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Can Cities Fix a Post-Pandemic World Order? ^[1]

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The coronavirus crisis sweeping the globe is exactly the type of emergency that the multilateral system, set up by the United States and its allies after World War II, was created to address. Instead, international cooperation has been straining to meet the moment: A meeting of G-7 foreign ministers ended in acrimony when the United States insisted the group call the novel coronavirus the “Wuhan virus,” a phrase widely seen as inflammatory; the G-20 took weeks to agree on suspending debt payments from poor countries, even as it is clear they are the most vulnerable to the catastrophe; and many countries, especially early on, simply failed to heed the guidance of the World Health Organization, which has also been accused of acting slowly and protecting China—and for which U.S. President Donald Trump

has now frozen American funding.

By contrast, mayors and governors have been taking decisive action, working around the clock on the front lines to save the lives of their residents, even as many national governments dawdled or refused. Cities have been relying on networks and relationships that span the globe to share experiences, knowledge, and equipment in the scramble to act fast and protect their citizens. Their global collaboration adds more urgency to a question that has been gaining momentum in recent years: Can city diplomacy help salvage the multilateral system? The pragmatism and innovation of local leaders, and their easy exchange of solutions, could be just the boost the international system needs—if nation-states will allow it.

Even before the pandemic, there were signs that cities' relationships with the United Nations and its agencies, the World Bank and regional development banks, and other multilateral bodies needed attention. The world has been rapidly urbanizing: By 2050, two-thirds of the world's population will likely live in cities, adding more than 2.5 billion people to their existing base. More than 80 percent of the world's GDP is already generated in metropolitan areas. City leadership is thus becoming fundamental to solving many of the world's toughest problems, going far beyond pandemic responses to other global challenges such as climate change, migration, and inequality.

These are the very issues that preoccupy the time, energy, and resources of the world's multilateral diplomats, but to date, cities have had little to no official role in their negotiations and agreements. The traditional multilateral system was set up by and for national governments. Local leaders are outside the circle as the world develops its so-called collective response, despite being the ones who come face to face with the implications, and solutions, for real people and communities.

The coronavirus pandemic illustrates the challenge well. U.S. states and cities set up their own systems to test for the virus, and in the absence of national or international procurement management, they have scrambled, in competition with each other and other localities around the world, to procure N95 masks, surgical gowns, and hand sanitizer.

At the same time, global cities are banding together to fill the gap in global cooperation. On March 27, Mayor Eric Garcetti of Los Angeles, using his position as chair of C40 Cities, a long-established network of megacities fighting climate change, convened a virtual assembly of 45 mayors from every region of the world. The mayors of Seoul and Milan shared their lessons and experiences, and mayors from London, Johannesburg, Jakarta, Kolkata and dozens more chimed in. Perhaps the most important lesson was conveyed by mayors in the throes of their response to those not yet hit: Act much more quickly and aggressively than you think you need to. A separate WhatsApp group of city staff started by Los Angeles quickly emerged as a forum to share advice on solving problems such as the spread of illness among health care workers and upticks in domestic violence. The mayor of Berlin organized a coronavirus response call with Berlin's partner cities around the world in which mayors discussed the right metrics for reopening and how to support small businesses. It is hard to imagine such open, frank conversations among national leaders, given the inward focus of many today.

Such networks of cities have been growing in scale and impact. In normal times, the C40's nearly 100 megacities are collectively focused on fighting the climate crisis and bending the curve of global greenhouse gas emissions, recognizing that cities consume over 67 percent of the world's energy and emit 70 percent of its carbon dioxide emissions. The members of the

network are committed to peaking emissions by 2020—Los Angeles and some 30 other cities have already done so—and to halving emissions by 2030, with interventions in the urban sectors where emissions are highest: buildings, transport, waste, and energy. By 2030, these commitments could deliver significant annual emissions reductions at a time when national commitments are flagging.

As governments begin to address the economic slump that the virus response has wrought, it will be these very cities that will fight hardest to ensure that a green and equitable recovery becomes the norm. The mayor of Milan is chairing a global task force under the auspices of C40 to help cities plan for just that. For its own part, Milan has already announced an ambitious plan to expand walking and cycling space across 22 miles of streets in the city center to reduce car use. Los Angeles is devising strategies to ensure that the homeless population that moved to emergency shelters does not return to the streets after the pandemic. Cities are exploring a variety of proposals that put equity and sustainability at the heart of rebuilding the economy.

Some city groupings take a strong political perspective. In December 2019, progressive capital cities in Slovakia, Hungary, the Czech Republic, and Poland—nations that oppose European Union policies on immigration and climate change—came together to create the “Pact of Free Cities.” The message from the mayors to the EU seemed clear: Just deal with us directly.

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The challenge for the EU, and for other multilateral institutions, is how to best leverage the leadership and creative solutions emerging from cities’ pragmatism while continuing to serve the interests of their member states. The pandemic has added new urgency to the widespread agreement that the multilateral system must evolve to be more effective in addressing global challenges, and its toughest skeptics are clamoring ever louder for reform. Supporting and learning from mayors, and inviting their perspective on key global policy decisions, offers a significant opportunity—but requires some reenvisioning of a world order meant to keep the peace among national governments that command militaries and manage global financial markets.

Nascent pathways have begun to link cities into the more formal proceedings of the international system. When all 193 member states of the U.N. General Assembly agreed to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in 2015, the inclusion of a separate goal (SDG 11) that focuses on urban areas signaled an acknowledgement by national governments of the importance of cities to their development priorities.

City leaders, however, once familiar with the SDGs, have not confined themselves to the city-specific goal, instead seeing themselves as having responsibility to advance all parts of the agenda. Places as varied as Bristol, England; Helsinki; Kitakyushu, Japan; Los Angeles; Mannheim, Germany; Mexico City; and New York have positioned their city strategies within the SDGs and committed themselves to regularly reporting their local progress to the global community. Repurposing the format of the national reviews that countries voluntarily submit,

this growing movement of cities from around the world has upended the staid annual progress check-ins at the United Nations with their dynamism and innovative solutions.

The United Nations has made other overtures. Secretary-General António Guterres personally attended the C40 mayors' summit in Copenhagen in October 2019, acknowledging the importance of city leadership as “first responders” to the climate emergency and pledging that the U.N. system will do everything it can to support their efforts. His office has also launched the Local2030 initiative, indicating support for local efforts to advance sustainable development. In 2018, the outcomes of a Mayoral Forum hosted by Marrakech, Morocco, inserted a local perspective into the formal deliberations of new U.N. global agreements on migration and refugees.

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Beyond the U.N., in 2017 the mayors of Paris and Buenos Aires jointly launched the Urban 20, a collection of the largest cities from G-20 countries. Now in its third year, the group has developed credibility as an important G-20 affinity group, but it nonetheless has limited prospect, thus far, of influencing the agenda and decisions being made by G-20 heads of state.

While these few examples of emerging intersections are heartening, they also demonstrate that the current relationship of cities to the multilateral system is ad hoc and issue-dependent. With a partial exception of one of the smallest agencies in the U.N. development system—the United Nations Human Settlement Programme, whose focus on improving informal settlements, slums, and housing gives it an urban audience—cities are secondary or nonplayers in global and multilateral policymaking processes.

This especially holds true for financing: Municipalities can access loans from the World Bank and other multilateral development banks only when their national government approves, which is too often a binding constraint, given local politics. Newer multilateral facilities such as the Green Climate Fund are creating structures that allow cities to apply directly, but these have not yet been enough to change long-standing practice; the Green Climate Fund, for example, has not certified one city to receive its money.

City-to-city cooperation and city diplomacy are gaining strength and credibility just as the multilateral system is under severe pressure, poised at a moment of great opportunity on one side and great danger of implosion on the other. Never before has the multilateral system's chief architect, the United States, been so active in undermining it while other nations, including China, aggressively resist its norms and values. And even supporters recognize that major reform is necessary for the bureaucracy to be effective in responding to the problems that the system was designed to address. As the pandemic highlights the real-life implications of global challenges that have grown ever more complex, the expectations for multilateralism have grown both in breadth and responsibility—and the system has struggled to meet them.

The immediate accountability of mayors to their constituents—because their records are visible on the streets of their cities—makes them more action-oriented than national-level politicians and more open to solutions, no matter what their origin. They come to these global

problems less burdened by historical animosities and political baggage. Rivalries among mayors manifest as competition to deliver more and better for their residents. Moreover, their limited role in national security frees them to be more welcoming to diverse types of international cooperation. Even with the promise of more effective problem-solving, however, it will be difficult to convince some nation-states that their city leaders, who may not share their politics, deserve a role in traditional multilateral forums.

But in an era of worldwide political divisions and dissatisfaction with institutional leaders, people's trust in their local governments has remained high. Many mayors continue to benefit from reputations for being pragmatic and focused on solutions rather than bogged down in politics. A slew of current and former mayors parlayed their local records into candidacies for U.S. president in 2019 and 2020, echoing the politics of other countries, where the path from mayor to head of state is well trodden. Today, Mexico, Indonesia, and the United Kingdom are all led by former mayors.

The coronavirus crisis has exposed the fissures and weaknesses in the multilateral system while highlighting the growing strength and dynamism of local leadership. Simple immediate acts could enable a closer relationship beneficial to both cities and the multilateral bodies: naming a special envoy for cities who reports to the U.N. secretary-general, for example, or mandating that mayors be included in national delegations that attend the U.N. General Assembly or G-20 summits. The COP26 climate conference and other now-delayed negotiations could use the extra time to find ways to fully integrate subnational governments. Over the long term, institutionalizing ways to embrace local leaders and their pragmatic, direct, problem-solving perspective might well be the best step the multilateral system could take.
