City Diplomacy: Towards More Strategic Networking? Learning with WHO Healthy Cities

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Abstract
Cities are increasingly capturing the attention of major international actors and now regularly feature in multilateral processes. Yet while there are many studies on networking among cities, there have been few studies of 'city networks' as formal and institutionalized governance structures facilitating city-to-city and city-to-other actors cooperation, or 'city diplomacy'. Institutionalized networks of cities, while not new, are becoming a growing presence on the international scene, almost omnipresent and perhaps even too common. Might it be time for a 'Darwinian' selection between city networking options? Diving deeper into this networked challenge, this essay focuses on the effects this networked diplomacy and overlap it might have on cities. Drawing on a research collaboration between the UCL City Leadership Laboratory at University College London and the World Health Organization's Healthy Cities Network and both a global dataset of city networks as well as qualitative focus group data, we consider the growth of these governance structures, their strengths, but also the weaknesses associated with their rapid growth, and how cities can engage with this networked landscape more strategically. In short, we argue that the potential of city networks must go hand-in-hand with more integrative and strategic thinking at both local and international levels.

Policy implications

- *Recognize the global extent of city networking*: global policy actors are faced today by a vast city networking landscape well beyond limiting 'national networks' and 'twinning' partnerships between cities; yet we have little systematic appreciation of the shape and impact of this landscape.
- *Public-private coalitions are key*: albeit critical for legitimacy and long term survival, the support of multilateral organizations to city networking is not enough to grant their success and requires other global policy actors (e.g. business and philanthropies).
- *More strategic and less opportunistic networking is needed*: there might be today too many city networks, painting a confusing global landscape of possible engagements and raising questions of possible natural selection among networks in a resource-constrained space.
- *Networks are communities, not just branding opportunities*: cities' incentives to the involvement in institutionalized networking remain closely connected to investment/market opportunities and legitimacy-building, but it is the role of networks as 'communities of practice' that cities regularly reiterate as key to success.

Introduction

Cities are increasingly capturing the attention of major international actors such as UN agencies, EU and World Bank, now regularly featuring in high-level talks such as the negotiation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). This recognition is far from sidelined. For instance, if advocacy by cities on climate change has traditionally taken place outside of formal frameworks, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change has now called for an explicit focus on cities in its sixth assessment (AR6), and even a special report in the seventh (AR7). This also follows growing participation in national and regional politics by individual city leaders and coalitions of cities both in the Global North

and South, from the devolution challenges of the UK to the smart city hype in India and the United States.[1] With cities currently housing more than half the world's population and standing on the frontline of key challenges such as industrial pollution, the spread of infectious diseases, economic and social inequalities and migration, it is progressively clear why the participation of city leaders in discussing current societal challenges is vital (e.g. Bloomberg, 2015). As has been argued elsewhere (Acuto, 2016), this urbanization of international affairs also comes with mounting acknowledgment of the active participation of cities, as local governments not just as places, in global policy processes. Institutionalized networks of cities, while not new, are becoming a growing presence on the international scene.

They are now common vehicles for cities to de-localize their policy making by linking across regional, national and international boundaries. In this paper we consider the extent of this networked governance, its strength but also the weaknesses associated with its rapid growth, arguing that cities can engage with this networked landscape more strategically. This is not however just a theoretical intervention: the essay draws on a collaboration between the World Health Organization's European Healthy Cities network and the City Leadership Laboratory (the Lab) at University College London. This link was geared at better understanding the potential for 'city diplomacy' and at offering advice for national healthy cities networks and cities as to engaging across science-policy boundaries more effectively.

Cities as actors, networks as organizations

While there are many assessments of networking among cities (e.g. Derudder et al., 2012), there have been few studies of 'city networks' as institutionalized governance structures facilitating city-to-city and city-to-other actors cooperation. This is a critical gap in a time where cities are increasingly at the forefront of international affairs and where city-based discussions are integrated within major multilateral agendas such as SGDs and the Paris Climate Agreement (Acuto and Parnell, 2016). As some scholars have recently started to discuss, we tend to treat cities more as places than actors and yet the latter dimension, embodied here by formal city networking, remains understudied (Bouteligier 2014; Ljungkvist, 2014). The WHO European Healthy Cities network offered an apt testing ground for this dimension. The network is an established presence in the wider landscape of city diplomacy which has been operating for over a quarter century, representing an example of regional network (focused in particular on Europe) while remaining clearly connected to national politics (as it is formed by national 'chapters' from European countries) and international agendas (as it is sponsored by WHO). Additionally, and key for a science-policy collaboration: the network has a well-established tradition as community of practice for municipal officers, health practitioners and academics to convene in regular meetings, and has produced regular self-assessments of its operations and challenges.[2] Over the past two years the Lab has been partnering with WHO to better address the challenges associated to such active presence of cities on an international stage.

Here, then, we move more specifically to the 'actor' dimension of cities as agents in, not just places of, city networking, and discuss 'city networks' as institutions. Elsewhere 'city networks' have been described as formalized organizations involving cities as their main membership and characterized by reciprocal and established patterns of communication, policy making and exchange (Acuto and Rayner, 2016). Certainly, this study is not a first. There is a well-developed body of work on city networking in the context of environmental and sustainability initiatives (e.g. Jensen, 2004), and an often less advertised but refined scholarship

linked directly to WHO Healthy Cities looking at health policy in cities in a networked way (e.g. de Leeuw 2001). There is even some scholarly and practical writing on the role of city networking in traditional international relations (IR) arenas like conflict and security (Mush et al., 2008). Yet these remain 'silo-ed' approaches, failing to take into account the complexity and breadth of city based networks in particular across different sectors. Here we aim to avoid this bias by starting from a review of the city network landscape. This might in fact be an area where the objects of study themselves, like the C40 Climate Leadership Group or the EUROCITIES network, have done more work than academia. For instance, the United Cities and Local Government (UCLG) network has now ran for over a decade a committee on city diplomacy. As such, the partnership with WHO Healthy Cities at the basis of this paper highlights the need to bridge this science-policy gap, aiming at an integration of practice-based accounts with theoretical (scholarly) thinking.

Learning 'with' WHO: a science-policy approach

Building on this ethos, the methodology underpinning the essay is two-fold: a large review of the landscape of city networks, upon which we draw preliminary policy considerations, and more in-depth interview-based explorations giving a glimpse of these issues in the context of a network. The essay therefore couples broader generalizations with the specific context of WHO Healthy Cities. According to our definition above, and by scanning the horizon of national, sub-national, issue-based and international initiative that might fit this definition, we could estimate that there might be over 200 such organizations globally, many of which have been in place, like Healthy Cities, for several decades.[3] In order to offer a snapshot of this wide picture of networked urban governance, we reviewed a representative sample of 170 of these for their geographic spread, their leadership structure, themes of their activities, outputs and affiliations with other stakeholders. For this purpose the study's database includes both national (members cities from a single country) and international city networks (cities from multiple countries from around the world), and distinguishes these latter from more regionally-specific networks (e.g. Europe, Southeast Asia) that identify with a distinct international geographical area, or the smaller context of sub-national networks that are confined within specific areas of a country. We focus our snapshot of city diplomacy across this variety of networks, rather than in one specific geography, to offer a more realistic picture of the variety of formal relations cities have today within their own borders, across their region, and internationally, which all co-exist at the same time.

This investigation paints an important backdrop to city diplomacy, flagging several issues of concern for both urban and global policy-making. This approach is then supplemented, in a series of more qualitative sections throughout the essay, by analysis from over twenty individual interviews and four focus groups conducted at the 44th and 45th Annual meetings of the WHO European Healthy Cites

Network respectively in Athens, Greece (2014), and in Kuopio, Finland (2015). The aim of this research has been to appreciate the implications of such complex landscape from a practical policy viewpoint, that of Healthy Cities members, drawing on the experience of city leaders and staff, as well as national network managers (within the broader European Healthy Cites framework), to encourage a deeper sense of what it means to conduct city diplomacy, and to inform more systematic academia-policy interactions inspired by the Lab-WHO partnership.

City networking: geographies and incentives

City networks are critical elements of the global landscape of city diplomacy. To better understand the policy implications of this networked reality, we should, first, take a closer look at the emergence and the incentives towards city networking. Yet this also begs, in the next section, important strategic questions for cities that should be answered with more in-depth engagement with cities themselves.

The emergence of city networks

First we need to step away from depictions of the role of mayors, city officers and municipal governments as downward looking. While localized policy making might still be the predominant activity of municipal governments, it is undeniable that cities, big and small, now have to face a wider policy landscape of connections, markets and peers which go beyond the local. With over two hundred networks active globally, city diplomacy is no rare occurrence and city networks are a widespread phenomenon. Among these, there is a core group of long-standing organizations, mainly comprised tight-knit domestic networks (some of which trace their origins more than 100 years back) in developed countries like the US, Switzerland or Japan. This demonstrates that city diplomacy can, at least within national framework, be sustained in the long run – an issue we return to later in the article. Despite the economic and political limitations of city-to-city cooperation (see Bontenbal and van Lindert, 2009) throughout the last century, and the predominance in the Cold War era (and early 1990s) of bilateral twinning arrangements (Jayne et al., 2011), a similar argument could be made for transnational initiatives like the International Union of Local Authorities, with more than 250 members across 40 countries that just celebrated its 100th birthday, demonstrating the potential for international municipal cooperation. The landscape of city diplomacy, however, is changing and expanding. Among those networks that are currently operating today, 29 per cent were created between 1990 and 2000 while 30 per cent were created since 2001. This means an increase of 43 networks in the decade between 2004 and 2014, more than four new networks per year, testifying to the mounting demands and interest for networking for local authorities.

Importantly, we see an expansion in supra-national city diplomacy. While national networks continue to represent the largest type of city networks (49 per cent in total, and

36 per cent of the networks created since 2001), there is also a growing trend for regional urban associations in Europe, Latin America or Asia (21 per cent in total, representing 30 per cent in networks created since 2001). This is equally pushed forward by regional bodies like the EU or the ASEAN, but also by multilateral processes like those of WHO. For example, the WHO promotes its local health agendas through a number of region-specific WHO-affiliated city networks (Healthy Cities in Europe, Alliance for Healthy Cities in Asia, etc.) that help local governments implement WHO goals and share health strategies among each other (de Leeuw et al., 2014).

International networks (29 per cent of the total, 46 per cent of the networks created since 2001) are starting to populate the overall landscape quite substantially. The WHO is not unique in its push for this cooperation. For instance, the UN agency for human settlements, UN-Habitat, launched in 2012 a Global Network of Safer Cities aimed at strengthening cooperation on matters of urban safety. The internationalization of city networks is not only being pushed by multilateral organization but also by influential members of the private sector. Just over 63 per cent of the 'international' city networks surveyed by the Lab have forms of multilateral and corporate partnership with organizations including UNICEF, the ILO, UN HABITAT, or private interests like Google, SAP and Cisco, or philanthropic influence as with Bloomberg Philanthropies and the Rockefeller Foundation. This is particularly the case in networks for sustainability, but the landscape of city networking flags some commonality with health, security and several other sectors. Hence, even at a summary look, there appears to be ample evidence to argue city diplomacy is flourishing, but what are its challenges?

Networking healthy cities: multilateral genesis

WHO Healthy Cities stands as a testimony to the legacy and growing popularity of city networking. WHO European Healthy Cities Network consists of nearly 100 cities and towns from the WHO European Region that are committed to health and sustainable development. Members join the network based on explicit criteria that are regularly renewed. Each five-year 'phase' of the network focuses on core priority themes and is launched with a political declaration by member city leaders and a set of strategic goals broadly aligned with WHO priorities. For instance, the overarching goal of the current Phase VI (2014–2018) is implementing the 'Health 2020' framework at the local level, as with the implementation of the 'Health for All' agenda in previous phases.[4] In this sense, as a body driven by its partnership with multilateral policy making in WHO, Healthy Cities differs from the nature of networks like C40 (established by cities) or Rockefeller 100 (established by private entities). In fact, Healthy Cities was originally devised in its first phase of implementation, from 1987 to 1992, to serve as a 'field laboratory' (Tsouros, 1995) for testing 'Health for All' at local level and giving important feedback to WHO and member states – a 'networks of commitment and diffusion' (Kickbusch, 2003, p. 385) within the broader WHO policy arena.

Hence if the WHO has promoted its local health agendas through a number of region-specific affiliated city networks (e.g. European Healthy Cities), it has done so while, at least in Europe, attending to the need of maintaining a focus on national specificities. The WHO European Healthy Cities Network, then, is constituted by sub-networks, established nationally (Italian Healthy Cities, Hungarian Healthy Cities, UK Healthy Cities, etc.), that allow cross-national connections while not losing sight of their central government's agendas and localized specificities. Along with the proactivity of a highly involved WHO Europe office, this seems to be a core driver of the longevity of the network. As both city leaders and network leads testify, it speaks to the importance of paying attention to national agendas even in a highly globalized world, while being able to rely on colleagues facing similar challenges abroad.

Networks as communities

A key function of networking, and one that is reflected in Healthy Cities, is their role as an information-sharing platforms aimed at empowering local initiatives (Bouteligier, 2014). While it is not always possible to establish a direct causal link between a project starting in a city and involvement in or by a network, city networks formalize and institutionalize forums for cities to learn from each other and plan jointly. This can work in one of two main ways. On one hand, networks offer cities the opportunity to act as a group and band together towards the achievement of given shared goals (Lee, 2013). On the other hand, networks as shared information platforms can empower individual cities with technical knowledge, shared resources and technology they would not be able to obtain on their own – something which cities appreciate even if it is not directly applicable to their own reality (Bulkeley, 2006).

Clearly several networks are increasingly explicitly focusing on this role as knowledge brokers. For instance in its most recent reports, the C40 has emphasized how 'sharing is working' and how policy mobility, as well as joint experimentation, in the network is yielding important results.[5] Here Healthy Cities offers an example of how such practices can be made explicit. Because of the high number of academic-practitioners involved, as well as because of the regular and public review of the network's operate (published in journals like *Urban Health* and *Health Promotion International*), the WHO network has regularly understood how its national networks 'at different levels and interactive manners, are epistemic communities' (de Leeuw, 2013, p. 18; also see Heritage and Green 2012). Focus groups confirm this deep entrenchment of research thinking and practice, and the early (in respect to other networks) adoption of common metrics is illustrative of this. Healthy Cities developed a set of 32 healthy city indicators (HCIs) to describe the health of its citizens and capture a range of local initiatives addressing the wider dimensions of health. The introduction of HCIs has encouraged cities to adopt a structured process of collecting information on the health of their citizens and build on this information for evidence-based policy

and to strengthen collaboration with peers overseas, where Healthy Cities expressed a clear interest in 'inter-city comparability' and an understanding of one's own 'standing' in a community of practice (Webster and Sanderson, 2012).

Networking incentives

The desire to better include cities in international challenges is not a unilateral move by international institutions. Rather, this trend also highlights the commonplace frustration among municipal authorities with the failure of central governments to reach meaningful decisions on matters of pressing concern such as environmental change, poverty alleviation, the improvement of existing trade deals or the management of increasingly rapid flows of people across the globe.

The enthusiasm demonstrated by cities in the past few decades, testified by the figures above, suggests cities see real gains in engaging through networks. For instance, the recent set of reports by C40 and ARUP on *Climate Action in Megacities*, the *Powers for Climate Action* and the *Potential for Climate Action* (a set of studies developed in collaboration with the UCL City Leadership Lab) all pointed at the impact of city diplomacy and of C40 as a network in offering preliminary evidence that collaborative modes of urban governance are delivering transformative action in cities.[6]

While signing up and advocating for international agendas such as 'Health for All' or the climate action campaigning of networks like C40 and ICLEI, many cities remain engaged in these networked activities because of their 'localizable benefits'.[7] Healthy Cities' city leaders show clear pragmatic approaches to city networking. A common worry among these and other leaders consulted at both Kuopio and Athens WHO summits was to whether such initiatives would all necessarily translate into actually fundable or market-worthy initiatives. If over 63 per cent of the international city networks surveyed by the Lab have forms of multilateral and corporate affiliation, health seems not to have reached analogous levels of public-private partnership. As a few city leaders confirmed to us confidentially in focus groups, there are questions as to whether Healthy Cities allows similar levels of 'market access' to those of more popular sustainability networks like C40 or 100 Resilient Cities.[8] This is well matched in the experience of (and literature on) several environmental networks, where participation allows several cities to attracted networked procurements from large business interests like Honeywell or Siemens (Gordon, 2013; Roman, 2010). In Healthy Cities some positive feedback emerges, including from smaller cities, about the benefits of being able to meet representatives from other cities at network events, and coordinate joint projects. This has for instance been flagged regularly as an effective mechanism to attract EU funding, for example, via the UrbACT scheme or connecting cities and other EU regional development infrastructural grants.

Yet this is not just an investment story nor should we quickly jump to the conclusion that it is all about neoliberalism and market access. In our focus groups with WHO Healthy Cities the importance of networking in creating a

regular forum for international accountability mechanisms also emerged as key. Networked assessments (as with the HCIs noted above) can positively compel cities to revisit their practices and the ways they collect and present data on local problems, also emerging visibly as an important incentive. Equally, the sense of a well-established community of practice, sharing experiences on policy experiments and ways to 'get around national limitations' echoed clearly in the views of municipal officers and national network managers alike.[9] In short, it is important to understand the 'networked benefits' of city diplomacy in their quintessential 'glocal' characteristics: it allows us to seek alternative pathways to policy making between purely municipal and limiting central-local approaches, and it necessarily needs to be read as international (or regional) while not forgetting the pragmatic applied views of a mayor or a municipal officer. Hence it seems like, both from landscape data and deeper interview engagements in Healthy cities, the issue of incentives should be presented in a more nuanced fashion than a pure market story – accounting for the key role of the communities of practice that emerge in networks like WHO Healthy Cities.

Complex policy challenges

Being a member of a network offers cities the alluring possibility of channeling funding, drawing on and offering technical know-how support to further urban (re)development projects and giving cities the chance to have a say in national, regional and international politics. However, the vast array of networks available leaves cities with a dilemma: where should they focus their networking efforts? In our case, as a snapshot of the broader networking imperatives to city leaders, mayors and their staff have often been confronted with the issue of which network should they chose to join, if they choose to join any at all, and how can they ensure that the network they join has a large enough say in the issues at stake for them to serve locally-relevant purposes. If formal networks now number in the hundreds, then, this criticism is not an inconsequential matter for cities big and small. From the perspective of cities, there are two main challenges created by the sheer number of networks. The first, at the network level, is that issues might then be parceled out and silo-ed between networks. Simply, too many in the network membership does not translate directly into inter-sectorial cooperation and integrated benefits within city hall itself (see Figure 1). Second, at the city level, is that this networked imperative might in fact put a larger burden for network management on city officers. Simply, many networks result in just as many needs for communication, reporting, collaborating and engaging on already stretched local administrations.

A vast landscape

The enthusiasm and the rapid creation of many new networks over the past decades, with marked increases from the late-1980s, has led to several networks adopting narrower and narrower focuses in order to differentiate themselves from others, while others have broadened their catchment to cross-cutting themes like 'sustainability' or 'resilience'. The danger of this trend is in its tendency towards fragmented and potential silo-ing of urban matters. Overlap does of course not always mean conflict but it might lead to several parallel tracks and the development of an international ecosystem of city networking that can be hard to navigate for cities.

This complexity is at times echoed at the national level too, adding to further splintering in the landscape of city networking. One example of geographic overlap is for instance in Indonesia, where five separate municipal networks (ADEKSI, APEKSI, APKASI, ADKASI, and another network dedicated to the particularities of island-state municipalities) crowd the national landscape.[10] This is matched in Global North countries too, and also leads to parallel multiple networks. So for instance, if in contexts like Australia, New Zealand or Italy there remains one single national association of cities, in cases like the UK (with several different networks like Core Cities, Key Cities, the Scottish Cities Alliance and so forth) the role of city diplomacy in national politics still lacks a coherent single voice. These qualitative observations also apply to our

Figure 1. Number of networks by focus areas across the last century

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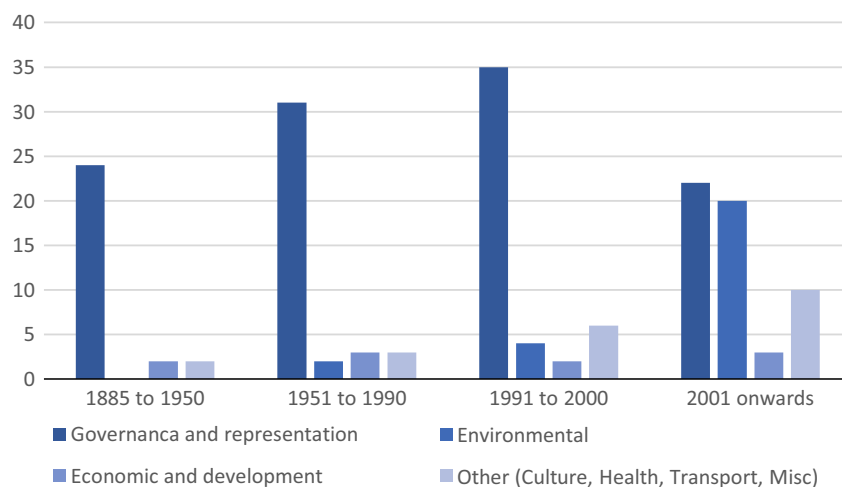
big picture review of 170 city networks. For example, in this study, we observed numerous overlaps across a vast variety of dimensions including geographic coverage (many networks in a certain region), thematic (many networks approaching similar issues) or a mixture of both addressing similar issues with similar geographical coverage, and little communication between them.

Issue-based overlap is also potentially extensive, and its real-world consequences over demand for networking activities are critical. As one example of thematic overlap, of the 170 networks studied, almost 50 of these to be related to climate change. Among these, five visible players (C40, the Climate Change Alliance, ICLEI, UCLG and the World Mayors Council on Climate) on their own held between them more than 30 events and major international meetings on the topic of climate change (without even including smaller workshop activities) in 2014 alone.

Many different city networks often offer similar channels to similar, if not the same, institutional goals. For example, within the 170 networks dataset, of 25 pan-European regional networks, 40 per cent of them clearly described their mission as improving participatory governance and the presence of European urban areas in local and EU-level politics (compared to pan-European networks meeting for other goals such as promoting urban culture, environmental goals or urban health). The idea of social 'Darwinianism' among institutions has already been discussed by in Keiner and Kim (2007, 1p. 386): is it possible that we are in such a vastly networked conditions that, in fact, we might be witnessing a progressive 'natural selection' among city networks, where only the 'stronger' and more environmentally-fit (in terms of funding, visibility and efficacy) networks will in fact survive? It is important to note, however, that this availability of networking channels is not in and of itself a problem. The enthusiasm shown by practitioners for important world issues such as peace, democracy and climate change can only be seen as positive. However, the volume of meetings, networks and events also has negative implications specific to cities, especially those that are smaller and more resource strapped.

Healthy cities in a sea of networks?

There are thus, in theory, several overlapping if not redundant features of the city networks 'ecosystem'. Yet what are the consequences of this on the everyday activities of cities themselves? Preliminary evidence from our work with WHO Healthy Cities points at resource strain and questions as to the actual relevance of this volume of networking demands. For instance, in a focus groups with mayors and other high-level city executives from across Europe at the 45th WHO Healthy Cities Summit in Kuopio, one major problem highlighted by all attendants was that resources were being spread too thinly across several projects. This is true, perhaps unsurprisingly, of both small, medium and large cities. As a senior figure from a major European global city put it to us in Athens in 2014, while there is tremendous potential to share expertise effectively and learn much from multiple network memberships, cities might today be 'swimming in a sea of networks' and the capacity to choose directions wisely might be more and more complicated.[11]

Further, many city officers within WHO Healthy Cities raised the issue that it remains difficult to justify allocating resources to international activities when constituents cannot see the direct benefits of engaging internationally. For example, one mayor for a major UK city cited travel costs as being particularly problematic for city leaders (elected or not), especially if they are compelled to attend more and more international summits. Expenses which are considered necessary for state-level politicians are more controversial on the local level and while networks and IGOs recognize that cities have a valid role to play on international negotiating tables, the same cannot always be said for local constituents. Thus, if externally cities are faced with the question of what processes they should adhere to and what resource commitments they should make, internally they are faced with an additional double-faced dilemma: how, as cities, are they to manage relations with the outside world? And how does this remain accountable to the needs and demands of their local constituencies?

Crucially, in discussion with mayors and city leaders in our focus groups, it emerged that one of the problems with city networking is that there are very few guides on best inter-sectorial practices. City networks remain mostly silo-ed in different thematic areas, as does much municipal policy, and yet mayors are more and more requited to think in an integrated systems way, linking issues as disparate as safety, air pollution and smart innovation together. While there is a growing body of literature describing networks of cities and the benefits of cities interacting internationally, there is hardly any literature on the decision-making process behind this. Analysis of both focus groups and 'deep dive' case studies in WHO Healthy Cities highlighted how in fact there is a growing need for a pragmatic approach not only to local politics but also to international relations by cities, if not to the 'glocal' translations between the two. Questions raised included, for example, whether cities do better focusing exclusively on big networks, which have a strong international presence, or in smaller, regional networks which are better geared to having a narrower, more local and potentially more visible impact. Looking on the micro level of the city, we can ask whether cities need an organized and central office on international affairs, or whether, conversely, international engagements can be managed more effectively split among different teams in the city management. Finally, looking at the networks on the macro-level, we ask how relations between networks can be structured more strategically. This research agenda remains, to date, embryonic but clearly of direct policy relevance. In essence, it might be time for cities and the academe alike to think more strategically and less anecdotally about city diplomacy.

There is here an important point about political leadership. Networks like ICLEI, chaired by the mayor of Seoul Park Wonsoon, UCLG with the mayor of Istanbul Kadir Topbaş, or indeed C40 with a series of leaders like Eduardo Paes from Rio and now Anne Hidalgo from Paris, all speak to the importance of internationalization champions playing a bridging

role between the mundanity of everyday urban affairs and global audiences like those of COP21 or SDGs. Our WHO case confirms this but also points out the need for a 'deep' and continuing engagement of political leadership not just from major cities but across the board. As already recognized by prior studies of Healthy Cities, politicians have a key role in national networks as they 'convey legitimacy' and can 'enlarge the grounded epistemic community' (see Heritage and Green 2012). However, as these assessments pointed out and as mirrored in our focus groups, city networks remain relatively fragile achievements: mirroring changing fads and shifting research agendas, epistemic communities 'come and go' (Eyles et al., 2009, p. 35), political cycles affect the presence of a continued leadership by member cities, and market/financial pressures make the economic grounds on which these collaborations stand often quite wobbly.

Networking networks?

A central policy question relates to networks themselves: how are successful networks connecting and coordinating with other networks while avoiding conflict and overlaps in their mutual goals? With over 200 city networks and counting, across all shapes, issues and forms, is this a time for a natural selection in city networks? Keiner and Kim (2007) noted how these institutions seem to have one of two 'Darwinian' options: merge into more comprehensive structures capable of further cross-sectorial collaboration, or risk being disbanded by 'stronger' city networks.

Whether we look at qualitative or quantitative data, issues or governance shapes, or whether we focus on a single issue in relation to the whole (health vis-à-vis city diplomacy) or the overall landscape itself, this scenario seems crowded and complex. Increasingly, we see emerging networks of networks or 'meta-networks' that arise to facilitate the relations between networks (Acuto, 2013; Bouteligier, 2011; Keiner and Kim, 2007). Similarly we see networks in themselves, as with C40 or UCLG, creating sub-networks on thematic issues, whether it is municipal waste or democratic accountability. Equally, there is as of yet very little hierarchy between city networks and the international system is still very much in flux between a host of new networks being created, old or possibly unsuccessful (or 'dormant') ones merging into new ones with others or disappearing and larger ones consolidating their position. UCLG, a major representative of cities on cross-sectorial issues today, is for instance an example of this, having emerged in 2004 as the amalgamation of the International Union of Local Authorities and the United Towns Organization, and having moved to a series of sub-networking activities around all sorts of issues including city diplomacy. In health, WHO Healthy Cities did the same by relying on national and regional networks of networks, divided by country, mobilizing a Healthy Cities agenda across cities of all sizes in Europe. The UN Global Network on Safer Cities could be a similar evolution relying on national networks like that of Mexico, and local champions (like Palermo, Bogota or Montreal) to further the network's goals. The true test here is thus whether networks

can establish themselves as recognized fora within their given fields, but a further challenge emerges from their existence in a complex and multi-issue multilateral arena where issues of, for instance climate, equality, disaster preparedness and urban development stand side by side as in the new Sustainable Development Goals.

Different from the existence of a state-centric UN system, where certain institutions like WHO, UNHCR or the UNFCCC have established themselves as 'go to' fora for issues like health, refugees or climate, in the city diplomacy sphere no clear venue represents urban debates on, for example, disaster reduction, culture or climate.[12] Hence, if one prominent feature of state-level diplomacy is that of 'forum shopping' (Busch, 2007; Karns and Mingst, 2013) move issues across established fora.[13] This practice to allow for the negotiations to yield the best outcomes at the center (as negotiations on climate in the primate climate venue like UNFCCC) or marginally (as with negotiations on health in a gender venue like UN Women), no such feature is easily available to city diplomacy. With city networks there is very little scope for forum shopping. Few networks have a well-established identity within the cluster of existing networks. Among those which do, it is clear that a large number derive this identity from their affiliation with a well-recognized IOs and private sector (such as UN-Habitat or UNESCO Cultural Cities) while a much smaller number, including UCLG, C40 and a number of regional networks such as EUROCITIES, were put together by cities and city leaders themselves and have gained legitimacy via partnership with the private sector, width of coverage or regional relevance. No doubt, one of the prime reasons for engagement in WHO Healthy Cities highlighted in our focus groups was that of the affiliation with the World Health Organization as source of authority, expert advice, mediation and local legitimacy. This is certainly echoed in experiences such as UNESCO cities or the vast amount of time-limited and theme-focused networks prompted by UrbACT in Europe. In short, it is nearly impossible to decouple the city diplomacy story from the landscape of state-based and multilateral politics.

City networks embedded in multilateral bodies like WHO (or indeed UNESCO, UN-Habitat and many other examples), while strengthened by the legitimacy of these institutions, can also be made fragile by the internal politics of these very same organizations. The support of WHO in Healthy Cities is key and shows that long-term membership does lead to benefits in integrating health in other municipal agendas (de Leeuw et al., 2015). Yet this also leads to an exposure to WHO affairs more in general. As a politician pointed out in one of the focus groups, the 'UN connection' is critical to maintain a legitimate and long-term engagement, but it creates a form of 'UN dependency' that exposes it to shifts in the (WHO's) institutional priorities and 'internal spats'.[14] Hence, the policy confusion of that municipal officers in North and South cities might face in choosing which networks to engage in demonstrates that there is still no understandable roadmap of such complex institutional framework, and very little systematic data at hand for city leaders to stir their international engagements.

For a more strategic city networking

Whether it is the eyes of a municipal officer or the pen of an urban scholar, an international overview of the global policy landscape of city diplomacy might be rather disorienting. Clearer roadmaps for city diplomacy are needed. Our study has only begun to unpack a vastly complex reality, that of city networking, which confronts policy makers and academics alike with puzzling choices.

The preliminary goal of this paper has been to evaluate the complexity and implications of such scenario, based on the experience of work with WHO Healthy Cities, to offer initial suggestion as to a series of considerations necessary for cities and research organizations to tackle this complex networking landscape. This approach highlighted how more systematic but also cross-sectorial views are needed and would assist cities to assess their commitments as well as networks to better structure themselves based on the limitations of cities. As we highlighted, although there is a wealth of literature on how states do and should engage in institutions, very little comparative literature is available for cities and very little non-thematic non-case studies analysis is at hand to make sense of such a complex puzzle. This in turn can lead to questions of Darwinianism amidst city networks and diminishing views on the wealth of city-based efforts ongoing in world politics.

These considerations towards a greater strategic approach in city diplomacy work on both city and network levels. On the city-level, participants in our Lab-WHO research noticed that irrespective of size those cities which draw the most satisfaction from their network participation are those which approach networking strategically. While this remains a qualitative observation in need of more systematic analysis (perhaps via a global city diplomacy satisfaction survey beyond the means of this study), the elements of strategic international engagement and praise/contentment for city networks seem to appear regularly hand in hand in focus groups. Strategic networking is generally embodied in practices such as consistently reviewing international engagements, as with the Finnish city of Kuopio within Healthy Cities that is benchmarking international engagements against its strategic urban plan. Yet, even just by reviewing mayoral press releases, strategic urban plans and international office statements, this 'strategic reward' factor is also reflected beyond WHO as with Yokohama in Japan, Chicago in the United States and Melbourne in Australia. Needless to say, we would encourage further systematic research in this strategic reward link. Yet it is clear, from the Healthy Cities experience, that this spirit of reflexive international engagement is valuable and can be sustained by the networks themselves, especially in their community of practice dimension. Having conducted Healthy Cities' self-evaluations for more than three decades, De Leeuw (2013) has highlighted that this is imperative if Healthy Cities is to maintain credibility both at the international scale, where few other networks can demonstrate such extensive evaluation track record, as well as more specifically in a world of public health still dominated by narrow research paradigms.

On the network level, we noted that networks must consider collaborating across sectors or face 'natural selection'. As cities gain more outlets to participate in international diplomacy, they will also become more discerning. We expect to see a top-tier of trend-setting networks emerge, just as among state-level international institutions there are clear fora which are particularly influential in shaping the debate on given topics. Equally, we see (whether it is in the 25-year experience of WHO Healthy Cities or confirmed by 'big hitters' like C40 at present) a distinct effort towards benchmarking and measuring the influence of city networking and policy mobility – clearly pointing at networked efforts to testify to and enhance the effective collaboration between cities. This is something that cities, which do not have the same resources for international relations as states, clearly need but will also cause major re-shifting among networks. Whether we buy into the 'Darwinian' thesis or not, then, it is clear that today we face a central juncture in city diplomacy that calls for cross-sectorial collaborations, more strategic thinking on behalf of cities and networks, and more systematic assessments by academia. The field, as it appears to us, is ripe for engagement and forward-looking solutions. It is up to cities, networks, scholars and the multilateral sector to offer an effective evolution, not just an unchecked natural selection, to this ecosystem.

Notes

1. As with the White House 'Smart Cities Initiative' in September 2015, or the Indian Government '100 smart cities' programme. See https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2015/09/14/fact-sheet-administration-announces-new-smart-cities-initiative-help and http://smartcities.gov.in/writereaddata/SmartCityGuidelines.pdf
2. Beyond the network's own self-identification (Tsouros, 1995), we defined WHO Healthy Cities in this sense following Adler's (2008, p. 195) definition of a 'community of practice' as a 'like-minded groups of practitioners who are bound, both informally and contextually, by a shared interest in learning and applying a common practice'.
3. To compile the database we collected the widest possible sample from the existing literature (generally skewed towards environmental networks), as well as from a search of national networks, and networks connected to multilateral processes (e.g. the #UrbanSDG campaign), and applied snowballing sampling to offer further depth to the database. A sample of 170, representing the overall split between localized, national, regional and international networks was then analyzed more in depth via desk review and semi-structured interviews. For more on this see Acuto and Rayner (2016).
4. For more on this agenda see Kickbusch (2010).
5. ARUP and C40, *Powering Climate Action*, London: ARUP and C40 Climate Leadership Group, 2015. Available at: http://publications.arup.com/publications/p/powering_climate_action_cities_as_global_changemakers
6. ARUP and C40, *Climate Action in Megacities 3.0*, London: ARUP and C40 Climate Leadership Group, 2015. Available at: http://cam3.c40.org/#/main/home

7. Quote from an interview with WHO Healthy Cities national network coordinator from Eastern Europe, Kuopio, 25 June 2015.

8. Flagged in interviews with four WHO Healthy Cities members, deputy mayors and senior municipal officers from European mid-size and large cities, Athens, 24 October 2014.

9. Repeated at both focus groups with municipal officers and network managers in Kuopio, 25 and 26 June 2015.

10. See DELGOSEA (Partnership for Democratic Local Governance in Southeast-Asia) 'Key Stakeholders' http://www.delgosea.eu/cms/Key-Stakeholder/Introduction, last accessed 8 April 2016.

11. Conversation with WHO Healthy Cities member city senior official, Athens, 23 October 2014.

12. There are of course prominent networks in most of these areas, like UNESCO Cities in culture or C40 on climate, but there is to date no established and institutionally recognized fora at the heart of city diplomacy in the large majority of sectors.

13. We rely here on an understanding of 'forum shopping' as equilibrium generating phenomenon but do acknowledge that the global policy literature on the term, as rightly pointed out by a peer reviewer to this manuscript, does offer differing views on, for example the capacity to shift fora to take advantage of strategic inconsistencies between international policy arenas (Murphy and Kellow 2003). This alone would warrant a city diplomacy study of its own.

14. As noted by a mayor of WHO Healthy Cities member from a European large city, Athens, 24 October 2014.

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