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# The Emergent Role of Cities as Actors in International Relations

<https://www.e-ir.info/2019/08/06/the-emergent-role-of-cities-as-actors-in-international-relations/>

SALOME GONGADZE, AUG 6 2019

The city is having a moment. It is said that the twenty-first century is the first truly 'urban century' because of unprecedented rates of urbanization worldwide (Hall & Pfeiffer 2000; Kourtit et al 2014, 1). As globalization continues to integrate international society and reduce the salience of borders, cities are being acknowledged as internationally important centres of political and economic power (Curtis 2014, 16). As the optimism of the post-Cold War moment fades and gives way to an international environment characterized by deadlocks and increasingly intractable collective action problems, optimistic commentators have begun to argue that the state-centric international system is failing and that 'the city can change the world' (Barber 2013b, 5).

Setting aside these bold propositions, it is evident that the rise of cities in international affairs is something that scholars in the international relations field should be reckoning with. International Relations theory has always spoken of 'actors' in the international arena. The theoretical traditions that dominated 20<sup>th</sup> century IR scholarship restricted the designation of 'actor' solely to unitary nation-states, which at the time were considered the only entities capable of acting meaningfully at the international level (Morgenthau 1948; Waltz 1979). More recent research has begun to consider a variety of 'non-state actors' in IR, ranging from entities such as non-governmental organizations to transnational corporations (Josselin & Wallace 2001, 1). Yet, contemporary understandings of International Relations have not yet been able to seriously accommodate the city as a significant object of analysis in global politics (Curtis 2016, 457).

This observation has been the catalyst for a body of research that seeks to utilize the analytical tools of IR to better understand the agency and importance of cities in contemporary global affairs (see: Ljungkvist 2014, 32; Curtis 2014, 16; Acuto 2010, 425-448). Scholars in this field argue that the declining salience of national borders and rigid separations between the 'domestic' and the 'international' brought upon by globalisation, have created space for cities to engage with the international community and form cooperative relationships with cities across borders (ibid.). However, there are some issues in this burgeoning field, mainly a lack of clarity in this new field over what cities 'behaving as actors' actually entails and, by extension, a tendency to ascribe any interaction between 'the city' and 'the international' as evidence of this.

This inquiry thus contributes to this literature by asking whether cities are behaving specifically as *actors* – political units that collectively pursue stated or implicit objectives – in issues and forums that concern international relations. It also assesses how substantive city action is, looking to discuss city action in a more critical and balanced capacity than is sometimes found in the literature and in media discussing the topic (Swiney and Foster 2019, Hachigian 2019). This study advances not only the niche 'cities and IR' field, but also international relations scholarship more broadly because it seeks to update understandings of the international system to include cities as actors.

The main research question asks if cities behave as actors in contemporary world politics. In addition, I ask two sub-questions that aim to add depth to my analysis and introduce a critical assessment. I ask what the predominant tools cities use to achieve IR-related objectives are and how substantive city actions have been. The inquiry is structured around two sections containing two case studies each. Each section focuses on a significant issue area in IR in which there has been city action. Establishing city activism on multiple issues should establish that there is a stronger

# **The Emergent Role of Cities as Actors in International Relations**

Written by Salome Gongadze

emerging trend for engagement among cities that is not simply tied to a single issue.

The first issue area is climate change. I look at it because it is a major rising concern in international politics and an issue area where actors at various levels – sub-national, national, private, transnational – have interacted with one another to solve problems (Bouteligier 2013, 61; Acuto 2016). Climate change is also significant because it is a problem in which cities are both profoundly implicated due to the intense levels of carbon-emitting economic activity occurring within them and are profoundly in danger of because of their population densities (UN-HABITAT 2011). To examine city action on climate change, I study two major transnational city network organizations that act on climate change issues: the C40 Cities Climate Leadership Group and Global Covenant of Mayors for Climate and Energy.

The second issue area is migration.<sup>[1]</sup> Migration is a relevant issue area because cities are important junctures in global refugee and migration flows – more than half of all refugees and internally displaced peoples live and move through urban areas (Abdenur & Muggah 2018 VI). Migration has also been an international issue area where diverse actors interact and where cities have occasionally broken from state-level discourses on migration policy (ibid.). Lastly, it is also an issue area at which it appears no academic work in the cities and IR field has ever looked at before. To examine city action on migration issues, I look at the Europe-based EUROCITIES Solidarity Cities initiative and the migration-related activities of the United Cities and Local Governments network.

Regarding methodology, I rely on a qualitative approach in line with the methodology of previous research on cities and international relations (Bouteligier 2013, 68; Acuto 2013, 40; Ljungkvist 2015, 12). This research strategy has been chosen by these scholars in order to produce a thicker, more accurate understanding of contemporary international society and the role of cities in it. This intention will largely drive my research for this project as well, as an understanding of whether a political entity is 'behaving like an actor' is dependent on detailed and context-specific investigation. I utilize qualitative primary data sourced largely from the websites of the initiatives profiled, as well as wherever possible, qualitative evidence from secondary sources like news articles and academic studies about these initiatives to fill out my case studies.

Following these case studies, I discuss my findings in relation to the three research questions. I will argue that the evidence shows that cities are behaving as actors in contemporary world politics, as they have pursued objectives related to emissions reduction and refugee integration in cooperation with cities across borders and with existing international institutions. The predominant tools and strategies used by city actors to achieve IR-related objectives are mimicking international diplomatic practices, organizing in transnational networks, and engaging with IOs and other international actors. In assessing the substance of city actions, I argue that these actions have been substantial within the limited possibilities of the contemporary global governance paradigm. The initiatives profiled in the case studies are substantive in that they offer cities valuable commitment-signalling platforms, capacity-building opportunities, and the chance to speak with a louder collective voice to the international community.

This text is arranged in seven parts. Part one will consist of a literature review that will outline the existing literature studying cities and international relations and will demonstrate how this project contributes to this literature. Part two will outline the three research questions the project focuses on and discuss the project's theoretical framework. Parts three and four will be made up of the four case studies of international city initiatives. Part five will discuss the findings of the case studies and formulate answers to the three research questions. Part six will form the conclusion, where I will reiterate my main findings, discuss some limitations of the research, and offer ideas for future research.

## **Literature review**

In this section, I will conduct a literature review that illustrates what is currently known on this topic and the larger intellectual trends in IR and Urban studies that have created an opening for the study of cities as international actors. I will first profile two streams of literature that concern cities and international relations and discuss their respective strengths and weaknesses. I will then demonstrate how my project contributes to the literature.

Past research on this topic can be broadly grouped into two 'streams' of literature. The first is often referred to as 'Global Cities' or 'World Cities' and is the research tradition in which the idea of cities being particularly significant

# The Emergent Role of Cities as Actors in International Relations

Written by Salome Gongadze

internationally was born. It is primarily characterized by an interest in the rising importance of the urban unit in the global economic system. Peter Hall's 1966 work *The World Cities* has been cited (Acuto 2010, 2956) as a starting point – this text described how major cities acted as focal points for global capital, talent, cultural production (Hall 1966). Another foundational contribution would emerge in the 1980s from Friedmann, who proposed the 'world city hypothesis' – a framework that 'link[ed] urbanization processes to global economic forces' and argued that major cities existed as 'basing points in the spatial organization and articulation of production and markets' (1986, pp. 69-83). This work, in its utilization of Wallerstein's world systems framework, indicates the largely materialist character of the global cities research agenda and its primary interest in criticizing global capitalism (Taylor 2015, 94).

Sassen's 1990 book *The Global City* is cited (Acuto 2010, 2959) as the next and most significant of all works in this school. This text describes how a small group of large cities, including New York, Tokyo, and London, consolidated institutions which denoted power in the context of a globalized economy, thus developing a 'new strategic role' in global society (Sassen 1990, 1-7). Works that followed honed in on the networked nature of these cities and possible hierarchies that could be identified among them (Derudder and Taylor 2005, 71; Smith 2005, 45).

The primary insight of this research agenda relevant to this project is the identification of the fact that changes in the nature of the global economy and society – globalization – have had significant impacts on how power is arranged in the world. However, scholars have taken issue with its exclusive focus on economic dynamics, which leaves out other dimensions of political interaction and leaves the city appearing as an oddly limp conduit through which the global economy is orchestrated (Curtis 2014, 20; Ljungkvist 2014, 55). Ljungkvist (ibid.) describes this as an 'overly economic' description of how urban centres have been empowered in recent decades, one that risks presenting a reductive account of these processes that is unable to make sense of city cooperation around issues such as climate activism (see also Bulkeley et al 2012, 915).

The second stream of literature emerged, in part, to counter this narrative, as well as to look at the issue of urban agency using the analytical tools of international relations (IR) scholarship. I will thus refer to it as the 'cities and IR' stream. It is worth noting that scholars in this field do not necessarily consider themselves to be working in a separate tradition from the 'Global Cities' stream, but I argue that this literature has become large enough to be considered distinct. Furthermore, its authors' frequent reference to issues in the IR field, as opposed to the urban studies field, indicates a distinct focus on IR and an attempt to unify elements of the Global Cities literature with IR studies (Acuto 2013, 2; Herschell and Newman 2017, 16; Brüttsch 2012, 307).

Prior to profiling its contributions, it is useful to overview a set of interconnected trends in IR studies that created the intellectual foundations for this scholarship to emerge. We can point first to the large-scale movement away from the nation-state being considered the sole player in global politics and the introduction of various 'non-state actors' as analytically significant in IR.<sup>[2]</sup> The assumption that states exist as 'black boxes' that interact in response to one another with no attention afforded to internal processes or contestations within them was dominant in the early and mid-20th century (Morgenthau 1948, Waltz 1979), but has since come under such sustained criticism (Agnew 1994, 54; Lacher 2003, 522, Barnett and Sikkink 2008, 64) that it might now be considered more of a minority view. There has been increasing room in IR to look at non-state actors as genuine topics for study that can significantly affect global political processes (Josselin & Wallace 2001, 1).

The second trend is the emergence of 'global governance' as a descriptive concept to explain international cooperative problem-solving (Weiss 2013, 2, Barnett and Sikkink 2008, 63). Broadly, this involves the recognition that the world is governed by a diverse set of formal and informal practices involving state and non-state actors. The study of global governance recognizes that authority in global affairs can be claimed by competing actors who work to solve global problems (Biersteker 2013, 263). 'World government' and the hierarchies associated with it are rejected in favour of a decentralized, multiscale approach (Barnett and Sikkink 2008, 63).

The third trend involves a recognition of the significance of globalization – 'the process in which the world moves toward an integrated global society and the significance of borders decreases' – as an influential factor in reshaping the international environment (Zürn 2013, 404). Globalization profoundly affects the separation between the domestic

# The Emergent Role of Cities as Actors in International Relations

Written by Salome Gongadze

and the international as separate analytical categories (ibid., Held & McGrew 2001, 71).

All these developments set the stage for the emergence of the 'cities and IR' literature. The field is considerably newer than the 'Global Cities' literature. The first 'cities and IR' contributions were published in the early 1990s and the field took off with the publication of several monographs and edited books on the topic in the 2010s. The general argument unifying this literature is that states as rigid, unitary actors are less significant in world affairs and, as a result, cities have emerged as significant entities (Brutsch 2013, 310).

The first expression of this idea is in a 1990 paper by Chadwick Alger, which studied the 'world relations of cities', rejecting the 'tyranny of the state system ideology' to look at how city governments responded to IR issues that were typically considered prerogatives of national governments, which at the time included nuclear issues, apartheid, and foreign aid (1990, 493). Later, Alger would more explicitly tie the rise of cities to changes in the international system, arguing that they have allowed cities to 'perforate the state's external unity' and engage with IOs, other cities, and the international community at large (Alger 2011, 23). This idea was developed in several other articles that called attention to the growing but under-examined significance of cities in international and regional affairs (Calder and de Freitas 2009, 78; Kern 2009, 310; Acuto 2010, 325).

The aforementioned 2010s monographs offer a more in-depth theoretical justification for why and how cities should be appreciated as players in the international field. Herschell and Newman argue that the study of international city engagement fills a space 'between the Urban Studies and IR disciplines', given that the former neglects international engagement as peripheral because it is not the primary focus of city governance and the latter neglects city agency because cities remain subsumed under the authority of the nation state (2017, 16). Ljungkvist focuses on 'global city reflexivity' – a process of deliberate action in which policymakers use self-knowledge and understanding of the global environment to make new claims of authority and act on issues (2015, 8).

I will ground my dissertation largely in this literature. There will be less focus in weighing up competing theoretical justifications for the role of cities in IR but rather a specific look at how cities behave as actors in IR. This study will contribute to the literature by studying city actor behaviour in major IR issues. The necessity for doing this emerges from a tendency in this literature to look too widely at any IR-related city activity as evidence of cities behaving as actors, even if said activity does not really describe 'actor behaviour' as such. Ljungkvist (2015, 32; 2016, 5) looks at city action in the 'conduct of international relations', a broad category which includes cities as actors but also as '*objects* of international norms and regulations'. In another study, Calder and de Freitas claim to study cities as 'actors', but only examine cities as sites of major IR-related events and hosts of major international organizations (2009, 78).

Given the newness of the field and its positioning in the intersection of multiple disciplines, this fuzziness is understandable. A wider research agenda for the cities and IR field can include investigations into cities as actors, objects, and sites of international transactions, and indeed looking at all these guises is necessary to fully understand the multiple roles cities play in contemporary IR. However, this project will aim to specifically fill the space for a targeted research project looking *solely* at cities as actors. It will also aim to assess the quality and substance of city action – in the current literature and in media discussing the topic (Swiney and Foster 2019, Hachigian 2019), city action is often described uncritically and without much discussion of whether these actions affect international politics or policy in any real capacity. This more specific focus can have potentially larger implications for the further dismantling of state-centrism in IR. Secondly, research into how cities can produce impactful international change can be more helpful for individuals within these cities to learn about how such action can be brought about.

## Research questions and theoretical issues

Having identified where this research project exists in the scholarly literature and explained how it contributes to this literature, it is now possible to formulate a central research question: Do cities behave as actors in contemporary world politics? Secondly, I will look at two sub-questions that add depth and descriptive detail to the main research question. These include: What are the predominant tools and strategies used by cities to achieve IR-related objectives? and If cities are actors, how substantive have their actions been? Identifying the predominant tools and

# The Emergent Role of Cities as Actors in International Relations

Written by Salome Gongadze

strategies used by cities helps add detail to understandings of the role of cities in international affairs. I am also interested in finding out how substantive city actions are – that is, how meaningful they are in contributing larger goals of the initiatives I will study.

Several theoretical issues emerge out of the formulation of these questions. In this section, I aim to resolve these issues and clarify how these questions should be answered. I will first discuss the operationalization of Question 1, namely defining what a city being an actor means in practice. I will then discuss a possible problem related to studying cities as actors, as identified in some of the literature on this topic.

## *What it means to 'be an actor'*

A major component of understanding this phenomenon and answering the first question is the operationalization of 'agency' or 'being an actor'.<sup>[3]</sup> The concept of 'agency' is under-examined in IR literature (Jackson, 2004, 256) and existing research mainly relates to states as actors (Wendt 2004, 289; Wight 2004, 269). In the context of this project, I am looking for evidence of city governments 'acting' – pursuing stated or implicit objectives – on issues and in forums that concern international relations. This places intentionality at the forefront of actor behaviour, instead of a definition that might tie it to power held or effectiveness of action.<sup>[4]</sup> This can accommodate the fact that cities can behave as actors without necessarily having to hold immense amounts of power or succeed in their aims.

## *The black box problem*

There is a possible contradiction between my stated intent to penetrate the 'black box' of the state to account for the international agency of cities and the fact that I aim to view cities as actors. It can be asked if, by opening one 'black box' (the state), one is simply creating *another* black box by flattening the city into a holistic 'actor'. Furthermore, it could be claimed that a focus on cities is a somewhat arbitrary distinction, in which cities get a degree of special but arbitrary recognition as actor units.

There is indeed some debate within some works in the cities and IR literature about whether viewing cities as 'actor units' is appropriate, though a number of scholars do not discuss this issue despite utilizing the actor conceptualization (Herschell and Newman 2018; Bouteligier 2012). Acuto (2013, 58) rejects the actor conceptualization as problematic for the reasons stated above, arguing that this risks turning the city into a 'miniature republic' in which the 'logic of state action' is simply brought down to the lower urban level. Curtis (2011, 1947) is similarly concerned with reifying an 'essentialist view of units'.

Ljungkvist (2015, 31) answers to this by focusing on collective identity, utilizing the insights of Wendt, a key constructivist scholar who discussed the state in his seminal *Social Theory of International Politics* (1999, 196). Wendt emphasises that states are constituted by social relations and that the state is bound together by a 'group Self' and provides a level of 'collective intentionality' that makes it possible for the state to 'act' to do something (ibid. 218-220). Ljungkvist argues that collective identity is the source of city agency and the reason Wendt's arguments can be applied to the city, writing that 'the global city as an actor in world politics is...understood and analysed based on a notion of collective identity and represented by the city's local political apparatus institutionalizing and authorizing collective action on its behalf' (2015, 32).

In line with Ljungkvist, I argue that identity is one component of urban actorness – a political unit is formed and made effective by recognition of itself by the individuals who make it up. Another reason, which does not appear to have been discussed in the context of understanding actorness, is that of *authority*. The city is an actor because its leadership can claim authority in the global political environment in a way that cannot be made by some other units (Herschell and Newman 2018, 65-80). This rebuts the claim that focusing on cities as actors is an arbitrary distinction, because the distinction is in fact not arbitrary. The city has unique historical significance in human history, as the oldest geographically-rooted form of political organization (Barber 2013, 13). A recognition of the political importance of the concept of the city, just as the nation-state is recognized as a uniquely authoritative concept, makes it so that cities can be recognized as 'actors'. Whilst it is important to avoid overly-simplistic discussion of city action that mischaracterizes the city as a tightly bounded and totally cohesive political unit, I emphasize that one of

# The Emergent Role of Cities as Actors in International Relations

Written by Salome Gongadze

the major features of the theoretical framework of this project is the explicit *rejection* of perspectives that view the city as a 'set of processes' that orchestrate global capitalism (see: Castells 1989 for this perspective).

## Cities and Climate Change

As mentioned above, climate change is the first of the two international issues that I will examine city action on. I will utilize two case studies to do this, focusing on two climate-change networks – the C40 Cities Climate Leadership Group and the Global Covenant of Mayors for Climate and Energy. In each case study, I will give a short overview of the organization's history and governance before describing its major activities. Further analysis of the implications of this evidence for my research questions is found later in the Discussion section.

### *C40 Cities Climate Leadership Group*

The first case study is the C40 Cities Climate Leadership Group (C40), a transnational network that evolved out of the 2005 World Cities Leadership Climate Change Summit hosted by London Mayor Ken Livingstone. At this summit, representatives from 18 major cities committed to rapid action on emissions reduction, as well as organizational steps to produce 'procurement policies and alliances to accelerate the uptake of climate-friendly technologies and influence the marketplace' (C40 Cities 2019a). In 2006, this agreement was built upon to create the C40 Network – named C40 for the 40 member cities which founded it (ibid.).

The C40 has since been chaired by mayors of some of the world's biggest and most internationally-active cities in two-year terms: London's Ken Livingstone, New York's Michael Bloomberg, Toronto's David Miller, Rio de Janeiro's Eduardo Paes, and currently Paris's Anne Hidalgo. In addition to the Chair, C40 is governed by a board of directions, a steering committee made up of city mayors, and a permanent staff (ibid.). At present, C40 is composed of 96 member cities.<sup>[5]</sup>

The C40's main activities can be grouped into three categories. The first category is the creation of collective climate commitments. The impetus for the creation of the C40 was a shared commitment among member cities to play a bigger role in solving the global climate crisis (Bouteligier 2014, 61). This is achieved through several mechanisms. Firstly, membership to the C40 is predicated on mandatory conditions such as a city member 'setting a target for reducing GHG emissions, developing a climate action plan with concrete initiatives to meet the target and, actively sharing best practice examples with other cities through the C40 network' (C40 Cities 2017). There are also smaller sets of commitment pacts like the 'Deadline 2020' commitment, in which 25 signatory cities agreed to implement climate action plans consistent with emissions reduction and temperature control targets developed during the Paris Climate Agreement (Hurst and Clement-Jones 2017, 7).

The second category is that of hosting regular summits and meetings. The nadir of the C40's collaborative meeting capacity are the C40 Mayors' Summits, which occur every three years. The most recent occurred in Mexico City in 2016, featuring panels related both to specific sustainability topics like public transport as well as C40-related business such as awards ceremonies, networking events, and planning meetings (C40 Mayors Summit 2016). Other events include workshops like the Transit Oriented Development Network workshop held by ten C40 members in Addis Ababa and regional forums like the C40 Latin American Mayors Forum held in Buenos Aires in 2015 (C40 Blog 2015).

The third category is that of capacity-building and development projects. This work is mainly done through the C40's sub-networks, development programs, and its finance facility. The C40 coordinates 17 issue networks that focus on sharing information and developing best practices on specific sustainability issues like air quality, building efficiency, and mass transit (C40 Cities 2019b). The C40 also offers a finance facility, which provides financing for targeted climate action projects, supported through funds offered by the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development, the UK Government Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, and the United States Agency for International Development (C40 Cities Finance Facility 2017).

### *Global Covenant of Mayors for Climate and Energy*

# The Emergent Role of Cities as Actors in International Relations

Written by Salome Gongadze

The Global Covenant of Mayors for Climate and Energy is a transnational network that grew out of two older emissions-reduction city organizations – the Compact of Mayors (launched in 2008) and the EU Covenant of Mayors (launched in 2014). These two initiatives joined together, in the interest of creating a single ‘umbrella’ under which city climate action could exist, to form the Global Covenant of Mayors for Climate & Energy in 2016 (European Commission 2016a). The Global Covenant aims to serve as the ‘largest global coalition of cities committed to climate leadership’ and to follow through on the commitments made at the Paris Climate conference in 2016 (ibid). The Global Covenant is governed by a board of 10 mayors and a Founder’s Council of partner organizations (Global Covenant of Mayors for Climate & Energy 2019).

In line with its commitment to a having wide-ranging membership, the Global Covenant is made up of 9300 cities and municipal areas across the world, in contrast to the more exclusive C40 Cities group.<sup>[6]</sup> Membership is to all cities and local governments regardless of size or location, contingent on the submission of a ‘commitment document signed by an appropriately mandated official according to local government procedures’ that contains a detailed climate action plan and commitment to regular reporting of progress (Global Covenant of Mayors for Climate & Energy 2017, ibid. 2018).

The Global Covenant’s main activities mirror some of the work done by the C40. There is a focus on information sharing, both among network members and for the purposes of public transparency. The Covenant’s website hosts an information tool that allows anybody to look up a particular city and find links to its specific action plan and access climate-related data like carbon emissions, and to see its progress in fulfilling the requirements of regular reporting and action-planning to be considered ‘compliant’ under Covenant rules (Global Covenant of Mayors for Climate & Energy 2018). Best practices and resource information is also shared among network members through available online resources and through the regional covenant sub-groupings (ibid.).

The second is that of orchestrating climate-related commitments across cities. City commitment plans need to be ‘at least as ambitious, and preferably more ambitious, than [the city’s] respective government’s Nationally Determined Contribution (NDC) under the Paris Agreement’ (ibid.) As mentioned above, cities are organized into local ‘chapters’ of regional covenants that intend to encourage regional cooperation and the development of region-specific actions and commitment projects (ibid., 4).

## Cities and Migration

In this section, I will look at city action in the international issue area of migration and refugee movements. I will again explore two international city initiatives on this issue through two case studies. The first case study will be of the EUROCITIES Solidarity Cities network, which engages European cities on refugee issues. The second case study will be of the migration-related activities of the United Cities and Local Governments network.

### *EUROCITIES Solidarity Cities Initiative*

Solidarity Cities is a city network initiative launched in 2016 that focuses on migration and refugee issues in a European Union context. It was founded by Giorgos Kaminis, the Mayor of Athens, in light of the influx of refugee and migrant activity into Europe that began in about 2015 (Solidarity Cities 2019a). This influx, sometimes described as the ‘European refugee crisis’, has had significant implications for European politics (European Commission 2016b). Solidarity Cities’ stated aim is to “constitute the framework under which all cities’ actions and initiatives [on refugee and migrant policy] are presented, highlighting the political leadership of cities in addressing this challenge” (Solidarity Cities 2019a). Solidarity Cities is predicated on the recognition that cities are frequent destination and transit points for new refugees in Europe and is focused on local government cooperation on refugee issues (Solidarity Cities 2019b). Solidarity Cities exists under the auspices of the EUROCITIES network, an association of European cities that is closely associated with and funded by the European Commission (EUROCITIES 2016, 2).

Solidarity Cities is concentrates activity around information, mutual assistance, and advocacy. Information sharing and mutual assistance in Solidarity Cities has taken the form of workshop, conference, and site visits for city leaders and local stakeholders, focused on issues of refugee management and integration, such as refugee integration

# The Emergent Role of Cities as Actors in International Relations

Written by Salome Gongadze

policy, processing site maintenance, and child education programming (Solidarity Cities 2019b). The network has also commissioned research reports in cooperation with the parent EUROCITIES network that outline the experiences of cities with the influx of refugees (EUROCITIES 2016, 2-19; EUROCITIES 2017, 2-19).

Solidarity Cities' advocacy work has both a lobbying and an activist function. Its lobbying focuses on petitioning the EU for funding and other support to reflect the disproportionate impact that the influx of asylum seekers has had on cities. The 2015 Statement on Asylum in Cities pushes for 'structural solutions' to the refugee issue, more funding for local integration programs, 'a sharing of responsibility and solidarity', and a greater voice for cities in developing European asylum laws (Solidarity Cities 2015). Its activist function focuses on making political statements about the need for a humanitarian response to the so-called refugee crisis and the need to promote cities within European and international policy dialogues on refugee issues. Solidarity Cities produced an open letter for the 2016 UN World Refugee Day calling for an emphasis on 'solidarity, humanity and dignity' in solutions to global human displacement issues and a rejection of the 'nationalistic, isolationist and at times xenophobic undertone to some debates' (Solidarity Cities 2016).

## *United Cities and Local Governments – migration action*

The final initiative discussed will focus on the migration-related activities of the United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG) network. UCLG is a transnational city network founded in 2004 and dedicated to being a 'the united voice and world advocate of democratic local self-government, [and] promoting its values, objectives and interests, through cooperation between local governments, and within the wider international community' (UCLG 2019a). It is composed of seven regional sub-sections and one section dedicated to metropolitan areas and very large cities (UCLG 2019c). UCLG is governed by a five-member co-presidency and an executive bureau (ibid.).

UCLG organizes all migration work under an umbrella project called #Cities4Migration, which itself is delivered in partnership with UN-Habitat and the International Centre for Migration Policy Development (ICMPD).<sup>[7]</sup> Like the other networks discussed, conferences and summits make up a major component of its activities. One major summit was 2017 Global Conference on Cities and Migration, hosted by UCLG, UN-Habitat, and ICMPD. This summit resulted in the drafting and signing of the Mechelen Declaration on Cities and Migration. The intent of this declaration was to petition the UN, which was in the process of drafting the Global Compact on Migration and Refugees, to recognize within this compact the particular impact of human displacement on cities and to include cities as partners in drafting of national and supranational migration policy (Mechelen Declaration 2017, Swiney and Foster 2019).<sup>[8]</sup> It is worth noting that, whilst this declaration takes a new step in making a claim for city inclusion in a UN compact, it does not challenge the status quo in terms of the ultimate role of states to adjudicate on migration policy, stating explicitly that 'migration governance is a State's sovereign prerogative' (Mechelen Declaration 2017).

## Discussion

In this section, I will discuss my findings in relation to the three research questions I identified in part two. I will argue that, cities do behave as actors in contemporary world politics because cities are pursuing objectives on issues and in forums that concern international relations. The predominant tools and strategies used by city actors to achieve IR-related objectives are mimicking international diplomatic practices, organizing in transnational networks, and engaging with IOs and other international actors. With respect to substance and quality of city actions, I will argue that while these initiatives are largely not *more* substantive than comparable state-to-state initiatives, they offer valuable commitment-signalling platforms, capacity-building opportunities, and the chance for cities to speak with a louder collective voice to the international community.

### *Do cities behave as actors in contemporary world politics?*

The case studies show that cities do behave as actors in contemporary world politics. Earlier, I stated that cities could be deemed actors if there is 'evidence of city governments 'acting' – pursuing stated or implicit objectives – on issues and in forums that concern international relations'. I argue that the evidence *has* indeed shown that cities are pursuing objectives on issues and in forums that concern international relations, establishing cities as actors. City



# The Emergent Role of Cities as Actors in International Relations

Written by Salome Gongadze

governments have formed relationships with other cities across borders and international institutions in order to pursue objectives related to both climate change and migration action.

Cities in the C20 and Global Covenant of Mayors for Climate and Energy networks have made collective compacts to develop strategies for emissions reduction and climate change resilience, which if fully implemented, have the potential to develop into a parallel urban climate change governance regime alongside national commitments in the Paris Climate Accords. The Solidarity Cities and United Cities and Local Governments networks have allowed some cities to speak collectively and make more authoritative demands for the inclusion of urban voices and interests in international and regional migration governance regimes and to engage in the international politics of refugee issues.

*What are the predominant tools and strategies used by cities to achieve IR-related objectives?*

There are four predominant tools and strategies used by cities that are behaving as international actors. These strategies include cities mimicking international diplomatic practices, organizing in transnational networks, and engaging with IOs and other international actors.

## *Mimicking international diplomatic practices*

One way in which cities take on actor roles and acts on IR-related objectives is by borrowing from a playbook of strategies and rituals long-practiced by states in international relations. One example of this is the widespread practice of 'summitry' – the practice of holding large international multi-stakeholder conferences and meetings to discuss transnational issues, set agendas, and produce declarations (Dunn 1996, 3). David Dunn notes that summitry has been practiced in international politics since at least the middle ages, but that the twentieth century saw an unprecedented expansion of the summit as a form of formalized interaction (ibid.) Other scholars have commented upon the expansion of summitry by non-state actors beyond the traditional meetings of major heads of state as indicators of the disaggregation of states and the growth of global civil society (Pianta 2001, 16; Death 2011, 2).

All but one of the city initiatives and networks profiled feature summits, conferences, and workshops as components of their work. These summits include not only urban leaders but also representatives from international organizations, civil society, and business stakeholders. Some of these summits have also featured other common diplomatic practices such as the signing of declarations, such as the Mechelen Declaration on migration signed at 2017 Global Conference on Cities and Migration and the declaration signed at the 2005 World Cities Leadership Climate Change Summit to found the C40 Cities group. Copying established diplomatic practices like summits and declarations helps lend credibility to city engagement in IR, as well as offering position-signalling and networking benefits.

## *Organizing in transnational networks*

The second strategy used by cities is that of the transnational network organization model. Scholars, both inside the 'cities and IR' literature in and broader IR scholarship, have studied the rise of the transnational network as a mode of global governance (Slaughter 2005, 21; Boutelegier 2013, 20; Acuto and Rayner 2016, 1148; Eilstrup-Sangiovanni 2016, 3). A transnational network is a form of organization in which actors are associated with one another in a series of horizontal relationships (Eilstrup-Sangiovanni 2016, 3). The growth of transnational networks is described as an "attempt to reintegrate dispersed governance capacities" of the wide-range of international actors in contemporary international relations in order "to unite the resources of governments, NGOs, and private actors in pursuit of shared goals" (ibid).

Transnational networks serve many purposes, including fostering cooperation, sharing information, funding research, and orchestrating activism (Boutelegier 2013, 20). Slaughter emphasizes the transformative potential of global governance through transnational networks, praising their flexibility, efficiency, and capacity to solve the largely global problems of the twenty-first century (2005, 21). These individual initiatives can themselves be networks of city actors unified by a governing body but also parts of larger issue networks around climate change and migration. For example, the Solidarity Cities network is a network of cities interested in dialogue and cooperation on refugee issues,

# The Emergent Role of Cities as Actors in International Relations

Written by Salome Gongadze

which itself is a part of a larger network of migration-related organizations around the European Union. Joining or forming transnational networks allows cities to mimic the behaviour of other actors in IR and take advantage of the benefits of the network organization model. These networks allow cities to cooperate horizontally on policy decisions like emissions reduction without having to involve nation-states above them.

## *Engagement with IOs and other international actors*

The final, repeatedly used, strategy is that of engagement with existing IOs and other significant international actors. All the initiatives profiled have some relationship to existing international organizations and major NGOS, either through formal partnerships, funding relationships, or joint management of conferences. These organizations include the World Bank, various UN agencies, the World Wildlife Fund, the European Commission, and the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OSCE). Contact with IOs and other major actors indicates a degree of institutional acceptance and encouragement for more room for cities in international politics – the United Nations has been especially interested in including cities in its activities and partnering with city initiatives (Acuto 2017). Engagement with IOs has helped plug cities into larger global governance conversations and add international legitimacy to city action.

## *If cities are actors, how substantive have their actions been?*

Cities can certainly be considered actors in IR based on my analysis, but whether they can be considered *substantive* actors is less clear and more dependent on what 'substantive action' is understood as. I have established earlier in this text that I ask about substance because I am interested in understanding not only if cities are making claims to authority in IR, but also if they are taking action that is more than merely symbolic. As defined earlier, a substantive actor is one that engages in meaningful action that contributes to a given initiative's larger goals. I will argue that these actions have been substantive, but that this substance lies in the ways in which the networks allow cities to signal their commitments on issues and share ideas and best practices.

On one hand, it is possible to argue that the 'mainstream' international policy character of these city initiatives make action often un-substantive and not particularly distinct from already-existing international engagement on the same issue areas. As discussed earlier, the initiatives profiled in the case studies are heavily integrated into traditional global governance institutions like the UN, not independent of them. On one hand, this integration lends international credibility to cities as actors and provides them with access to established IR institutions. On the other hand, this also means that city actor actions will match the institutional character and path dependencies of these organizations – and can be subject to the same criticisms of they face (Acuto and Rayner 2016, 1158).

This leads to a situation where new city voices are brought to the table, but produce actions that do not depart substantially from the existing cacophony of declarations, summits, strategic partnerships, and high-level dialogues already happening through mainstream global governance institutions on climate change and migration. Certainly, much has been written about the failings of contemporary global governance regimes to make meaningful progress on pressing global issues (Wilkinson 2002, 3; Hale et al 2013, 2). With their emphasis on dialogues and reliance on largely non-binding commitments, it can be argued that these city action initiatives fall victim to the same problems.

On the other hand, scholars have pointed out that mainstream practices like 'summit theatre' and network membership do not necessarily denote ineffectiveness or lack of substance (Death 2011, 2; Thakur & Weiss 2010, 15; Lee and Koski 2014, 476). Carl Death argues that summits, especially in the climate change space, play important "symbolic, performative and theatrical roles" in "persuading global audiences that political elites are serious about issues such as sustainable development or climate change" (Death 2011, 2). In a study of the C40 climate network, Lee and Koski try to answer why cities would join the C40 or other networked action organizations if they can arguably take the same steps on climate change without being members (2014, 476-477). They suggest network membership serves to demonstrate commitment to constituents and provide access to resources and support from other network members. Their research also finds that membership to the C40 "contributes significantly and substantively to the likelihood that a city addresses climate change" and that transnational climate networks also generate significant positive spillovers on climate awareness through their existence (ibid., 489).

# The Emergent Role of Cities as Actors in International Relations

Written by Salome Gongadze

This debate illustrates two competing frameworks for assessing the substance and quality of a given global governance initiative – one which judges an initiative on its ability to produce binding and actionable outputs (see Cléménçon 2016, 24 for this kind of analysis) and one that considers the impact of less tangible benefits like policy spillover effects, signalling, and the development of group identity through cooperation (see Death 2011, 2). The latter framework is more appropriate for analysing city activities within the limitations of the contemporary international environment. Judgements of the substance of such initiatives must also take into consideration the activities of these networks that aim not necessarily to change some aspect of international politics but to build spaces of collaboration and idea exchange among network members. It has been shown that all these initiatives place emphasis on capacity building to help cities do their part in solving global problems like climate change and refugee integration.

Thus, I argue that the city networks outlined here have taken actions that are substantive to the limited standards of contemporary global governance regimes. Their substance lies less in their ability to make binding commitments, which very few state-to-state initiatives have ever done, and thus is inappropriate to be used as a benchmark for denoting an action ‘substantive’ in this context. Substance in the context of city action lies in commitment-signalling, capacity-building opportunities, and the chance to speak with a louder collective voice to the international community.

For example, the Global Covenant of Mayors for Climate and Energy functions similarly to the Paris Climate Accords, which both rely on non-binding commitments towards emissions reduction (Brun 2015, 116). Though the Paris Accords have been criticized for a lack of legally binding commitments (Cléménçon 2016, 24) they have also been celebrated for the important signal that their embrace by all state parties sent. The Global Covenant is therefore not necessarily *more* substantive than the Paris deal, but the involvement of cities is significant because cities committing to climate reduction independently may lead to faster action on emissions reduction. It may also help keep countries which have only one foot in the Paris deal – namely the United States, which has announced its intent to exit the deal but not formally done so (Holder 2018) – still partially involved through American cities’ participation in the C40 Cities and Global Covenant networks.

Solidarity Cities and the United Cities and Local Governments similarly cannot do much to affect governments’ final prerogative over migration policy and are thus about as ‘substantive’ as refugee-focused NGOs or the UN Refugee Agency. However, they provide platforms for signalling city governments’ stances on migration issues, a stronger collective base for lobbying, and inter-network solidarity and support for cities coping with the challenges of managing large population inflows.

## Conclusion

It may yet be too early to tell if ‘cities can save the world’, but it is clear that cities are behaving as actors in world politics and require scholarly attention (Barber 2013b, 5). This project has investigated city engagement in international issues by studying four case studies of organized transnational networks of cities – C40 Cities, the Global Covenant of Mayors for Climate and Energy, Solidarity Cities, and United Cities and Local Governments. It has been found that cities are indeed behaving as actors in world politics, as they are forming formal partnerships with other cities across borders and international institutions to pursue objectives related to both climate change and migration action. Cities are mimicking international diplomatic practices, organizing in transnational networks, and engaging with IOs.

Whilst these initiatives are largely not *more* substantive than comparable state-to-state initiatives, they allow cities to signal their commitments and positions on issues and create spaces to cooperate and share ideas and strategies for emissions reduction and refugee integration. The real innovation in the broader development of international urban empowerment is not necessarily in the content of its action but in the fact that it is happening at all – there is no defined role for cities in the international arena, so their entering into cooperative relationships with cities in other countries is a significant step in and of itself.

The project has contributed to both the niche ‘cities and IR’ international relations subfield and broader international relations scholarship in several ways. Firstly, it has contributed to the ‘cities and IR’ scholarship by conducting a

# The Emergent Role of Cities as Actors in International Relations

Written by Salome Gongadze

targeted investigation into how cities behave as actors in IR. I have also broadened the larger evidence base for international urban engagement by offering a look at city action on migration, which does not appear to have been studied before in this field. This study has also contributed to International Relations studies more broadly by offering further evidence that a state-centric approach to understanding world politics is inappropriate, given the multitude of actors interacting on the international arena. I have shown that other political units – not just nation states and private ‘non-state actors’ – can claim authority in world politics and form collaborative relationships with one another and with existing international institutions.

This research could have benefited from access to a more diverse pool of data, especially in the form of interviews with individuals involved in city networks in order to get a better picture of how these networks function ‘on the ground’. Due to time and resource constraints this data was not possible to gather for this study, but interview data and other information that sheds light on day-to-day workings and insider dynamics should be included in further research on this topic. The study of the emergent phenomenon of cities engaging in world politics is an exciting one with a range of possibilities for future research. There is room to investigate any one of these initiatives in more detail, similarly to the way in which Lee & Koski (2014, 476-477) and Bouteligier (2013, 61) have studied the dynamics of the C40 Cities Leadership group. As these initiatives and others like them develop, there will also be room to discuss new questions on topics like which cities participate most heavily in such networks and the responses of national governments and IOs to city engagement.

Kristin Ljungkvist argues that cities taking on newly assertive roles in international affairs is just another development in a long tradition of cities acting as nuclei for innovation and change, writing that ‘cities have long been a place where revolutions begin’ (2014, 52). This study has shed light on a possible new revolution in international affairs begun in the city, one in which cities become notable players in world politics. IR scholarship must consider this development and include cities as actors in world politics.

## Appendix

Table 1: C40 member cities

Africa Cairo, Addis Ababa, Accra, Nairobi, Lagos, Dakar, Cape Town, Durban, Johannesburg, Tshwane, Dar es Salaam Asia Beijing, Chengdu, Dalian, Guangzhou, Nanjing, Shanghai, Shenzhen, Wuhan, Hong Kong, Tokyo, Yokohama, Changwon, Seoul, Jakarta, Istanbul, Dhaka, Bengaluru, Chennai, Jaipur, Mumbai, Kolkata, Mumbai, New Delhi, Amman, Karachi, Dubai, Kuala Lumpur, Singapore, Bangkok, Hanoi, Ho Chi Minh City Europe Copenhagen, Paris, Berlin, Heidelberg, Athens, Milan, Rome, Venice, Amsterdam, Rotterdam, Oslo, Warsaw, Moscow, Barcelona, Stockholm, Basel, London North America Montreal, Toronto, Vancouver, Mexico City, Austin, Boston, Houston, Los Angeles, New Orleans, New York City, Philadelphia, Portland, San Francisco, Seattle, Washington DC South America Buenos Aires, Curitiba, Rio de Janeiro, São Paulo, Salvador, Santiago, Bogotá, Medellín, Quito, Lima, Caracas Australia and Oceania Melbourne, Sydney, Auckland

Source: <https://www.c40.org/cities>.

Given the high number of members of the Global Covenant of Mayors for Climate and Energy, membership data is not offered in this Appendix. Full listings of members can be found online at <https://www.globalcovenantofmayors.org/cities/>.

Table 2: Signatories to the Mechelen Declaration (note some cities are represented by larger associations)

Africa Gaborone, Brazzaville, Tiassalé, Addis Abba, Arua Asia Tehran, Amman Europe Mechelen, Brussels, Athens, Central Union of Municipalities of Greece, Warsaw, Barcelona, United Cities France, Madrid, Network of Associations of Local Authorities of South East Europe North America New York City, Montreal South America São Paulo, Santiago, Curridabat, Upala, Pichincha, Santo Domingo, Australia and Oceania N/A

# The Emergent Role of Cities as Actors in International Relations

Written by Salome Gongadze

Source: <http://citiesofmigration.ca/2016conference/>.

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## Notes:

[1] I use 'migration' as a blanket term to describe the international movement of asylum seekers, refugees, and migrants for the purposes of simplicity.

[2] 'International relations' remains the most common term used to describe politics at the global level despite the

# **The Emergent Role of Cities as Actors in International Relations**

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observation that the ‘-national’ suffix reifies an inaccurate focus on the nation-state (Baylis et al 2017, 2). I will use the terms ‘international relations’ and ‘global politics’ interchangeably to describe global-level political activities.

[3] In the context of this project these two terms (agency and ‘being an actor’) will be used interchangeably, though it is worth noting some scholars treat them as separate concepts (Bierman et al 2009, 38).

[4] This sentence and the one preceding it use material previously submitted in my December 2018 proposal.

[5] Table 1, found in the Appendix, lists all C40 members organized by continent.

[6] A link to the full listing of members can be found in the Appendix.

[7] ICMPD is an NGO founded by the governments of Austria and Switzerland in 1993 to develop multilateral cooperation on migration policy in a European context (ICMPD 2019).

[8] A list of signatories to the Mechelen Declaration can be found in the Appendix.

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