

# **GENEVA CITIES HUB**

# **2020**

## ANNUAL REPORT



# Introduction

Created in March 2020, the *Geneva Cities Hub* (GCH) celebrated its first anniversary in the midst of a pandemic that has demonstrated beyond doubt that cities play an essential role in the management of global crises.

95 per cent of all reported COVID cases have occurred in cities, which are especially vulnerable to the spread of infectious diseases because of their size, high connectivity, and population density and concentration. Though deeply affected by the pandemic, cities have nevertheless been in the front line of responses to the health and socio-economic crisis, proposing creative local solutions<sup>1</sup> that have helped their citizens and supported recovery.<sup>2</sup>

Because the world is increasingly urbanized, cities are also destined to be at the heart of responses to other global challenges, such as climate change, mass migration movements, disasters, inequalities, etc. Because cities are first responders on the

ground, their voices need to be heard in multilateral fora that debate these global problems and decide how they should be tackled.

GCH was set up to accompany this trend and strengthen the role of cities in international discussions that take place in Geneva. In doing so, it considers a range of questions, notably the creation of a specific international status for cities and the grant of UN consultative status, as well as other possibilities that emerge as its strategy evolves.

This Annual report describes GCH's activities in 2020. Despite COVID health regulations which hampered the activity of the new organization, during its first year GCH was nevertheless able to build solid ties in Geneva's ecosystem, initiate policy discussions and other activities that have strengthened the links between cities and International Geneva, and so position itself in Geneva as a new relevant actor on urban issues.

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<sup>1</sup> *United Nations Policy Brief: COVID-19 in an Urban World*, July 2020, pp. 14, 20, 26.

<sup>2</sup> Resilient Cities Network, *Cities for a Resilient Recovery*.

# The launch of the Geneva Cities Hub

A product of the collaboration between the City of Geneva, the Canton of Geneva and the Swiss Confederation, GCH was created on 2 March 2020. A press conference was held to mark the event. Due to health restrictions, a launch event could not be held until 25 August 2020, when invitees representing States, cities and their networks, international organizations, civil society, and academia participated in an inaugural conference. During this event, several GCH partners emphasized that multilateral institutions need to include cities better. The Swiss Ambassador stressed that cities

have a strategic role to play in developing practical solutions, and notably in the achievement of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). He went on to say that *"their experience, their knowledge on the ground and their capacity to implement are indispensable to efforts to address global challenges. Recognizing this does not diminish the importance of States, but will make the work of the international community more effective and relevant."* Overall, participants welcomed the creation of GCH, declaring it to be a useful addition to International Geneva.



# Initial activities and creation of partnerships

GCH took rapid steps to establish itself as a new organization on urban issues created to support actors in International Geneva. For instance, with UN-Habitat – a natural partner, given its sustainable urbanization mandate – GCH organized three workshops on UN-Habitat's human rights strategy, in collaboration with the Office of the UN High Commissioner on Human Rights, the Geneva Human Rights Platform and other organizations. The recommendations of these workshops will be implemented in 2021.

From the start, GCH made every effort to create partnerships with city networks that work to

strengthen cities' international presence, such as United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG) or the Association des Maires Francophones (AIMF), recognizing that one purpose of GCH is to enable cities to better access the varied institutional resources of International Geneva.

GCH also seized every opportunity to introduce its mission and objectives to diplomatic missions in Geneva, Federal officials in Bern, the Union des Villes Suisses, humanitarian actors in Geneva, and researchers at the Geneva Centre for Security Policy.



**SAMI KANAAN,  
PRESIDENT OF GENEVA CITIES HUB AND  
MAYOR OF GENEVA, 25 AUGUST 2020**

"Cities are at the forefront of the problems of the population, including climate change, social issues, migration and now the pandemic. States play a crucial role but cannot solve these global problems alone. Local governments and their networks are crucial partners to identify the challenges and come up with innovative and concrete solutions anchored in local communities."

# Urban October

In its first year, GCH worked closely with the [United Nations Economic Commission for Europe \(UNECE\)](#), particularly its Committee on Urban Development, Housing and Land Management. UNECE is naturally a close partner of GCH, given its commitment to urban development and its desire to help cities make their views on this subject heard in multilateral fora.

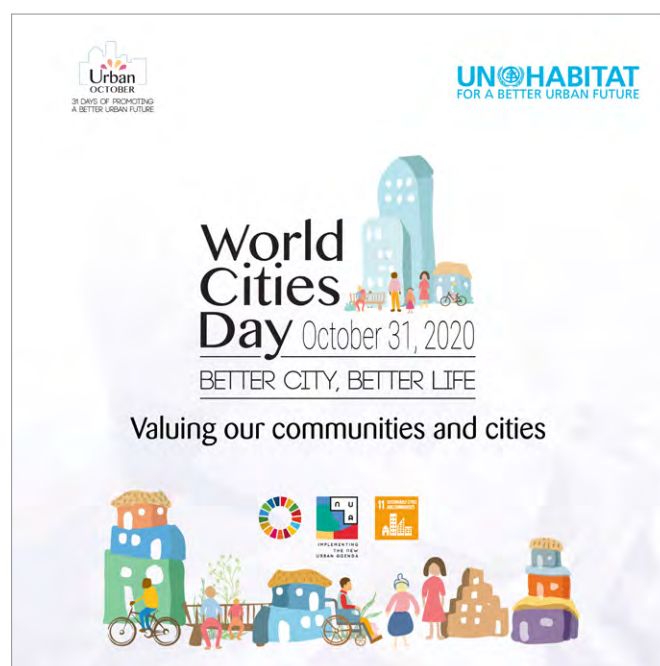
On 5 October 2020, GCH organized with UNECE and UN-Habitat the third '**SDG 11 Day**',<sup>3</sup> titled '*Supporting city actions for a resilient future*'. Opening the event with representatives of the UNECE, UN-Habitat and UCLG, Mr. Sami Kanaan, the President of GCH and Mayor of Geneva, reminded the audience that global challenges require local solutions. He noted that this event was very important because it opened the door to more inclusive forms of multi-lateralism. For the first time, more than thirty city networks were participating in a UN meeting to promote dialogue and cooperation between cities, their networks, and international organizations, civil society actors and academics based in Geneva. In the future, GCH hopes that more representatives of cities and city networks will join the conversation, because it is essential to take their aspirations into account in order to design global policies that are appropriate.

## INTERNATIONAL CITY NETWORKS DIRECTORY



To mark SDG 11 Day, GCH coordinated a publication of an [International City Networks Directory](#), which lists all the networks that participated. The Directory summarizes the vision, objectives and principal projects of each network, and

key contacts. It is a useful tool for strengthening sustainable relations between International Geneva and urban networks on issues relevant to SDG 11 and other matters. In future editions of the Directory, the plan is to gradually add more networks.



3 [Sustainable Development Goal 11.](#)



## Urban October continued

The highlight event of 2020 was the first **Forum of Mayors**, organized by UNECE on 6 October 2020 in association with GCH. Chaired by Mr. Sami Kanaan, President of GCH, the Forum of Mayors enabled local governments in Europe, North America, and Central Asia and the Caucasus to participate formally in a multilateral process (the 81<sup>st</sup> session of UNECE's Committee on Urban Development, Housing and Land management). At this historic Forum, Mayors presented their creative solutions and specific actions they had taken to make cities resilient, focusing particularly on Covid-19 and climate change. During the event, Mrs. Tatiana Valovaya, Director-General of the United Nations' Office at Geneva, emphasized that *"if objectives are global, implementation is local [...] The multilateral system must adapt to this new reality and be more open to all sectors of society, including local and regional governments"*. The Forum culminated in

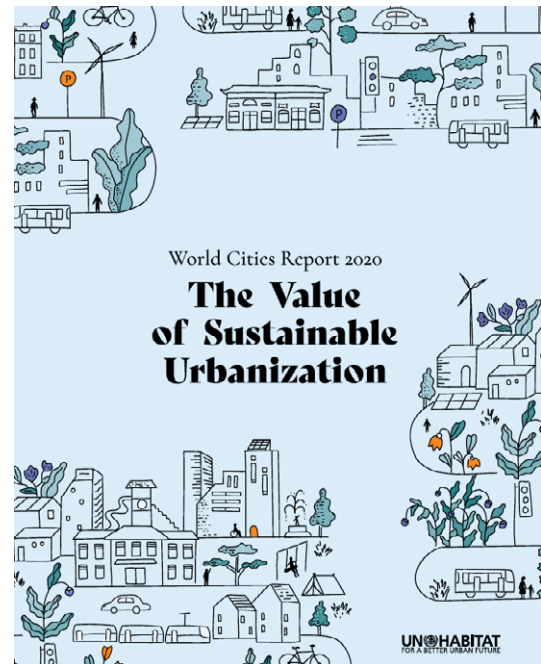
the adoption of the Geneva Declaration of Mayors, under which mayors in the UNECE region undertook to, *inter alia*, strengthen the resilience of their cities, make them greener, guarantee sustainable urban transport and affordable housing for all, and make their cities more equitable and more inclusive.

In coming years, the Forum of Mayors will continue to be a platform for exchange and learning, that presents at international level the vital contributions of local and regional communities in all areas of life, and reports back on the implementation of the Geneva Declaration of Mayors. GCH will continue to work actively with UNECE and other partners to organize this event, which for cities is an important entry point to the multilateral world. The next Forum of Mayors is planned in March 2022 in Geneva.



# Launch of the World Cities Report 2020

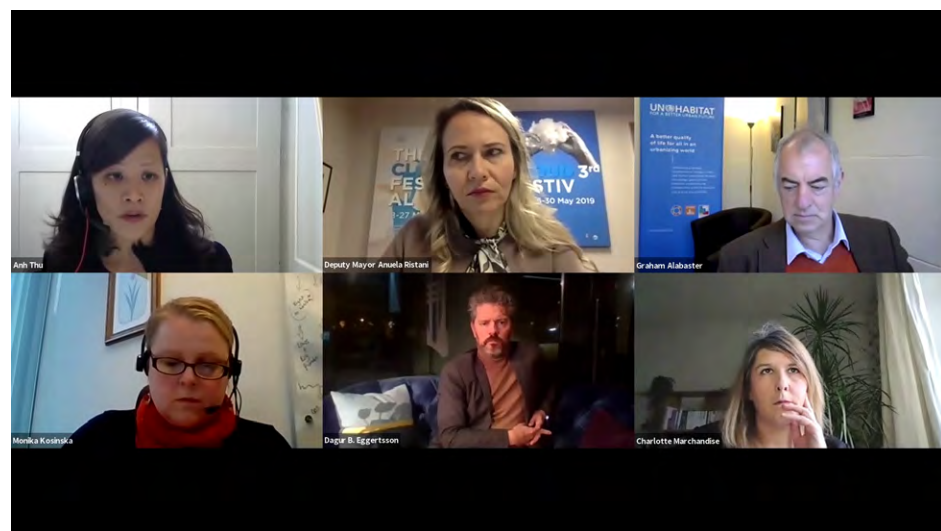
On 3 November 2020, in partnership with UN-Habitat and UNECE, GCH co-organized a virtual event to launch the World Cities Report 2020, focusing on ‘the value of sustainable urbanization’. The event spread key messages of the report, notably that cities are at the heart of the trajectory that leads to sustainable development and that delivering the New Urban Agenda must be a global priority. The panellists approached urbanisation from many of the expert perspectives represented in International Geneva (health, employment, migration, the right to housing, the environment). Moderated by GCH, the event attracted about sixty participants and clearly highlighted urbanization as an issue in Geneva’s ecosystem, thereby helping to create an urban community in the city.



# Urban talk on health in cities

On 3 December 2020, GCH organized an online event on the measures cities have taken to address the Covid-19 pandemic, and their impact on determinants of health (including social, economic and environmental factors that influence health and well-being). The participants included experts representing States, cities, international organizations, NGOs, private companies, universities and other institutions. Among many actions that cities have taken to address the pandemic, the representatives of cities specifically focused on: socio-economic inequalities that the pandemic has revealed; reorganization of space and urban transport to create the '15 Minute City', and community engagement to strengthen resilience and social solidarity across the various basic services that municipalities provide. In general,

responses to the Covid-19 pandemic have had a positive impact on the determinants of health because they have tended to prioritize preventive health approaches in urban environments. One of the panellists underlined in this context that *"health is a political choice"*. Cities have been able to show that, although they have been at its epicentre, they have been able to turn the pandemic into an opportunity to address urban inequalities, demonstrate the benefits of local and multisectoral approaches, and make important political choices that bear on the immediate and future health of their citizens. From the perspective of GCH, this debate helped to establish an urban health community on which GCH can draw in the future to achieve its mission.





# Participation of GCH in events to promote more inclusive forms of multilateralism

On several occasions in 2020 GCH was invited to participate in multilateral events convened to discuss health or refugees' issues. One example was a high level side-event organized by the World Health Organization, France, Finland and Indonesia in the margins of the 75<sup>th</sup> session of the United Nations' General Assembly. The purpose of this meeting was to underline the benefits of preparing for health emergencies, such as the Covid-19 pandemic, with the involvement of all sectors of society and all levels of government. At this event, Mr. Sami Kanaan, President of GCH, reaffirmed that local governments should not only be granted the resources required to implement policies, but should be involved in the international debates that craft solutions to global challenges.

On 9 December 2020, GCH was invited to participate in the closing ceremony of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees' annual Dialogue. The ceremony focused on how the international community can provide better protection and solutions for refugees, displaced persons, and


stateless persons in international emergency situations, such as pandemics. At this event, GCH observed that the needs of cities largely exceed their means and they lack resources, notably to protect and assist refugees and migrants in urban contexts. It also noted that cities, in their role of first responders in emergencies, should play a full part in the development of international policies, since they have knowledge of pragmatic and innovative solutions that can help depoliticise discussions.

GCH will continue to participate in events organized by its partners, notably to help build more inclusive multilateral approaches vis-à-vis cities. While GCH does not claim to represent cities, it seeks to create more space for them in global governance, because their experience on the ground, their ability to adopt local cross-cutting approaches, their powers of innovation, and their proximity to those they govern add considerable value, and above all offer solutions, to multilateral discussions that take place in Geneva.

# Mapping of urban entry points in International Geneva

Cooperation and partnership with other actors in International Geneva are at the heart of GCH's strategy. With this in mind, GCH held a number of informal bilateral discussions during the year. It also began an internal mapping exercise in order to understand the urban dimension of the work of organizations in International Geneva, identify entry points through which cities can engage with global governance, and opportunities for collaboration with GCH. To illustrate, this mapping exercise highlighted the work of the United Nations Office on Disaster Risk Reduction (UNDRR, <https://mcr2030.undrr.org/>), which is helping cities to become more resilient and sustainable between now and

2030, in line with the SDGs and other international instruments, such as the [Sendai framework for disaster risk reduction \(2015–2030\)](#) and the [Paris Agreement](#) on climate change. The mapping also covered the work of the Human Rights Council, notably its [resolution on local government and human rights](#), as well as city networks coordinated by the World Health Organization's (for example, [Healthy Cities](#)). The mapping will be completed gradually, supported by an online tool that enables the public to access the urban work undertaken in the Geneva ecosystem and helps to connect urban experts in Geneva.



## GENEVA CITIES HUB


We support cities and city networks to contribute more effectively to multilateral processes and bodies.  
We also provide a neutral platform to discuss urban issues.

This website showcases the urban dimension of the work of Geneva-based international actors.

### HIGHLIGHTS

EVENT

June 3, 2021 18:00




Geneva Cities Hub Party for the World Bike Day

📍 9 avenue de la Paix, Geneva

EVENT


May 4, 2021 13:00



Inclusive and responsible digitalization in the city

📍

PARTNERS



UNAIDS

📍

# Annual strategic retreat

The GCH's annual strategic retreat was an opportunity to reflect collectively on the role of cities in multilateralism and how that role can be strengthened. In addition to members of the GCH's Board (City and Canton of Geneva) and its strategic partner (Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs, FDFA), invitees included representatives of city networks, cities, States, international organizations, NGOs, universities, and platforms and think tanks.

Participants discussed ways to include cities more fully in multilateral activities, including multilateral intergovernmental processes, for example through the UNECE Forum of Mayors or participation in the UN human rights system. The retreat confirmed that International Geneva needs an organization like GCH to encourage multilateral foras and organizations to go beyond mere dialogue with cities and city networks and to enable them to truly participate in their work. To achieve this goal, GCH needs to identify and multiply entry points into formal and informal multilateral processes and build alliances with specific States, international organizations and cities. It will also need to stimulate thinking on how it can help strengthen

the capacity of cities to follow the work of International Geneva, and offer a neutral space in which all interested parties can discuss the complex issues related to the legal status of cities and the relationship between cities and States. These are all long-term tasks that require development of a robust network of partners, enabling GCH to fulfil its role and make Geneva a key location for discussion of urban issues.

## FROM THE REPORT OF THE GCH'S STRATEGIC RETREAT

Cities are more than a space in which things happen. They have become actors in their own right who have acquired local expertise and found solutions to global challenges. They are essential to the implementation of multilateral programmes, represent the institution of government that is closest to citizens, facilitate the vital efforts of numerous interested parties to resolve complex problems, and have the right to express themselves on matters that concern them.

# Looking ahead to 2021

Though the crisis linked to the Covid-19 pandemic may slow its activity, notably by reducing opportunities to interact with partners and UN fora and organs, GCH has high ambitions for 2021.

Two projects stand out at the start of the year:

- Following-up on the Geneva Declaration of Mayors adopted at the first Forum of Mayors, in close collaboration with UNECE and UN-Habitat.
- Organizing four Geneva Urban Debates (GUDs) on themes that are relevant to cities, in collaboration with a range of partners.



## GCH Management and funding

- GCH is an association under Swiss law and it is governed by a Board on which sit representatives of the organizations that founded it: the City of Geneva and the Canton of Geneva. GCH is supported by the Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs (FDFA), which provides funding and is a strategic partner. GCH receives additional funding for specific projects.
- GCH is managed on a daily basis by two staff, who are responsible for all its current projects, its strategy, administration, and relationship with the Board. The team also includes a communications officer and researchers.



# Conclusion

It was a challenge for GCH but also an opportunity to start out in such a difficult year. GCH successfully inaugurated its mission, notably by organizing and participating in several online meetings, which were easier to convene for a new and relatively unknown organization like GCH and also facilitated the participation of actors from outside Geneva. In addition, GCH was able to make contact with several actors in International Geneva, to learn more about the urban dimension of their work, and forge connections between them to build a community of urban experts in Geneva and foster synergies between various organisations. Further, GCH identified entry points through which cities could become more fully included in multilateral-

ism. It will continue to collaborate with UNECE and UN-Habitat, notably on the SDG 11 Day, the Forum of Mayors, and follow-up to the Geneva Declaration of Mayors that was adopted in October 2020. GCH will invest as well in its partnerships with other actors, such as the UN High Commissioner for Refugees and the World Health Organization. In the months ahead, GCH will continue to explore, alert to new opportunities for collaboration and entry points for cities into Geneva-based intergovernmental institutions. It will also pursue informal contacts with the aim of building a wide and robust network of partners and establishing itself sustainably in Geneva as an organization of reference on urban issues.



**TATIANA VALOVAYA,  
DIRECTOR-GENERAL OF THE UNITED NATIONS  
OFFICE AT GENEVA, 25 AUGUST 2020**

“Modern multilateralism must be inclusive. New actors, including cities, have a key role to play. When we make decisions, we need to consult and communicate with cities. In this sense the Geneva Cities Hub can contribute to modern, inclusive multilateralism.”



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