



## CITIES AND MORE EFFECTIVE MULTI-LEVEL GOVERNANCE\*

### MIASTA I BARDZIEJ SKUTECZNE WIELOPOZIOMOWE ZARZĄDZANIE

Agnieszka Szpak\*\* 

#### — ABSTRACT —

This article has been inspired by the vision set out in the UN Secretary's report General *Our Common Agenda* (2021) and the report of High-Level Advisory Board on Effective Multilateralism entitled *A Breakthrough for People and Planet. Effective and Inclusive Global Governance for Today and the Future* (2023). Given the growing role of cities in international relations, the research aim of this article is to answer the question: how to make multi-level governance more effective? The author argues that more effective multi-level governance has to be more inclusive and that cities should be formally included in international decision-making processes. The author also makes the case for the growing role of cities in international relations, cooperation and addressing global problems, including migration, climate change and pandemics such as the recent Covid-19.

#### — ABSTRAKT —

Ten artykuł został zainspirowany wizją przedstawioną w raporcie Sekretarza Generalnego ONZ *Nasza Wspólna Agenda* (2021) oraz w raporcie Doradczego Komitetu Wyższego Szczebla ds. Skutecznego Wielostronnego Zarządzania zatytułowanym *A Breakthrough for People and Planet. Effective and Inclusive Global Governance for Today and the Future* (2023). Z uwagi na rosnącą rolę miast w stosunkach międzynarodowych celem badawczym tego artykułu jest odpowiedź na pytanie: jak zwiększyć skuteczność wielopoziomowego zarządzania? Autorka twierdzi, że bardziej skuteczne wielopoziomowe zarządzanie musi być bardziej inkluzywne, a miasta powinny być formalnie uwzględnione w międzynarodowych procesach decyzyjnych. Autorka przedstawia również argumenty na rzecz uwzględnienia miast, ukazując rosnącą rolę miast w stosunkach międzynarodowych, współpracy oraz rozwiązywaniu globalnych problemów, takich jak: migracja, zmiany klimatyczne i pandemia, np. Covid-19.

\* This research was funded in part by National Science Centre, Poland, grant number 2021/41/B/HS5/00526. For the purpose of Open Access, the author has applied a CC-BY public copyright licence to any Author Accepted Manuscript (AAM) version arising from this submission.

\*\* Nicolaus Copernicus University in Toruń, Faculty of Political Science and Security Studies.

**Keywords:** cities; city networks; multi-level governance; UN Summit of the Future

**Słowa kluczowe:** miasta, wielopoziomowe zarządzanie, sieci miast, Szczyt Przyszłości ONZ

## INTRODUCTION

Multilateral cooperation is in crisis and nationalisms are on the rise, as evidenced, *inter alia*, by the war between Hamas and Israel, Russian aggression against Ukraine, tensions in the South China Sea region around Taiwan or the building of ever new walls on national borders, such as the Mexico-USA border or the Poland-Belarus border. Ingrid Wuerth Brunk and Monica Hakimi (2022) argue that the invasion of Ukraine by Russia on 24 February 2022 stands out as one of the biggest, if not the biggest, disruptions to the global order since World War II. Climate crisis and the inability and/or unwillingness to effectively fight it can be added to this list. These examples show that international crises multiply and overlap, which can lead to a global polycrisis (Lawrence, Janzwood & Homer-Dixon, 2022). Unfortunately, states very often attempt to close their borders and take steps which are unilateral and very often violate international legal regulations and human rights, as in the case of building walls on borders. While guarding the principle of sovereignty, nation-states are frequently incapable of cooperation; for them, their short-sighted particular interests are the priority objective, whereas the long-term interest of the humankind, which is also their interest, is taken for granted. Climate change or even climate crisis is a good example here.

In this context, cities are gaining increasing importance in the global arena. They are influencing international initiatives in unprecedented ways (Swiney and Foster 2019). Global challenges, spanning politics, society, economics and the environment, are growing in urgency. However, national governments often struggle to effectively support progressive international policies. Cities are stepping in to fill this gap, empowering themselves both nationally and globally. This shift is likely to bring significant changes to international politics and law, weakening the position of nation-states in the face of worldwide challenges such as economic globalisation and climate change (Swiney, 2020, p. 228).

There are currently about 300 city networks that are involved in diplomatic efforts, building agreements and achieving outcomes related to climate action, migrant protection and public health. As Robert Muggah (2021, p. 3) stated, “[c]ities account for 80 percent of global GDP. Yet they are also responsible for

roughly 80 percent of all carbon emissions. As such, cities are central to resolving some of the biggest challenges we face. If they can foster inclusion, renew trust and drive circular economics, cities will help energize multilateralism for the twenty-first century.”

## METHODOLOGY, MATERIALS AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This article has been inspired by the vision set out in the UN Secretary General’s report *Our Common Agenda* (2021) and the report of High-Level Advisory Board on Effective Multilateralism entitled *A Breakthrough for People and Planet. Effective and Inclusive Global Governance for Today and the Future* (2023). The Advisory Board was established by the United Nations Secretary-General and its report builds on *Our Common Agenda*. Both of these documents can be seen as part of the preparations for the 2024 Summit for the Future, where UN member States will have the opportunity to transform the current breakdown of multilateralism (meaning multilateral cooperation) into a breakthrough (High-Level Advisory Board on Effective Multilateralism, 2023, p. 5). This Summit in turn will be the continuation of the declarations made on the occasion of the United Nations’ 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary, where member States committed to enhancing global governance for the benefit of current and future generations. They asked the UN Secretary-General to present a plan for the multilateral system to confront this challenge. *Our Common Agenda* is the response to that request. Both reports propose steps to be taken to revitalize the multilateral system, and, as a consequence, multi-level governance and to make it more effective.

Given the growing role of cities in international relations, the research aim of this article is to answer the question: how to make multi-level governance more effective? The term “multi-level governance” encompasses widely distributed, pluralistic policymaking involving numerous participants, including institutions and individuals, and operating across various levels, from the local to the supra-national. Despite spatial differences and geographical separation, the essence of multi-level governance lies in the extensive connections that link these levels. Multi-level governance signifies influence, engagement (with both levels being equally important) and the mutual interdependence resulting from interconnected policymaking activities (Stephenson, 2013, p. 817). Daniell and Kay (2017, p. 4) note that “multi-level governance” typically refers to systems where authority is dispersed horizontally among all levels of government and across various

domains, including civil society, markets and states. However, there is a lack of consensus on the best models for designing and operating effective multi-level governance systems that can address diverse policy issues in different contexts. Researchers and stakeholders generally agree that effective governance today requires coordination and ongoing negotiation across multiple spheres, sectors and societal levels.

Rather than centralising power, multi-level governance encourages its diffusion (Stephenson, 2013, p. 821; Hooghe & Marks, 2001, p. 3). This approach assumes that powers and authority are distributed among various policy-making levels, involving both established and emerging entities and institutions, as well as public and private actors (Stephenson, 2013, p. 828). Multi-level governance empowers non-state actors by providing them with access to information and participation in decision-making. It coexists with formal governance, contributing to a comprehensive governance landscape (Stephenson, 2013, p. 824). As part of this global multi-level governance system, cities play a role in problem-solving, which includes addressing global challenges such as climate change and sustainable development.

It follows that more effective multi-level governance has to be more inclusive. Cities should not only be included informally but also formally. Why? There is a list of arguments for the growing role of cities in international relations, cooperation and addressing global problems such as migration, climate change and pandemics such as the recent Covid-19. These three case studies will be examined in Section 3, where numerous examples of various cities will be included. They will prove that in some areas cities handle global challenges and/or problems better than states. Such an analysis will indicate what other stakeholders can learn from cities. Multi-level governance cannot be restricted to states and international organizations, so in this article this term will also encompass sub-state or sub-national actors, specifically cities. In its report, the High-Level Advisory Board on Effective Multilateralism (2023, p. 4) also stated that “effective multilateralism must draw its strength and legitimacy from greater inclusion [...] and should extend beyond states to include and obligate a broader range of global and local actors, who will be crucial in delivering the breakthrough we need” (see also *Our Common Agenda*, 2021, p. 68). Section 4 will concentrate on cities’ demands to recognise their growing role in international relations. It is placed after the three case studies as these demands reflect the increasing influence of cities on many global issues and problems, as indicated

in the case studies. Finally, the conclusions will answer the research question and address the research goal.

The research methods used are desk analysis and formal-legal analysis (with reference to the legal acts and documents cited). Formal-legal analysis focuses on organising and interpreting the content of various documents and reports relevant to the research aim, e.g. the 2020 Joint Political Declaration within the Scope of the Virtual Mayors Summit in Mannheim, 2020 open letter to UN Secretary-General H. E. Mr. António Guterres, the Global Parliament of Mayors and the two aforementioned reports – the UN Secretary General’s report *Our Common Agenda* (2021) and the report of High-Level Advisory Board on Effective Multilateralism *A Breakthrough for People and Planet. Effective and Inclusive Global Governance for Today and the Future* (2023). This method facilitates the decipherment of cities’ demands for formal recognition of the position in international relations and multi-level governance, as these documents reflect those demands. A brief analysis of the selected relevant literature refers to the international relations literature and makes it possible to trace the symptoms of the growing role of cities in international relations.

The article aligns with the theoretical framework of institutional liberalism, which emphasises the significance of both states and non-state actors, including cities or local governments (considered as sub-state or subnational actors in this context). It prioritises the well-being of citizens over security concerns, giving greater weight to social, economic and ecological matters rather than military ones in international relations. This approach embraces non-state participants in international relations and highlights the interdependence of state interests, the diversity of international actors, the democratisation of global affairs and the growing interconnectedness globally.

## AREAS OF THE GROWING AGENCY AND IMPORTANCE OF CITIES

This section focuses on three case studies demonstrating the growing agency and importance of cities in international relations, and more specifically, in the multi-level governance framework.

## Migration

In her book *Migrants and Cities*, Margit Fauser highlights the contrasting perspectives of national governments and cities regarding migration. National governments often view migration as a political and abstract matter, focusing on statistics, while for cities migration presents concrete challenges and necessitates specific actions. Cities are where migrants reside and work, relying on local healthcare systems and infrastructure. While states frequently take measures to deter irregular migration, often with limited success, cities are inclined to address and resolve these issues, often with positive outcomes (Fauser, 2012). This divergence in approach often leads to conflicts between cities and central governments. In many cases, cities opt to navigate these conflicts because the alternative could be more detrimental, such as homelessness of irregular migrants or the issue of their unvaccinated children. These are daily challenges faced by cities (Szpak, 2019, p. 5).

In general, the integration of migrants into their new communities presents a formidable task for cities. It is up to cities that shape the extent and pace of integration. In the 2017 report *European Cities and Migrants with Irregular Status*, Nicola Delvino identifies various municipal initiatives aimed at facilitating the inclusion of irregular migrants across different service areas. These initiatives encompass shelter and housing support, legal guidance, healthcare, education, civic documentation and assistance for victims of crime. The report illustrates how municipalities, in the absence of clear guidance and often within restrictive national policies, resort to innovative and sometimes informal approaches to grant access to services without violating national laws (Delvino, 2017b; Szpak, 2019, p. 5).

At the European level, both the European Union and individual member states have adopted a strategy to contain irregular migration by implementing policies that exclude such individuals from the labour market and restrict their access to social assistance services. These policies, however, often lead to the marginalisation and vulnerability of those migrants who cannot return to their home countries, whether by choice or circumstance. In European cities, these return policies have not always prevented the emergence of marginalised sub-populations with limited official access to employment and social assistance. In cities like Genoa, Ghent, Rotterdam and notably London, irregular migrants are estimated to make up a substantial portion of the population, ranging from 3% to 6% (Delvino, 2017a, p. 22–23).

In many Western European countries, migrants of diverse backgrounds constitute a significant percentage of every community, primarily settling in larger cities. In response to this increasing ethnic diversity, cities are increasingly recognising the need for robust integration policies. One effective approach is to develop these policies in a participatory manner, involving representatives from both the receiving community and the migrant population themselves (Winiarska, 2015, p. 3). This inclusive approach to consultation and integration can occur at various levels, from the national system down to the municipal and neighbourhood levels. Many local governments have begun to acknowledge the presence of diverse migrant groups and are addressing their specific needs. This trend is particularly noticeable in cities with a high percentage of migrants. However, these experiences can serve as valuable examples for cities with fewer migrant residents (Winiarska, 2015, p. 10; Szpak, 2019, p. 6).

Research conducted in urban contexts also delves into the complexities surrounding irregular migrants, exploring both the challenges they face and the opportunities available to them (Delvino, 2017b). This line of research examines how cities address these issues, including a focus on sanctuary cities (Villazor, 2010). Within this context, Rose C. Villazor investigates a contentious and intriguing aspect, namely how sanctuary cities and their legislation highlight the tensions between national and local citizenship. The latter extends some protection to undocumented or irregular migrants. Using the United States as an example, Villazor underscores that sanctuary laws clash with the federal government's authority to regulate who can legally enter and remain in the country (Villazor, 2010, p. 579; Szpak, 2019, p. 3–4).

As far as sanctuary cities are concerned, the city of New Haven, for example, pioneered the introduction of a municipal identification (ID) card, making it the first of its kind among American cities. This ID card is accessible to all residents, irrespective of their citizenship status. This card facilitates essential identification for various purposes, such as obtaining prescriptions, opening and accessing local bank accounts and using public services such as libraries (Urban Citizens..., 2008; Szpak, 2019, p. 4).

Cities such as London, as well as multiple Italian urban centres, demonstrated their willingness to invoke international human rights law with regard to migrants when local policies clashed with national ones. During the 2015 refugee crisis in Europe, they openly rejected adherence to their respective states' anti-immigration measures, condemning them as violations of international migrant and refugee rights (Swiney, 2020, p. 263). Given the failure of both the

European Union and individual European states to establish a lasting solution to effectively address the migration crisis, Dutch emergency shelters illustrate how local authorities are taking on more significant roles in managing the situation (Oomen & Baumgärtel, 2018, p. 628). For instance, Utrecht gained recognition as the first ‘human rights city’ in the Netherlands after it adopted formal policies following a 2014 decision by the European Committee of Social Rights (ECSR). This decision determined that the Dutch authorities were failing to fulfil their obligations under the European Social Charter by denying undocumented migrants and the homeless access to emergency social assistance. Despite the central authorities’ refusal to comply with the ruling, citing the Charter as non-binding and rejecting its jurisdiction for non-citizens, cities providing irregular migrants with emergency shelter nevertheless have often invoked the provisions of the Charter and the ECSR recommendations as justification for non-compliance with central policies and avoiding government sanctions. Utrecht’s municipal council, for example, emphasised that some undocumented migrants were unable to return to their home countries and would be forced to live in inhumane conditions on the streets. The council resolved to continue offering unconditional support and shelter to irregular migrants (Oomen & Baumgärtel, 2018, p. 618; Szpak et al. 2022, p. 25).

Sanctuary cities do not constitute a network but rather a group of like-minded cities (Lacroix 2021). Cities’ voice is enhanced when they act together in a network. Urban networks play a pivotal role in facilitating collaboration among cities on migration and asylum-related matters. They provide essential support to local authorities that are grappling with challenges such as the reception and integration of migrants (Oomen & Baumgärtel, 2018, p. 2). A selection of eight city networks that focus on refugee and migration policies, ranked by their significance, is outlined in the UNESCO’s report *Cities Welcoming Refugees and Migrants: Enhancing effective urban governance in an age of migration* (2016, p. 68–71). These networks include: the International Coalition of Inclusive and Sustainable Cities (established in 2004), the annual Mayoral Forum on Mobility, Migration and Development (2014), the Eurocities Working Group on Migration and Integration, Cities of Migration (2008), Cities for Local Integration Policy (2006), the Hague Process on Refugees and Migration (2000), United Cities and Local Governments (2004) and Arrival Cities (2015). In terms of the scope of activities conducted by city networks, their primary emphasis is on the exchange of information, the establishment of consistent standards within the realm of migration policies and securing financial resources to support their initiatives.



The operational domains of these city networks encompass activities such as “information sharing, demonstrating best practices, sharing narratives, holding governments accountable, seeking international assistance and establishing universal benchmarks” (Oomen & Baumgärtel, 2018, p. 3).

## Climate change

When it comes to environmental protection and climate change mitigation, cities have actively engaged in international relations and the enforcement of relevant international law. For example, during the 2010 World Mayors Summit on Climate in Mexico, leaders from 207 global cities adopted the Global Cities Covenant on Climate, known as the Mexico City Pact (World Mayors Summit on Climate..., 2010). Many city networks, such as C40,<sup>1</sup> ICLEI<sup>2</sup> and Climate Alliance,<sup>3</sup> are dedicated to combating climate change and promoting initiatives such as the development of pedestrian streets and cycling networks in urban areas (for more details, see Nguyen et al. 2020; Bulkeley & Betsill, 2003). As Janne Nijman notes (2011, p. 214), cities both contribute to the climate change problem and are an integral part of the solution. Although cities are responsible for 75% of global CO<sub>2</sub> emissions, they have also independently or collaboratively implemented numerous programmes and measures to combat environmental pollution.

There have been grassroots initiatives related to climate change, such as the 2005 effort led by Seattle Mayor Greg Nickels. He encouraged other cities to align with the Kyoto Protocol's goals and commit to local reductions of greenhouse gas emissions, leading to the formation of the US Mayors' Climate Protection Agreement. This network comprises over 1,000 US municipalities that follow Kyoto norms, despite the US not adhering to the Protocol (Frug & Barron, 2006, p. 22; Nijman, 2011, pp. 222–223). Through proactive measures, cities have found a way to break free from the international political gridlock that has hindered climate change efforts for years (Szpak et al. 2022, p. 28).

Moreover, even after the international community finally adopted the Paris Climate Agreement, the United States threatened to withdraw in an attempt to undermine it. President Trump justified his decision to terminate the Paris

---

<sup>1</sup> C40 website, <https://www.c40.org/>.

<sup>2</sup> ICLEI website, <https://iclei.org/>.

<sup>3</sup> Climate Alliance website, <https://www.climatealliance.org/home.html>.

Agreement by stating that he was elected to serve the interests of the people of Pittsburgh, not Paris. In response, Mayor Bill Peduto of Pittsburgh was quick to commit his city to the Paris Agreement, emphasising its benefits for Pittsburgh's residents, economy and future (Roberts, 2017, p. 12).

Following the Trump Administration's withdrawal from the Paris Agreement, an unparalleled coalition of US cities, states, corporations and educational institutions reaffirmed their commitment to assisting the United States in achieving its climate objectives under it. This gave rise to the so-called America's Pledge initiative, which aims to consolidate and measure the efforts of states, municipalities, businesses and various non-national entities within the United States as they strive to reduce their greenhouse gas emissions in alignment with the Paris Agreement's objectives (About America's Pledge online). In this context, Ileana M. Porras (2008, p. 592) highlighted that in instances where there was a lack of strong state leadership on climate change, cities took the lead, which was welcomed and accepted by the international community. Consequently, in addition to being part of the problem, cities prove to be part of the solution to climate change. They are aware of their role in climate crisis and, as such, they are undertaking many initiatives aimed at healthy and sustainable environment, sometimes against the national policies of their countries.

## Pandemics

In the face of the global challenge posed by the Covid-19 pandemic, it has been, and continues to be important to recognise that, in addition to nation-states, there are other significant actors actively engaged in combating this crisis. Indeed, cities fall into this category. While the central government holds the authority to make decisions regarding nationwide restrictions and economic stimulus packages, the practical execution of preventive measures, daily crisis management, and the provision of guidance for transitioning to the "new normal" rests primarily with city authorities (Rudakowska & Simon, online, p. 2).

Furthermore, there are instances where a nation-state's response may appear unconventional or counterproductive, to say the least. For instance, during the unprecedented Covid-19 pandemic crisis, the US government made the controversial decision to withdraw from the World Health Organization (WHO). Despite international calls for reconsideration, President Trump proceeded with this withdrawal, diverting funds to other purposes. That move ran contrary to the global trend of nations uniting to confront the threat, with the US notably

placing blame on China for the origin of the virus, even employing labels like “Chinese virus” or “Wuhan virus” in official communications (BBC, 2020). This also constituted a blow to multilateral cooperation.

At the same time, many cities have stepped up to ensure the availability of essential services and materials. These responsibilities are typically within the purview of nation-states, but central authorities often fail to fulfil them due to limitations in resources, information or sometimes incompetence. Consequently, cities have emerged as alternative providers, effectively shouldering some of the functions that would ordinarily be carried out by the State. In this manner, they are able to circumvent the limitations of nation-states.

It is important to stress that, in general, when cities assume these roles, their intention is not to compete with the state, but rather to complement its actions. Throughout the Covid-19 pandemic, cities acted primarily in a complementary capacity, filling in the voids left by State actions. The WHO also faced significant criticism since the outset of 2020, mainly due to the perceived lack of major coordinated international efforts to combat the spread of the SARS-CoV-2 virus. Questions were raised regarding the global community’s overall lack of preparedness for a pandemic of this scale, and inquiries were made into the WHO’s apparent failure to fulfil its primary duty of safeguarding global public health. In stark contrast, it was governors and mayors who took swift and resolute action, working tirelessly to safeguard the lives of their constituents, while certain governments either delayed their reaction or declined to respond effectively. Through interconnected relationships and networks (like Eurocities, C40) that link cities worldwide, urban centres were actively sharing information, resources and essential equipment to promptly protect their populations against the pandemic. This situation served as a recent example of the evolving global collaboration among cities, offering a glimmer of hope that city diplomacy could play a pivotal role in revitalising the multilateral system. Local leaders are known for their pragmatism and innovation, and their influence and dynamism are on the rise. Should nation-states permit it, this trend of seamless exchange of solutions between cities may provide the impetus needed to reinvigorate the international multilateral system, the vulnerabilities and deficiencies of which were starkly exposed by the Covid-19 crisis.

For instance, Vittoria Beria, the International Affairs Director of Milan, spoke of her role at the time, which was to gather information from cities that had already faced the pandemic and could offer valuable insights into crisis management. Embracing the concept of “paying it forward,” she expressed Milan’s readi-

ness to share knowledge, drawn both from the experiences of its predecessors and the lessons learned during the city's rapid and intense encounter with the Covid-19 pandemic. As one of the first European cities to be significantly and swiftly affected, Milan underwent a steep learning curve for local authorities and residents alike. Now, Milan is well-equipped to provide data, solutions and practices that can prove invaluable in managing various aspects of the intricate and multi-stage phenomenon such as a viral pandemic striking a modern city (Pipa, Beria, Hachigian, 2020).

Polish cities also took proactive measures against Covid-19, often ahead of the actions taken by the Polish government. Many cities immediately activated crisis management reserves within their budgets to combat and mitigate the spread of Covid-19, without waiting for funds from the central government (Środki ochrony zdrowia od Kulczyk Foundation dotrą jutro do Poznania, 2020). These financial resources were primarily utilised to purchase personal protective gear and hospital equipment, such as ventilators and tests. Furthermore, many Polish cities expanded their initiatives to combat the virus and its impacts. For instance, Poznań initiated a recruitment process for small grants, allowing non-governmental organizations to secure funding for activities supporting residents during the pandemic, such as online events, neighbourhood and volunteer assistance initiatives and aid distribution efforts. Additionally, Poznań offered co-financing for NGO activities aimed at preventing the spread of the virus, such as personal protective gear and materials, as well as equipment and materials for remote work (Środki ochrony zdrowia od Kulczyk Foundation dotrą jutro do Poznania, 2020).

A similar situation occurred in the United States, where many mayors acted ahead of their federal and/or state governments. Mayors in cities like Houston, Phoenix and San Francisco enforced 'stay at home' orders several days before federal and state orders (Watts, nd). In Brazil, the mayors of Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo implemented quarantine measures against the former President Bolsonaro's recommendations (Olivera, nd). In Bogota, actions were taken before the national lockdown was officially declared (C40, Early action to manage..., nd).

These actions by cities highlight their capacity to address crises independently of their respective states and offer valuable lessons in pandemic management and response (Hachigian, Pipa, 2020). Cities have the potential to significantly contribute to resolving global challenges, even in the face of extreme events such as the Covid-19 pandemic. Their effectiveness can be substantially amplified when they unite their strengths and capabilities by establishing robust networks.

## CITIES' DEMANDS FOR FORMAL INCLUSION

Cities are aware of their role in addressing the global problems mentioned above. Understanding their growing role in international relations, cities want formal recognition thereof. To achieve this, there is a need to transform the international system to become more inclusive and efficient. This transformation aims to enable cities to become reliable partners, justified by their dual role as both sources of problems and potential solutions. The multilateral international arena should be open to cooperation with individuals and their local representatives. At this point, I would like to highlight two significant events. Firstly, during the Virtual Mayors Summit in Mannheim on 9 September 2020, a Joint Political Declaration was issued, representing a powerful statement by mayors. It asserted that “cities within the United Nations system are crucial partners in upholding a rule-based world order” and emphasised the necessity of their permanent integration into processes and structures for advancing multilateralism. Furthermore, it underscored that achieving global goals, particularly in sustainable development, requires redefining the role of cities within the UN system and called for institutional reforms within the United Nations, ultimately leading to the formalised participation of cities in UN decision-making processes. This declaration was supported by various participants, including UN Secretary-General António Guterres.

In September 2020, the Global Parliament of Mayors (GPM) sent an open letter to the United Nations emphasising the significance of cities in today’s global politics. They urged the UN to formally recognise cities in international decision-making and suggested a global discussion on reshaping the global governance system. The proposed reform would elevate cities and city networks to a level equivalent to states in international policymaking. The existing global governance system, which mainly involves state representatives, fails to effectively address various global challenges such as climate, healthcare, migration, poverty and security.

The GPM proposed that, on its 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary, the UN should transform into the “United Nations and Cities of the World” to reflect the need for global urban representation in governance. Despite the widespread acknowledgment of cities’ global efforts, they still lack a consistent say in decisions related to urban life. This issue gained attention in 2017, when the UN’s Special Representative on Migration Peter Sutherland called for the “systematic inclusion of local authorities’ representatives in national delegations during international migration meetings” (Open letter to UN Secretary-General H.E. Mr. António Guterres, 2020).

These demands align well with the suggestions from the reports *Our Common Agenda* (2021) and *A Breakthrough for People and Planet. Effective and Inclusive Global Governance for Today and the Future* (2023). One of the steps recommended by these documents in the context of rebuilding trust in multilateralism and multi-level governance through inclusion is to “provide formal status to cities, subnational governments and private sector actors in key multilateral process” (High-Level Advisory Board on Effective Multilateralism, 2023, p. 7). Such a step could become part of a broader inclusive multilateral system, also including (in addition to cities and local governments) representatives of civil society, refugees and forcibly displaced persons, as well as the youth (here the UN Youth Office was created in 2022) and the succeeding generations, regarded as the most excluded group in the multilateral system (High-Level Advisory Board on Effective Multilateralism, 2023, p. 15–17). All these groups should have the right to participate in the global decision-making processes (High-Level Advisory Board on Effective Multilateralism, 2023, p. 13).

According to *Our Common Agenda* (2021, p. 75), “cities are crucial and innovative drivers of global change today.” Keeping this in mind, the UN Secretary-General suggested exploring permanent mechanisms for involvement and consultation that align with the sovereignty of member states and the principles outlined in the United Nations Charter regarding membership. More detailed recommendations include the establishment of an Advisory Group to the Secretary-General, focusing on Local and Regional Governments, and two interconnected steps to actively involve subnational governments in global governance, while maintaining the central role of states. Cities (and regions) should be accorded special status in the UN. The High-Level Advisory Board added that the Summit of the Future could pinpoint specific institutions and processes where local and regional governments are granted a formal and permanent status, distinct from civil society and non-governmental organizations. This special status would be particularly relevant in domains such as environmental issues, global health, migration, refugee response, combating transnational organized crime and sustainable development. Further aspects to be considered include the exploration of ways to directly engage local and regional authorities in relevant multilateral treaty processes, allowing them to actively participate as signatories with defined responsibilities (High-Level Advisory Board on Effective Multilateralism, 2023, p. 17; *Our Common Agenda*, 2021, p. 75). Hopefully, the Summit will accept these proposals and in thus recognise the growing role of cities in the multilateral system and multi-level governance.

## CONCLUSIONS

The current global order is primarily centred around nation-states, tailored to their needs and interests. This framework was established at a time when cities housed less than 1 percent of the world's population. Now, however, with over 55 percent of the global population residing in urban areas, cities have become pivotal hubs in the international economy. A new form of networked multilateralism can be significantly enhanced by actively engaging cities as they are deeply involved in addressing real-world challenges and devising innovative solutions. City networks, if further strengthened and expanded, have the potential to counteract threats to international treaties such as the Paris Climate Change Agreement or the Geneva Convention on the Status of Refugees. Additionally, they can reinforce global cooperation efforts (Muggah, 2021, p. 6).

Under multi-level governance, cities have experienced an increase in their influence by gaining greater access to information and involvement in decision-making procedures (Stephenson, 2013). This type of governance, which is more flexible and informal, exists alongside formal and structured governance systems. In line with the perspective adopted in the paper, cities are now active participants within this network, assuming a substantial role in addressing challenges, including global ones such as climate change and sustainable development.

As cities become integrated into the global multi-level governance framework, they actively participate in addressing global-scale challenges, including issues related to climate change and sustainable development (Goldin, 2013, p. 3), with the Covid-19 pandemic being the most recent example. One of the advantages of entrusting cities with the responsibility of managing such global issues is their notable efficiency. By circumventing the boundaries of national sovereignty, cities adopt a pragmatic rather than ideological approach to problem-solving, whereas nation-states may sometimes prioritise safeguarding their sovereignty, potentially constraining actions that could infringe upon it. In contrast, cities and their mayors tend to adopt a more practical stance, focusing on action and solutions rather than the preservation of sovereignty (Coll, 2015).

As articulated by Anna Rudakowska and Craig Simon (2020, p. 4–5), the Covid-19 crisis highlighted the efficiency of cities as actors. Their main focus is on achieving measurable goals, which is reflected in the implementation of local policies. In the face of this unprecedented situation, cities demonstrated swift and adaptable responses for two main reasons. Firstly, thanks to the extensive networks they had established, the exchange of information, solutions and best

practices took place rapidly and efficiently. Furthermore, city networks and similar associations typically operate with minimal formalities, greatly enhancing their capacity for efficient communication processes.

The recommendations from the High-Level Advisory Board on Effective Multilateralism, (2023, p. 6 and 7) provide a way to rejuvenate and reposition the multilateral system during and beyond the Summit of the Future. They propose a shift toward a more networked, less hierarchical global governance system. In this system, decision-making is decentralised and the collective efforts of diverse actors are channelled toward a shared mission. This is fully in line with the concept of multi-level governance. Consequently, for multilateralism to be more effective, it needs to be more networked and inclusive and decision-making more decentralised. Cities (as well as the other actors mentioned, but the focus of this paper is on cities) must be included, firstly because more than half of humanity lives in cities, and soon it will be two-thirds, and secondly, because cities are indispensable in tackling global challenges and threats such as migration, climate crisis or pandemics. In this vein, the above analysis indicates what other stakeholders can learn from cities, for example:

- Ideology-free and pragmatic cooperation;
- Networking (in city networks), which serves as one of the most efficient ways of addressing and solving local and global problems;
- The fact that city networks are more agile and better equipped to address global problems, or at least most of them, than states. City networks benefit from intellectual and cultural resources and facilitate cooperation. It is worth noting that cities possess many state-like attributes, except for sovereignty and the exclusive use of force. However, they still face challenges, including the presence of slum areas for millions of urban dwellers and their significant energy consumption and carbon emissions despite occupying a small percentage of the Earth's land area.

When it comes to the question of whether cities handle global challenges more effectively than states, for example in the case of the migration crisis or climate change, it must be acknowledged that the answer is not straightforward. It largely hinges on the interpretation of the term 'efficiency.' Jean-Baptiste Buffet, who leads the Policy team of United Cities and Local Governments, firmly asserts that cities excel in this regard, as evidenced by their successful hosting of refugees, often without waiting for government approval (interview with Jean-Baptiste Buffet, Head of the Policy team of the UCLG, 4 October 2021).



However, Andreas Kiefer, former Secretary General of the Congress of Regional and Local Authorities of the Council of Europe, offers pertinent insights. In an interview, Kiefer underscores the significance of multilateralism and multi-level governance, emphasising that “in this interconnected world, any endeavour by a single entity is destined to fall short” (interview with Andreas Kiefer, Secretary General of the Congress of Regional and Local Authorities, 4 August 2021). This implies that the intricacy of modern challenges is so immense that no entity, be a city or a State, can resolve them in isolation, and that more effective multilateral cooperation and multi-level governance are indispensable. The UN Summit of the Future is an opportunity to formally recognise the growing role of cities in international relations and their potential for more effective and more inclusive multilateralism.

## REFERENCES:

- About America's Pledge (2024). Retrieved from: <https://www.americaspledgeonclimate.com/about/>.
- Arcadis Sustainable Cities Index (2022). *Prosperity beyond Profits*. Retrieved from: <https://www.arcadis.com/en/knowledge-hub/perspectives/global/sustainable-cities>.
- Brunk Wuerth, I. & Hakimi, M. (2022). Russia, Ukraine, and the Future World Order. *American Journal of International Law*, 116(4), 687–697.
- Bulkeley, H. & Betsill, M. M. (2003). *Cities and Climate Change. Urban Sustainability and Global Environmental Governance*. New York: Routledge.
- BBC. (2020, July 7). *Coronavirus: Trump moves to pull US out of World Health Organization*. Retrieved from: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-53327906>.
- Coll, J. (2015, July 1). *Cities Emerging Soft Power: 5 Key Advantages for Improved Global Governance*. Retrieved from: <http://isnblog.ethz.ch/technology/cities-emerging-soft-power-5-key-advantages-for-improved-global-governance>.
- C40. (nd). *Early action to manage COVID-19 in Bogota*. Retrieved from: [https://www.c40knowledgehub.org/s/article/Early-action-to-manage-COVID-19-in-Bogota?language=en\\_US](https://www.c40knowledgehub.org/s/article/Early-action-to-manage-COVID-19-in-Bogota?language=en_US).
- Delvino, N. (2017a). *The challenge of responding to irregular immigration: European, national and local policies addressing the arrival and stay of irregular migrants in the European Union*. Retrieved from: <https://www.compas.ox.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/AA17-Delvino-report-FINAL-1.pdf>.
- Delvino, N. (2017b). *European Cities and Migrants with Irregular Status: Municipal initiatives for the inclusion of irregular migrants in the provision of services*. Retrieved from: <https://www.compas.ox.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/City-Initiative-on-Migrants-with-Irregular-Status-in-Europe-CMISE-report-November-2017-FINAL.pdf>.

- Fausser, M. (2012). *Migrants and Cities*. Farnham: Ashgate.
- Frug, G. E. & Barron, D. J. (2006). International Local Government. *The Urban Lawyer*, 38(1), 1–62.
- Goldin, I. (2013). *Divided Nations: Why Global Governance Is Failing, And What We Can Do About It*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Hachigian, N. & Pipa, A. F. (2020, May 13). *Can Cities Fix Post-Pandemic World Order?* Retrieved from: [https://www.uscpublicdiplomacy.org/blog/can-cities-fix-post-pandemic-world-order?fbclid=IwAR1IeFv9tjfoB\\_AdtQKRSaVi62swT9jpxVJrzRG-GRG\\_rhGDK-L0u6qoeAuQ](https://www.uscpublicdiplomacy.org/blog/can-cities-fix-post-pandemic-world-order?fbclid=IwAR1IeFv9tjfoB_AdtQKRSaVi62swT9jpxVJrzRG-GRG_rhGDK-L0u6qoeAuQ).
- High-Level Advisory Board on Effective Multilateralism (2023). *A Breakthrough for People and Planet. Effective and Inclusive Global Governance for Today and the Future*. New York: United Nations University.
- Hooghe, L. & Marks, G. (2001). *Multi-Level Governance and European Integration*. Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.
- Joint Political Declaration within the Scope of the Virtual Mayor's Summit in Mannheim (2020). Retrieved from: [https://www.mannheim.de/sites/default/files/2020-09/EN\\_Declaration\\_formated.pdf](https://www.mannheim.de/sites/default/files/2020-09/EN_Declaration_formated.pdf).
- Lawrence, M., Janzwood, S. & Homer-Dixon, T. (2022). *What is a global polycrisis? And how is it different from a systemic risk?* Cascade Institute. Retrieved from: <https://cascadeinstitute.org/technical-paper/what-is-a-global-polycrisis/>
- Muggah, R. (2021). *Rethinking Multilateralism. The case for engaging cities in the new multilateralism*. Retrieved from: <https://igarape.org.br/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/2021-12-07-Case-for-engaging-cities-in-the-new-multilateralism.pdf>.
- Nguyen, T. M. P. et al. (2022). Understanding how city networks are leveraging climate action: experimentation through C40. *Urban Transformations*, 12. Retrieved from: <https://doi.org/10.1186/s42854-020-00017-7>.
- Nijman, J. (2011). The Future of the City and the International Law of the Future. In S. Muller et al. (Eds.), *The Law of the Future and the Future of Law* (pp. 213–229). Oslo: Torkel Opsahl Academic EPublisher Oslo.
- OECD (2014). *Migration Policy Debates. Is migration good for the economy?* Retrieved from: <https://www.oecd.org/migration/OECD%20Migration%20Policy%20Debates%20Numero%202.pdf>.
- Olivera, M. (nd). *In Latin America, cities are leading the fights against COVID-19 by expanding health services and protecting vulnerable communities*. Retrieved from: [https://www.c40knowledgehub.org/s/article/In-Latin-America-cities-are-leading-the-fight-against-COVID-19-by-expanding-health-services-and-protecting-vulnerable-communities?language=en\\_US](https://www.c40knowledgehub.org/s/article/In-Latin-America-cities-are-leading-the-fight-against-COVID-19-by-expanding-health-services-and-protecting-vulnerable-communities?language=en_US).
- Oomen, B. & Baumgärtel, M. (2018). Frontier Cities: The Rise of Local Authorities as an Opportunity for International Human Rights Law. *European Journal of International Law*, 29(2), 607–630.
- Our Common Agenda. Report of the Secretary-General* (2021). United Nations.

- Open letter to UN Secretary-General H. E. Mr. António Guterres. Global Parliament of Mayors (2020). Retrieved from: <https://globalparliamentofmayors.org/gpm-open-letter-to-un-secretary-general/>.
- Pipa, A. F., Beria, M. F., & Hachigian, N. (23 April 2020). *The Brookings Institution's Webinar: Global City Cooperation in the response to Covid-19*. Retrieved from: <https://www.brookings.edu/events/webinar-global-city-cooperation-in-the-response-to-covid-19/>.
- Porras, I. M. (2008). The City and International Law: in Pursuit of Sustainable Development. *Fordham Urban Law Journal*, 36(3), 538–601.
- Roberts, A. (2017, June 3). Beyond the Globalism/Nationalism Divide: The Rise of Cities and Corporations Seeking International Obligations. Retrieved from: <http://opiniojuris.org/2017/06/03/beyond-globalismnationalism-divide-rise-cities-corporations-seeking-international-obligations/>.
- Rudakowska, A., & Simon, C. (2020). International City Cooperation in the Fight Against Covid-19: Behind the Scenes Security Providers. *Global Policy*, Retrieved from: <https://www.globalpolicyjournal.com/articles/health-and-social-policy/international-city-cooperation-fight-against-covid-19-behind>.
- Stephenson, P. (2013). Twenty years of multi-level governance: 'Where Does it Come From? What is it? Where Is It Going?', *Journal of European Public Policy*, 20(6), 817–837.
- Swiney, Ch. (2020). The Urbanization of International Law and International Relations: The Rising Soft Power of Cities in Global Governance. *Michigan Journal of International Law*, 41(2), 227–278.
- Swiney, Ch. & Foster, S. (2019). Cities Are Rising in Influence and Power on the Global Stage. Retrieved from: <https://www.citylab.com/perspective/2019/04/city-leadership-international-policy-mayors-u20-uclg-c40/587089/>.
- Szpak, A. (2019). How to deal with migrants and the State's backlash – Polish cities' experience. *European Planning Studies*, 1-18. DOI.org/10.1080/09654313.2019.15.
- Szpak, A. et al. (2022). *The Role of Cities in International Relations: The Third-generation of Multi-level Governance?* Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing.
- Środki ochrony zdrowia od Kulczyk Foundation dotrą jutro do Poznania [Tomorrow health protection measures from Kulczyk Foundation will reach Poznań]. (14 April 2020). Retrieved from: <https://www.money.pl/gielda/srodki-ochrony-zdrowia-od-kulczyk-foundation-dotra-jutro-do-poznania-6499789962159745a.html>.
- Urban Agenda for the EU. Pact of Amsterdam* (2016). Retrieved from: [http://ec.europa.eu/regional\\_policy/sources/policy/themes/urban-development/agenda/pact-of-amsterdam.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/sources/policy/themes/urban-development/agenda/pact-of-amsterdam.pdf).
- Urban Citizens: Municipal Identification Cards (ID) For Inclusive And Safe Communities* (2008). Retrieved from: [http://citiesofmigration.ca/good\\_idea/inclusive-immigration-id/](http://citiesofmigration.ca/good_idea/inclusive-immigration-id/).
- Villazar, R., C. (2010). "Sanctuary Cities" and Local Citizenship. *Fordham Urban Law Journal*, 37 (2), 573–598.

- Watts, M. (nd). *As President Trump Attacks the World Health Organisation, Cities Unite to Tackle COVID-19*. Retrieved from: [https://www.c40knowledgehub.org/s/article/As-President-Trump-Attacks-the-World-Health-Organisation-Cities-Unite-to-Tackle-COVID-19?language=en\\_US](https://www.c40knowledgehub.org/s/article/As-President-Trump-Attacks-the-World-Health-Organisation-Cities-Unite-to-Tackle-COVID-19?language=en_US).
- Winiarska, A. (2015). *Przykłady partycypacji migrantów w miastach wielokulturowych* [Examples of migrants' participation in multicultural cities]. Retrieved from: [https://partycypacjaobywatelska.pl/wp-content/uploads/2015/07/Aleksandra\\_Winiarska\\_migranci\\_a\\_partycypacja.pdf](https://partycypacjaobywatelska.pl/wp-content/uploads/2015/07/Aleksandra_Winiarska_migranci_a_partycypacja.pdf).
- World Mayors Summit on Climate – Mayors push for hope after Copenhagen (2010). Retrieved from: <http://www.iclei.org/climate-roadmap/advocacy/global-lg-events/2010-world-mayors-summit-on-climate-mexico-city.html>.