

## **GPM Position Paper: Multilevel Governance** ***Amplifying the Role of Cities in International Governance*** **SDG 16/ 17**

### **Background**

The Global Parliament of Mayors (GPM) stands at the forefront of the city empowerment movement in which city leaders and networks are exerting newfound influence on the historically states-only institutions of global governance. Cities, through their elected leaders and increasingly influential networks, are creating alliances with international organizations, shaping international norms and agendas, and propelling cities into the center of the international policy making process. The centrality of cities to all current and foreseen global challenges is starting to be acknowledged in a growing number of international agendas, such as the UN Sustainable Development Goals (specifically, SDG11), the Paris Climate Agreement, the Addis Ababa Action Agenda, the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction, the UN Conference on the Environment and Development, the UN's "New Urban Agenda," and the UN's Global Campaign on Urban Governance, among others. The Global Task Force of Local and Regional Governments, which GPM is a member of, is an even more robust example of the ways in which cities are inserting themselves into the center of international governance.

However, despite the above examples, cities are still largely excluded, at least formally and structurally, from international policy making; and when they are included, it is typically only at the whim and invitation of their federal counterparts. For example, cities were largely left out of the drafting process for the Global Compact for Migration (GCM), which was adopted by the UN General Assembly in December 2018. City leaders participated only upon invitation by their national governments, as required under international law, which securely establishes nation-states as the gatekeepers and exclusive codifiers of all international agreements. In states that rejected the GCM, such as the U.S.A., cities were excluded entirely. Because cities were largely absent from this process, they were unable to influence a topic, migration, which arguably impacts them more directly and profoundly than any other actor. Their absence is reflected in the text of the GCM. Indeed, the words 'city,' (or 'cities') and 'mayor' are missing entirely from the nearly thirty-five page GCM, while the word "urban" appears only once. Similarly, the UN High Commissioner for Refugees' strategic plan on refugees mentions "urban" refugees once, while the Global Compact on Refugees (GCR), like its counterpart on migration, similarly mentions "cities" in one single instance. This is despite the fact that the vast majority of refugees and migrants relocate to cities.

The structural exclusion of cities is not for lack of cities' strenuous efforts to assert their voices in the international policy-making process. Both the Mechelen Declaration, signed by 150 cities, and the Marrakesh Declaration, similarly signed by over 150 city leaders, were focused on demanding that cities have an opportunity to participate in the shaping of migration and refugee policies, as well as in their implementation, follow-up and review. It remains to be seen whether this collective effort by cities will lead to a genuine opening for cities in the shaping and carrying out of these policies. The Compact on Refugees, despite only one reference to cities, does mention the need for "networks of cities and municipalities" that host refugees to "share good practices and innovative approaches" (UNHCR 2018: para. 38). Similarly, the UN's New Urban Agenda, which emerged out of the Habitat III process, explicitly calls for greater cooperation between national and local authorities in addressing the challenges of forced migration. Unfortunately, even these overtures to cities and their networks are carefully couched in nationalistic language. In the case of the former document, cities are invited to participate but only "[i]n consultation with national authorities and in respect of relevant legal frameworks" (GCR, §37).

## Objectives

These recent examples illustrate how the coordinated efforts and collective voices of mayors and local leaders—through such mechanisms as declarations, resolutions, and collective self-commitments—can be deployed to gain influence in the international policy-making arena. Thanks to the effective advocacy of MMC, IOM and UCLG, the mayoral Roundtable on Migration is no longer a side event of the Global Forum on Migration and Development (GFMD), but instead, is now included in the main GFMD Summit programme in Quito this November. This will ensure that cities are included in the official forum where international migration policies are debated and discussed. A gathering of big and medium sized cities, the MMC and several Permanent Representatives from the UN at an official event of the UN General Assembly in NY in May 2019, facilitated by MMC/OSF, led to the explicit acknowledgement of the city mechanism in the review of the report on the GCM and GCR (within the IMRF-International Migration Review Forum).

The level of influence that cities can exert in international governance directly correlates with the number of participants involved: as the number of participating mayors, city networks and urban leaders increases, so too does their influence. The involvement of mayors on issues such as migration can lead to better global policies for three specific reasons: their involvement increases the democratic legitimacy of the international decision making process, ensures that international decisions are more compatible with local needs, and most importantly, increases the likelihood that international agendas and policies, such as the SDGs, will be effectively implemented. To achieve greater mayoral influence, the coordination and transaction costs of mobilizing mayors and local leaders toward a common purpose must be minimized so that they can speak collectively, with one unified voice.

The GPM is uniquely situated to provide this voice, and more specifically, to organize, coordinate, and scale up the collective action of cities and their leaders. The GPM is not a city network, but a parliament engaged in parliamentary-like activities. It engages in open policy debates, deliberates on proposed motions, conducts fully transparent and inclusive votes through digital technology available to all members, and drafts and implements resolutions based on the majority's expressed preferences (as determined through the voting process). In this way, the GPM complements, but does not duplicate or compete with, the efforts of other city networks, many of which they already partner with, notably including UCLG, Metropolis, EURO CITIES, the US Conference of Mayors, ICLEI, and C40. The GPM, like many other traditional "parliaments," also partners with numerous international organisations, such as UN Habitat, UNHCR, WEF, UNICEF, and IOM. The potential of GPM to serve this crucial coordinating and amplifying role for mayors specifically, and to scale up their involvement in international politics, will be contingent on its ability to create and offer a reliable form of "digital" or "virtual" democracy. Many associate the technological revolution of the last two decades with disruption of democratic processes and systems. Although technology can certainly be used in nefarious ways, if harnessed correctly, it holds the potential of reinventing the international governance system to be vastly more inclusive and equitable than it currently is and in ways that can vastly increase the opportunities for cities to be involved.

Embedded in the GPM's parliamentary infrastructure is a voting platform that enables collective decision making by hundreds, and potentially thousands, of mayors and other target groups (representatives of city networks, citizens, staffers, etc.); this infrastructure will be key to the GPM's ability to successfully advance the argument for multi-level governance at the international level. Without a mechanism to capture and disseminate the collective voice of the world's mayors to the existing international governance institutions, notably including the UN, then this argument will likely fall on deaf ears. A recent test conducted by the GPM, in which mayors from around the world were invited to vote on resolutions using a digital platform proved effective and was hailed as a success. The test resulted in a GPM Resolution, "Empowering Cities to Cope with Global Challenges," which was presented to the UN Habitat Director at the first UN Habitat Assembly in Nairobi this past May. Forty-three mayors from 27 countries and five continents supported this resolution, which represented the first time that the GPM operated as a "virtual platform" for its members. This technology

holds the potential to be scaled up and to reach a broader body of GPM members and audiences.

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