

ENGAGING LOCAL AND REGIONAL GOVERNMENTS IN MULTILATERALISM

TAKING STOCK AND NEXT STEPS



This working paper has been published to mark the third Anniversary of the Geneva Cities Hub (GCH), which was established to “connect cities, city networks and international development cooperation actors based in Geneva, and facilitate exchanges on urban issues in International Geneva” (GCH statutes, Article 3). The paper offers some informal reflections that are expected to evolve. GCH seeks to advance thinking about the involvement of local and regional governments in multilateralism, hoping to contribute to the work of many other actors that are pursuing similar objectives.

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List of abbreviations

AIMF	Association internationale des maires francophones
CUDHLM	UNECE Committee on urban development, housing and land management
ECOSOC	UN Economic and Social Council
GCH	Geneva Cities Hub
GCR	Global Compact on Refugees
HRC	UN Human Rights Council
ICRC	International Committee of the Red Cross
IFRC	International Federation of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies
ILO	International Labour Organization
ICLEI	Local Governments for Sustainability
IOM	International Organization for Migration
ITU	International Telecommunications Union
LRGs	Local and regional governments
OHCHR	Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights
MMC	Mayors Migration Council
NGO	Non-governmental organization
SDGs	Sustainable Development Goals
UN	United Nations
UCLG	United Cities and Local Governments
UNDRR	UN Office for Disaster Risk Reduction
UNECE	UN Economic Commission for Europe
UNGA	UN General Assembly
UN-Habitat	UN Human Settlements Programme
UNHCR	UN Refugee Agency (UN High Commissioner for Refugees)
UNSC	UN Security Council
UNSG	UN Secretary General
UPR	Universal Periodic Review
WHO	World Health Organization
WSIS	World Summit of the Information Society
WTO	World Trade Organization

Executive Summary

The Geneva Cities Hub (GCH) was created to improve the inclusion of cities and other local and regional governments (LRGs) in multilateralism and to foster exchanges on urban issues among Geneva-based stakeholders.¹ It has convened numerous informal exchanges in the past three years to increase understanding of the multilateral environment, of the stakeholders with whom it cooperates, and clarify what tangible contributions it can make to fulfil its mission. This document sets out the vision for GCH that has emerged from these exchanges.

Located in Geneva, the GCH has naturally focused on State-driven United Nations (UN) multilateral diplomacy, which does not grant any formal standing to LRGs. Formal standing is granted only to States, and to intergovernmental and non-governmental organizations. Yet LRG participation to UN multilateralism would add much value. LRGs can help to connect international policy debates to action on the ground; their local/regional solutions can be scaled up to address global challenges; and their involvement would ensure greater impact, since LRGs would more actively support decisions they had helped to take, and LRGs have increasing influence in an urbanized world.

LRGs have a variety of motives to engage at multilateral level. They want to take part in setting

the international agenda because they have to implement many international policies, or expect tangible benefits from their multilateral engagement (such as additional economic investment or access to international funding). LRGs also understand that international engagement can strengthen communication with their central government. Yet, despite these motives and the value that LRGs could clearly add, obstacles remain. Without formal standing at the UN, LRGs rarely prioritize multilateral engagement and lack resources and expertise to make best use of the multilateral system, which is often perceived to be abstract, slow and ineffective. Further, it is a challenge to conceive how adding numerous LRGs to the UN's 193 Member States and its many other stakeholders will help the UN system to function properly.

The needs and aspirations of LRGs are one factor. Other stakeholders also have key roles in enabling LRGs to participate in UN multilateralism.

- UN Member States stand at the centre of all efforts to include LRGs in multilateralism. While they may understand that LRGs add value, States may be reluctant to encourage their presence because they consider LRGs to be components of the State. GCH works to promote a positive narrative and convince States to see LRGs as complementary stakeholders.

¹ The GCH's statutes state that it will "connect cities, city networks and international development cooperation actors based in Geneva, and facilitate exchanges on urban issues in International Geneva". Very often, 'cities' and 'local and regional governments' (LRGs) are used interchangeably. In this document, the GCH will refer mainly to LRGs, a term that is more inclusive and specific than 'city'. The document also uses 'regional' to refer to subnational geographical spaces rather than spaces that include several States. Finally, the GCH acknowledges that the powers and competencies of subnational governments vary widely from country to country.

- International organizations, although ultimately accountable to their Member States, have a certain margin of manoeuvre to engage with LRGs. At present, most Geneva-based international organizations have urban programmes and they increasingly want to work with LRGs. The GCH considers international organizations as “allies” in promoting the engagement of LRGs in multilateralism and continues to partner with them.
- City networks have proven successful in reaching out to the UN and making LRGs more visible in various multilateral processes. However, in the UN system, they are categorized as NGOs, which does not reflect the fact that LRGs are political actors with decision-making power and public accountability. Based on shared objectives, the GCH continues to collaborate with and complement the work of city networks and supports their engagement in Geneva.

To raise the profile of LRGs in multilateralism, it is sensible to focus on “International Geneva”, because it hosts numerous multilateral bodies and processes, many of which can provide points of entry for LRGs. In addition, a vast amount of expertise is found in Geneva that can help LRGs address the challenges they face. These reasons explain why it makes good sense for LRGs to include Geneva in their multilateral engagement.

Considering its operating environment and stakeholders, the GCH is well positioned to create more space for LRGs to participate in selected multilateral processes. It will continue to: organize meetings and exchanges; highlight solutions to global challenges that LRGs can bring to multilateral discussions; make visible the urban work of international organizations; foster the development

of an urban community in Geneva; and “translate” multilateral work for LRGs, so that it becomes more accessible and relevant to them. In the course of these activities, the GCH will develop a convincing narrative, targeting both States and LRGs, showing the value that LRGs’ engagement adds to multilateralism, and will apply this narrative in the various fields (human rights, health, etc.) that Geneva-based multilateral bodies and processes address.

More concretely, the GCH will pursue its work on entry points and hopes that progress can be made to secure the participation of LRGs in UN meetings in their own right, to mainstream LRG-relevant language in UN resolution, and also advance two new ideas: to create a specific UN status for LRGs, and to create a new UN body dedicated to LRGs. Of course, to realize the new ideas, States will need to give their support and take formal decisions. While the ideas of a new status and a new UN body are complex and raise many questions, interesting precedents are available. Further, if States show political will, they are likely to find solutions in the course of negotiation.

In the last three years the GCH has used its multilateral expertise, network, convening power, communication tools, and neutral stance to fulfil its mission. It has been successful at raising awareness in parts of the Geneva-based international community about the role and perspectives of LRGs in various areas. But raising awareness is only a first step. To make further progress, strong political support and the sustained commitment of all stakeholders will be necessary to secure change, heed the call of the UN Secretary General, and build a more inclusive, effective and relevant multilateralism that responds to the needs and aspirations of the people it serves.

Introduction

The Geneva Cities Hub (GCH) was created in 2020² to improve the inclusion of cities and other local and regional governments³ (LRGs) in multilateralism, especially in “International Geneva”, a major centre for global governance and multilateral diplomacy, as well as foster exchanges on urban issues among Geneva-based stakeholders.

In the past three years, the GCH has partnered with LRGs, city networks, international organizations, States, civil society and academics to create more space for LRGs to participate in international bodies and processes, by providing them with entry points in the multilateral system, highlighting their work in relevant areas, and communicating the value that they can add to multilateralism.

In this process, the GCH convened numerous informal exchanges to discuss the needs, expectations, priorities and challenges of the above stakeholders. It also developed a unique “mapping” of the urban work of Geneva-based international actors and their collaboration with LRGs.⁴

This document sets out the vision for the GCH that has emerged from these exchanges. First, it briefly explains how the GCH understands multilateralism and the current standing of LRGs in the multilateral system. It then examines the value that LRGs can bring to multilateralism, the reasons they want to engage, and the obstacles that impede them from doing so. Third, the document looks at the stakeholders that can assist the GCH to achieve its

objectives. In addition to LRGs themselves, the GCH seeks support from Member States, city networks and international organizations. It argues that Geneva is the right place to raise the profile of LRGs in multilateralism. Finally, the GCH describes what it can do to assist LRGs to participate in multilateralism and the entry points that exist or need to be created to enhance multilateralism and make it more inclusive, effective and relevant in the longer run.

Overall, the GCH hopes that this document will shed light on what can be done to support and advance the engagement of LRGs in international affairs, and to overcome obstacles that hinder their engagement.



2 The GCH was founded by the City of Geneva, the Canton of Geneva and the Swiss federal authorities.

3 See note 1.

4 <https://www.genevacitieshub.org/en/mapping/>

1. Multilateralism: The United Nations, Member States and LRGs

“Multilateralism” is a broad concept that refers to processes in which several parties work together to achieve a common goal or solve an issue in a collective manner. In this document, “multilateralism” mainly refers to classical State-driven multilateralism in the framework of the United Nations (UN).

Located in Geneva which hosts numerous UN entities, the GCH has naturally focused on the UN. In particular, it concentrates on State-driven multilateral diplomacy and how the latter can include LRGs more fully, in line with the vision of a more inclusive and effective multilateralism which the UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres set out in ‘Our Common Agenda’.⁵ At the same time, the GCH has cooperated and partnered with international actors outside the UN system, including the ICRC, IFRC, and ISO, and will continue to do so.

The UN is composed of and led by its 193 Member States, which convene in “bodies” or “organs”, such as the Security Council (UNSC), the General Assembly (UNGA), the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) or the Human Rights Council (HRC). The UN secretariat, led by the UN Secretary General (UNSG), serves these bodies and organs and reports to the Member States. Consequently, the UN

secretariat is accountable to Member States, even though it enjoys a certain margin of manoeuvre. States have also created intergovernmental organizations, such as the World Health Organization (WHO) and the International Telecommunications Union (ITU), whose secretariats also service Member States. States are at the heart of the UN, and they stand at the centre of all efforts to develop or modify UN proceedings that could eventually offer a larger role to LRGs.

LRGs have no formal standing at the UN.⁶ They cannot be accredited as Member States (though Member States can include LRGs in their national delegations), either as Observers (the status of intergovernmental organizations and some other entities) or as non-governmental organizations (NGOs), which since 1996 can enjoy “ECOSOC status” (granted to NGOs that wish to participate in the work of the UN and that fulfil certain criteria)⁷. As a result, LRGs do not yet have a space in the UN system. They can only participate in an ad hoc manner, if invited to do so by a Member State, a UN entity, or an accredited NGO. Usually, these invitations cover single events and engagement is rarely sustained.

5 See ‘Our Common Agenda: Report of the UN Secretary General’, 2021, paras. 106 and 119.

6 LRGs are recognized as one of the “major groups and stakeholders” in certain UN negotiations, since the 1992 Earth Summit in Rio, where nine major groups were formed to facilitate a “whole of society” approach to consultation. Such an arrangement obviously does not reflect the fact that LRGs are political actors with local/regional decision-making powers and public accountability. In addition, the major groups are not acknowledged by all UN processes and do not provide a status that enables members to take part in intergovernmental meetings.

7 For more information on NGO ECOSOC status, see <http://csonet.org/index.php?menu=17>.

2. The added value of LRGs in multilateralism

Taking the multilateral context described above as a point of departure, the GCH's main objectives are to influence relevant stakeholders and encourage the multilateral system to become more open to LRGs. However, one of the main questions that has been raised from the very beginning is: "What value do LRGs add to multilateralism?"

In all the numerous exchanges facilitated by the GCH, the answer to this question has invariably been the same. It can be summarized in three words: connection, solutions, and impact:

- **Connection.** LRGs have the ability to connect international policy debates to action on the ground, because they are close to their population, know the local and regional environments in which they operate, and are responsible for implementing many of the global policies that States approve at international level. For instance, local/regional leaders can help address global challenges by raising public awareness and encouraging behavioural change through consultations and participatory processes at their level. They have done this, for example, on migration issues. Local/regional leaders have been able to link international policy debates related to the Global Compact on Refugees (GCR) with events on the ground. In line with the GCR's position that "States and relevant stakeholders [need to] contribute resources and expertise to strengthen infrastructure so as to

facilitate access to appropriate accommodation for refugees and host communities ..." (GCR, §78), the Mayor of Medellín, Colombia, expanded an existing housing assistance programme to provide accommodation for migrants and displaced families from Venezuela. The city of Medellín also made efforts to raise awareness among migrants and refugees about health, employment, legal assistance and other services that the municipality provides, and to involve migrants in local decision-making.⁸ Similarly, after the GCR called on "States and relevant stakeholders [...] to promote economic opportunities for employment creation and income generation" (GCR, §70), the Mayor of Entebbe, Uganda, committed to provide job training and employment to migrants, refugees and other marginalized communities by developing and implementing a wetland restoration plan, which also fulfils a climate mitigation strategy.⁹

- **Solutions.** LRGs are affected by global challenges discussed at international level (climate change, mass migration flows, pandemics, etc.), and craft local and regional solutions to these that respond to the needs and expectations of their populations. Bringing local/regional solutions to multilateral discussions adds enormous value, because it enables good practices to be replicated and scaled up, enhancing global progress. LRGs have been forthcoming in the fight against climate change and have explored many

8 <http://localaction.mayorsmechanism.org/actions/housing-assistance-migrant-and-displaced-families>.

9 <http://localaction.mayorsmechanism.org/actions/employing-migrants-and-refugees-protect-namiiro-wetland>.

urban initiatives to reduce their greenhouse gas emissions. For instance, Tbilisi, Georgia, has reformed its transport system to encourage people to use public buses, the metro and bicycles in place of their private cars¹⁰. Geneva, Switzerland, has invested in “Genilac”, an innovative renewable thermal programme that uses lake water to cool and heat buildings in central Geneva, thereby reducing greenhouse gas emissions¹¹. Such solutions are developed for a specific context but can be adapted or adopted by other cities or scaled-up by States, strengthening efforts to combat climate change.



- **Impact.** LRGs are often protagonists in key global challenges. Including them in global governance forums would improve adherence to international standards and would strengthen implementation, given LRGs’ influence in an urbanized world. In general, more progress could be made on global agendas if recommendations and action plans considered LRGs as more than simple implementing partners. For instance, fuller inclusion of LRGs in UN climate-related negotiations would make it easier to operationalize their outcome, given that LRGs (and more specifically cities) are the primary emitters of greenhouse gases, one of the main drivers of climate change¹². Another example is the new WHO treaty on pandemics that States are currently negotiating. Cities and urban settings have been hotspots of the COVID-19 pandemic and have specific vulnerabilities. When preparing to respond to the next pandemic, it would be logical to consider LRGs as implementers of key programmes (community engagement, public awareness programmes, treatment prioritization, distribution of pandemic-related products, etc.) but also as full partners in urban preparedness and response initiatives and efforts to mitigate the shocks caused by pandemics. LRGs have lessons to share about how they managed and recovered from the pandemic. Including them in the treaty would both improve the text and its implementation.

10 <https://eurocities.eu/stories/a-transport-revolution-in-tbilisi/>.

11 <https://ww2.sig-ge.ch/actualites/genilac-le-plus-grand-reseau-thermique-ecologique>.

12 It is important to acknowledge that many LRGs have taken measures that go further than the UN climate agreements.

3. LRGs' engagement in UN multilateralism: motivations and obstacles

Motivations

LRGs' motives for wanting to participate in global governance have been a red thread running through GCH discussions. When asked "Why do LRGs want to engage in UN multilateralism and what do they expect to gain from their engagement?" representatives of LRGs have often made the following points:

- LRGs want to participate in international agenda-setting because **implementation also ends up at their level**. Indeed, LRGs are on the frontline in managing the fallout from transnational issues. They want to contribute to forming the policy environment in which they are required to operate. They insist that their role should not be limited to that of implementer. LRGs can also be partners that are agile and quick and have the capacity to respond in times of crisis.
- LRG engagement at international level must generate **tangible benefits** for their residents, to justify the cost of participating in international affairs. Benefits might include: creation of more jobs; enhanced international exposure, attracting economic investment or financial resources; learning from others' good practices and obtaining tested and proven solutions from elsewhere; advantages of scale due to cooperation; opportunities to benchmark performance. LRGs can

also make use of multilateral agreements (such as HRC resolutions¹³ or climate change agreements) to lobby their governments and obtain more resources, thereby putting themselves in a position to implement agreements effectively.

- The participation of LRGs in multilateral processes may also increase their **access to international funding and private-public partnerships**. Currently, because the UN, the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) and other international institutions are State-led, States must approve grants and funds for projects. These are usually transferred to central governments, even if they touch upon urban issues or target municipalities. If LRGs were to raise their international profile, they might not only contribute to the debate but enhance their access to international funding.
- On global issues, LRGs want a more **formal channel through which to engage with their own central government** and acquire more visibility at national level. LRGs' actions can complement and extend the actions of central governments, and help to deliver key global goals, such as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) or the Paris Agreements.

13 For instance, resolution 51/12 of the UN Human Rights Council, on 'Local government and human rights' (adopted in October 2022), mandates the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) and UN-Habitat to build human rights capacity at local level.

Obstacles

Obstacles to LRG engagement in UN multilateralism have also been a red thread through GCH discussions. One obstacle is clearly their lack of standing at the UN. Other obstacles are mentioned below, with hints on how to overcome them.

- Though many LRGs would like to engage,¹⁴ **multilateral affairs are rarely a priority and resources, capacities and expertise are often lacking.** In addition, LRGs are not generally well informed about how the UN functions, the role of Member States, the negotiation of international agreements and decisions, or their implementation by UN entities. Though more and more LRGs are establishing international offices,¹⁵ many do not have the mandate or competencies to deal with multilateral affairs and their engagement therefore depends heavily on the vision of local or regional political leaders. By comparison, States have for decades invested in building expertise and capacity in their Ministries of Foreign Affairs to engage sustainably in multilateral forums. To follow up priority issues and manage transitions when local/regional leaders change, LRGs should also establish adequate administrative capacity to deal with multilateral affairs.
- The **scope of multilateralism is (too) broad** and touches on almost all areas of life. As a consequence, **LRGs may not know where to invest resources and capacity.** Engaging on all multilateral fronts is not realistic. They may therefore want to be strategic and identify topics that are priorities for them and also high on the international agenda (climate change, migration, health, plastic pollution, etc.). On these issues, they can make the most impact, based on their interests and local context. Opportunities to complement the actions of States might also influence the priorities LRGs set.
- **LRGs sometimes perceive multilateralism as abstract, slow and ineffective, and therefore an inefficient instrument to address global challenges.** LRGs want to be proactive (not only reactive). They are looking for quicker solutions than the multilateral system currently delivers on urgent transnational issues such as pandemics, climate change or migration. Their engagement in the multilateral system could help change its nature in the longer run. The UNSG has also emphasized the need for a stronger, more networked, effective and inclusive multilateral system in his report 'Our Common Agenda'.¹⁶
- Multilateralism can be perceived as slow, ineffective, and complex because it involves many stakeholders with divergent views and interests. **Adding LRGs to the 193 Member States, alongside civil society, the private sector, academics, and other stakeholders, could clearly challenge the UN multilateral system in terms of numbers.** NGOs would appear to set a similar challenge. In practice, however, although more than 6,300 NGOs have been granted ECOSOC status, the UN has continued to function and States continue to accord ECOSOC status to new NGOs.

14 In line with its mandate, the GCH mainly engages with LRGs who are interested in international affairs. For many LRGs, however, it is not yet an important concern.

15 See Pejic, D., Acuto, M., Kosovac, A. (2022), 'City Diplomacy during Covid-19: the 2022 Cities and international engagement survey', Melbourne Centre for Cities, Chicago Council on Global Affairs, https://melbourne.figshare.com/articles/report/City_Diplomacy_During_COVID-19_The_2022_Cities_and_International_Engagement_Survey/19719676.

16 'Our Common Agenda: Report of the UN Secretary General', 2021, paras. 106 and 119, <https://www.un.org/en/content/common-agenda-report/#download>.

4. Member States

As noted earlier, States stand at the centre of all efforts to modify UN proceedings in a way that could eventually offer a larger role to LRGs. So the central question is: “Are States ready to increase the presence of LRGs at multilateral level and what are their incentives to do so?”

The GCH believes that no legal obstacles stand in the way of LRG participation in UN multilateralism. The question is essentially political and relates to States’ positioning. Indeed, while UN multilateralism is State-driven, over the decades space has been created to allow participation by civil society organizations, academics, private sector actors, and other stakeholders, depending on the issues discussed. All these actors apply soft power to influence the global agenda, alongside States, which have come to realize that global challenges were too big and numerous for them to handle on their own.



States may nevertheless be reluctant to increase the presence of LRGs in multilateral affairs, because they consider that LRGs are components of the State and that States represent LRGs (which are not subjects of international law) when they participate in international events or processes. This argument is legally correct. States may also be reluctant to include LRGs for political reasons, for instance because local or regional leaders are from a different political party than the party of the national government. In consequence, LRGs are rarely consulted by their central government before the latter engages at international level. This creates the possibility of a disconnect between what States commit to at international level and what happens on the ground at local/regional level.

Since its formation, the GCH has worked (and will continue to work) with representatives of States to raise awareness about the work LRGs do in selected thematic areas (health, human rights, digitalization, etc.) and to promote the complementary role they play in addressing global challenges and developing international agreements. In taking this approach, the GCH has encouraged States to: support the contribution of LRGs to international processes (such as the UN Universal Periodic Review); include LRGs in national delegations for international events or processes (such as the Global Refugee Forum, a multi-stakeholder event); and give LRGs a specific status in those processes, distinct from the status of NGO (see section 8).

5. International Organizations

The role of international organizations is closely linked to that of States, in particular when it comes to the UN, its bodies (UNGA, UNSC, etc.), and its specialized agencies (ITU, UNHCR, WHO, etc.). They are intergovernmental entities, which are serviced by secretariats that are ultimately accountable to Member States (even if, as mentioned above, they have a certain margin of manoeuvre). Many engage with LRGs at global policy level, and also operationally, for instance to obtain humanitarian access or implement development projects in a city or region.

The GCH mapping demonstrates that most Geneva-based international organizations and their secretariats work with LRGs, have urban programmes, and seek to strengthen their urban work in the future.¹⁷ “Urban focal points” have been appointed and “urban teams” are being strengthened in the secretariats of these organizations. Interest is growing for several reasons:

- Urbanization has made LRGs, and in particular cities, protagonists in key global challenges. For instance, because cities are the primary emitters of greenhouse gases, international organizations want to partner with LRGs to implement measures in and with cities that will strengthen efforts to combat climate change.
- Urbanization compels UN entities to rethink and redesign their modus operandi and priorities. An example is the State-led Committee on urban development, housing and land management (CUDHLM) of UNECE. Set up to promote inclusive, smart and sustainable cities, the Committee has established a Forum of Mayors as its subsidiary

body to share actions and innovative solutions on urban issues. As a result, mayors will be able to provide advice and submit recommendations to States on relevant matters.

- UN entities must address more issues that are more complex. To cope and find solutions, they need to partner with more stakeholders. For instance, the UNHCR relies on a myriad of stakeholders, including LRGs, to implement the GCR and enhance the protection and assistance provided to refugees worldwide.
- UN entities implementing global agendas, such as the SDGs, have come to rely on LRGs (alongside States) to localize these agendas and implement them at subnational level. LRGs have in turn been forthcoming in relation to the SDGs. Some of them have produced Voluntary Local Reviews that complement Voluntary National Reviews and enable them to assess their progress on SDG implementation.



17 <https://www.genevacitieshub.org/en/mapping/>.

For all these reasons, the GCH considers that international organizations and their secretariats are “allies” in promoting the engagement of LRGs in multilateralism. It will continue to partner with them to:

- Create spaces in selected processes, such as the Forum of Mayors, UPR, the World Summit of the Information Society (WSIS), intergovernmental negotiations on pandemics, and plastic pollution.
- Organize events that make visible the work that LRGs do at local/regional level and demonstrate their contribution at international level.
- Facilitate contacts and collaboration between international organizations and LRGs, not least with a view to encourage more LRGs to engage in Geneva.



6. City networks

From the start, the GCH has prioritized engagement with city networks. LRGs form city networks to cooperate on specific topics (climate change, environment, diversity, human rights, etc.) or a broader set of issues. There are national, regional and international networks, but to date the GCH has mostly partnered with networks active at multilateral level, such as UCLG (United Cities and Local Governments), ICLEI (Local Governments for Sustainability), Metropolis, AIMF (Association Internationale des Maires Francophones), WeGo (World Smart Sustainable Cities Organization), Peace in our Cities, and MMC (Mayors Migration Council). Most are members of the Global Task Force on LRGs, a coordination mechanism that undertakes joint advocacy work on global policy processes.

City networks such as UCLG, C40, ICLEI and MMC have played a crucial role in enabling LRGs to exchange and cooperate and engage in multilateralism. They have successfully reached out to UN

leadership and made LRGs visible in various multilateral processes. Given that LRGs frequently lack resources and expertise, these networks help them to find their way through the multilateral system, amplify their voices, build collective knowledge, and develop a shared agenda at international level.

With regard to their standing in the UN system, city networks are automatically categorized as NGOs, since they do not qualify either as Member States or intergovernmental entities. A handful of city networks (including UCLG, ICLEI and Mayors for peace) have obtained NGO ECOSOC status¹⁸ and may therefore attend and speak at UN meetings. While granting NGO status to city networks is correct from a legal point of view (city networks are non-profit structures under the national legislation of the States in which they have been created), this arrangement obviously fails to reflect the fact that LRGs are political actors with local or regional decision-making powers and are publicly accountable.

Over the years, the GCH has partnered with city networks on various themes to advance the cause of LRGs at international level and support their engagement in multilateral bodies and processes. The GCH will continue to collaborate with and complement the work of those networks, putting forward its expertise on multilateral affairs in Geneva. In particular, the GCH would be ready to support the Global Task Force on LRGs to engage with international actors in Geneva.



18 It is important to say that individual cities and individual LRGs, that are members of city networks, do not qualify for NGO ECOSOC status.

7. International Geneva

LRGs have successfully raised their profile at the margins of important multilateral processes (the High-Level Political Forum, New Urban Agenda-related conferences, climate change and other environmental negotiations), including in New York, which hosts the principal UN organs. This has not been the case in Geneva. However, “International Geneva” offers LRGs significant opportunities both to influence multilateral bodies and processes and draws on international expertise that can help them to tackle issues at home.

First, as a major centre for global governance and multilateral diplomacy, Geneva addresses a vast diversity of issues (health, human rights, humanitarian affairs, migration, labour, trade, science, environment and sustainable development, peace-building and disarmament, etc.), and assembles a broad array of international actors that work on technical and operational matters (including the ICRC, ILO, IOM, ITU, OHCHR, UNDRR, UNECE, UN-Habitat, UNHCR, WHO, WTO and numerous international NGOs). It therefore concentrates in one place an important number of multilateral bodies, processes and initiatives, many of which are entry points for LRGs.

Perceived as being less political than New York, International Geneva is also traditionally more inclusive than other multilateral hubs. In particular it is more receptive of non-State actors. States are used to engaging with a broad array of stakeholders in Geneva, in contrast to New York, where, for instance, NGOs have more difficulty obtaining physical access to meeting rooms at UN headquarters. Compared with New York, it is therefore easier for LRGs to participate in multilateral processes in

Geneva. It is probably not a coincidence that the Forum of Mayors was established in Geneva, where Mayors are able to directly address a UN inter-governmental body (UNECE CUDHLM) and make recommendations on how to address regional and global challenges – a first in UN history.

Second, International Geneva is not only a place where people from all over the world meet and discuss global challenges. Over the years, it has also accumulated a vast amount of expertise that can be useful to address challenges in a range of local and regional contexts. International organizations offer technical assistance and various other services to both States and LRGs. The WHO can provide LRGs with support and build their capacity on many health-related topics, including urban planning, housing, environmental issues, transport and mobility, nutrition, physical activity, and COVID-19. Outside the UN system, the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) or the International Standards Organization (ISO) also offer interesting tools that can help LRGs cope with climate change, improve sustainability, or enhance their resilience. The World Economic Forum also hosts an impressive number of urban initiatives that catalyse public-private collaboration on pressing urban challenges. GCH’s mapping gives LRGs more information on urban tools offered by international organizations based in Geneva, as well as persons to contact.

8. The role of the Geneva Cities Hub

Given its operating environment and stakeholders, the GCH is well positioned to pursue its mandate to create more space for LRGs in selected multilateral processes. To this end, its activities focus on organizing meetings and events, developing a convincing narrative to support LRG involvement in multilateralism, and working on LRG entry points.

Events and narrative

Since its formation, the GCH has organized a significant number of meetings and events on topics of interest to LRGs that are also highly relevant to the multilateral agenda: health, human rights, climate change, migration and forced displacement, digitalization, humanitarian assistance, plastic pollution, urban violence, etc.

These events have fulfilled several objectives:

- They support the claim that LRGs can bring valuable practices and solutions to multilateral discussion of global challenges.
- They make the urban work of Geneva-based international organizations more visible and foster the development of an urban community in Geneva.
- They “translate” multilateral work to LRGs and build their expertise so that multilateralism becomes more accessible and more relevant.

The GCH will continue to organize events in the future because, in addition to these objectives, events contribute to crafting a strong narrative – targeting both States and LRGs – about the value that LRGs add to multilateralism. Although a general narrative already exists (see section 2), it is necessary to demonstrate that the participation of LRGs can help to “connect”, “solve” and “transform” each of the issues that distinct multilateral bodies and processes address. For example, the GCH organized several events on “Mayors, human rights and the UPR”.¹⁹ On one hand, these demonstrated to States that it is often LRGs that connect international human rights obligations to their implementation on the ground; and, on the other, they encouraged LRGs to take part in the UPR in order to clarify their role in protecting human rights in their territory, enhance dialogue with their central government, and improve adherence to and implementation of UPR recommendations at local/regional level.²⁰ In the same vein, the GCH has closely cooperated with the ITU. It will continue to facilitate the participation of mayors in WSIS high-level dialogues on smart cities and in all related opportunities and challenges that mayors face when digitalizing municipal services and infrastructure.

19 For GCH news on this matter, see <https://www.genevacitieshub.org/en/the-best-way-to-start-implementing-upr-recommendation-is-at-local-level/>.

20 More information on LRGs and the UPR can be found in ‘UPR Tips for LRGs’, published by the GCH-led Coalition for Local and Regional Governments in the Universal Periodic Review.

Entry points

The GCH strives to give LRGs tangible entry points into selected multilateral bodies and processes. Entry points provide physical access but also enable LRGs to contribute to international discussions and ensure that international discussions and agreements take their role into account. It is important here to emphasize that the GCH does not seek to reduce the vast diversity of LRG views to a single voice, which would necessarily produce a narrow field of consensus. Rather, it hopes that LRGs will make use of the entry points on which the GCH focuses to communicate their rich and diverse views.

The GCH's work on entry points takes several forms:

Participation

The GCH believes that LRGs should be able to participate in UN meetings in their own right, alongside States, civil society and other stakeholders. While LRGs are invited from time to time as guest speakers at specific events, the GCH advocates for a more sustainable engagement of LRGs in multilateralism. That is why it has been a strong supporter of the Forum of Mayors from the outset.

As a unique initiative within the UN, the Forum of Mayors offers a useful platform for dialogue on sustainable urban development, for mayors themselves but also for States and the UN. It is a major entry point for LRGs to the UN system and encourages more inclusive, effective and relevant multilateralism because it brings the UN closer to the realities and needs of populations.

The GCH has established a close relationship with the UNECE secretariat and has been involved in preparing, organizing, and following up the Forum. Recently institutionalized as a subsidiary organ of the CUDHLM sitting in Geneva,²¹ the GCH has been invited to take part in the Bureau of the Forum of Mayors, in support of its President, the Mayor of Geneva. In this capacity, the GCH will continue to follow the new body as it develops. It will also strive to expand its current geographical scope (Europe-Central Asia), in order to hear the voices of mayors from other regions (Africa, Asia-Pacific, Middle East and Northern Africa, Latin America and the Caribbean). To that end, the GCH will cooperate with all UN Regional Economic Commissions to establish an interregional segment of the Forum of Mayors.

Negotiations

The GCH follows relevant UN intergovernmental negotiations, monitoring the degree to which UN resolutions negotiated and adopted by Member States take into account the role and perspectives of LRGs. Introducing "LRG-friendly" language into intergovernmental texts (that are often the most concrete outcome of a UN conference and reflect the commitment of the international community on a given matter) is a way to acknowledge the contribution that LRGs make to addressing global issues and to multilateralism.

For example, the GCH held informal discussions with States to introduce specific language into HRC resolution 51/12 on "Local government and human rights". It successfully anchored the principle of

21 See Economic Commission for Europe, Decision relating to the Forum of Mayors, ECE/EX/2023/L.4, adopted on 13 January 2023.

a “whole-of-government approach” in the text,²² and encouraged States to involve LRGs in actions to follow up the UPR and to provide adequate resources to enable LRGs to fulfil their human rights responsibilities.

The GCH also contributed specific LRG-related language to other important intergovernmental negotiations, including the pandemic treaty being negotiated at WHO²³ and the plastic pollution treaty²⁴ that is being discussed in the framework of the UN Environment Assembly.

Status

As noted, LRGs have no formal standing at the UN, though they can participate to UN meetings if they are invited as a guest speaker for a specific event, are accredited through a city network that has NGO ECOSOC status, or are invited to join a national delegation of their State. The GCH has encouraged States to include LRGs in their delegations, for instance to the UPR. However, none of these practices are sustainable, or satisfactory for LRGs that wish to participate and speak in their own right.

The GCH has therefore been reflecting on the possibility of establishing a specific UN status for LRGs. For this to happen, States would need to formally support creation of such a status. The GCH foresees two options, which are not mutually exclusive and could be pursued in parallel:

- a) States might approve a procedure that grants *ad hoc* **status** to LRGs, enabling them to take part in specific meetings. States would seize opportunities as they arise to grant specific status to LRGs in relevant processes, such as intergovernmental negotiations on the pandemic treaty at WHO or the Global Refugee Forum convened by UNHCR.
- b) States might create a **general status** for LRGs, enabling them to participate in the work of the UN on terms similar to the NGO ECOSOC status. This option would imply a lengthy diplomatic process, and the adoption of a UNGA or ECOSOC resolution.

Regardless of the option retained, several issues would have to be addressed. Who could obtain the status, on what grounds? Who would decide whether an LRG fulfilled the relevant criteria? Should the number of LRGs with status be limited, or unrestricted (like the arrangement for NGOs)?

22 A “whole-of-government approach” aims to ensure horizontal and vertical policy coherence across all sectors and levels of government. For example, while international human rights law is often within the purview of Ministries of Foreign Affairs, human rights are relevant to many other Ministries and to other levels of governments in the State.

23 For instance, the GCH has suggested including a new guiding principle acknowledging that a whole-of-government approach is required to effectively prevent, prepare for and respond to pandemics. It has also proposed that the new pandemic treaty should acknowledge that urban planning is a key element of preparedness and response, and that cities and local authorities play key roles in preventing, preparing and responding to health emergencies.

24 The GCH has suggested that, to be effective, the new plastic pollution treaty should call on States to follow a “whole-of-government” and “whole of society” approach by addressing the full life cycle of plastics and all relevant stakeholders. The GCH has also argued that the treaty should spell out the roles of local governments, which are (a) implementors, entitled to capacity building and resources, as appropriate, in each State; (b) decision-makers, under a division of labour determined by each State; and (c) entities that formally and publicly implement and disseminate the instrument at local level.

Such questions look intractable. In practice, however, some could be resolved in a pragmatic manner over time. Past multilateral experience suggests that many concerns will not eventuate or that pragmatic solutions will emerge over time.

New UN LRG body

Noting that the UNSG has proposed an Advisory Group on LRGs, the GCH also led several exchanges on the establishment of a new UN body dedicated to LRGs. Here again, the political will of States will be the decisive factor.

Such a new body could build on the precedent of the UN Advisory Committee of Local Authorities (UNACLA), established in 1999 to strengthen dialogue between the UN System and local authorities involved in implementing global agendas and their local dimensions. A new body could be composed of LRG representatives and could exercise an advisory function to the UN, taking inspiration from existing UN bodies such as the Human Rights Advisory Committee, the International Law Commission, or other standing/ad hoc committees to the ECOSOC and UNGA.



Like the creation of a new status for LRGs, such a body would have to address several questions. What would be its mandate? Where would it be positioned in the UN system? Who could become a member and who would select its members, on what grounds? What would its procedures be? How many members could such a body accommodate? These complex issues might be addressed during the negotiation process.

Precedents could be looked at, such as the Forum of Mayors, recently established as a new body with a mandate, a venue, a clear position within UNECE architecture, the ability to provide advice and recommendations to the CUDHLM, and a defined membership (one mayor per country). States discussed the selection process for mayors at length, and found distinct roles for States, the UNECE secretariat, and the Bureau of the Forum of Mayors (composed of three mayors). The selection process was carefully negotiated by States and mayors to balance the interests of various stakeholders. As noted, the Forum has achieved something unique in the whole UN system: mayors can directly address a UN intergovernmental body and make recommendations on relevant matters.

Another interesting precedent is the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe, which has 612 members representing more than 130,000 LRGs from 46 member States. As the voice of Europe's municipalities and regions, the Congress fosters consultation and political dialogue between national governments and local and regional authorities. Since its foundation in 1994, The Congress has developed a governance structure and procedures and built relationship with the Council of Europe and its various bodies. When thinking about a new UN LRG body, it may be fruitful to look more deeply into the character and evolution of the Congress.

Conclusion

International Geneva offers LRGs numerous opportunities to engage in multilateralism and make their voices heard by a wide array of international stakeholders. In the last three years, the GCH has used its multilateral expertise, network, convening power, communication tools, and neutral stance (as an actor outside of the UN system) to fulfil its mission. It seeks to identify and open opportunities for LRGs to participate in multilateral forums, create a convincing narrative in support of their participation, and assist LRGs and city networks to cooperate more intensively with States, international organizations, and NGOs.

The GCH has been successful at raising awareness in parts of the Geneva-based international community about the role and perspectives of LRGs. This work has addressed human rights, digitalization, health, plastic pollution, migration, and other themes. But raising awareness is only a first step. To make further progress, strong polit-

ical support and sustained commitment by all stakeholders will be required, including from the GCH's founders, to realize the opportunities that are available and persuade the multilateral system to include LRGs more fully. Change requires time and much effort, and the UN multilateral system is a "large tanker". Nonetheless, the GCH believes the prize is worth the effort because, despite its shortcomings, the multilateral system will continue to provide the pulse of the international community. It is the space where global challenges are addressed, and where international agreements are made that affect every aspect of our lives. The GCH will continue to organize events and develop a narrative, and, above all, rally political support for participation of LRGs in multilateral forums. It will support the call of the UNSG to build a more inclusive, effective and relevant multilateralism that responds to the needs and aspirations of the people it serves.





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