



Extract from the report:

Spotlight on **Global Multilateralism**

Perspectives on the future
of international cooperation
in times of multiple crises

**Inclusive multi-level
governance:
the case for the
meaningful involve-
ment of local and
regional
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public service trade
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lateral system of
the future**

BY EDGARDO BILSKY AND DARIA CIBRARIO

Inclusive multi-level governance: the case for the meaningful involvement of local and regional governments and public service trade unions in the multilateral system of the future

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Every day, local and regional governments (LRGs) and their staff are on the frontline of the world's intersecting global crises. However, their roles are not yet adequately acknowledged, and their expertise leveraged in the global multilateral system as it currently stands. This article reviews the contribution of LRGs and their workers and trade unions to the global debate on the reform of multilateralism and identifies paths towards their meaningful inclusion through the future reform of the UN system. It advocates for a structural shift in the multilateral system enabling a genuine, two-way local-regional-national-level dialogue, strong LRG, worker and community participation in international policymaking, and inclusive global cooperation capable of integrating local solutions and policy innovation from the bottom-up to accelerate the concrete implementation of global public policy agendas.

Introduction

The 2015-2016 adoption of the United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, the New Urban Agenda (NUA) and the Paris Agreement on Climate Change laid the foundations for a new framework for global cooperation and multilateralism towards a better future for humanity and the planet. The urgency to fulfil these commitments has now become a life-or-death matter as current, concurrent emergencies are threatening the very existence of our planet, societies and civilization. However, in a context of intersecting global challenges – including pandemics, climate change, inequalities, and conflict – the multilateral system is in crisis. In 2020, on the occasion of its 75th Anniversary, the UN launched a global consultation on the future of multilateral institutions, as well as *Our Common Agenda*, the UN Secretary-General report on the reform of the UN system.¹ Also, in 2024 the UN will hold a “Summit of the Future” precisely on the theme “Multilateral Solutions for a Better Tomorrow” to advance this debate

and adopt a new “Pact for the Future”.² The urgency of this endeavour is witnessed by the 2022 establishment by the UN Secretary-General of the High-Level Advisory Board on Effective Multilateralism, whose recommendations will inform the 2024 UN Summit of the Future.

In a world where the frontlines of any emergency are eminently local, the international rise of cities and civil society as international actors points to the urgent need for the evolution of multilateralism towards a renewed global governance system meaningfully inclusive of local and regional governments (LRGs) and of legitimate, accountable non-state actors.³ The 2020 UN policy brief “COVID-19 in an Urban World”⁴ and the creation in 2020 of the UN Taskforce on the Future of Cities to review the role of LRGs in the future multilateralism are a proxy indication of the attention that LRGs have recently acquired in the UN system. More recently, the UN

1 UN Secretary-General (2021)

2 UN Secretary-General (2022)

3 UN DESA (2023); Saiz (2019)

4 UN (2020)

Secretary-General proposed to create a permanent Advisory Group of Local and Regional Governments to facilitate a more structured partnership with the UN System.⁵

Local and regional governments' contribution to the global debate on the reform of the multilateral system

This process comes as a result of a long tradition of peace advocacy, city diplomacy and city-to-city cooperation that has seen LRGs advocate since the 1990s for their acknowledgment as legitimate governmental partners in their own standing at the UN, beyond the UN Major Groups. In 1999, an UN Advisory Committee of Local Authorities (UNACLA) was established and attached to the Executive Director of UN-Habitat, composed of a group of mayors representative of the main global LRG networks. In 2016, the World Assembly of Local and Regional Governments was recognized as the representative mechanism for the interlocution between the UN and LRGs in the outcome document of the Habitat III Summit.⁶

Beyond UN-Habitat, LRGs have been actively engaged in different UN processes, programmes, and specialized agencies, including UNDP, UNEP, UNICEF and UN Women. LRGs participate as a united constituency at the UN High Level Political Forum (HLPF), in the Conferences of the Parties (COPs) on climate and biodiversity, in the UN Commission on the Status of Women, in UN-Water, in the International Migration Review Forum and in the Global Partnership for Effective Development Cooperation. LRGs collectively monitor and report to the HLPF on the localization of the SDGs, as well as the progress on the NUA, and have developed concrete initiatives such as Local for Action Hubs to support the implementation of global agendas.⁷ LRGs actively participate in the UNFCCC Race to Zero campaign and over 12,000 LRGs made commitments to reduce greenhouse gas emissions.⁸

LRGs are also active in the G20 and G7 processes through the Urban 20, and Urban7 gatherings.

As part of their contribution to the UN75 consultation the Global Taskforce of Local and Regional Governments (GTF) and United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG)⁹ conveyed the voices and vision of LRGs worldwide for the next generation of multilateralism: their report, “The Role of Local and Regional Governments in the Future Global Governance of the International System”, calls for a comprehensive multilateral system that acknowledges the realities of an urbanized and decentralized world.¹⁰ A system with true local-regional-national dialogue, strong community participation and more inclusive international policymaking and global cooperation to become a reality, catalysing the implementation of global agendas. LRGs propose an inclusive, multi-level, networked multilateralism based on collaborative relations across different levels of governments and communities, capable of reflecting local solutions and policy innovation from the bottom-up, but also of conveying the emerging challenges cities and territories face so they can be included and addressed in global policies. This vision places participatory democracy, decentralization and subsidiarity at the core of multilateralism to realize peace, human rights, social inclusion and sustainability from the ground up. The proposal also envisages a fair, effective global funding architecture to mobilize adequate resources to support LRGs in the localization of the global agendas.

Finally, the 2022 UCLG World Congress adopted its “Pact for the Future of Humanity” (the Pact), also as a contribution to the upcoming UN Summit of the Future.¹¹ The Pact was developed through a participatory process in consultation with key stakeholders (civil society, trade unions, academia, private sector) to deliver a new social contract with ‘care’ as an overarching principle at its heart, and universal public

5 UN Secretary-General (2021), p. 75.

6 UN Habitat (2016)

7 GTF (2017-2022); UCLG (2019); <https://local4actionhubs.uclg.org/es/global-map>

8 12,600 LRGs have committed to reducing 24 billion tonnes of CO₂ by 2030; <https://www.globalcovenantofmayors.org/>

9 The GTF gathers the majority of the global and regional networks of subnational governments (28 organizations). UCLG represents over 250,000 cities, regions and metropolises as well as more than 175 LRG associations worldwide.

10 GTF (2022)

11 UCLG (2022)

service access as the hallmark of a new, ‘caring society’. The three axes of the Pact – People, Planet and Government - are to be implemented through a feminist approach to politics, a new relationship with the planet, and self-government with local democracy. UCLG’s Pact also underlines the critical need for accountable multilevel governance and inclusive multilateralism to bridge local actions and global policies, such as promoting the respect for human rights at a local level (see also Box 1).¹²

Box 1

10, 100, 1000 Human Rights Cities and Territories by 2030!

Human rights are one of the founding pillars of the UN and are at the heart of global agendas. The Human Rights Cities movement emerged from different local and regional processes since the 1990s, triggered by growing urbanization and increasing social and economic challenges. Since the 2000s, LRGs worldwide have contributed to developing a universal culture of human rights through the implementation of human rights agendas at a local level and through the incorporation of a human rights-based approach in local policies (e.g., social inclusion, housing, participatory democracy, etc.). This approach turned into a global movement in the 2010s, thanks to the launch of several international initiatives under the auspices of the UCLG Committee on Social Inclusion, Participatory Democracy and Human Rights and its leading cities (e.g., Gwangju, Mexico City, Saint-Denis, Barcelona). The Global Charter Agenda of Human Rights in the City, a pioneer document written by LRGs and based on their experiences, was adopted by UCLG in 2012. In addition, the Gwangju Principles for a Human Rights City defined for the first time the notion of “Human Rights City” in

2014 at the World Human Rights Cities Forum, the largest meeting of Human Rights Cities worldwide, which has been held annually since 2010 in collaboration with several UN agencies and the national government of the Republic of Korea.

In 2013, the Republic of Korea and other countries promoted the adoption of a UN Human Rights Council resolution to define the role of local governments in the promotion and protection of human rights, which promoted a structural dialogue between local governments and the UN, combining international trends and the analysis of municipal policies on human rights.¹³ The growing inequalities – exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic – pushed LRGs to further commit to the promotion of human rights. This engagement was reflected in the Global Campaign “10, 100, 1000 Human Rights Cities and Territories by 2030,” launched in 2022 by the Cities of Utrecht, Grigny, Gwangju, Mexico City, Vienna and Barcelona. The Global Campaign will contribute to connecting local initiatives at the international level, promoting networking, solidarity and multilevel cooperation, in line with the cooperation agreement signed between UCLG and the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) in 2021.

Inclusive multilateralism for LRG workers and trade unions

LRGs are key state actors and institutions formulating policies and concrete solutions to fulfil global agendas and tackle the world’s intersecting crises. They are – beyond elected officials and politicians – comprised of working people who implement those policies and deliver vital services to communities and territories on an ongoing basis. Indeed, workers and trade unions are among the non-state actors critical to ensuring a more inclusive, effective multilateral-

12 The LRG movement has reaffirmed its involvement in achieving the human rights agenda and showcased its focus on people through the Lampedusa Charter for a Dignified Human Mobility and the 2020 Rome Charter. Also, the UCLG Municipal Peace Talks have put transformative city diplomacy at the centre of the peace agenda.

13 UN Human Rights Council (2015); see also <https://www.ohchr.org/en/about-us/what-we-do/partnership/local-governments>

ism rooted in human rights, solidarity, democracy, inclusive development, social justice and peace.

Traditionally associated with SDG 8 as key to the realization of Decent Work, workers and trade unions are in fact essential to the achievement of all of the SDGs. This is particularly evident in the case of local public service workers – the staff of LRGs – as they constitute and operate vital services and infrastructure to local communities with their labour.¹⁴ Decent working conditions in local public service workplaces are not only a fundamental human right requirement and a transformative commitment of the 2030 Agenda and the NUA, but also a pre-requisite to ensure equitable access to quality local public services to everyone, anywhere. This principle is well recognized by both UCLG and Public Services International (PSI) – the global trade union federation representing public service workers worldwide – in their 2020 Joint Statement in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic.¹⁵ The Joint Statement issued guidelines for their respective memberships to protect the most vulnerable in our communities by ensuring continued public service delivery, while keeping frontline workers safe and in decent working conditions.¹⁶

Yet, although many international workers and trade union organizations have consultative status with ECOSOC and are acknowledged within the Workers and Trade Unions UN Major Group, they are often overlooked in international policymaking, or assimilated into the wider civil society. The involvement of unions in the development of global policy frameworks varies greatly across UN agencies and other multilateral institutions, which undermines efforts to build a truly inclusive multilateral system. Under the slogan of “partnerships” and “multistakeholder initiatives” new forms of so-called “multistakeholderism” have gained popularity, although they often lack clear transparency and accountability rules and tend to serve primarily the interests of private business actors.¹⁷ However, several UN agencies do recognize

the fundamental contribution, professionalism and expertise that workers and trade unions bring to their missions and have meaningfully involved them accordingly, as shown by examples in Box 2.

Box 2

How are workers and trade unions involved in the governance of some UN agencies?

International Labour Organization (ILO): the ILO is the only tripartite UN organization, meaning that social partners – governments, worker and employer representative organizations “enjoying equal status”¹⁸ are embedded and integral to its governing bodies. Worker representatives elect 14 representatives to the Governing Body of the ILO, and therefore participate in the election of its Director-General, as well as in the standard-setting, programmes and daily operations of the organization.

World Health Organization (WHO): because of the critical role workers play in the protection and advancement of public health – including nurses, care, medical and hospital staff – the WHO recognizes their trade unions as a critical non-state actor to engage with in a systematic and sustained fashion in the interest of the organization.¹⁹ Representing health and care service workers globally, PSI has been included since 2018 among the currently 220 organizations with official status at the WHO, in compliance with its Framework of Engagement with non-State actors (FENSA).²⁰

International Maritime Organization (IMO): the IMO is the global standard-setting authority for the safety, security and environmental performance of international shipping. The International Transport Workers Union Federation (ITF) – the

¹⁴ See for example Cibrario (2021).

¹⁵ PSI/UCLG (2020)

¹⁶ PSI (2020)

¹⁷ See for example Buxton (2019).

¹⁸ Art 1(d) of the Declaration of Philadelphia, Annex to the ILO Constitution; https://www.ilo.org/dyn/normlex/en/f?p=1000:62:0::NO:62:P62_LIST_ENTRIE_ID:2453907:NO#A7

¹⁹ WHO (2023)

²⁰ WHO (2016)

global union federation representing millions of transport workers, including international maritime and urban transport workers – has had consultative status at the IMO since 1961. ITF worker representatives attend all IMO bodies and actively participate in five IMO Committees and seven Sub-committees.²¹

UN-Water: UN-Water includes PSI in its governance as a partner by its role as professional union representing water and sanitation workers worldwide. Partners take an active role in UN-Water meetings, engage in Expert Groups and Task Forces and provide support to specific activities. Their collaboration with UN-Water is guided by a set of Guidelines on UN-Water Partners.²²

When it comes to public services, difficulties with LRGs and public service worker unions meaningful involvement in multilateral organizations and policy systems are twofold. At the ILO, for instance, only central government representatives are acknowledged as public sector and public service employers regardless of level of government responsibility for service delivery, even if some ILO processes and discussions have recognized the role of LRGs in upholding decent work in public service provision, such as in the case of public emergency services, urban transport and public procurement.²³ Conversely, the role of trade unions and workers remains largely unacknowledged in several UN agencies and multilateral financial institutions. This includes UN-Habitat, where PSI, ITF and Building and Wood Workers' International (BWI) – the three global union federations mandated by the Council of Global Unions (CGU) to follow urban policies at the UN – members of the General Assembly of Partners (GAP) – are hardly consulted and involved in meaningful work on urban policies, public services, SDG 11 or with UNACLA,

although they hold the frontline expertise in these fields.²⁴

Conclusions

If humanity is to successfully tackle the multi-crises of our times, a structural shift in multilateralism is needed to make it more democratic and inclusive, to effectively advance peace, equity and social justice, and to truly work in the public interest. This is why LRGs ask for a full-fledged permanent seat at the decision-making table of the multilateral system, as per the UN Secretary-General's proposal to create an UN Advisory Group of Local and Regional Governments. Besides, trade unions and legitimate community organizations should be organically included and meaningfully consulted in global policymaking, and in multilateral institutions and processes, as they bring their unique frontline expertise that is so critical to implement all global agendas.

In addition, when it comes to life-saving public service provision, emergency response, the climate crisis, fighting inequalities and seeking innovative, practical solutions, both LRGs and their workers need an appropriate space and meaningful mechanisms to channel their voices, express their demands and recommendations – including their joint ones – and to be listened in the multilateral system. To do so, they also need to be enabled to carry out constructive social dialogue between themselves on a regular basis, to ensure that LRG workers are in decent conditions, with adequate staffing levels, training, safety and tools, so they can ensure continued local quality public service delivery to everyone in any community and territory.

This vision requires innovative, accountable mechanisms that strengthen cooperation and dialogue across the different spheres of government, meaningfully include legitimate non-state actors and civil society, and be based on collaborative governance, policy co-creation and implementation and ongoing dialogue. It also necessitates a new generation of legal, governance and policy frameworks based on

21 https://www.itfseafarers.org/sites/default/files/paragraph/issues-attachments/files/A4%20-%20Your%20Rights%20%E2%80%93%20The%20IMO_0.pdf

22 UN-Water (2021)

23 ILO (2009) and ILO (2018)

24 PSI (2022)

human rights and on a public-good approach that adequately recognizes LRGs, workers, civil society and other legitimate non-state actors each in their roles and areas of expertise; and that capitalizes on their complementarities and synergies.

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