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STUTTGART AND UTRECHT

Localising sustainable development goals by fostering international cooperation

Regarding international agreements and declarations, the authors are arguing for an “urban mainstreaming” in the agenda of global institutions. They examine how the local level accepts and promotes its active role within these universal aspirations and how this could also enhance the international agenda of cities including their mutual cooperation.

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In 2015 the United Nations adopted the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), often also referred to as the Global Goals. SDGs are characterised by the familiar paradigm of "Think global and act local" and the underlying assumption that there is no "North" and "South", but that every country should be committed to sustainable development. SDGs are a universal and international framework, asking all levels, but especially the local level (explicitly addressed in Goal 11) – including government, society, scientific institutions and business – to take action.

Glocal ambitions, however, which assume a dynamism between international ambitions on one side and innovative local development on the other, are part of a broader trend.

We see a similar kind of translation and localisation in the field of Human Rights Cities (Oomen, Davis & Grigolo 2016), climate commitments, Habitat III (the New Urban Agenda) (Satterthwaite 2016), but also at the European level through

the EU Urban Agenda, which was set in May 2016 by the Pact of Amsterdam.

For many cities it is not for the first time to become and act more sustainable. On the local level there is a long tradition of policymaking and cooperation with local stakeholders to improve living conditions, equal opportunities and the creation of a sustainable environment. Many of the SDGs are also inspired by current innovative developments within cities.

In this article we will examine firstly why we are arguing for an "urban mainstreaming" in the agenda of global institutions, and how the local level accepts and promotes its active role within these universal aspirations. Secondly we will formulate some directions how this could also enhance the international agenda of cities including their mutual cooperation: complementing the mentioned paradigm by "acting globally with local inspiration".

New glocal dynamics and the 'upcoming' role of cities

At this moment a number of discussions about 'localising' the SDGs, human rights and The New Urban Agenda / Habitat III are coming together on the international stages. This is not a new combination. At the beginning of the nineties, the debate on "the right to the city" gained momentum in South America and in the global scene as well (Garcia 2016: 115). The association "Local Governments for Sustainability" (ICLEI) was founded in 1990 by 200 local governments from 43 countries to promote the concept of sustainability, and two United Nations Conferences with the same intention followed: the Earth Summit (Rio de Janeiro 1992) and Habitat II (Istanbul 1996). The "Local Agenda" became a driving force in many German and Dutch communities by motivating civil society and local administrations (often led by the first) to implement the concept of sustainability and international solidarity. The alter-globalisation movement emerged, which crystallised in the organisation of World Social Forums (WSFs) held since 2001. As a result, the World Charter for the Right to the City was drafted in several WSFs and in additional international workshops.

Now, after the expiration of the agreements within the framework of the United Nation's Millennium Development Goals, cities are challenged to take action in order to con-

tribute to the objectives of the SDGs and the historic agreement of the international community with the 21st United Nations Climate Conference in Paris 2015 (COP21) to fight climate change. There are (still) many discussions about cities in these settings. The New Urban Agenda defines itself as a contribution "to the implementation and localisation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development in an integrated manner, and to the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and targets, including SDG 11 of making cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient, and sustainable." Yet, what about the cities themselves?

International policy-makers conclude that cities should be operated and managed in a radically different way (Reilly 2017). However rarely will you find a reference how local experiences, in turn, will impact transnational working methods, discourses and ambitions. The text of the agenda is based on a kind of abstract policy discourse, in which it is difficult to imagine how it will create and stimulate new inspirational impact from the local to the global. Often the question arises: How should we do that? What precisely? Who will finally do something? Therefore the urban level is often seen as the "Deus ex Machina" that offers the solution, a kind of wishful thinking from the global to the local level.

The local level is not a real discussion partner yet (Chan 2016): When the European Commission organised the opening session of the 10th European Development Days 2016 in Brussels with six Heads of State, the President of the World Bank, the Secretary-General of the United Nations and the Foreign Affairs Coordinator of the European Union, no mayor or local representative of non-government organisations (NGOs) was invited to speak; only one out of the 100 workshops offered during this 2-day conference was organised by the cities. While the symposium attracted 3000 participants, only six of them represented a city. For local representatives there were obviously not enough reasons to attend when national and international institutions and their professionals dominate the world of international cooperation and development. From a legal point of view one might argue that international and development coopera-

tion per se is a national, not a local task and responsibility. But this is exactly the paradigm shift of the SDGs concerning development – we are well past the idea of development aid in which the rich North tells the poor South what to do. We are talking about global challenges faced by all states and cities – each to a different extent, but all are asked for action in their own premises. For economically stable countries such as Germany and the Netherlands ‘new’ questions appear on the agenda: is our ecological footprint too big? Is our consumption based on fair trade? Do we do enough to fight inequality and social exclusion? Is life expectancy in good health distributed fairly across the population? Is education a fundamental right for everyone? Are our cities resilient and safe?

In the coming years, the number of people living in cities will increase greatly, either through national or international migration, putting enormous pressure on sustainable solutions. And thus also the laboratory character of the cities will grow. This makes cities increasingly important actors within the (inter-) national set of actors jointly caring about the planet: This is the reason why cities need a say in international fora beyond the usual negotiation process where consultancies, NGOs, companies, ministries, or agencies decide on international agendas and declarations. Because once the declaration has been signed, cities are left alone in the execution and realisation of the SDGs. The facilitating effort of national and international organisations is relatively small. In most cases, concerned individuals, initiatives by small NGOs, social entrepreneurs, innovative businesses and local authorities seek and support each other in approaches and solutions. If one considers the international dimension and partnerships enshrined in SDG 17, cities in general do not obtain structural funds from their national governments, although there are some funding possibilities especially in Germany in order to support the international engagement of municipalities.



Photo: Ramon Mosterd

From local to global? Utrecht in the Netherlands

The involvement of cities

As said before: The world of global development is still profoundly dominated by nation states and international organisations (Chan 2016). European cities as well as cities worldwide have created associations, networks or lobby-organisations of cities (UCLG 2016) with different capacities to speak and negotiate in their name. The advantage is obvious, since it takes the burden from every individual city to play constantly on the international stage. The disadvantage

is that policy officers and representatives with sometimes little working experience on the local level speak in a city's interest; when cities are involved just a few mayors or their representatives participate.

At the EU level we see an interesting example of a new and different kind of involvement of cities in international developments. An experiment has started within the framework

of the Urban Agenda for the EU, which was established on 30 May 2016 during the Dutch EU Presidency. Partnerships have been started on 12 important topics in which five EU cities, Eurocities, some national governments, expert organisations, and some representatives of the European Commission work together to improve EU policies. It is the first time that cities (in addition to the more official responsibilities of the Committee of the Regions) work on very concrete policy issues together with European officials in a structured way. The experiment is also interesting since city representatives should also speak on behalf of other cities, not only representing the specific interests of their own city. They will somehow have to express the international connectedness with interests, problems and challenges of other cities. This means that they should inquire about what is happening in other cities and how they feel about certain issues. They need to express that they also speak in the name of those not sitting at the table. Because of the direct involvement of cities in the international arena, the actual connectedness of the cities and their mutual cooperation and exchange will have to increase.

It could be the source of a dynamism that is significantly different from what is customary in the EU with (still) 28 national interests. It might lead to a new contract – facilitated and supported by network associations – between the supranational, relatively ‘neutral’ EU professionals and city representatives. For the following round of EU partnerships, a partnership on the joint realisation of the SDGs would be an interesting next step of city involvement on the international stage. While we are experiencing a first attempt of direct involvement of the cities to improve international policies, funding and regulations at the European level, such direct involvement is extremely rare at the global level. Nevertheless, international agreements like the SDGs, human



Photo: City of Stuttgart

Opening of the annual conference of the European Network Energy Cities on April 16, 2017, Town Hall Stuttgart

rights and the New Urban Agenda are slowly becoming a new inspiration for more and more cities to take their first steps on the international stage. Although the international agreements were formulated with little cooperation from the cities, it also encourages cities to link global aspirations to local practices. Since the adoption of the SDGs, some cities consider how they can frame their existing policies under the umbrella of the SDGs, how they could use them to improve their own policies, and how they could learn and cooperate internationally with other cities to meet global challenges. It is now up to the international institutions to equally accept cities as forerunners and innovators in practice by implementing urban mainstreaming in their policies (Halberstam 2007).

New international principles guiding the international relations of cities

In this section we elaborate on the challenge of cities to join forces in realising the SDGs. Many cities have a long tradition of mutual relations and cooperation. These relations were often based on initiatives by individuals, associations, corporations, universities, schools, churches or other organisations. Sometimes they were also based on – or at least supported by – local municipalities; sometimes it was the personal engagement of a mayor (Martins & Álvares 2007).

They were often based on a theme of mutual interest or simply the friendly relations between people. Numerous labels have been used after World War II for the international relations of cities, such as twinning, city-to-city cooperation, partnership or sister cities, friendship cities, international solidarity, etc. This kind of relationship does regain importance, but a number of factors have changed the international cooperation context of cities significantly:

1. Due to worldwide developments like climate change, food and water shortage, war and migration, it is increasingly urgent that innovative solutions are disseminated in a city-to-city-oriented way and spread worldwide.
2. The ability to communicate and to connect with other cities and gather knowledge about what is happening elsewhere in the world and how it relates to one's own city has increased significantly by new technologies.
3. The global agreements at the international level (like the SDGs and human rights) have created a (at least invisible) relationship between cities (Lee 2014); in this sense cities have become "partners" in the realisation of these agreements.
4. Global processes also take place at subnational levels, thereby disrupting the notion of mutual exclusivity between the national and the global (Sassen 2009). Globalisation has also impacted the international relations of businesses; local economies are much more related to markets abroad than 20 years ago.
5. In comparison to the situation 20 years ago, many more people with a migration background are living in European cities (Oomen 2017). The diverse character of cities has also greatly increased the ability to connect internationally. With the heterogeneity of cities, the possible engagement related to developments elsewhere was also enhanced.

The co-operation agenda of cities

The central feature of the international cooperation agenda for cities is increasingly its diverse forms of co-operation. Depending on the subjects, ambition, partners or individuals involved, there will be a range of relationships with cities from other places in the world. Some contours of such an international cooperation agenda are:



Photo: City of Stuttgart

Participants from Ghana and Uganda at the 8th Cities for Mobility Congress 2016 in Stuttgart

- Enhanced globalisation will push cities into making clear what their specific focus, their ambition or "offer to the world" is. Putting the spotlight on topics that a city wants to develop draws international attention of people (networks, knowledge, ideas, talent, emotions) and resources and becomes a meeting place for more specialised innovation. This focus is the starting point of a local breeding ground for people and organisations to start a co-operation. With this in mind, cities will be looking more and more for counterparts and partners in other cities in order to strengthen their own ambition. "Similarities" are becoming a mutual inspiration. "Specific focus" and "similarities" are, oddly enough, the two sides of the same coin of urban development.
- Another direction is the growing importance of 'reciprocity'. Cities in the North have had a development relationship with cities in the South for decades. In many cases, they have established a unilateral aid relationship, in which colonial dependencies were maintained and reproduced. Meanwhile, it is clear that these hierarchical relationships are no longer tenable in a globalised world. Of course, there are still huge inequalities between the North and the South, but interdependencies and the readiness for mutual learning have increased.

- Since cities are rapidly becoming more heterogeneous, the question arises whether thinking in terms of differences and identities still fits the new situation. A new paradigm, based on “similarities” (Bhatti & Kimmich 2015), will redefine the public urban space as a common and “shared space”, in which local and global actors will create new kinds of cooperation to work on overcoming differences.
- Based on similarities and the reciprocity behind this approach, more (and different kinds of) relations of like-minded cities will emerge. These may be bilateral or in (smaller or bigger) networks, in the real and the virtual world. Against this background, the position of translators, key persons, gatekeepers or transmitters of ‘ideas’ and ‘similarities’ are crucial. The connections between cities therefore always proceed through people and particularly through some persons who are on the edge of different worlds. These people will establish a reciprocal relationship – much more than in the 20th century – as was said before: they are the mediators of universal ideas and concepts of interest to the cities.
- New mindsets are needed in order to find cities with a similar focus. In order to facilitate the experience of mutual inspiration, personal relationships are often the key to a good and sustainable cooperation. This article and the cooperation of both authors are examples of such a city-to-city cooperation. Neither motivated by official partnership agreements nor long-lasting network relations, farsighted city planners and mobility experts in Utrecht and Stuttgart started an informal co-operation, in which they acknowledged similar goals: two cities working on the biggest railway and central station development in their country, experts sharing the same enthusiasm for alternative mobility concepts, and lately like-minded politicians putting citizens’ participation in the center of their political agenda.
- Finally, a strong competitive model of city marketing will slowly lose influence. Citymarketing professionals saw and see each other primarily as competitors; and they contributed to the belief that cities are a ready-made product that could be sold like a hotdog: the city as a business case to smell, to sell and to consume. In the above-mentioned development, more and more cities will abandon this rigid model in the coming years. Instead, people in cities will tell their story in a ‘dialogue’ with the storytellers of other cities, supported by social media, coupled with the innovative contribution that they intend to make to global challenges. Thus it will become less the so-called professional marketing agencies that can operate effectively in this respect, but the co-creating multitude of local social actors in international cooperative networks, who inform, activate and invite to join their networks, locally and abroad.

Epilogue

The world is watching its cities. And the international community hopes for the cities creative ability to turn sustainability challenges into a new generation of solutions, attitudes and lifestyles. With the SDGs and the New Urban Agenda the international community sets again the frameworks of urgency and calls for change. But the “object” or “incubator” of change was not much involved. Conversely, communities and cities must learn to fulfil their role in a globalised environment; on the one hand by having their local actions inspired by international frameworks; on the other hand by taking active co-responsibility for the frames

in which the tasks are formulated. Cities should be at the table when global policies are formulated, supported by their associations. This global responsibility also gives impetus to the international cooperation between cities in concrete tasks. Therefore cities are on the eve of a new kind of integration. Cities will increasingly initiate mutually inspiring projects and exchanges. Similarities will bypass differences in giving direction to the collaborations of the future, and the principle of reciprocity will slowly but surely take the place of unequal collaboration and competition.

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