explicitly denying nonstate actors voting rights or “observer” status, the UN Charter recognized the importance of stakeholder engagement and consultations for the purpose of accessing expertise. In 1946, 41 NGOs received UN accreditation. The importance of consultation with stakeholders was confirmed in 1996, and as of 2018, the number stands upward of 4,500.⁴⁵ Various structures for integrating civil society expertise into UN negotiations have been developed in recent years. In advance of the negotiations for the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015–2030, for example, the UN Office for Disaster Risk Reduction facilitated nearly 90 events that engaged not only member states but also partners, stakeholders, and networks. Expert input into the New Urban Agenda was similarly extensive and included broad citizen, expert, and government official contributions through 11 regional and thematic conferences involving more than 10,000 participants, as well as the work of 200 experts (organized into policy units) to synthesize 22 UN reports into 10 policy papers.

Integrating urban issues into international organizations

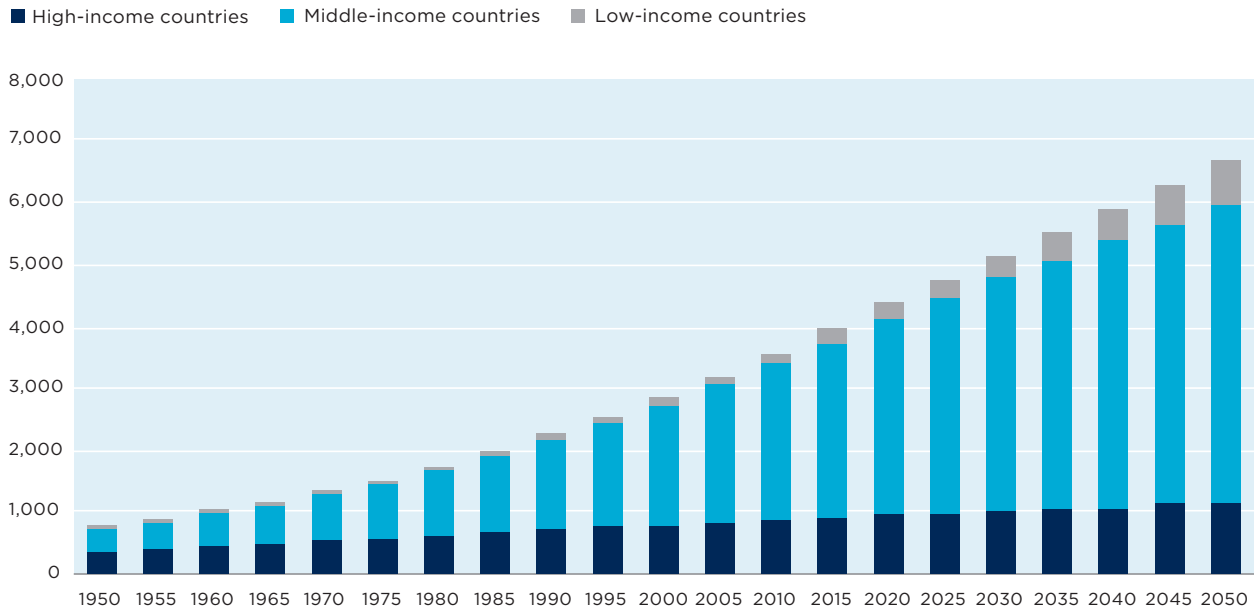
The myriad forms of urbanization present an organizational challenge to multilateral institutions led by and structured around nation-states. Urbanization is occurring most rapidly in cities throughout Africa and Asia, but Europe and Latin America are also undergoing their own urban metamorphoses in well-established cities. Urbanization is tied to a host of other issues, including energy, climate, water, security, and human rights. Sprawl and metropolitan growth are challenging municipal governance and stretching urban ecosystems across borders—but particularly in middle-income countries (Figure 3). It is not always clear where technical experts and relevant diplomats on cities should sit in the bureaucratic and hierarchical structure of leading IOs.

Globally focused bureaucracies, whether IOs or foreign ministries, often map out internal structures that correspond to the world as they see it. Frequently, a portion of an organization is given geographic or regional responsibilities. At the IDB, for instance, this geographic focus falls under the Vice Presidency for Countries. At the US Department of State, this falls under the Under Secretariat for Political Affairs, and beneath that the regional bureaus. These geographically focused sections of the bureaucracy are often among the more powerful departments as they frequently maintain the connection to country offices or embassies.

Such structural adaptations are often the result of a slow progression of bureaucratic evolutions, often balancing centralized control at the national level with distributed engagement and expertise at the local level.

Figure 3

Global urban population, millions



Source: World Urbanization Prospects 2018 Interactive Data (for Annual Urban Population at Mid-Year [thousands]); accessed October 24, 2018), <https://population.un.org/wup/DataQuery/>.

Of course, the world is more than just places driving change—it is also the trends driving change. And so, bureaucracies have also developed thematic expertise around key topics. At the World Bank, such offices fall under the Vice Presidency for Global Themes, among others. At the US State Department, they are called “functional bureaus” and focus on issues such as energy, counterterrorism, and human rights. The interaction of these thematic offices with regionally focused ones is often a matter of friction, a battle of internal politics over turf, policy topics, or resources.

There are various approaches to integrating the expertise around and knowledge of urban issues into the headquarters and secretariats of IOs. In certain instances, initiatives have served

to facilitate overcoming bureaucratic limitations. In many instances, tension has developed between establishing a central urban office or distributing urban experts throughout various departments—though personal relationships and informal networks remain key regardless of the organizational structure.⁴⁶ No single approach is used across IOs, nor do these approaches seem to have been created with intent at a specific point in time. Such structural adaptations are often the result of a slow progression of bureaucratic evolutions, often balancing centralized control at the national level with distributed engagement and expertise at the local level.*

* This finding is consistent with the 2014 findings of Future Cities Catapult, *Urban Innovation and Investment: The Role of International Financial Institutions and Development Banks*, December 2014, and suggests that despite ongoing reorganizations, the tension is inescapable.

Launching urban engagement initiatives

Not all IOs are equally affected by urbanization and its attendant effects. Those IOs focused on a range of global security issues, such as nuclear arms control, for example, are unlikely to have built out significant responses to the rise of cities. In contrast, development banks, the OECD, and the United Nations, including its various agencies and programs, all include missions and goals that require a high level of literacy and activity on urban issues.

Like many other regional development banks, the IDB's urban engagement dates back decades and has followed a familiar trajectory, with an initial focus on housing shifting to a focus on service delivery and enabling policies. As part of this process, the IDB moved away from financing housing construction and toward more holistic efforts aimed at neighborhood upgrades, infrastructure development, and city-center rejuvenation in places such as Barrio 31 in Buenos Aires.⁴⁷

The aforementioned ESCI program at the IDB began with five pilot cities in 2010 and eventually grew to 71, including cities in all 26 IDB-borrowing countries.* When the initiative wrapped up in 2015, it was folded into the Climate Change and Sustainable Development Sector within the Vice Presidency for Sectors and Knowledge.⁴⁸ Under this structure, most urban experts sit within the new Housing and Urban Development Division. The new division still manages traditional urban issues such as housing, but it is specifically oriented toward working with other sectors. It is a finance shop, to be certain, but also service-oriented, allowing for urban expertise to be integrated into other sectors.

* ESCI's focus was meant to be on rapidly growing midsize cities, especially those with more than 100,000 residents, but ultimately came to include cities with populations between approximately 2,500 and 2.5 million and geographic size from 9 km² to nearly 10,400 km².

The institutionalization of the ESCI has further energized urban work at the IDB, but did it also give rise to new bureaucratic barriers? For all the criticism of IOs, they do not hesitate to produce their own. Among other developments, the 2016 OVE report examined the institutionalization of the ESCI. It noted: "On the one hand, the institutionalization of the initiative should increase the incentives and ownership of staff who are now in CSD. However, the informal coordination mechanisms with other sector departments (e.g., water, transportation) may now be weaker."⁴⁹ Despite those worries, IDB officials report the ability and institutional encouragement to work on sectors beyond housing.⁵⁰

Designating formal departments

In the case of the IDB, the informal arrangements, relationships, and habits of practice developed during the ESCI may have encouraged continued interdisciplinary exchange even when urban issues were reorganized. The ADB's approach is similar, if more centralized both bureaucratically and culturally. The ADB, headquartered in Manila, has five regional departments with sectoral divisions, one of which includes urban issues. At times, as with the IDB's coupling of urban and housing, the sectoral divisions feature a coupling of urban and other thematic issues, including water and transport. The East Asia regional department, for example, which covers China and Mongolia, combines urban and social work.

There are also crosscutting efforts, formal and informal, built out of discrete offices. The Sustainable Development and Climate Change Department features an urban group that feeds regional departments and sectoral divisions with policy, resource, and partnership ideas. Meanwhile, development of the *Urban Operational Plan*, which outlines the bank's approach to urban issues, "was led by the Urban

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community of practice . . . through a process that combined internal consultations across operations departments and their resident missions, inputs from resource persons of stature in their fields, and external consultations with both ADB DMCs [development member countries] and development partners.”⁵¹ Formal offices or departments have the additional advantage of being clear points of contact for outside or partner organizations.⁵²

Distributing work throughout the institution

The World Bank’s approach to urban issues is the most extensive of IOs that are not exclusively focused on such issues. It has both a central hub and distributed officials, as well as formal and informal mechanisms for multisectoral work. As of 2013, the World Bank’s dual goals are to eliminate extreme poverty and boost shared prosperity. Social, Urban, Rural and Resilience (SURR) is one of 14 “Global Practices” at the World Bank. SURR oversees roughly \$4 billion to \$5 billion in lending per year with an outstanding portfolio of \$25 billion.⁵³ Beyond this centralized practice, urban work and expertise is also distributed throughout the other sectoral practices, such as transportation and water. Multisectoral urban projects are often under the auspices of SURR, while more traditionally sectoral investment with urban focus are overseen by the appropriate thematic practice. This approach is consistent with development banks in general, where most urban-focused work is still overseen by departments or offices not explicitly “urban” by definition.⁵⁴

The OECD, meanwhile, has been working on urban issues for decades. Organized around best practices, the Group on Urban Affairs was established under the environment directorate, but its focus has steadily included more economic issues. The OECD is now organized thematically around technical committees, of which there are scores. In 1999, it established the Regional Development Policy Committee (RDPC), with three subservient working parties, including one focused on urban policy. The RDPC remained the home of most urban issues until 2016, when the OECD established the Centre for Entrepreneurship, SMEs, Regions and Cities to oversee numerous urban-focused projects. Technical experts in other committees, in particular around education, are increasingly approaching issues with a subnational focus, but urban expertise and training are, more often than not, acquired on the go in such cases.⁵⁵ Not unlike the IDB, the OECD has also organized bureaucratic energy through leadership-led initiatives, including the OECD Champion Mayors for Inclusive Growth, the Local Economic and Employment Development program, the Roundtable of Mayors and Ministers, and the World Observatory on Subnational Government Finance and Investment.

Creating new agencies

Nowhere has the organizational challenge around urban issues been more apparent than in the United Nations. Indeed, over the course of 2015–16, a specter haunted negotiations around the New Urban Agenda, the global agreement that comes out once every 20 years on cities and human settlements: What should happen to UN-Habitat?

UN-Habitat’s original mandate was to promote shelter for all; its mission has evolved over the years to support advancements in urban planning, urban services, risk reduction, and basic services. It is now

the architect and executor of the New Urban Agenda and responsible for the implementation of the SDGs.

The divergence of positions among member states, let alone other UN agencies and civil society, on the future of UN-Habitat was enormous. Some member states, such as Kenya, envisioned a strengthened UN-Habitat with a bigger budget and a more explicit leadership role on urban issues across the United Nations. Others, it was whispered, envisioned a new UN urban effort, modeled on UN-Energy and UN-Water, that worked more as an interagency coordinating body between agencies and programs. As such, the divergent positions tracked ongoing bureaucratic challenges for organizing around urbanization, but with the frictions of geopolitics overlaid on top. The issue remained heated throughout negotiations and was one of the final points settled in the late hours of the last negotiating session.

Ultimately, the New Urban Agenda identified UN-Habitat as a focal point for the implementation and monitoring of the New Urban Agenda but granted it neither exclusive domain over urban issues nor the agenda itself. It left to the General Assembly and the Secretary General, governed by leaders at the nation-state level, the question of UN-Habitat's efficacy and future reorganization.

In April 2017, UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres initiated a high-level panel—including diplomats, mayors, planners, and network leaders—to examine the effectiveness of UN-Habitat and, implicitly, the United Nations' approach to urbanization. The panel's report, delivered in August 2017, faulted the United Nations for its failure to "adequately acknowledge the pace, scale and implications of urbanization, the dependence of the 2030 Agenda on the direction of urban development, or the fundamental role played in urban development by local governments and

other local actors."⁵⁶ It proposed, among other recommendations, the appointment of UN-Habitat "as a coordinating mechanism" within the United Nations, a move that would supplement and facilitate UN-Habitat's normative work.

In other words, further interagency and program exchange was needed beyond what UN-Habitat was attempting.

Almost uniformly, member states did not agree. Some suggested it was a faulty stand-in for strengthening UN-Habitat, while others, such as the United States, advocated further analysis and reform.⁵⁷ "[T]here are no current institutional mechanisms to coordinate the work with other agencies to avoid duplication, increase efficiency, or enhance policy integration," the high-level panel's report concluded. This bureaucratic impasse remains intact, illustrating the exhausting complexity and bureaucratic challenge of creating urban agencies in existing multilateral organizations governed by nation-state leaders.

Implementation and working in cities

Much as they might concentrate on internal dynamics, IOs do not exist for the sake of bureaucratic innovation or reorganization: they seek influence and efficacy. However, two specific challenges make achieving these objectives in the context of cities complicated. First, most IOs operate through and alongside nation-states. These relationships, often with ministries, almost universally supersede those with local authorities. Second, as the number of megacities and secondary cities continues to grow, IOs face a diplomatic problem of scale; building and maintaining the necessary relationships in thousands of cities is no easy task. In other words,

most IOs face one of two problems: they are either restricted by their own governance structure and codes from engaging cities directly, or they lack the practical capacity to do so.

Despite these challenges, most major IOs are moving ahead, working on urban issues with cities as well as their national governments. For many IOs, country teams are both the strategic and tactical lead, developing—in partnership with national capitals—long-term development or lending plans. These plans are then implemented locally, including through partnerships with municipal officials and civil society. To work at the municipal level, in other words, IOs must conduct diplomacy at multiple scales. As such, effective development and implementation of programs and policies require three components: vertical and horizontal policy alignment into national bureaucratic structures, reliable local relationships, and accurate data and mapping.

Effective vertical and horizontal policy alignment in national structures

The IOs that form an integral part of the post–World War II order are organized around the nation-states that compose their membership and frequently finance their budgets. While a great deal of the work of IOs—indeed, in some cases the majority—is operated in urban settings, the primary relationship for IO leadership almost always remains with national governments. In most instances, such as with the International Monetary Fund, this is not a strategic choice but a mandate. As such, any municipal engagement is shaped not only by the IO and cities in question but by the relevant national government as well.

The World Bank’s engagement with a given country is shaped by two key processes. The first produces the Strategic Country Diagnostic, essentially a national overview, and the second process and

product is the Country Partnership Framework (CPF), which provides the strategic basis around which the World Bank engages with respective countries. The CPF is developed through a process in which the client—that is, the country—is represented by the national government.⁵⁸ While key stakeholders may be consulted, the World Bank process “starts from the member country’s vision of its development goals, which is determined by a country-owned and -led strategy process.”⁵⁹

Meanwhile, the country offices at the IDB, which fall under the Vice Presidency for Countries, first and foremost, maintain relationships with national counterparts in ministries. The ADB’s *Urban Operational Plan* similarly makes clear that it will be implemented consistent with “the strategic priorities in the concerned developing member countries.”⁶⁰ As with plans, so too with money. At the IDB, for example, all loans in a country, even if they will be repaid from municipal budgets, are guaranteed by respective national governments. In these cases, the first steps toward approval are organized through the national government.

The story at the OECD is similar. Like the regional development banks, the World Bank, and the United Nations, the OECD is organized around its member countries. The general program of work is approved by members, and any proposed topics from the secretariat work their way through the countries on the relevant committees. Whereas the United Nations interfaces with foreign ministries and the World Bank with finance ministries, OECD committees can seek input from a wide range of national ministries, including finance ministries, but also ministries such as, in the case of the United States, the US Department of Commerce, the US Department of Housing and Urban Development, and the US Department of State. This constant interaction with member countries has allowed the OECD to organize a national peer-to-peer exchange on urban issues. The OECD first convened ministers

responsible for urban affairs in Paris in 1986 to discuss urban growth and associated environmental and economic issues.

These ongoing relationships with national government provide a key opportunity to integrate policy across various levels of government. The urban affairs group within the Regional Development Policy Committee at the OECD, for example, has among its charges the creation of fora for policy exchange. These fora have increasingly included subnational actors. Herein lies a key role for IOs: they can provide or build the platforms for vertical policy integration, for aligning of incentives, and for the adoption of best practices at both the national and subnational levels.

In 2007, the OECD convened its first Roundtable for Mayors and Ministers on the topic of the global

economy. The forum, which has subsequently included thematic dives on climate change, inclusivity, and job creation, has connected dozens of mayors and ministers. The sixth and most recent roundtable took place in Mexico City in 2015.

At the IDB, building vertical policy alignment was considered part and parcel of success in the ESCI. The 2016 OVE report concluded: “Political support—both from the mayor and from other layers of government—ensures ownership and facilitates coordination within the municipality and between the municipality, the state/province, and the national government. This, in turn, facilitates the timely provision of the data and information needed to do the assessment, and continued support in the pre-investment and investment stages.”⁶¹

What if there is no government in my city?

In June 2014, the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) occupied Mosul, a city of nearly one million residents, making it Iraq’s second-largest city. Local government ceased to operate and connections to the governorate and national government became extremely limited. For civilians, local civil society groups, international humanitarian organizations, and even the Iraqi government, knowing the nature of Mosul’s streets and services became a challenge.

Since then, the UN Human Settlement Programme (UN-Habitat), often operating alongside other UN agencies and the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), has been a key knowledge hub for humanitarian and development organizations. In December 2016, UN-Habitat produced an extensive study of the city not only detailing ISIL’s effects on build design and services but also providing much broader background on the city’s recent history with an eye toward facilitating post-ISIL reconstruction.

In May 2017, UN-Habitat produced an “Environmental Hazards Assessment” of the recently liberated city. Done in partnership with and the support of UN agencies, OCHA, and the Nineveh Governorate, the map details a wide array of ongoing threats. It highlights ammonia, asbestos, and natural gas risks from damaged factories, as well as explosive hazards areas around military bases and gas stations. The map also details the current locations of hospitals, dentists, and even veterinarians.

In July 2017, UN-Habitat launched the Mosul Portal, a data and assessment platform that provides detailed satellite mapping of Mosul and updates on services from electricity and water to debris and schools.⁶²

At best, the IO holds a unique position that allows it to bring together new partners both vertically and horizontally. At worst, cities find themselves in search of their own solutions.

It is worth mentioning that the privileged position of the national government vis-à-vis IOs presents challenges in addition to these opportunities. It is not uncommon for the mayors of major or secondary cities to be of a different party than those in power in the capital. Furthermore, in a significant number of countries across continents, mayors have gone on to become heads of state. This means that for IOs as well as for foreign ministries, the internal politics of a given country can encumber national and subnational diplomacy. In fact, numerous IOs report domestic politics inhibiting local initiatives.

Reliable local relationships

Not unlike foreign ministries and their embassies, much of the day-to-day operation of IOs depends on their country offices. These offices maintain relationships, first and foremost, with national governments and ministries. Increased focus on urban issues, however, has allowed for, and depended upon, the ability of such offices to build and maintain more localized relationships as well.

At the IDB, country offices—which fall under the Vice Presidency for Countries—have built extensive relationships with subnational governments and NGOs.⁶³ Local relationships have been key to initiatives such as the ESCI, but they have also allowed many IOs to play a unique subnational convening role. Not unlike the convening of ministers and mayors by the OECD, the localized consensus-building and planning efforts of the IDB and others have brought together city officials

and civil society stakeholders who often operate in different spheres. The diagnostic process deployed by the IDB around informal settlements in Asunción, Paraguay, for example, required a multisectoral approach that broke down silos.⁶⁴ The 2016 OVE report, which examined the institutionalization of the ESCI, noted: “ESCI was also particularly successful at implementing many different types of partnerships with a wide array of development partners from government, academia, and the private sector, both inside and outside the region.”⁶⁵ At the ADB, the vast majority of the urban experts reside in Manila, while field teams reside in their respective countries and oversee loan implementation.⁶⁶ The World Bank has even used its convening capacity to crowdsource city solutions, as in the case of Mumbai, from other cities around the world.⁶⁷ In all such cases, it is crucial that any strategic planning efforts convened by the IO officials remain cognizant of parallel planning processes being conducted by the municipal or regional authorities themselves.

While, unlike the IDB or World Bank, the OECD does not make loans, its analytic process also requires extensive localized engagement. Its RDPC and the Working Party on Urban Policy below it created the fora for vertical policy integration, but an additional pillar of its work is the production of country and city reports.* These territorial reviews are driven by demand and not financed by the core budget. Rather, they often result from requests from a city or country or, in the case of OECD’s 2012 report *The Chicago Tri-State Metropolitan Area*, from the private sector in the form of the chamber of commerce.⁶⁸ Such engagement, conducted with more than 30 cities worldwide, has similarly allowed the OECD to draw and build out extensive local relationships.

* It had three pillars in total, with the third focused on data, including the Metropolitan Database and the Functional Urban Areas initiative.

Can an international organization help me get to work?

The Magogoni Fish Market in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, a rapidly growing city of nearly five million residents, provides much of the fish for merchants in the city and suburbs. It is located on the Indian Ocean and has long been linked to the city neighborhoods and suburbs by *dala dalas*—a widespread, loosely regulated system of privately operated minibuses across eastern Africa.

To link the greater metropolitan area and unclog the city center, the Tanzanian government and the World Bank have undertaken a major infrastructure project. The wider project provides more than \$2.4 billion in financing and includes ongoing development of a bus rapid transit (BRT) system.

The first of six phases of the BRT was completed in 2015 and was financed in part by a \$290 million credit from the International Development Association, a World Bank fund. It included 20 kilometers of truck routes and a fleet of 140 modern, high-capacity buses. Ridership rose from 70,000 per day in 2016 to 150,000 by early 2017. The second phase was launched in March 2017 with a \$225 million concessional credit from the International Development Association (IDA) in addition to an IDA Scale-up Facility Credit of \$200 million. Additional funding is being provided by the African Development Bank and the Africa Growing Together Fund.

The rapid deployment of BRT systems in cities around the world has been subject to some criticism in recent years, but the Dar es Salaam BRT was awarded the 2018 Sustainable Transport Award by the Institute for Transportation and Development Policy, which praised it for its design, fare system, and—most importantly—efficacy. It has become a model for study by other cities in the region.⁶⁹

The ability of country teams to work effectively at the local level is a product of both the IOs' relationships with national governments and the balance between headquarters and country offices within the respective IO. At best, the IO holds a unique position that allows it to bring together new partners both vertically and horizontally. At worst, cities find themselves in search of their own solutions.

The outsiders: Cities shaping their own agendas

City leaders have long looked beyond their own borders. Athens and Sparta were city-states at

the center of empires, and Venice would later follow suit. The Hanseatic League allowed city leaders to organize terms, relationships, and norms beyond their frontiers, particularly in the realm of commerce. And even at the height of the Cold War, sister city relationships allowed for and facilitated people-to-people diplomacy and cultural and scientific exchange.

A networked world is nothing new, but the scale, strength, and speed of networks at the beginning of the 21st century is perhaps unprecedented.⁷⁰ City networks are no exception. For better and for worse, they are shaping city roles and mayoral activities on the global stage, including their interactions with IOs.

2005: Here come the networks

The latter 20th century and early 21st century saw the establishment of scores of influential international city networks. Metropolis, the World Association of the Major Metropolises, was founded in 1985 with 14 founding members as a forum and platform for larger cities. Local Governments for Sustainability (previously International Council for Local Environmental Initiatives, or ICLEI) was established at the World Congress of Local Governments for a Sustainable Future in New York in 1990 with a focus on technical consulting, capacity building, and knowledge sharing among local governments. Another leading international network, United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG), was founded in 2004 out of the long-standing International Municipal Movement and focuses on innovation sharing as well as advocacy around the principle of solidarity.⁷¹ These networks differ in structure. At the end of 2017, for instance, Metropolis had 137 members with a secretariat in Barcelona, ICLEI included more than 1,200 cities and towns, and UCLG's membership included more than 240,000 towns, cities, and regions.

Regional networks have also become more active and commonplace. Eurocities was established in 1991 to facilitate cooperation between European cities and to advance their shared interests in Brussels. The Urban Sustainability Directors Network, founded in 2008, connects local government sustainability officials from Canadian and US cities and counties. The Asian Climate Change Resilience Network was also launched in 2008, with support from the Rockefeller Foundation, to help cities prepare for and manage the impact of climate change.

While many networks have existed for decades, there has undoubtedly been a surge in recent years. Collaborative research between the City Leadership Laboratory at University College London and the World Health Organization's

Healthy Cities Network estimated that as of 2016, there were more than 200 city networks.⁷² On average, the group found four new networks were established per year from 2004 to 2015. Of the new networks established since 2001, 30 percent have been regionally focused and nearly 50 percent internationally focused.⁷³

Among these new networks, the most visible and well-funded has been the C40 Climate Leadership Group. C40 originated out of a 2005 meeting, hosted by London's mayor at the time, Ken Livingstone, of 18 cities to discuss carbon emissions mitigation. A subsequent 2006 meeting expanded the discussion to 40 cities, and the group now numbers 92 cities, representing more than 25 percent of global GDP and 12 percent of global population. C40's secretariat sits in London with a rotating chair occupied by the mayor of a member city. The position has been filled by some of the world's most visible mayors, such as Michael Bloomberg of New York City, Anne Hidalgo of Paris, and Eduardo Paes of Rio de Janeiro. With major funding by Bloomberg Philanthropies, the Children's Investment Funds Foundation, and Realdania, C40 has focused on emissions reduction while also building subnetworks around policy issues ranging from food systems to bus rapid transit and mobility management. In doing so, the group's work centered almost entirely on cities rather than national governments or IOs. That changed in 2015.

2015: A political turn

The 21st session of the Conference of Parties (COP21) of the of the UN Climate Change Conference convened in Paris from November 30 to December 11, 2015. It was expected by member states and civil society observers to be a defining international summit on climate change. The United States and other national leaders in the climate space organized massive multilateral and bilateral diplomatic efforts to ensure the Paris

outcomes established a viable path forward over the next decade for mitigating carbon emissions.

Leading city networks came together to do the same. A climate summit had been held alongside COP15 in Copenhagen in 2009, but the 2015 efforts went far and beyond, both in terms of preparation and for Paris itself. In advance of the final negotiations, C40, ICLEI, and UCLG began working with partners, including national governments and ministries, to build political momentum and capital for the negotiators. The three networks joined in Paris to host the Climate Summit for Local Leaders alongside COP21. Michael Bloomberg, then serving as a cohost and as the UN Special Envoy on Cities and Climate Change, stated, “COP21 is the first time that cities will have their voices fully recognized at a global UN conference on climate change—and the first time mayors are gathering in great numbers to demand bold action.” He continued, “By holding [the summit] alongside the national negotiations, we will highlight local action on a global stage and help show how much progress is possible.”⁷⁴

Meanwhile, the strength and capacity of these networks was not unnoticed by experts and diplomats working in other policy areas, particularly on transnational issues, and scores of new networks were launched in subsequent years. At the UN General Assembly in September 2015, members states—led by the United States—launched the Strong Cities Network, consisting of dozens of members with an eye to facilitate urban- and community-level exchange to counter violent extremism. Seven months later, in April 2016, the OECD launched the Inclusive Growth in Cities Campaign. At a follow-up meeting in Paris later that year, 50 “Champion Mayors” adopted concrete steps to address inequality in the “Paris Action Plan for Inclusive Growth in Cities.” Over 2015–16, meanwhile, the General Assembly of Partners

(an umbrella group of local authorities, civil society groups, and urban experts) worked to influence the outcome of the UN Conference on Housing and Sustainable Urban Development (Habitat III).

By mid-2016, cities had scores of networks through which they could exchange policy solutions and innovations on transnational challenges and make their voices heard on the global stage—the latter of which would prove to have increasing importance.

2017: Outside in

Diplomacy was turned upside down in 2017. The Trump administration weakened long-standing alliance systems, such as NATO, and put at risk relationships with close allies, such as South Korea. Meanwhile, the United Kingdom continued its departure from the European Union—which, along with NATO, was one of the signature diplomatic accomplishments of the post–World War II era. These developments reverberated through IOs as the Trump administration threatened to withdraw funding from certain UN agencies and programs, as well as from the United Nations writ large.

Keeping on trend, 2017 was also a defining year for urban issues on the international stage, in particular for mayors, as some of the defining features of city diplomacy shifted. Despite the development of new networks and initiatives such as the OECD’s Inclusive Cities Campaign, climate action—both in terms of adaptation and mitigation—still sits as the dominant political issue around which cities are collectively organized. When the Trump administration announced in June 2017 its intent to withdraw from the Paris Agreement, cities, states, universities, and corporations reacted in defense of the agreement. Under the auspices of the “We Are Still In” campaign, more than 380 cities—joined by other groups—stepped forward to fulfill US obligations under the agreement.

What is New York City doing?

New York City is home to more diplomats than any other noncapital city. Notably, the Mayor’s Office for International Affairs in New York is not located downtown in City Hall but instead within a block of UN headquarters.

In April 2015, the City announced “One New York: The Plan for a Just and Strong City,” a plan for the city’s future built on four pillars: growth, equity, sustainability, and resilience. In September 2015, heads of state and diplomats gathered at the UN General Assembly to adopt the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the 17 sustainable development goals (SDGs).

As part of the larger “Global Vision | Urban Action” initiative, New York City produced a two-part publication, “A City with Global Goals,” that connects the City’s plan and the SDGs.

Part I, published in December 2015, illustrates how the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the SDGs fit within the City’s strategic plan. Part II illustrates the degree to which the City’s goals and actions will help fulfill the SDGs. The plan goes beyond the 17 SDGs to link New York City policies and actions to the more-detailed SDG targets adopted in March 2016.

New York City, like the rest of the world’s municipalities, ultimately did not have a seat at the table to adopt the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and SDGs. All the same, it has explicitly linked its “One New York” plan to those international agreements: “We hope these examples of the relationships between global and local planning, models and goals help to begin a conversation on local implementation of the global goals.” Such a conversation will not only lead to more likely success of the goals—it will also give them a further and ongoing, if informal, mandate.⁷⁵

Over the course of 2017, cities—especially those in the United States—increased the political language, visibility, and levels of their commitments. In December, the City of Chicago and the Global Covenant of Mayors hosted the North American Climate Summit in Chicago. More than 60 mayors signed the Chicago Climate Charter, which included specific steps each city would take to help the United States meet its Paris Agreement obligations.⁷⁶ And while there were no officials present from the White House, foreign diplomats, including from China and the European Union, were in attendance. This asymmetrical diplomacy—with national

diplomats, city leaders, development banks, and IOs—can be expected to continue.*

Just as COP21 proved to be a turning point in urban diplomacy, COP23 in November 2017 provided the year’s most visible moment in subnational diplomacy. Breaking with precedent, the United States decided not to have an exhibition space at the summit for American diplomats to host NGOs, business leaders, and foreign leaders. Instead, the massive unofficial US pavilion featured California’s

* This asymmetry was especially so at the September 2018 Global Climate Action Summit in San Francisco.

Governor Jerry Brown and New York City's former Mayor Michael Bloomberg as chief diplomats. Although mayors played a very visible role at COP21, this engagement by US subnational leaders was categorically different. As I wrote in CityLab, “[w]hile still within their elected mandates, [these leaders] were also acting in opposition to the stated policy positions of the White House . . . the point from a diplomatic perspective and the standing of cities internationally was significant: cities sought to play on the global stage alongside nation-states, rather than merely as components of them.”⁷⁷

And COP23 was not merely performative. The Bonn conference saw two notable developments regarding the municipal-IO relationship. First, ICLEI became the first noncountry associate member of the NDC Partnership—an initiative of countries,

multilateral development organizations, and others launched at the preceding COP22 in Marrakech, Morocco, to help facilitate technical change in preparation for Paris Agreement implementation and reporting.⁷⁸ Second, the Bonn meeting also featured the consideration of a “Voluntary Gateway to Encourage, Measure, Report, Verify and Account for: Non-Party Contributions” to the Paris Agreement. The draft decision, while a brief three points, “encourages” nonparty contributions toward the objective of the Paris Agreement. Not unlike the voluntary commitments by cities welcomed in fulfilment of the New Urban Agenda, cities will increasingly be able to make their actions seen and collectively recognized by IOs and their member states. Such developments can be expected to continue as SDG-monitoring and -reporting mechanisms evolve.

Will cities shape the G20 agenda?

The city diplomacy tool kit is now well developed. Cities and their networks have sought to influence major international negotiations using strategic communications, political power, and the wide reach of their networks. The lessons learned, and diplomatic skills and practices developed, have enabled cities to expand their efforts.

In advance of the 2018 Group of Seven (G7) Summit in Canada, major international city networks, the city of Montreal, and the Federation of Canadian Municipalities issued a joint letter to G7 leaders outlining urban perspectives and actions on global challenges.⁷⁹ Perhaps the most notable development has been the Urban 20 (U20), a collection of the world's leading economic cities seeking to influence G20 outcomes and highlight urban perspectives. Launched in Paris by Mayor Anne Hidalgo of Paris and Mayor Horacio Rodríguez Larreta of Buenos Aires in December 2017 in advance of the 2018 G20 meeting in Argentina, the U20 has drawn on the economic strength of participating cities as well as the expertise of C40 Cities, the OECD, and the World Bank. The G20 has long welcomed perspective from think tanks, civil society, and business. It will now also get it from the world's mayors.⁸⁰

Recommendations

While cities do not yet have a formal seat at the table, they can bring food to the party. Their collective action, ability to influence, and momentum is reminding major IOs of the need to reevaluate their own urban strategies and structures.

In the meantime, as the world's IOs continue to evolve and adapt to the rising influence of cities, and cities seek to influence multilateral agreements, IOs, cities and city networks, and NGOs should consider the following recommendations.

International organizations:

- Encourage vertical policy alignment within countries. IOs have access to national governments, ministries, and departments that often reaches beyond cities' access to those entities. While this dynamic means IOs must balance political relationships between national and municipal levels, it also means they can and should play a crucial role in encouraging and facilitating vertical policy alignment.
- Recognize the need for localized engagement. Most IOs connect success in urban initiatives to the quality and independence of field work or country teams. New technologies, bureaucratic habits, and career incentives often encourage centralized decision-making, and support from headquarters is also essential to success. If an IO is going to remain or become subnationally active, it should recognize the need for localized engagement and the presence this requires.
- Facilitate local financial support. Building of localized knowledge and the facilitation of local finance will remain crucial to

IOs' successful municipal and regional engagement. In addition to the built environment, water, and other thematic areas of expertise, IOs should focus on tracking knowledge creation and finance deployment in the private sector by other IOs and by states themselves.

- Understand the nature of internal limitations. IOs should identify whether their urban engagement faces limitations owing to legal or regulatory issues on the one hand or capacity limitations on the other.

Cities and city networks:

- Consider other strategies to achieve outcomes. Cities and their networks should recognize that while they may seek a seat at the table, they now have well-established platforms for attempting to influence IOs and international agreements. The pursuit of a seat at the table and the energy that demands should be balanced with more immediate results that focused campaigns can produce.

Nongovernmental organizations:

- Expand opportunities to leverage expertise. As they often do during negotiation processes, NGOs with urban expertise should continue to work to share their knowledge with IOs and UN negotiations through formal processes, partnerships, and informal engagement with diplomats and development experts. They should also make clear to member states the continued need to ensure observer participation in UN processes and negotiations.

Conclusion

While dozens of IOs led by nation-states were created to give structure and order to international relations, rapid urbanization and the rising influence of cities have raised new questions around their mandates and structures. Today's most pressing global challenges—which the world's leading organizations were charged with addressing—clearly cannot be solved without urban expertise. Yet the number of cities and the challenges they face are far too complex and decentralized for multitudes of IOs to effectively engage at the local level. Some IOs are creating agencies dedicated to urban issues while others are integrating urban themes into their frameworks. They are all slowly evolving to respond to the needs of the urban world. And in the meantime, cities can continue to create new avenues and mechanisms to ensure their voices are heard when globally and locally important decisions are being made. ■

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