

: Global Governance Spotlight

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City-centred global governance in times of radical uncertainty

Achim Wennmann

Cities are ever more important in an era of radical uncertainty in which multiple risk factors converge into acute and recurring crises and systemic breakdowns. This article underlines the importance of problem-solving mechanisms in cities to cushion the effects from governance system failure. By prioritising instruments such as problem driven iterative adaptation (PDIA), collective action or platforms, cities can solve problem faster and shape the political systems relevant for the protection against future risk.

Introduction

Speeches at every global gathering in recent years have emphasized that we are living in an era of radical uncertainty. The factors shaping this era are manifold – pandemics and new diseases, population growth, displacement, urbanization, climate change, environmental degradation, geopolitical shifts, technological innovation, rising inequalities and exclusion, just to name a few. When they converge, ever more frequent, widespread, and intense crises become the norm, posing a threat to governance capacity at every level. The era is ‘radical’ because change is fast and happens at scale; it is ‘uncertain’ because present instruments and frameworks for understanding to manage this change are either inadequate or non-existing. This situation emphasizes the importance of capabilities for problem solving and adapting systems, especially in the territories where most of humanity now lives – in cities.

The strategic context for global governance

Advances in scientific research over the last two decades have shaped a solid evidence base about the world of today and tomorrow which in turn is a foundation for anticipatory action and diplomacy. From the data of the International Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) or projections of global population figures, or scenarios of the impact of quantum computing on societies and economies, this research underlines that the current global governance arrangements, including the UN, can only be one of multiple instruments to assure global peace and security. The strategic outlook for global governance points to a world that is decidedly less state-centric. The power of global firms in the tech, extractive, energy or agricultural sectors or the spread of social movements illustrate the diffusion of power and agency beyond states and invites reflection about the additional layers of collective security and cooperation necessary to complement the UN system.

This Spotlight argues that problem solving with a focus on cities could become its own multilateral mechanism to cushion the effects from governance system failure. The focus is on problem solving, because to counter the impact of declining global commons there is a need for more short and medium term problem solving and at a scale that current approaches are ill equipped to deliver.

Cities in a multiplex world

The current international system builds on the history of states agreeing to binding relationships by regulating warfare and collaboration on global commons challenges. Although the 1648 Treaty of Westphalia provided the foundation for the current state centric order, the fact is that states have never monopolised “international” relations if one considers the history of corporations, social movements and cities. Amitav Archarya described the current emerging order as a “multiplex world” referring to an era of more fragmented global governance characterized by an ever-increasing diffusion of power between state, private sector and societal actors. A multiplex world is like a multiplex cinema—one that “gives its audience a choice of various movies, actors, directors, and plots all under the same roof” (Archarya 2017). This new world order challenges hierarchical, mandate-driven institutions and emphasises the strategic relevance of network politics.

Cities are part of this multiplex world. Research suggests that there are currently more than 300 city networks, and these alliances increasingly indicate how cities project influence in an increasingly urban world (Acuto & Leffel 2021). Cities are important because first and foremost this is where people live. More than 50 per cent of the world’s population now living in urban areas and this figure will rise to 68 per cent by 2050 (United Nations 2018). Any policy, programme and initiative that claims to be “people centred” cannot therefore circumnavigate cities. Cities are also important politically, both as sources of identity, economic activity and hubs of innovation. The fact that the world is increasingly urban, means that people identify with the city in addition to, or instead of, the state or nation. Cities therefore structure peoples’ belonging, and the politics they engage with, are exposed to, or care for. Therefore, cities are mostly their own distinct political universe that have their own mode of governance and priority settings about what gets done through politics, for whom, and by whom.

If we accept cities as distinct political units then we can offer an outlook on the challenge of scale for a workable city-centred multilateralism. The UN projects that by 2030, there will be 43 megacities with more than 10 million inhabitants, 66 cities that count between 5 and 10 million inhabitants, 597 cities with 1 to 5 million inhabitants, and 710 cities will have between 500,000 and 1 million inhabitants, and 827 cities with populations between 300,000 and 500,000 (United Nations 2019). Suppose we consider this landscape as a collection of distinct political spaces dotted around the world, we are looking at a total of 2,243 “urban” political entities. This figure dwarfs the

number of state entities – a mere 193 – that form the membership of the UN. If we accept control over population and territory as a key marker of political authority, we have to also ask the question why the 71 UN member states with less than 5 million population should have more say in global governance than the 109 cities with more than 5 million inhabitants. The prospect of Mumbai with 42 million inhabitants by 2050, Kinshasa with 35 million, and Karachi with 32 million (Hoornweg & Pope 2016) illustrate the question of representation in global governance and of whose voice counts in defining priorities for action and associated resource allocations.

Adding an additional layer of complexity is the heterogeneity of cities that often translates into an ‘urban dilemma’. This is a phenomenon whereby cities are “a force for unparalleled development on the one hand, and a risk for insecurity amongst the urban poor on the other” (Muggah 2012). It is the characteristic of the propinquity of cities – the state of people being close to someone or something – that defines the reality and complexity of many rapidly growing cities. The abundance of people living in sometimes extremely constricted urban spaces offer opportunities for rent seeking and distribution that are unique to the urban context. Like within states, this dilemma translates itself in the city into a fragmented landscape of authority, placing formal authorities next to several de-facto power holders that govern in conditions of “fragmented sovereignty”. This concept captured the reality of many cities (and states) that authority over populations, territory, or markets is shared, a phenomenon that is also described as “hybrid political orders” or “limited statehood”.

Instruments for city-centred multilateralism

In the face of the characteristics of cities noted above, a city-centred multilateralism needs to be fit for purpose to solve problems in extremely heterogeneous environments marked by fragmented authority. This situation requires competences and capacities to work with all actors necessary to solve problem in cities, including both formal city authorities as well as the many de-facto authorities. The logical next question is about the ‘how’ – or ‘how do we solve problems so that the process translates into an additional layer of insurance for peace and security in the city and that works despite complexity? Pointers for a response include instruments such as problem driven, iterative adaptation (PDIA), collective action, or platforms.

The first instrument for city-centred multilateralism emphasizes the role of solving problems over

finding solution. This subtle difference goes beyond semantics and builds on decades of learning from international development or state building support. Much of the state-centred multilateralism delivers programmes through an implementation perspective where global norms are jointly agreed upon and then translated into actions that UN member states are supposed to implement. The rationale behind such so-called ‘solution- and leader-driven change’ (SLDC) is that “reforms are introduced through a disciplined, formal project process: solutions are fully identified up-front and are the focus of change; the reform is fully planned out at the start and implemented as planned; a champion drives the process; and a ... best practice solution is produced” (Andrews 2015). The problem is that in an era in which problems are growing faster than solutions, this line of working is too slow and too unresponsive to complexity, opening the risk of producing inadequate responses too late to be meaningful. SLDC stands in contrast to ‘problem driven, iterative adaptation’ (PDIA) which is an approach by which “reforms are introduced through an iterative process more reflective of ‘muddling through’: change is motivated by a problem, not a solution; the reform content emerges through a process of experimentation and trial and error; with multiple agents playing different leadership roles; producing a mixed-form hybrid that is fitted to the peculiar context.” Such an approach defines the necessary partnerships for change based on those actors with the de-facto power to resolve the problem and is particular apt to navigate the complex and mostly resource-poor operations environments. Over a decade of practical applications of PDIA have made this approach become a standard instrument for development assistance, yet it could be more widely applied, including in cities under stress of climate change impact and insecurity.

The second instrument for city-centred multilateralism emphasises reliance on collective action, rather than institutions. Social innovation research has shown that support to a particular institution can be effective in creating an isolated impact, but it is of limited utility when it comes to generating broader impacts at scale in an interdependent world marked by complex relationships. Isolated impact approaches are oriented toward “finding and funding a solution embodied within a single organization, combined with the hope that the most effective organizations will grow or replicate to extend their impact more widely” (Kania and Kramer 2011). This single organization can be a state, a government department or entity, or a specific private service provider. The case for collective impact approaches rest on the systemic origins of radical uncertainty and the fact that “no single organization is responsible for any major social problem, nor can any single organiza-

tion cure it.” Collective impact research therefore suggests that institution-centred modes of action might be too limited to work in complex environments – such as cities – and mechanisms that nurture collective action by multiple actors will be required.

Translating collective action into practice means prioritizing funding for its functional components. This includes the development of “a common agenda, shared measurement systems, mutually reinforcing activities, continuous communication, and backbone support organizations” (Ibid.). Research also emphasizes the importance of nurturing a shared purpose, open organizational designs, and network strategies, as well as diplomatic competences that mediate between all actors involved and keep the process focused on achieving the shared purpose (Kornberger 2022). Collective action approaches therefore require investment in operational designs that include interface spaces (that enable communication between a diverse set of actors), architectures for participation (that regulate divisions of labour and who participates where and when in the process), and feedback loops (that nurture learning and identify needs for adjusting the process). What makes these efforts different from state-led processes is the focus on who holds de-facto power for change-making rather than who has the formal mandate for it. By focusing on de-facto power to get things done, collective action approached can work across formal and informal political spaces.

The final instrument for city-centred multilateralism are platforms that serve to coordinate and help in the operations of collective action processes. In business, platforms evolved from the performance of several well-known firms that have excelled in connecting different communities and facilitating transactions between them. Airbnb, eBay, or Uber are examples of companies that have applied a platform model to their business strategies. Economists have described business platforms as responses to opportunities from working within multi-sided markets. Platforms position themselves in-between different markets or different communities of buyers and sellers. They provide a common physical or virtual place to facilitate interaction between market participants or community members and minimize the transaction costs between them.

In a global diplomatic hub like Geneva, a platform approach has been applied by Switzerland as part of its host state functions for the United Nations Office at Geneva – the European headquarters of the UN. While traditionally supporting the “hardware” of buildings, conference centres and other infrastructure, it has increasingly supported the “software” of platforms, including cross-cutting

networks that leverage knowledge to convene and innovate across institutions and sectors. Platforms links formal UN processes to a broader set of stakeholders, including for instance through the Geneva Cities Hub that brings the voice of cities into different multilateral negotiations. Such a platform approach could become an engine for cross-cutting collaboration in cities and facilitate the connections between sources of demand, material capacities, practical know-how and investment for problem solving. Platforms therefore hold significant potential as an instrument for partnership brokerage across institutions and sectors, yet they require the necessary local knowledge and political aptitude to do so with formal and informal actors. This ability of platforms to work in the hybrid political order of cities will be critical for city-centred multilateralism in times of radical uncertainty.

Author

Dr Achim Wennmann | Director for Strategic Partnerships of the Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies, where he is also a Lecturer and Senior Researcher. A longer version of this paper is forthcoming under the title *Pragmatic Peacebuilding for Climate Change Adaptation in Cities* (USIP Peaceworks, 2023).

Other publications on peace in cities can be found: <https://www.graduateinstitute.ch/academic-departments/faculty/achim-wennmann>.

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