

GENEVA CITIES HUB

2021

ANNUAL REPORT



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Introduction

During 2021, the Geneva Cities Hub (GCH) pursued its mission, to strengthen the role that cities and local and regional governments (LRGs) play in international discussions in Geneva. In the last two years, GCH has become a relevant actor on urban issues, adding value to Geneva's ecosystem while developing its own niche.

Despite the global pandemic, which has continued to disrupt multilateral diplomacy in Geneva and elsewhere, GCH participated in and organized a range of virtual, hybrid or in person events, thereby strengthening its role as a platform, as well as its presence and connections in and beyond Geneva, notably with city networks such as United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG), Local Governments for

Sustainability (ICLEI) and the Association Internationale des Maires Francophones (AIMF, International Association of Francophone Mayors). During its second year of activity, GCH focused on its principal areas of work: bringing local and international actors together around events that raise the profile of urban issues in International Geneva; working with UNECE and UN-Habitat on the Forum of Mayors; using quiet diplomacy to think about how cities might participate more widely in multilateral processes; and mapping the urban work of multilateral actors in Geneva.

Last but not least, GCH successfully strengthened its institutional structure, staffing, and finances, thus giving itself the means to carry out its mission.



A. Geneva Urban Debates and City Diplomacy events

During the year, in association with UN-Habitat, GCH launched its flagship events: the **Geneva Urban Debates (GUDs)**. GUDs highlight the contributions cities make to tackling major challenges that are discussed in International Geneva. They underline that cities are able to find local solutions to global problems by adopting multi-stakeholder approaches. The four GUDs in 2021 addressed: water and sanitation (March), Accelerating progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (June), Strengthening cities' economic and financial recovery (June), and Human rights (October). Each of these events increased awareness and knowledge of urban challenges and good practices in a specific policy area, brought urban actors to the attention of Geneva's international community, and demonstrated the value of partnerships between cities and international organizations. To illustrate, recognizing how much the Covid-19 pandemic has harmed municipal budgets, international organizations shared instruments that cities can use to revive their economies and increase their resilience when future crises occur.

In parallel, GCH initiated a new series on **city diplomacy** and the participation of LRGs in ongoing multilateral processes. The first event, which launched an academic study titled City Diplomacy, discussed the challenges that cities neces-

sarily confront when they engage with diplomacy (including the status of LRGs in relation to national and international governance structures, the shortcomings in capacity and finance of small and mid-sized cities, and the effect of political differences between cities and their national governments). The second City diplomacy event focused on the participation of cities in intergovernmental discussions before and during COP26 (the climate change conference held in Glasgow in November 2021). LRGs are very active internationally on climate change: the event was an opportunity to examine how much city initiatives were reflected in the negotiations before COP26 or had influence on the Glasgow Climate Pact.

The City diplomacy events lie at the heart of GCH's mission. They shed light on LRGs' good practices, show their added value through local solutions developed by all sectors of society, highlight local and regional points of view on global issues, and help to feed these into multilateral processes and intergovernmental negotiations.

It is important to add, finally, that the GUDs and City diplomacy events increase the international influence and presence of cities, and assist the emergence of a community of urban experts which include States through their Permanent Missions in Geneva.

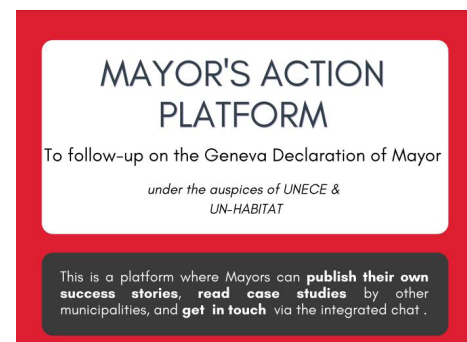
B. Collaboration with UNECE and UN-Habitat

During its second year of activity, GCH continued to collaborate closely with [UN-Habitat](#) and the [UN Economic Commission for Europe](#) (UNECE), and in particular its Committee for Urban Development, Housing and Land Management. Given their commitment to sustainable urban development and their desire to give cities a voice in multilateral affairs, both Geneva-based UN entities have become close partners of GCH.

GCH agreed its first Memoranda of understanding with UN-Habitat and UNECE in 2021. These agreements have enabled the three organizations to establish shared objectives: to increase the participation and involvement of cities in multilateral processes and meetings; and set a formal framework for organizing events and joint communications, especially in regard to the Forum of Mayors.

The collaboration has given birth to several projects.

- In order to follow-up on the [Declaration of Mayors](#) adopted during the first Forum of Mayors, GCH set up the [Mayors' Action Platform](#) (MAP), under the auspices of UNECE and UN-Habitat. The MAP is an online platform enabling mayors and their administrations to showcase city initiatives and solutions that implement the Declaration, as well as exchange and network among peers.



- During “Urban October”, together with UN-Habitat and UNECE, GCH co-organized the fourth “[In-Focus SDG11](#)” round table, on 6 October 2021. Titled ‘*Housing and sustainable urban development in a world marked by Covid-19 and climate change*’, one of its objectives was to promote dialogue and partnerships. The participants shared innovative tools and practices for supporting local initiatives that address global challenges (such as climate change and the world-wide housing crisis), and for developing collaborative projects that implement SDG 11 (and more broadly the 2030 Agenda). Sharing these tools and practices advances cities in their search to achieve sustainable urban development.



Signature of the Memorandum of Understanding between GCH and UN-Habitat, June 2021

B. Collaboration with UNECE and UN-Habitat *continued*

- During preparation of the Second Forum of Mayors (4–5 April 2022), GCH was an active member of the Forum’s Steering Committee. The Committee is composed of representatives of States, local and regional authorities, UN entities, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and other partners, and was established by UNECE’s Committee for Urban Development, Housing and Land Management (see [https://undocs.org/fr/ECE/HBP/201, §35](https://undocs.org/fr/ECE/HBP/201,§35)) to oversee preparation of the Forum of Mayors.¹ Participation in the Steering Committee has given GCH access to members of the diplomatic community who follow urban questions closely, and enabled it to influence planning of the Forum, which is one of the most important entry points for LRGs to International Geneva.
- GCH works particularly closely with UNECE, which is based in Geneva, but it also works with the four other UN regional economic commissions: UNECA, UNESCWA, UNECLAC and UNESCAP. In this spirit, and in association with UNECE and UN-Habitat, GCH organized a retreat for all the regional economic commissions in October 2021. The objective was to explore opportunities to strengthen collaboration on urban matters between the five commissions. In particular, there was a desire to understand how each commission works with LRGs and their networks, and the degree to which these relationships could be brought to the attention of their respective inter-governmental bodies to advance the dialogue between States and LRGs. Finally, a longer term goal was to explore the extent to which the UNECE Forum of Mayors might inspire other Commissions to hold similar events in their regions.

INTERNATIONAL CITY NETWORKS DIRECTORY



During the SDG11 round table, GCH published the second edition of its *International City Networks Directory*. It has added a number of new entries, including C40, the Resilient Cities Network, and the Human Rights Cities Network. The Directory provides a snapshot of the vision, aims and key projects of each city network, plus contact addresses. It is a useful tool for strengthening the links between International Geneva and these city networks on issues related to SDG 11 and other topics. GCH will publish a new version in 2022.

¹ The Steering Committee of the Forum of Mayors assists the Secretariat of the Committee for Urban Development, Housing and Land Management, notably with the invitation list, the Forum’s theme, and the content of its debates.

C. Quiet diplomacy

Facilitating informal and confidential discussions, bringing key actors together, and encouraging cooperation between them, are at the heart of GCH's mission. The aim of quiet diplomacy is to progress positions, promote the involvement of LRGs in multilateral spaces, and enable LRGs to exert more soft power at international level. To achieve these outcomes, GCH has three advantages: a sound understanding of multilateral actors and mechanisms; the Villa Rigot, which is two minutes from the Palais des Nations and an ideal location for informal discussions; and GCH's status as an independent organization outside the UN system.

In 2021, three informal and confidential discussions were organized at the Villa Rigot for a small number of UN staff, diplomats and academic experts to discuss a range of legal, political and logistical issues. For example:

- Why is it of interest to LRGs to invest time and resources in participating in international fora?
- Why might States be inclined to accept an increased presence of LRGs?
- What is the status of LRGs in international law?
- Would multilateral processes become more effective if they included LRGs more? Would it help them to address global challenges?
- What does 'increased presence of LRGs' mean? For example, is soft power the aim, or formal UN recognition of LRGs?

- Given the very large number of LRGs in the world (whereas there are 193 member States of the UN), how should LRGs that want/can/should participate in multilateral processes be 'selected'? What role should States play in that process?
- Who can or should represent LRGs internationally? International city networks? LRGs themselves? A mix of actors?

These exchanges have helped GCH to think more clearly how to increase the participation of LRGs, and notably about the obstacles to achieving that goal. GCH will continue to lead informal discussions with various participants in 2022, reflecting its own and partners' needs.



D. Network of urban experts in Geneva

From its inception, GCH swiftly built contacts with representatives of international organizations that take an interest in urban issues. It did so to acquire a better understanding of what they do (notably by mapping their activities: see section F); to clarify their expectations of an actor like GCH; and to develop a community of expertise on urban issues in Geneva.



UN TASK FORCE ON THE FUTURE OF CITIES

The network of ‘urban focal points’ that GCH established was useful to disseminate information about the work of the UN Task Force on the Future of Cities. Established in 2020 by the UN Secretary-General, the Task Force is chaired by UN-Habitat. It brings together UN entities (UNHCR, UNECE, WHO, OHCHR, UNICEF, etc.), and involves in its work the Global Taskforce of LRGs, which unites numerous international city networks, such as United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG), ICLEI, C40, Resilient Cities, AIMF, the Global Parliament of Mayors, and the Mayors’ Migration Council (MMC), etc.

The UN Task Force on the Future of Cities is mandated to examine how institutional relations between LRGs and the UN can be strengthened, including through intergovernmental processes and local LRG initiatives to promote sustainable development (see section E). One of the Task Force’s first objectives was to contribute to the UN Secretary-General’s report Our Common Agenda, released in September 2021.

During 2021, the UN Task Force on the Future of Cities met regularly in New York (virtually, because of restrictions due to the Covid-19 pandemic). To facilitate the flow of information between New York and Geneva, and to involve relevant actors with urban expertise, GCH and UN-Habitat organized several informal briefings that reported on the work of the Task Force. These briefings raised awareness among Geneva-based actors of the increasing significance of urban issues in the UN, and stimulated them to reflect on how they engage cities and other LRGs in their work.

E. Participation of LRGs in the Universal Periodic Review

In 2021, GCH explored how the UN human rights system includes cities and LRGs in its work. To this end, it reviewed reports by several human rights mechanisms ([Special procedures](#), [Treaty bodies](#), [Universal periodic review](#)) on about 15 States. This research showed that LRGs have rarely been considered by the mechanisms, which were created by and for States, but that they have attracted more attention as time has passed.

In practice, nothing prevents these UN mechanisms from going beyond national administrations and engaging with LRGs, or even addressing recommendations to them. On this basis, GCH took steps to encourage the inclusion of LRGs in the Universal periodic review (UPR). It made sense to start with the UPR because its procedures are well defined, and the involvement of States is clear and significant. It is a multilateral instrument that offers LRGs an opportunity to interact directly with States at international level.

GCH organized several events for partners to discuss this possibility. They included a side-event during a ministerial meeting of UNECE, informal brainstorming meetings, and a discussion at GCH's annual strategic retreat.

The participation of LRGs in the UPR interests several institutions that will be critical to efforts to promote the participation of cities in multilateralism, including the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, UN-Habitat, and the city network [UCLG](#). GCH's initiative created a positive space in which key actors could meet and collaborate. In association with them, GCH will continue to pursue this issue in 2022.

ANNUAL STRATEGIC RETREAT

GCH's annual strategic retreat (December 2021) assembled some twenty participants from LRGs, city networks, States, international organizations, civil society and academia.

It had two parts. First, the group established parallels between the UPR and the review process of the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The [Voluntary local reviews](#) on implementation of the SDGs represent an interesting example of LRGs' participation in a State-led process (where States submit Voluntary national reviews). Useful lessons from the SDGs review process can be drawn for LRGs that would like to contribute to the UPR and share how they implement human rights locally.

In the second part of the retreat, participants teased out the meaning of '*support LRGs' involvement in the UPR*'. They discussed why, when, where and how such involvement might be supported.

In general terms, the participants concluded that it was relevant, timely and important to augment the presence of LRGs in the UPR, not least because the 4th cycle will focus on implementation.

F. Mapping the urban work of international actors based in Geneva

GCH continued the mapping that it began in 2020 to help bring to light the work done on urban issues by actors in International Geneva. It provides an overview of their activities on urban questions, and highlights the tools and services that international organizations can make available to LRGs. The mapping has two objectives: to make access to International Geneva easier for LRGs that want to link up with specific organizations; and to provide an overview of urban work in Geneva, in order to promote synergies and potentially cooperation between international entities and with LRGs.

Several organizations were added in 2021, including the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), and the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). The note on ICRC highlighted the steps that this important humanitarian actor has taken to adapt its assistance and protection programmes to meet the needs of victims of urban warfare, urban violence and urban displacement. The article on UNHCR presents its work with cities, which today host the majority of the world's refugees. It highlights the tools that UNHCR has developed to help cities exchange information on migration issues. We will continue to add new actors in Geneva and beyond to the mapping in 2022.



G. Union of Swiss Cities and national city networks

GCH liaised with the Union of Swiss Cities (UVS, Union des Villes Suisses) and with Switzerland's largest cities to discuss their urban diplomacy. GCH was involved in a number of informal meetings that gave Switzerland's major cities an opportunity to discuss international urban diplomacy, the role of UVS in this area, and the potential value of exchanging information with international city networks to which they belong.

Following these meetings, GCH, in association with the City of Geneva, mapped the participation of five Swiss cities (Basel, Bern, Geneva, Lausanne, Zurich) in international city networks, to understand and encourage exchanges between them, including in the context of their work in UVS. GCH's initiative was welcomed by the five cities, and further discussions will be organized in 2022.

NATIONAL CITY NETWORKS

GCH is interested in the role that national city networks (such as UVS) can play in multilateral processes. The primary vocation of national city networks is to protect and defend cities' interests vis à vis national authorities. Their priorities are above all national. Nevertheless, some are interested in international questions. The strength of national city networks is that they speak for a large number of cities within one State: this makes them interesting organizations, able to represent cities in multilateral fora. GCH hopes to explore this subject more deeply in the future.



H. Partnerships in other events

Complementing the activities described above, GCH engaged in a number of events that helped to make it more visible as a new organization, to strengthen work on urban issues in Geneva (notably by including representatives of LRGs), and develop a community of urban expertise. In particular:

- The [UN High Commissioner for Refugees](#) held a virtual [conference on its 70th anniversary](#) titled '70 years protecting people forced to flee' (January 2021). When it took the floor, GCH noted that LRGs are today on the front line of efforts to respond to forced displacement and should be included in international debates about refugees and migrants.
- GCH joined the [Geneva Human Rights Platform](#) to organize an event during the [World Summit on the Information Society 2021 : 'Digitalization in the Cities and Privacy for Citizens'](#) (April 2021). Speakers from Santiago (Chile), Barcelona (Spain) and Munich (Germany) discussed what is needed to develop 'smart cities', that apply innovation and technology to meet the needs of their citizens but protect personal data and the right to privacy.
- Also in the framework of the World Summit on the information Society, the [Association Internationale des Maires Francophones \(AIMF\)](#) and GCH co-organized an event on '[Inclusive and responsible digitalization in the city](#)' (May 2021). Speakers representing the cities of Geneva, Tunis (Tunisia), Kigali (Rwanda), and Lyon (France) presented their digitalization strategies for making municipal services accessible to everyone, including marginalized populations, while protecting the environment (digital sobriety).
- GCH joined [UN-Habitat](#), the [Geneva Human Rights Platform](#) and [The Global Land Tool Network](#) in convening open consultations in May and July 2021 to review responses to the call issued by the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights for '[written contributions to the draft general comment \(No. 26\) on Land and Economic, Cultural and Social Rights](#)'.
- The [International Committee of the Red Cross \(ICRC\)](#) and GCH co-organized an [event on urban violence and protection of healthcare in the city](#) (June 2021). City representatives and health workers from Karachi (Pakistan), Chicago (United States), and Fortaleza (Brazil) described the measures they had taken to deal with urban violence in their environments.
- The [Permanent Mission of Switzerland to the United Nations in Geneva](#), the [UN Road Safety Fund](#), [Pro Vélo](#), [Urbz](#) and GCH held a reception at the Villa Rigot [to celebrate World Bike Day](#) (June 2021). It was a welcome opportunity to celebrate soft urban mobility and to (re-)connect with Geneva's local and international communities, including diplomats, international staff and people interested in urban issues.



H. Partnerships in other events continued

- The Global Commission on Drug Policy and the cities of Geneva and Zurich held an event with GCH on Drug Policies and City Governments (June 2021). It brought together the mayors of Athens (Greece), Ithaca (United States), Frankfurt (Germany), and Quezon City (the Philippines) for an informal discussion of municipal drug policies and their relation to national policies.
- All the UN Regional Commissions met in July 2021 for a side-event of the High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development. GCH's intervention emphasized the crucial role of cities in economic recovery. This event highlighted the tools that UN entities have developed to help cities recover in ways that are inclusive and sustainable.
- The International Telecommunications Union (ITU) organized an event during World Cities Day titled 'Building Climate Resilient Cities with Digital Transformation' (October 2021). Moderated by GCH, it underscored that digital technologies can enable cities to become more resilient to climate change and achieve the ambitious goals set out in the Paris Agreement, the New Urban Agenda, and the Sustainable Development Goals.
- GCH assisted UCLG and the City of Geneva in organizing the UCLG Taskforce for Territorial Prevention and Management of Crisis (November 2021), chaired by the City of Geneva. At this meeting, representatives of international humanitarian organizations (OCHA, the International Federation of the Red Cross and Red Crescent, as well as UN-Habitat and UNDP) discussed risk management and humanitarian crises with representatives of LRGs in Lebanon, Ghana and Mali, and how the role of LRGs could be augmented.



I. Geneva Cities Hub: organization, finance and communications

GCH is an association under Swiss law, whose Board is composed of the organization's founders and funders: the City of Geneva and the Canton of Geneva. GCH is also supported, financially and as a strategic partner, by Switzerland's Federal Department of Foreign Affairs (FDFA).

GCH was able to multiply its activity in 2021, having consolidated its organizational structure. Two co-Directors, who have a deep understanding of both multilateralism and Geneva's ecosystem, were appointed in July 2021 to co-lead the organization.

In addition, the Board decided to prioritize communications. The website was refreshed, and GCH adopted a new logo that highlights its role as a platform, with interconnected circles to represent GCH partners. The team was further strengthened in June 2021 by the appointment of a Communications Officer, who is responsible for developing the website, managing social media communications, and promoting GCH's public events.



GCH co-directors, Kamelia Kemileva and Anh Thu Duong

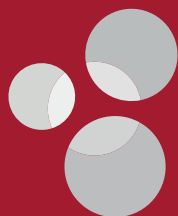
Conclusion

In 2021, GCH successfully positioned itself as a credible and relevant actor, working on an issue that has increasing importance for Geneva's ecosystem. During the year, GCH took advantage of numerous opportunities to make itself better known, extend its network, and gauge the interests of actors. This work has enabled GCH to refine its strategy, and identify the most promising partners, programmes and processes for increasing the participation of LRGs in multilateral fora.

In 2022, it is clear that LRG participation in the UPR, the involvement of LRGs in intergovernmental negotiations (on health, the environment, etc.), and the inclusion of LRGs in important multilateral

discussions (the Forum of Mayors, the UN General Assembly High-Level Meeting on the New Urban Agenda, the World Urban Forum), will be among GCH's central priorities. The GCH will also continue its quiet diplomacy, will organize new Geneva Urban Debates, and will deepen its relations with international organizations and city networks. Several opportunities will arise in 2022 to highlight urban concerns and urban actors on the international agenda, and reaffirm that cities are not simply spaces for the implementation of policies, but political actors who must be involved in any modern form of multilateralism that hopes to respond effectively to the challenges the world is facing.





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