# HEIDELBERG UNIVERSITY

# FACULTY OF ECONOMICS AND SOCIAL SCIENCES

# INSTITUTE OF POLITICAL SCIENCE

## DISSERTATION

## City Networks and Global Agendas: The UCLG Localization Frame

Doctoral candidate: Ricardo Martinez Arias

Supervisor: Prof. Dr. Michael Haus

*Published in February 2022*

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# List of abbreviations

| | |
|---|---|
| 2030 Agenda | 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development |
| AIMF | International Association of Francophone Mayors |
| C40 | C40 Cities Climate Leadership Group |
| CEMR | Council of European Municipalities and Regions |
| CIB | Capacity and Institution Building |
| COVID-19 | Coronavirus Disease 2019 |
| EC | European Commission |
| EIU | The Economist Intelligence Unit |
| EU | European Union |
| GDP | Gross domestic product |
| GOLD | Global Observatory on Local Democracy and Decentralization |
| GTF | Global Taskforce of Local and Regional Governments |
| FCM | Federation of Canadian Municipalities |
| HLPF | United Nations High-level Political Forum |
| ICLEI | ICLEI - Local Governments for Sustainability |
| ICT | Information and communications technology |
| IULA | International Union of Local Authorities |
| LGMA | Local Governments and Municipal Authorities Constituency |
| MDG | Millennium Development Goal |
| NGO | Non-governmental organization |
| ORU Fogar | Organization of United Regions / Global Forum of Regional Governments and Associations of Regions |
| SDG | Sustainable Development Goal |
| UCCI | Union of Ibero-American Capital Cities |
| UCL | University College of London |
| UCLG | United Cities and Local Governments |
| UK | United Kingdom |
| UN | United Nations |
| UNACLA | United Nations Advisory Committee for Local Authorities |
| UNDESA | United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs |
| UNDP | United Nations Development Programme |

| | |
|---|---|
| UN-Habitat | United Nations Human Settlements Programme |
| US | United States |
| UTO | United Towns Organisation |
| VLR | Voluntary Local Review |
| VNR | Voluntary National Review |
| WBGU | German Advisory Council on Global Change |
| WHO | World Health Organization |
| WW | World War |

# Acknowledgments

# Introduction

## Argument of the dissertation

The current dissertation focuses on city networks as rising actors in global governance. Situated in the gap between international relations and urban studies, it aims to contribute to the study of the growing international role of cities in both empirical and theoretical terms. On the one hand, it explores the city network United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG) and its relationship with global agendas as a case study within the growing literature on city networks. On the other hand, it seeks to show the analytical purchase of deploying the theoretical framework of discursive policy learning, contributing by adding a specific political science perspective to the study of the burgeoning phenomenon of city networks.

The thesis revolves heuristically around learning as a key output that city networks provide to their members. While policy learning in city networks constitutes an emergent corpus, the specific scholarly effort to link this with the relationship with global agendas does not mirror the dynamism currently unfolding in empirical terms. The heterogeneous literature on policy learning may be conceptualized through the contraposition between positivist and constructivist approaches, and, by the same token, as the integration of a rational and discursive dimension, or a cognitive and political component. The discursive construction of knowledge is proposed as the lynchpin by which to address the relationship between city networks and global agendas, harnessing the interlinkage embedded in the social construction of urban and global politics.

UCLG is the largest organization of local and regional governments in the world. It is a meta-organization representing 70% of the world's population, with over 250,000 members, among towns, cities, and regions, and 175 local and regional government associations in over 140 UN member states. Created in 2004, it is the inheritor of inter-municipal formal organizations whose establishment dates back to 1913, seven years before the creation of the League of Nations. Within the ecosystem of city networks, UCLG is a generalist organization beyond thematic specializations. It addresses a plethora of topics of relevance in urban and territorial governance such as gender equality, capacity building, crisis management, housing, local finance, migration,

mobility, multilevel governance, social inclusion, transparency, and urban strategic planning. Disproportionately (and provocatively) defined as the "world's largest and most influential organization nobody has ever heard of" (Barber, 2013, p. 111), UCLG has not received much scholarly attention in the growing body of literature on city networks, which has so far prioritized the issues of climate and environmental governance.

With the overarching objective to contribute to the theorization of the relationship between city networks and global agendas, the dissertation follows an abductive logic that moves back and forth between the theoretical expectations and empirical analysis. The research develops an analytical framework around the notion of discursive empowerment through institutionalization, which builds on the relationship between five conceptual associations stemming from the retrofitting dialogue between theory and empirical research: the *legitimacy* of a city network, the *frame* as a social construct elicited by the *political opportunity* that global agendas entail for local governments, and the *empowerment* that city networks bestow on their local government members as the result of processes of *institutionalization*.

The frame is both a conceptual lens through which to interpret social reality and an object of social reality, as it is constituted by UCLG as a social construct that links the diagnosis of trans-boundary political problems and the prescription of local policy solutions contributing to both global and local goals. The fundamental quality of the localization frame lies in a storyline that incorporates and connects changes and multiple themes, while providing a sense of coherence to the narrative. It constructs shared meaning and structures relations among actors with diverging accounts of social reality by harnessing the tactical polyvalence of discourse and productivity of power.

Framing global agendas as a call for localization allows the institutional core added values of UCLG: unity and diversity, to be activated. The social construction of the localization frame constitutes the external component of the wider institutional logic of appropriateness that upholds UCLG. In an organization characterized by a remarkable degree of internal diversity, an interest-based logic of consequences is purposely overridden by an identity-based logic of appropriateness. Through the routinized circulation of specific cognitive frameworks, the common and unifying identity of the local government members is constructed as the 'discursive glue' of the organization. Members' behavior relies on fundamental mutual expectations

that need to be routinely re-instantiated by means of coordination and coherence. Rule-based institutionalization contributes to the discursive reduction of complexity by providing interpretive schemata that facilitate actions and endow them with resources, ultimately contributing by simultaneously controlling the risks and harnessing the opportunities associated with political ambivalence.

The governmental, democratic, and proximate identity of UCLG's membership, and the procedural and diverse representation, legibility, and commitment of the organization are the two intertwined sets of sources of legitimacy that the city network offers to multilateral actors. The localization frame harnesses the political agency that the international consensus and common language of the global agendas offer to local governments. Increasingly perceived as a legitimate actor within the global governance arena, UCLG promotes, accommodates, and organizes the networked orchestration of the political agency of cities in the global urban era, around policy issues that have long exceeded the monopolistic notion of national sovereignty.

By strategically leveraging the organization's unity and diversity, UCLG deploys the membership's legitimacy when advocating for the recognition of local governments in global governance. Hence, the localization of global agendas is the fundamental political opportunity structure to seek to influence the state-centric entrenched interests embedded in the global governance architecture, as well as to justify the organization's work with respect to its members. UCLG empowers its members by bestowing organizational legitimacy as a discursive resource.

Members experience the organizational benefits stemming simultaneously from rule-based institutionalization and the coherence of a narrative that bridges trans-boundary political problems and local policy solutions. Unity in diversity and the localization of global agendas are mutually reinforcing elements of the same institutional process.

## Overview of the dissertation

The first chapter reviews the structural forces underlying the rise of cities and their networking structures internationally: urbanization and globalization. It further studies the impact of COVID-19 on these two processes, noticing how the pandemic, along with the ongoing strengthening of the nation-state as a

dominant political actor, has re-contextualized but not undermined the key role of cities in a globalized urban world. It further focuses on the recent evolution of global governance and the opportunity that lies in the global sustainability and development agendas adopted in the 2010s.

The second chapter reviews the intersection between city networks, global agendas, and learning. It notices how questions about legitimacy and ownership of public policy have assumed reinvigorated relevance within the context of the emergence of non-state actors and hybrid configurations in global governance. It underscores that the international dynamics of cities do not simply revolve around economic globalization or the narrow subset of iconic global cities. The discursive construction of policy learning is proposed heuristically to grasp the relationship between the city network UCLG and the UN global agendas.

The third chapter develops the analytical framework of the dissertation. Building on the retrofitting dialogue between theory and empirical analysis, it outlines the notion of discursive empowerment through institutionalization along with the conceptual relationship between legitimacy, frame, political opportunity, empowerment, and institutionalization. It contends that the constitution of ideas and interests through discourse and the creation of meaning through institutionalization are enabling conditions of empowerment. Acknowledging the empirical amalgamation of domination and empowerment, power is conceptualized as both a productive force and the result of organizational outflanking. Embracing institutions as key explanatory factors of discursive processes of legitimation, the research adopts a (sociological) institutionalist perspective to disentangle how UCLG approaches global governance as a positive-sum power reality led by inter-state configurations in their capacity as power holders. The focus on discursive constructions and institutionalization, as well as the intersection with theories of power and legitimacy outline a specific political science perspective that aims to contribute to the ongoing interdisciplinary efforts devoted to the study of cities and their transnational networking endeavors.

Document analysis, participant and direct observation in in-person and virtual meetings, and semi-structured interviews are presented in the fourth chapter as the research methods identified to collect and triangulate data. The consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic in the move from in-person to distance-based collection techniques are further presented. The research is

underpinned by an abductive logic that recursively interrogates the relationship between the theoretical expectations and the empirical analysis. The chapter provides a synthetic recap on the conceptual scheme of legitimacy, frame, political opportunity, and empowerment through institutionalization. Lastly, it sketches out the initial expectations prior to the empirical phase so as to provide the reader of the dissertation with a clearer idea of the interpretive journey covered by the (continuous) interplay between theory and data.

The fifth, sixth, and seventh chapters present the results of the empirical research. They constitute a part of the dissertation devoted to the analysis of UCLG as the contingent association of a logic of appropriateness and the social construction of a frame.

UCLG is introduced in the fifth chapter as a meta-organization with a significant degree of internal diversity, which is controlled and harnessed through an identity-based logic of appropriateness. While the logic of consequences and logic of appropriateness drive the behavior of UCLG members, the latter plays an overriding role, which is further in line with the expansion of soft power and non-binding norms in global governance. The sociological institutionalist perspective allows the creation of an organizational local order that aims simultaneously to harness diversity and strengthen unity.

The sixth chapter illustrates how the unity of the organization and the identity of its members are assembled in the context of the dedicated purpose of framing the global development agendas adopted in the 2010s as a political opportunity structure. By strategically leveraging the organization's unity and diversity, UCLG deploys the membership's legitimacy to increase the recognition of local governments and influence the state-centric entrenched interests embedded in the global governance architecture. In sum, UCLG empowers its members by bestowing organizational legitimacy as a discursive resource.

Acknowledging the inherent institutional embeddedness of discursive practices, the seventh chapter presents discursive properties that are central in the construction and reproduction of the localization storyline. Through the example of the COVID-19 response, the discursive adaptability of the legitimation strategy deployed by the organization is shown, as it simultaneously leverages the pandemic crisis as a window of opportunity to call for societal normative transformation and embeds it within the consensus built around the pre-existing global agendas.

The eighth chapter restates the main empirical findings and places them in a wider theoretical perspective that sways between international relations and urban studies. Seeking to contribute to the interdisciplinary encounter of the political and geographical studies devoted to urban politics, it outlines the central dimensions of emerging global networked urban governance. By looking at the remarkable degree of similarity with the historical development of inter-municipal relations since the 19th century, it dissects the complexity of the drivers underlying the decisions by city governments to step into the international arena. It reflects on the complex interlinkage between policy circulation and political networking, demonstrates the analytical relevance of legitimacy to understand the ecosystem of city networks, and reviews the relationship between UCLG and the depoliticizing trends currently unfolding in global governance. Lastly, it reflects on the relationship between UCLG and the UN against the backdrop of ongoing geopolitical transformations and the state-centered framings underpinning the transnational dynamism of cities.

# 1  City networks in the global arena

## 1.1  The structural forces underlying cities internationally

Cities are gaining momentum internationally in our contemporary world. The debate about the underlying forces and actors involved outlines a landscape that puts forward innovative ways of understanding international politics.

Given the growing importance of this subject, first it is important to sketch out what we mean in this dissertation by the term 'city'. As we will see, the very definition of what a 'city' is (and what 'urban' is) is the object of heated debate.

Due to their complex nature, cities can be conceptualized through distinct disciplinary lenses such as, for instance, spatial urban components of a wider settlement system or legal entities. In a different light, we know that cities fulfil an essential cultural role as places to which human beings, as individuals or groups, attach meanings (Chen et al., 2018, Chapter 1). We also know that they may be interpreted beyond the association with their local governments, as cities host complex networks of public, private, and plural[1] actors (Katz & Nowak, 2017, pp. 1-5). Following Schragger (2016, p. 15), the city is here understood as an abstraction that embodies a public role that goes beyond narrowed understandings such as that of basic provider or administrative unit. What distinguishes cities from other human settlements, and indeed explains their ascendancy, is their configuration as dense human centers with wide external webs of connectivity (Robinson et al., 2016, pp. 2-5). The birth of cities is historically tied to the Agricultural Revolution, as for the first time, humankind could benefit from surpluses of food and undergo a whole new series of transformations.[2] Since then, the city has played a fundamental role in human society, further bolstered in 'recent' history by an unprecedented set of quantitative and qualitative changes.

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[1]  The term 'plural' is here used following the definition by Mintzberg (2015, p. 30) in order to encompass "all associations of people that are owned neither by the state nor by private investors".

[2]  This conventional thesis was overturned by Jacobs (1969), who argued that the rural economy developed in order to meet the increasing food demand of urban population. Taylor (2019, pp. 523-525) suggests that these opposite viewpoints might stem from different definitions of what is regarded as a city during early human history.

Two key interrelated factors underpin the rise of cities in the international arena: urbanization and globalization.[3] These, in turn, are closely linked with other structural forces.[4]

As per the first factor, urbanization is a demographic process that refers to the movement of populations from rural settlements to urban settlements (McGranahan et al., 2016, p. 14). By 2050, 68% of the world's population will be living in urban areas (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs [UNDESA], 2019, p. xix). We can understand the magnitude of the rate of change if we take into account that, in 1950, urban dwellers accounted for 30% of the world's population (UNDESA, 2019, p. xix). The growth in urban population is due to the increasing percentage of inhabitants living in urban areas (i.e. urbanization)[5] and the overall demographic trend (UNDESA, 2019), as the world's population of 7.6 billion in 2017 is expected to reach 9.8 billion in 2050 (UNDESA, 2017, p. 12). It is projected that population growth and urbanization will add 2.5 billion new urban residents between 2018 and 2050 (UNDESA, 2019, p. 11). This shift puts cities at the forefront of several contemporary challenges and opportunities. To give just a few examples, while 881 million urban dwellers were living in slums[6] in 2014 (United Nations Human Settlements Programme [UN-Habitat], 2016, p. 48), by 2030, around 2 billion inhabitants could be living in slums or other informal settlements (UCLG, 2017, p. 46). At the same time, cities contribute to 80% of the global gross domestic product (GDP) (UN-Habitat, 2016, p. 27).

This massive shift, however, should be nuanced. The growing urban population is and will be spatially uneven. It is estimated that 90% of the new urban dwellers expected by 2050 will live in Africa and Asia[7] (UNDESA, 2019,

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3    Forecasting the specific link between urbanization and globalization is a case apart. If waves of globalization and change become increasingly shorter, as historical accounts seem to suggest, the urbanizing "windows of opportunity" will also close swiftly (Parnell et al., 2018, p. 10).

4    Taylor (2019, pp. 513-514), for instance, argues that globalization, urbanization, and climate change are inherently interrelated, fundamental processes in our contemporary world.

5    As McGranahan et al. (2016, p. 14) notice, the term 'urbanization' should not be confused with the overall growth of the urban population: only half of it is related to urbanization, while the rest is due specifically to the overall demographic trend.

6    Despite its potentially negative connotation, Satterthwaite (2016a, p. 3) explains that the term 'slum' as an informal settlement is preferred for several reasons: it is used discursively by some representative organizations specifically with a positive use; it is deployed officially in the relevant global estimates; and, in some countries, it might allow its residents to access specific benefits. UN-Habitat (2016, p. 57) "defines slums as a contiguous settlement that lacks one or more of the following five conditions: access to clean water, access to improved sanitation, sufficient living area that is not overcrowded, durable housing and secure tenure".

7    In China alone, Smil (as cited by the German Advisory Council on Global Change [WBGU], 2016, p. 7) points out that more cement was used between 2008 and 2010 that during the entire 20th century in the United States (US).

p. 1). A few countries, on the other hand, will decline in terms of urban population, as is the case for Japan that is expected to have 12 million fewer urban residents by 2050 than in 2014 (UNDESA, 2015, p. 14). While the widely spread "claim that more than half of the world's population now lives in cities has become a form of 'doxic common sense'" as Arboleda (2014, p. 339) argues, it is not urbanization that constitutes a brand new contemporary phenomenon, as this has characterized human society for over 10,000 years, but rather the unprecedented pace of the current demographic trend (Ljungkvist, 2014, p. 34). This shift, which is often correlated to increasing density, might actually foster peri-urbanization[8] and a decrease in density (Troy, 2017, p. 3), which is confirmed globally by the fact that both in developed and developing countries, on average, the spatial expansion of cities has grown 2/3 times more than its population (UN-Habitat, 2016, p. 177). Hence, the perception of urbanization might differ from its inherent reality, as McGranahan et al. (2016, p. 14) point out by highlighting the perceived contraposition between cities, seen as drivers of development, and urbanization, seen as a threat that might put the functioning of cities in jeopardy, despite the fact that one is conducive to the other. However, the agglomeration dynamics underpinning the rising urban era are undeniable, as mounting evidence correlates economic growth with physical proximity (Schragger, 2016, p. 18). Country-level statistics show that as the percentage of urban population increases in the framework of the overall national population, so does GDP and per capita income (UN-Habitat, 2007, p. 9). By the same token, the contribution of urban centers to national income is larger than their demographic weight within the nation (UN-Habitat, 2016, p. 27).

The pervasiveness of urbanization is even more complex. Despite the impressive amount of ongoing urban-to-rural transition, it would seem that this shift is multi-dimensional, encompassing both quantitative and qualitative considerations. Even when, historically, most of the population lived in 'rural' areas, the world was already 'urban'. As Magnusson (2011, p. 11) contends: "[t]he so-called 'modern' world – the world that people have been living in for the last five centuries – is urban".[9] Meanwhile, even though cities cover nearly

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8     Peri-urbanization is a dispersed pattern of urbanization, related to transformations outside suburban areas and associated with the production of hybrid landscapes (UN-Habitat, 2016; WBGU, 2016; Troy, 2017).

9     Magnusson (2011, p. 11) further points out that the current massive transformations actually taking place in Africa and Asia are contemporary, yet unpredictable, re-instantiations of the urban transformations previously experienced in Europe and North America.

3% of the world's land surface (Chávez et al., 2018, p. 68), their planetary impact is unprecedented. As Amin and Thrift (2017, p. 33) eloquently summarize: "cities are one of the main products and producers of the Anthropocene".

The second key factor underpinning the rise of cities internationally is globalization. Traditionally associated in particular with its economic dimension, globalization[10] is now understood as a process that encompasses economic, social-cultural, and governmental-political dimensions (Abrahamson, 2020, p. 2). It "denotes the expanding scale, growing magnitude, speeding up and deepening impact of interregional flows and patterns of social interaction" (Held & McGrew, 2003, p. 4). The integration of countries and people is enabled by the reduced cost of transportation and communication, as well as by "the breaking down of artificial barriers to the flows of goods, services, capital, knowledge and (to a lesser extent) people across borders" (Stiglitz, 2002, p. 9). These trans-boundary flows are structured around networking dynamics enabled by the unprecedented innovation in information and communications technology (ICT) (Castells, 2009). As with urbanization, globalization has characterized human society in previous historical periods (e.g. Hirst & Thompson, 1999). Among different opinions, a central strand distinguishes the contemporary form of globalization from the previous ones as a consequence of the rise of the technological paradigm of informationalism (Castells, 2001; Castells, 2009). Another account identifies the current moment as one of corporate globalization, a highly integrated world economy enacted by corporations and neoliberal policies that follows the two previous waves of imperial and American globalization (Robinson et al., 2016, pp. 13-16). Following Modelski (2003, p. 55), we might summarize that globalization[11] defines the (initially Western-driven) modern globe-spanning culmination of multifold processes of widening interactions among the world's human communities throughout history.

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[10] See Bartelson (2000) for a digression on the historical trajectory and ontological presuppositions of the concept of globalization.

[11] Globalization is closely linked to 'transnationalism', which is a term used specifically to characterize those phenomena that cut across and transcend traditional nation-state configurations (Mitchell, 2009, p. 772). Contrary to the historically inaccurate accounts that associate it with the current context of neoliberal globalization, transnationalism is a feature of the longer historical timeframe of modernity (Smith, 2005b, p. 238).

While forging external relations with the surroundings has historically been a defining feature of the foundation and development of cities, urban connectivity has become central in today's world, as cities generate and circulate the flows that contribute to sustaining globalization (Robinson et al., 2016, p. 5). Even though the canonical definition of globalization focuses on the interdependence among nations, specific cities within nations are the ones actually managing the underlying flows of people, capital, goods, and ideas (Abrahamson, 2020, p. 1). As globalization promotes the spatial dispersion of economic activities, it concurrently requires territorial centralization as certain "global" cities take on the strategic role of "control and command" centers of the global economy, by producing finance and advanced corporate services (Sassen, 2005, p. 34; Sassen, 2010, p. 7). The power of these cities resides in the concentration of assets that they harbor (Katz & Nowak, 2017, p. 2). In connecting selected cities with leading economic sectors, Sassen (2002, p. 27) points out that there are two types of information: the first, datum, is highly accessible thanks to technology, while the second, higher-order datum, refers to complex interpretations drawn by skillful and informed people, and relies upon a social infrastructure. As Castells (2010a, p. 2741) posits, knowledge sites and communication networks in the information economy fulfill the same spatial role the that sites of natural resources and the networks of power distribution represented for the industrial economy.[12]

This shifting reality has prompted a new geography of urban agglomerations, as we may appreciate by noticing the development of new concepts, such as urban corridors (Whebell, 1969), city-regions (Scott, 2001), or mega-regions (Florida et al., 2008) to name a few.[13] In overall terms these spatial configurations encompass urban phenomena characterized by: large spatial expansion; increasing flows of people, goods, services and information; the growing importance of ICT and transportation infrastructure; functional unity beyond institutional and geographical boundaries; and the creation of hybrid landscapes beyond both urban and rural continuity. Rather than being in a dichotomic relation, urban-rural linkages are increasingly recognized as

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[12] From a global perspective it should be noticed that, while the historical process of industrialization unequivocally tilted the urban-rural ratio, the current pace of rapid urbanization in the developing world cannot be attributed only to industrialization (Westlund & Haas, 2018, p. 12).

[13] Earlier attempts to grasp emerging urban morphological forms can be observed in the conceptions of conurbation (Geddes, 1915), megalopolis (Gottman, 1961), and the world-scale ecumenopolis (Doxiadis & Papaioannou, 1974).

their spatial patterns are blurred (WBGU, 2016, p. 4) and their interconnectedness is considered key for the sustainability of our planet (Revi, 2017, p. x). Concurrently, as urban agglomerations span institutional boundaries, metropolitan areas might be mistakenly considered as single urban units, omitting to recognize the existence in legal terms of several contiguous local governments (Frug & Barron, 2006, pp. 10-11).

Lastly, while the historic importance of cities in our contemporary world is clear, two overall observations are worth highlighting. Firstly, as Ljungkvist (2014, pp. 36-38) notices, in addition to an optimist narrative whereby, for instance, "cities magnify humanity's strengths" (Glaeser, 2011, p. 249), counter-narratives also underline this historic moment, yet in negative terms. Rather than the path to prosperity and the supply of jobs, Davis (2006, p. 16) understands rapid urban growth as the materialization of the neoliberal economy and its reproduction of poverty. Indeed, while there is a positive correlation between urbanization, growth, and human development (World Bank, 2009, p. 1), rapid urban growth is mainly taking place in developing countries (Graute, 2016, p. 6), where cities with least investment capacity are specifically those with the largest deficits in infrastructure and services (Satterthwaite 2016b, pp. 10-11). Secondly, the global cities presented above (Sassen, 1991)[14] need to be contextualized as cutting-edge representations of both the global interconnected economy and the harshest dimension of the neoliberal order in terms of increasing social exclusion and environmental crisis (Fernández de Losada & Garcia-Chueca, 2018, pp. 3-4).[15] Social degradation characterizes both the internal and external dimensions of global cities, as exchanges with other equally connected cities become more relevant than the relationship with the hinterlands (Westlund & Haas, 2018, p. 3). The opportunities stemming from the embeddedness in the global economy are often paralleled by the deprivation that unfolds when global cities disconnect from their regional and even national contexts (Toly, 2016, pp. 1-2). In this context, recent discussions have pointed out a "winner-loser dichotomy" – and called on it to be overcome – that emphasizes scholarly attention on the

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[14] In wider theoretical terms, the global and world cities literature can also be found, among others, in Brenner and Keil (2006), Castells (2010c), Friedmann (1986) and Taylor and Derudder (2016).

[15] Hoyler and Harrison (2017, pp. 2854-2855) notice how the world cities literature, conceived initially by Friedmann (1986) as a scholarly analysis of the capitalist contradictions in the urban realm, has been reoriented towards the production of a body of knowledge underpinned by a corporate-based uncritical celebration of cities.

'winning' cities of the global inter-urban competition[16] (Williams & Pendras, 2013, p. 290). In this regard, an opposing trend would better be fostered, as "*all* cities are global" (McCann & Ward, 2013, p. 5, emphasis in the original) and "ordinary cities" are as relevant as global and world cities (Robinson, 2006, p. 1). This implies an acknowledgment, despite their popularity among the general public, that megacities and large cities (i.e. human settlements of over 5 million inhabitants) are numerically and demographically less significant than small- and medium-sized cities within the world's total urban population (Birch & Wachter, 2011, pp. 9-12).

## 1.2  Avenues of action at the global level

As cities gain relevance globally, the different stakeholders that compose the urban fabric expand their external dimension. As Bunnell (2017, pp. 22-24) points out, with reference to the literature on world/global cities and their role as economic nodes inserted within wider networks, there are many cross-border networks actually shaping an emerging geography of urban connections.

Within this range of rising connections, the local government[17] represents a key urban stakeholder that has seen its reach dramatically influenced by the process of internationalization. The concept of local government, as the local level of the formal institutions of the state, relates to the growing importance of the notion of local governance (Stoker, 2011). Kjaer (2009, p. 137) outlines the recent shift from government to governance, as a movement from a hierarchical approach in which the politics-administration and state-society boundaries are clearly demarcated, to a network approach where this demarcation is blurred. Moving away from the traditional instruments of

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[16]  An interesting concept is that of global political cities, as settlements that stand out worldwide but not specifically due to their centrality within the global economy: urban centers with political actors or decision-making arenas with global scope (e.g. Washington DC, Brussels), with transnational civil society hubs and private arenas for public purposes (e.g. Porto Alegre, Davos), and with globally recognized symbolic significance (e.g. New York, Hiroshima) (van der Wusten, 2012, pp. 41-42).

[17]  In light of the research topic and for the sake of simplicity, the terms 'cities' and 'local governments' or 'localities' are used interchangeably. When necessary, the differentiation is explicitly acknowledged through the text, taking into account, as seen in Section 1.1, that they might imply different units of analysis. The research is mindful of the necessity to avoid conflating the terms 'city' and 'local government', acknowledging, among others, the inherent difference between the primary role of citizenship in the former and the mandate to formulate public policy in the latter (Fernández, 2016). This differentiation will be presented in greater detail in the remainder of the dissertation.

regulation of society by the state, the governance model emphasizes a shift towards cooperative modes of policy-making (Haus & Heinelt, 2005, pp. 18-19). The concept of governance applies to any organizational level in the realm of public affairs (Ruggie, 2004, p. 504), from the global arena to the urban level, in circumstances where "to rest on recourse to the authority of the state" is no longer possible (Stoker, 2000, p. 93). Nowadays, the authority and efficiency in the response to policy-making challenges does not reside solely with local governments (John, 2001, p. 3). As urban governance is increasingly shaped by state and non-state actors through their organization of and influence over urban society, a new distribution of responsibilities and procedures is advocated to allow cities to fully address contemporary challenges and contribute to sustainability (WBGU, 2016, p. 15). Shifting responsibilities from state actors to non-state actors undoubtedly raises important concerns in terms of accountability and local democracy. Nonetheless, it further provides the opportunity to recognize local governments not merely as basic service providers but place-based leaders (Hambleton, 2017, pp. 4-5). While acknowledging the contribution of numerous actors in the urban realm, it highlights the territorial coordinating role of local governments in the achievement of collective goals (Edelenbos & van Dijk, 2017, p. 5). As multiple authorities coexist in contemporary urban complexities, the role of traditional local administrators is called upon to evolve towards the profile of efficient urban politicians and the dynamics associated with networked authority (Magnusson, 2011, p. 29).

In this context, cities are embarking on different modalities of engagement, which in turn describe an emerging landscape of global politics. Herrschel and Newman (2017, p. 52) identify three overlapping types of international activity: "city-to-city engagement" and collaborative city networks (e.g. Gordon & Johnson, 2017); "city-to-international organization engagement" with institutions, for instance, inscribed within the systems of the United Nations (UN) and the European Union (EU) (e.g. Alger, 2014); and "city-to-state engagement", as local governments, with their own resources and vision, disconnected from their states or even actively supported by them, step individually into the international arena (e.g. Barber, 2013). Connecting with what we saw in the previous section, this is often exemplified by those global cities that concentrate most of the national economic productivity and act irrespective of national constraints.

According to Herrschel and Newman (2017, p. 94), three different modalities of approach characterize this emerging subnational landscape at the global level: horizontal networks, vertical engagement, and direct local engagement. In this third modality, both horizontal and vertical engagements are deployed in a system of variable geometry that responds to the individual policy agendas of the leading cities (Herrschel & Newman, 2017, pp. 94-96). Leading cities in the international realm are paradigmatic examples of modalities of direct local engagement and deserve, in this sense, specific analytical attention (e.g. Ljungkvist, 2016). Yet it is equally important to broaden the empirical focus to a wider range of local experiences, as globalization is materialized through the whole spectrum of human settlements across the world and "there is no such thing as an 'un-global city'" (Taylor, 2019, p. 526). Local governments with strong institutional and economic capacity as well as sound reputational accounts might complement their engagement in city networks with individual endeavors within the global arena. Yet many other local governments might join city networks as the first and easiest step towards gaining a higher degree of independence from the state, in terms of both its political and administrative dimensions, and in return engage in collaborative endeavors with peers internationally (Herrschel & Newman, 2017, pp. 3-4). "Secondary and peripheral cities" have the opportunity to take account of the perspectives of their citizens and attempt to gain influence and tilt the political power status of global cities by cooperating through city networks (Coll, 2015, p. 1). Even small cities capable of producing and circulating specific policy knowledge through translocal learning relationships may enable their urban fabric to connect with wider transnational networks (Bunnell et al., 2018). My research, thus, aims to shed light on these modalities of engagement and seeks to do so by focusing on the relationships that collaborative city networks[18] establish with international organizations.[19]

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[18] As we will see, the understanding of an institution as a horizontal networking model does not prevent internal hierarchical structures and dynamics inherently influenced by pre-existing power relations. See, for example, Bouteligier (2013b) for a specific analysis of how historically determined geographies of power relations are reproduced in and by city networks.

[19] In this research, international organizations and intergovernmental organizations are used interchangeably and differentiated by international non-governmental organizations (NGOs). International organizations refer to both global and regional multilateral organizations. Multilateralism is defined as "an institutional form which coordinates relations among three of more states on the basis of 'generalized' principles of conduct" (Ruggie, 1992, p. 571). In line with this widespread definition, Pevehouse and Von Borzyskowski (2016, p. 4) refer to international organizations as "formal organizations, with a permanent secretariat, and three or more member states". This dissertation does not separate out supranational and international

City networks are identified as "formalized organizations with cities as their main members and characterized by reciprocal and established patterns of communication, policy-making and exchange" (Acuto & Rayner, 2016, p. 1149-1150). This definition differs from that traditionally used in urban studies literature (e.g. Allen, 2010) to refer to transnational flows embedded in "networks 'of' and 'between' cities" (Davidson, Coenen, Acuto et al., 2019, p. 13). With regard to other strands of scholarly production, the term 'city network' is preferred to 'transnational municipal network' (e.g. Bansard et al., 2017) as it encompasses a wider empirical spectrum of transnational urban connections (Gordon & Johnson, 2017, p. 16). These governance structures offer a range of outputs to their members: exchange of information, increased policy-making capacity, increased awareness among citizens, engagement in collaborative action, city branding, access to financial resources and partners, an opportunity to voice cities' concerns, and increased political weight and visibility to influence decision-making processes (Acuto et al., 2017a; Bouteligier, 2013a; Bulkeley & Betsill, 2003; Giest & Howlett, 2013; Pflieger, 2014).[20] Following the conclusions shared by the University College of London (UCL) City Leadership Lab (Acuto et al., 2017a, pp. 8-10), city networks emerge as a specific empirical phenomenon in their own right: with over 200 organizations scattered across the world and over a quarter of them established between 2006 and 2016 only, city networks encompass a variegated landscape in terms of organizational form, size, coverage, interaction, products, and focus. The recent developments in these networking organizations deserve scholarly attention as part and parcel of a larger web of global urban governance.

A handful of conclusions extracted from the UCL City Leadership Lab research report (Acuto et al., 2017a, pp. 8-14) may give a quick overview of this institutional landscape: 53% of city networks are national organizations, 27% are at the regional level, and 20% on the global scale, yet with the regional and global scale gaining overall presence as national networks only account for 27%

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organizations neatly, as it uses the adjectives supranational and subnational to stress the specific position of global governance actors with regard to the state. For the sake of accuracy, it should be noticed that, with regards to international organizations, supranational organizations have a comparatively higher degree of independence from national bodies (Lindseth, 2016, pp. 152-153).

[20] Interestingly, at the end of the 20th century, Borja and Castells (1997, p. 321) identified five main objectives for the establishment of city networks: lobbying; consolidation of spaces to harness economies of scale and agglomeration; exchange of information, experience and technology; achieving a leadership role; and securing broader spheres of action.

of the new networks established since 2001; while 71% are multi-purpose, 50% of city networks are primarily focused on governance, 29% on the environment and 18.5% on inequality; there is also a diversity of budgetary capacities, as 24% of the city networks surveyed declared a budget of between US$ 50,000 and US$ 250,000, 36% a budget ranging between US$ 1 million and US$ 5 million, and 6% a budget of over US$ 10 million.

While this thriving phenomenon is historically inscribed within a much older process of transnational municipalism (Saunier & Ewen, 2008), two main recent trends, which differ in terms of degree and kind, have contributed to the delineation of the current scenario of city networks. One first shift in terms of perceived importance unfolded from sister-city connections emerging since the Cold War, around cultural, educational and recreational initiatives, to the pragmatic turn towards inter-municipal cooperation in the 1990s with growing experiences around initiatives such as information and technology exchange (van der Pluijm, 2007, pp. 28-29). A second shift took place in the 2000s through the evolution from "*municipal voluntarism*" to "*strategic urbanism*", that is, from local government officers joining communities of purpose and knowledge exchange, resembling the spirit of social movements, to a formalized political approach sustained by clear economic drivers, where comprehensive local agendas activate transnational engagements (Bulkeley & Betsill, 2013, pp. 139-140, emphasis in the original). As Davidson and Gleeson (2015, p. 34) contend, the contemporary modality of the city network is not solely limited to report-producing, but rather enables a platform that networks' members can deploy to bolster their own actions.

Resuming the previous conceptual linkage between collaborative networks and international organizations, this relationship, indeed, spans the key outputs of city networks. We come across it, for instance, when studying the advocacy efforts of city networks in order to influence the decision-making process of a multilateral institution or when assessing a joint initiative between a city network and an international organization on a specific urban policy. Yet among the key outputs of city networks, there is an additional dimension in the relationship between these and the international organizations that is worth taking into account, as it might shed new lights on this emerging phenomenon within international politics and a scholarly analysis of it.

City networks play a key role as learning platforms for knowledge and information exchange. In recent decades, globalization has led to increasing

numbers of export policy lessons, with several dimensions of public policy being devolved from the state to the subnational level (Stone, 2008, pp. 24-29). Local governments have been encouraged by state withdrawal and resource constraints to engage internationally in order to pursue their goals (Pflieger, 2014, pp. 339-341) and become acquainted with successful stories from abroad to be replicated or emulated at home (Chua, 2011, p. 36). In this context and with ICT innovation significantly enhancing the transfer of transnational urban policy (Harris & Moore, 2013, pp. 1503-1504), cities across the world have increasingly connected to innovate and learn from each other in several fields of urban policy (Campbell, 2012). The irruption of new actors in the decision-making arena and fiercer competition for public and private resources have propelled local innovation and policy transfer along multilevel and transnational lines (John, 2001, pp. 15-16). A fundamental factor underpinning urban policy learning and innovation is the awareness that cities embedded in a plurality of contexts face similar challenges (Katz & Nowak, 2017, p. 10). Nowadays, city networks provide platforms for 'governance by diffusion', enacting learning processes that ultimately promote the adoption of specific local actions (Hakelberg, 2014).

In less than two decades, a specific body of literature on city networks, mainly outside the mainstream corpus of urban studies, has taken shape. Some of these research works have specifically connected the adoption of formal transnational city networks as units of analysis with the empirical focus on learning as a key organizational output. For instance, in a pioneering contribution, Bulkeley and Bestsill (2003) studied the capacity of ICLEI – Local Governments for Sustainability (hereafter, ICLEI) – to foster policy learning and change by analyzing its Cities for Climate Programme (CCP), an international network of over 550 local governments active in promoting local initiatives for climate change mitigation, and then focusing on its impact through a case-study approach in six active member cities in Australia, the United Kingdom (UK) and the US. Lee and van de Meene (2012) developed a quantitative social network analysis to study the information-seeking patterns among the 40 members and 19 affiliate members of the C40 Cities Climate Leadership Group (hereafter, C40). In another quantitative study, Lee (2013) presupposed that information sharing and diffusion are a condition for global cities to join transnational networks specialized in climate change, in addition to the economic interests revolving around climate action. Niederhafner (2013)

explored regional similarities and differences between Europe and Asia by comparatively analyzing nine transnational city networks (i.e. Association of Cities and Regions for Recycling and Sustainable Resources, Climate Alliance, Energy Cities, Eurocities, Union of the Baltic Cities, Asian Network of Major Cities 21, Citynet, Clean Air Initiative for Asian Cities and Kitakyushu Initiative for a Clean Environment) adopting the lack of knowledge, along with other objectives, as a driver for networking and a structural goal for city networks. Bouteligier (2013b) analyzed two transnational municipal networks – Metropolis and C40 – to shed light on how their internal power relations influence key network outputs such as the transfer of best practices, access to resources, networking and agenda setting.

The examples extracted from this growing corpus warn us that the distinction between learning and the other types of outputs that city networks provide to their membership are inherently blurred. If we look at the hypothetical modalities of collaboration among members of a city network, this could materialize across a wide spectrum from learning to engaging in joint actions (Giest & Howlett, 2013, p. 351). In this regard, the conceptualization advanced by Happaerts et al. (2010, p. 130) clarifies this; they identify an external and internal dimension within the work of "inter-subnational networks", the former relating to the representation of interests of their members and capacity to influence within the multilateral fora, and the latter to policy learning and coordination around common problems.

The evolution of the body of literature on city networks is marked by the growing awareness that conventional conceptual frameworks are no longer suitable for grasping the dynamics taking place outside the traditional inter-state relations that depict international politics. In this context, the conceptual inputs inscribed within the literature on transnational advocacy networks (Keck & Sikkink, 1998) and environmental governance have played a key role in the evolution of the study of city networks (Grasa & Sánchez Cano, 2013). This second strand, starting with Bulkeley and Betsill (2003), has significantly contributed to the consolidation of the city networks literature through a broader scholarship revolving around climate and sustainability governance (e.g. Acuto, 2013b; Bouteligier 2013a; Gordon, 2020; Johnson, 2018; Keiner & Kim, 2007; Lee, 2015; Toly, 2008), along with specific bodies of work on inter-city networking around health (e.g. de Leeuw et al., 2014) and culture (e.g. dos Santos, 2021) (Acuto & Ghojeh, 2019, pp. 709-710). The environmental

emphasis should not be surprising if we observe how the sustainability discourse has shifted from understanding the city as a source of problems to a source of solutions (Angelo & Wachsmuth, 2020, p. 2203) and as a key theme increasingly addressed by city networks in the last two decades (Rapoport et al., 2019, pp. 35-36). However, the scholarly focus on city networks' work on climate change is contrasted by the fact that, as noticed in the results of the UCL City Leadership Lab report (Acuto et al., 2017a, p. 10), less than one third of these formalized organizations has the environment as its primary focus. This implies that other key empirical dimensions of the city network landscape are worth examining from a scholarly point of view.

Within the body of literature on city networks, the specific empirical effort on the relationship between city networks and international organizations, such as the agencies within the UN system, presents a dissonance between its growing empirical relevance and the scholarly attention received hitherto. My dissertation aims to tap into this literature gap. This need is further compelled by the specific historic moment that multilateral institutions and the international community as a whole are experiencing.

Between 2015 and 2016 the international community of states re-defined its commitment to development and sustainability by reaching several international agreements that set the agenda in terms of key dimensions for global, national, and local policy. In March 2015, the UN signed the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015-2030, a 15-year voluntary, non-binding agreement with seven global targets and four priorities to promote a substantial reduction in disaster risk and losses (UN, 2015c). In July 2015, the UN adopted the Addis Ababa Action Agenda (AAAA), a global framework for financing development to align financial policies and flows with social, economic and environmental priorities, and a set of policy actions to be undertaken by UN Member States to support the mobilization of means for the post-2015 agenda (UN, 2015a). In September 2015, in New York, the UN defined the post-2015 agenda, building on the previous set of Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) agreed in 2000, through the adoption of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (hereafter, 2030 Agenda) and a set of 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and 169 associated targets to guide global action towards sustainability, merging the previously detached development and environmental agendas (UN, 2015d). In December 2015, the Paris Agreement forged a voluntary accord to chart a new global climate deal

that commits to holding the global average temperature increase to well below 2 ºC above pre-industrial levels by the end of the century (United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change [UNFCCC], 2015). In October 2016, the New Urban Agenda was signed at the Habitat III Conference in Quito, reinvigorating the global commitment to sustainable urban development through a 20-year roadmap (UN, 2017).

Global agendas mark the pathway for years to come and enshrine a crucial reference for the growing international involvement of local governments and their formalized networking structures. My dissertation taps into this historic moment in global governance and incorporates into the current literature of city network the study of the specific relationship with global agendas. In this context, my research follows the recent example set by Kosovac et al. (2020) in their survey of the formal recognition of cities in major UN agreements. It aims to contribute to this specific strand by organizing the dissertation around learning as both a key output of city networks and a lens through which to understand the emerging relationship between city networks and international organizations.

The remainder of the first chapter will situate my research in the current theoretical debate, introduce the empowerment of cities through their networking structures, and address the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic in the context of city networks. The second chapter will delve into the research problem by shedding light on the interconnections between city networks, the global agendas, and learning.

## 1.3  A research enterprise on the fringe of disciplines

The current dissertation taps into the existing "conceptual gap"[21] that lies between the disciplines of international relations and urban studies as regards the emerging role of subnational actors in international politics (Herrschel & Newman, 2017, p. 1). The urban and the international are, indeed, increasingly united by a close and complex linkage. One the one hand, Bunnell (2017, pp. 20-21) sheds lights on the paradox that world cities literature, as the most influential recent contribution of urban studies to the analysis of globalization, might significantly eclipse its quintessential urban component, by paying

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[21]  An interesting exception that bridges these disciplines lies in the studies around paradiplomacy (i.e. parallel diplomacy), that is, diplomatic initiatives carried out by subnational governments in parallel to traditional state-based ones (e.g. Aldecoa & Keating, 1999; Tavares, 2016).

minor conceptual attention to the dimensions of proximity and located-ness. On the other hand, Herrschel and Newman (2017, pp. 12-13) posit that while the urban lens might be key to understanding the forces underlying the will of cities to act internationally, the attention must shift to the theoretical and analytical inputs of the international relations discipline, as better equipped to grasp the international realm. My research takes stock of this debate, that could be framed in scholarly terms as "global urban governance" (Acuto, 2019, p. 132), and proposes to contribute to it both theoretically and empirically.

The starting point, connecting with an existing extensive debate, relates to the very unit of analysis of my research. Despite the diversity of social structures enacted by humanity throughout history, the sovereign state is the sole macro-political unit in the world (Kissack, 2013, p. 9). Reproduced from Europe on the global scale through colonization and decolonization waves, it further underpins complementary assumptions regarding the link between the modern state and its territorial delimitation, the set of institutions with sovereign authority for all the political and legal affairs within this territory, the monopoly of the legitimate use of violence, and the right to wage war internationally (Kissack, 2013, pp. 8-9). The centrality of the modern nation-state in political science is conducive to the centrality of the Westphalian order in international relations. Derived from the peace treaties signed in 1648 at the end of the Thirty Years' War, the Westphalian order asserts the state as the central actor in international relations and, by claiming the supremacy of sovereignty and territoriality, understands the world as an "interstate system" (Osiander, 2011, p. 2752). The implications of the worldwide diffusion of the notion of state sovereignty are even more profound if we bear in mind how this paradigm undermined alternative models of political authorities such as subnational and transnational bodies (Reus-Smit, 2014, p. 359). As might be guessed from the initial pages of this text, this conceptualization is increasingly contested, as the traditional paradigm of the nation-state is deemed dysfunctional vis-à-vis the structural transformations of our society (Barber, 2013).

The end of the 20th century has experienced the 'retreat of the state', as the increasing flow and power of transnational capital within the deregulated globalized economy has weakened national economic sovereignty, while the decreasing provision of welfare and public goods has decreased the intervening power of the state within the everyday lives of its citizens (Strange, 1996). In

the meantime, political systems and public organizations have embarked on processes of decentralization, outlining a comparatively diverse landscape, as power is reallocated from higher- to lower-level structures within a government or administration (Benz, 2011, p. 545), as well as towards privatization (Avant et al., 2010, p. 5) and the adoption of private sector managerial and organizational forms according to the new public management reformatory principles (Lægreid, 2011, p. 1699). Such devolution of authority is inscribed within a wider process where traditional state public policy shrinks in favor of new scales and actors of policy action. In this context, we can notice experimental transgovernmental networks at the global and regional scales, as well as the delegation to semi-private networks equipped with sufficient expertise to handle complex governance functions (Stone & Moloney, 2019, pp. 3-4). These shifts, as we noticed earlier, connect with the evolution towards a governance model, as hierarchical and centralized structures are replaced by horizontal, networked, and hybrid approaches that accommodate new actors and configurations in the public realm (Curtis, 2014b, p. 26).

While this dissertation could have accurately depicted the overall state of the world until a few years ago, it is now increasingly accepted that the outset of the 21st century has witnessed the 'return of the state' (Castells, 2010b, p. 340). Going even further, by interpreting the huge post-2008 financial crisis governmental rescues of banking as the poster child of "the end of the ideology of public powerlessness", Delwaide (2011, p. 69) questions whether the very notion of the retreat of the state within the dominance of the neoliberal agenda ever existed. This notion is expanded by scholars such as Best and Gheciu (2014, p. 4), who emphasize that the end of the retreat of the state must be interpreted within a shifting understanding, whereas a diversity of actors can be considered public, not because of their identification with a bounded domain, but in light of their specific practices. In a slightly different understanding within the debate on transnational climate governance, the relatively recent thesis that power is shifting from state to non-state actors through hybrid configurations strikes a middle position, according to Bäckstrand et al. (2017, pp. 567-569), as the core of the complex institutional architecture enacted by the Paris Agreement seems to follow the national politics of the member states rather than the opposite. It is fair to think that the future international order will probably be constituted by a 'Westphalian triad' of sovereignty, territoriality, and nationalism embedded in an

increasingly interdependent system where both state and non-state actors will play substantive roles (Acharya & Buzan, 2019, pp. 263-264).

The return of the state is closely interlinked with the debate on globalization and international governance architecture. Particularly since the 2010s the taken-for-granted nature of globalization has been increasingly contested. Converted into a moot point, it has led us to question the axiom of the expansion of global governance at the expense of national sovereignty. The crisis of sovereignty under the threat of globalizing processes and the consequent attempt to reassert it underpin the interconnection traced between the current international wave of populist nationalism and the rise of identity politics in modern liberal democracies (Fukuyama, 2018, Chapter 8). In other words, the disquiet with globalization is deeply related to the ongoing debate on the crisis of the liberal world order. This is what Acharya and Buzan (2019, p. 179) define as the 'rise of the rest' and the end of the Western-dominated core-periphery international model, as the process of modernization is currently leading to a larger diffusion of wealth and power among a growing number of states (anticipated by the rise of Japan in the late 19th century). Mahbubani (2018, Chapter: Western Hubris) sees this historical tipping point in the Western world as the consequence of the hubris created by the end of the Cold War and victory in it. For scholars such as Pabst (2020, pp. 24-27), the ideational component is also central as Western societies, fragmented internally and trapped between the identitarian turn of liberalism and nationalist backlashes, do not have the assertiveness to defend their cultural models abroad. Yet the relationship between the return of the state and the increase in populism is not straightforward. In fact, it is also argued that the discourse against political and economic elites might weaken state and supranational institutions and, precisely as a consequence of that, empower local actors (Katz & Nowak, 2017, p. 5). All these disparate signs seem to suggest the importance of a globalist account that, while recognizing the ongoing structural transformation of defining characteristics of social organization, admits the simultaneous existence of globalization and de-globalization processes, leading to both integrated and fragmented societies (Held & McGrew, 2003, p. 7).

While local governments have globally advanced in terms of detaching from the reductionist understanding of "creatures of the state" (Frug, 1980, p. 1059), national governments still retain huge political, legal, economic and

social power over localities. After all, the fact that it is not possible for local governments to enter into international treaties is due to (state-centric) formal international law rather than the local legislative power to engage in foreign actions (Leffel, 2018, pp. 505-506). This explains, despite the undeniable importance of the decentralization agenda in the last decades, the process of recentralization, which is taking place in several states in both the developed and developing world, fueling the tension between devolution and recentralization forces (Calzada, 2014; Hennig & Calzada, 2015; Tyler Dickovick, 2011). In this apparently uncertain context, we know for sure that a central economic transformation has contributed to the emerging entrepreneurial role of cities, particularly on the international scale. The shifting to a post-Fordist and deindustrialized economy has led local governments, within the context of the trend towards the devolution of responsibilities, to adapt and step into the international realm in order to capture capital and labor as renewed economic assets (Amen et al., 2011, p. 23). This transformation is instrumental in understanding, as we saw before, both the analysis of the global and world cities literature and the increasing quest for urban policy learning.

During the 350 years that separate us from the Peace of Westphalia, local governments have played a secondary role at the international level vis-à-vis modern states (Ljungkvist, 2014, p. 32). The collaborative endeavor that stems from the emergence of revisited pre-Westphalian trading city networks such as the Silk Road or the Hanseatic League (Katz & Bradley, 2013, pp. 9-10) is testimony to the level of international interconnectedness that cities have achieved through history and restored nowadays (Barber, 2013, pp. 108-110). The traditional notion of state-centered diplomacy has been questioned since the end of World War II (WWII) when non-state actors, with a non-territorial (i.e. civil society organizations and multinational corporations) and territorial (i.e. subnational governments) character, entered the international stage (van der Pluijm, 2007, pp. 7-8). Several voices have arisen to advocate for the adaptation of our theoretical frameworks to this shifting reality. International relations theory has been called upon to solve the "territorial trap" that lies in the Westphalian order and state-centrism (Agnew, 2018, p. 31), connecting with the call to problematize the notion of territoriality, as claimed by the concept of "methodological territorialism" (Scholte, 2005, p. 66).

In this context, the articulation of the concept of global governance[22] opens up new possibilities for analytical endeavors. As different theoretical efforts aim to illuminate the multiple dimensions of this shifting reality, several conceptualizations have been advanced. As per the initial conceptualization, global governance refers to "an order that lacks a centralized authority with the capacity to enforce decisions on a global scale" (Rosenau, 1992, p. 7). Scholte (2011, p. 110) stresses a different nuance encapsulated in the "rules and accompanying regulatory processes that apply to jurisdictions and constituencies of a planetary scale". Anheier (2019, p. 769) notices that global governance is a doubly problematic concept: 'global' stands for something beyond the international scale yet without implying an even distribution across countries or regions, while 'governance' is originally a term from the corporate world that implies, in this case, a broader idea of government, beyond the traditional reference to the legislative, executive, and judicial branches. A helpful elucidation is provided by Weiss (2011, p. 70) and his emphasis on multi-actor and multilevel "collective efforts to … address worldwide problems that go beyond the capacities of individual states to solve". The global governance arena is an increasingly fragmented space, as institutions vary in terms of organizational forms and underlying norms, public or private constituencies, and geographical and thematic scope (Acharya, 2018, pp. 788-789). It implies the empirical amalgamation of a multiplicity of governmental and non-governmental governance actors, such as intergovernmental institutions and transnational regulatory regimes (Zürn, 2018, pp. 3-4). The critical aspect lies in the complex strategies enacted by state and non-state actors to mobilize their political resources through the networks constitutive of the global governance architecture, in order to define public policies in line with the relevant organizations' interests (Anheier, 2019, p. 782).[23]

It should be noted from a disciplinary perspective that the understanding of the international realm beyond the centrality of the nation-state is recent and fully advanced only within some of its theoretical strands. Whereas there is a high degree of theoretical sophistication within international relations theory,[24] the first two dominant theoretical trends of the 20th century, realism (e.g. Waltz, 1979) and liberalism (e.g. Keohane & Nye, 1971), albeit different,

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[22] See Hofferberth (2015) for a conceptual review of the different definitions of this term.
[23] See Laumann and Knoke (1987) for the initial application of this concept to US policy-making.
[24] See Reus-Smit (2020) for a succinct global introduction to the discipline. Refer to Burchill et al. (2005) for a detailed presentation of the different theoretical schools within the international relations literature.

rely on the assumptions that underpin the constitution of the modern state, assert inter-state relations within a condition of world anarchy, and do not envision cities as key players in the global arena. Similarly, with its foundational, distinguishing claim that anarchy and absence of a central authority give rise to an international society of states, the English School theory (e.g. Bull, 2012) maintains a strong state-centric perspective.[25] A more complex understanding of the international realm that accommodates new analytical inquiries beyond the predominant state-centric ontology is put forward by the feminist (e.g. Tickner & Sjoberg, 2011), post-modernist (e.g. Der Derian & Shapiro, 1989), and constructivist (e.g. Onuf, 1989) interpretations.

The quest to grasp the role of cities in world politics leads global governance and the constructivist contribution to the international relations literature to be embraced as the initial theoretical basis for my research.[26] The conceptualization of international politics as socially constructed (Wendt, 1992) leads us to question state-centered frameworks and embrace a wider diversity of actors involved. As Curtis (2011, p. 1946) highlights with regard to global governance and the shifting notion of territoriality, "the rise of transnational forms of urbanism can serve as one lens through which such challenges to the established order of the anarchical society of states is revealed". The notion of global governance and its openness towards cities and non-state actors in general provides a fruitful theoretical path and a promising bridge between urban and international relations scholars (Amen et al., 2011, pp. 27-28), thus tapping into the conceptual gap I referred to at the beginning of this section.

Indeed, several authors have contributed to illuminating this linkage. Scholte (2014, pp. 13-15) invites us to overcome the fixed underpinnings that assert specific primary levels of political action a priori and proposes the concept of trans-scalarity[27] to explore the dynamics related to democratic

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[25] A significant exception lies in the work developed by the English School around the concept of the world society and its focus on the non-state dynamics that constitute the international system (e.g. Buzan, 2004).

[26] Among international relations scholars, the term 'international' usually refers to inter-state relations, while 'global' encompasses the activities of both state and non-state international actors (Higgott, 2006, p. 616). Notwithstanding the merits of this argument, the current dissertation does not embrace this differentiation in a systematic way.

[27] "For all its emphasis on crossing spaces, trans *nationalism* still highlights the national, whereas the term trans *scalarity* avoids naming – and implicitly elevating – any particular scale" (Scholte, 2014, p. 14, emphasis in the original). The problematization of the national analytical scale is not a case apart. For instance, Lee (2015, p. 6) suggests using translocal to portray the formal and informal linkages of local actors, while Harris and Moore (2013, p. 1499) use the notion of trans-urban to refer to the circulation of knowledge on urban planning since the 19th

development. The notion of scale and its problematization become fundamental, pointing to its socially constructed nature (Swyngedouw, 1997), warning against the essentialist assumption of associating global and local with 'above' and 'below' (Smith, 2005b, p. 242), in favor of a relational appreciation of the mutually constitutive nature of the local and the global (Massey, 2005, Chapter 15). In this context, a multi-scalar understanding of global governance is proposed to inquire into global politics by focusing on the agency generated in and from global cities, and to connect the international-minded macro level of analysis on broad dynamics and the urban-minded micro level of analysis on everyday practices (Acuto, 2013b, pp. 168-169). As global cities have evolved from strategic sites to global actors (Ljungkvist, 2016), the networks constituted by cities have equally shifted to the level of organizations (Acuto et al., 2017b, p. 15) and are conceptualized as per their integration within a multilevel understanding of governance (Betsill & Bulkeley, 2004, pp. 490).

The first part of this theoretical review revolves around revealing subnational governments as both targets and agents of globalization. Cities are "loci of centripetal and centrifugal forces" – as external forces shape cities; these in turn generate forces that shape beyond the urban world (Toly, 2008, p. 342). As proved by the most recent debates on territoriality and scalarity, it implies that the current analytical endeavor lies within urban politics, as instantiation of the interplay that dynamically connects the global and local political worlds (Cochrane, 1999, p. 123).

As Davidson and Martin (2013, p. 6) indicate, while cities are increasingly connected through ties that shape a spatial relational landscape, city governments are still in place and operational. This positioning is fundamental when addressing the questioning of urban politics as its traditional inherent spatially-bounded character is put in jeopardy by globalization (Marcuse & van Kempen, 2000). Embracing the recent call by Jonas et al. (2018, p. 6-7), urban politics must be searched within the context of the social relations that cities maintain with each other, mindful that the importance that one locality might have for another requires the global and the local to be embraced as processes and relations.

This leads to the second theoretical grounding. If, like at the global level, urban political processes are socially constructed, the conceptualization of

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century. Particularly interesting for our urban focus is the notion of transnational urbanism by Smith (2005b, p. 243) and his focus on "grounding the discourse of the 'transnational' in the place-making practices of the 'translocal'".

urban politics must also include, as prompted recently by Jonas et al. (2018, p. 4), discourse as the object of study, devoting attention to the increasing recognition of discourse as a source of power, a producer of reality, and a key element between competing interests within the urban realm. From a disciplinary perspective, adopting discourse as an object of study opens us to the 'argumentative turn' (Fischer & Forester, 1993; Fischer & Gottweis, 2012) and 'interpretive turn' (Hiley et al., 1991; Yanow, 2000), integrating this as an additional resource in the task of bridging the conceptual gap between urban studies and international relations. As we will see, it further contributes by adding a specific political science perspective to the study of the burgeoning phenomenon of city networks.

## 1.4  Empowerment in city networks

The rationale beneath the growing influence of cities internationally has been put forward, yet the specific dynamics underpinning the emerging importance of city networks on the global scale deserve special attention. Against the backdrop of global governance, the rising relevance of city networks is shaped by the intersection of the drivers of globalization, urbanization and urban population growth presented beforehand with the notions of proximity, democracy, decentralization, neoliberalism and networked forms of governance. The complex interaction of these elements might lead to the empowerment of local governments engaging in city networks.

As Blank (2006, p. 889) explains, local governments rest on two concepts that lay the foundations of modern political liberalism: on the one hand, localities are framed within the bureaucratic model, standing as a structural part of the state, and enshrining the value of egalitarianism; on the other hand, localities are framed within the democratic model, catalyzing autonomously the will of their local communities, and are uniquely placed as a "schoolhouse for democracy". This tension underpins the characterization of local governments within political systems, as both subordinate entities of higher levels of government and context-specific democratic spaces of local actors (Haus & Heinelt, 2005, p. 16). With a key influence exerted by intergovernmental organizations, a "localist ideology"[28] (Blank, 2006, p. 902)

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[28] This composite term has been used earlier in urban politics literature. Within the analysis of local economic growth, Cox and Mair (1988, pp. 318-320) posit that localist ideologies are mediation devices leveraged by local business coalitions to address the gap between the

has emerged as a convergence point for opposite discourses: decentralization is promoted simultaneously to boost democratization and local mobilization, and foster the devolution of responsibilities and the rolling back of the state, underpinned by the principles of subsidiarity[29] and effective governance. In overall terms, with a significant degree of diversity (including recentralization waves), decentralization and strengthening of local democracy have been convergent macro-trends since the end of WWII on a global scale (Wollmann, 2020, "Convergence or Divergence" section). At the same time, the international outlook of local governments is also the outcome of a severe context where the devolution of authority from higher tiers of government does not correspond with an equal devolution of resources (Katz & Nowak, 2017, pp. 3-4).

Cities are on the frontline when experiencing the consequences of globally pressing problems that national governments fail to address through coordinated, bold action (Acuto et al., 2017b; Barber, 2013). With networked forms of governance gaining relevance in the current global governance scenario (Betsill & Bulkeley, 2004, pp. 474-476), non-state actors have enhanced their contribution to collective decision-making processes (Stone, 2012, pp. 493-496). In this context, cities and their networking structures in particular have demonstrated their will and capacity to tackle global issues (Curtis, 2016, p. 117), while highlighting their unique proximity to their local communities (Ljungkvist, 2014, p. 45). In a prominent difference with national governments, cities harness their nimble adaptability to external forces in the deployment of local solutions that are more aligned to the specificities of local contexts (Katz & Nowak, 2017, p. 9). A clear linkage emerges, hence, in terms of the interaction between the globalization of policy issues and devolution towards local level representatives whose constituencies experience, first-hand, the consequence of these transnational issues.

As a consequence, a paradigm shift has moved from the negative aspects traditionally associated with urbanization to the progressive emergence of messages stressing the key role of cities for our sustainability and future

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particularly local and the universally global, providing the local community with a reassuring sense of identity and worthiness against the oppressing impact of external forces and the crisis of meaning that it encloses. Along these lines, the resurgence of (new) localism has been associated with contemporary globalization and neoliberal restructuring of the state (Brenner & Theodore, 2002; Goetz & Clarke, 1993).

[29] The principle of subsidiarity "implies that decisions regarding the provision of services should rest with the government entity which, being closest to the community, is in a better position to deliver these services in a more cost-effective way" (UN-Habitat, 2013, p. 113).

(Bouteligier, 2014, p. 59). In a nutshell, the shift from negative to positive views of the urban world revolves around economic development (i.e. from parasites on the economy and the rural world to loci of innovation and economic vibrancy), environmental conservation (i.e. from sources of pollution and climate change drivers to centers with healthy populations and a high quality of life, sticking to low levels of pollution and greenhouse gas emission), and social inclusion (i.e. from concentration of poverty, inequality and violence to spaces of inclusive development, empowerment and basic services provision) (Satterthwaite, 2016b, p. 4). These evolving perspectives have converged into an emergent broad international consensus about the role of sustainable urban development as a driver for human development (Rudd et al., 2018, pp. 183-184).

This shift is not surprising if we observe the number of responsibilities that, to a larger or lesser extent, local governments from across the world have. These responsibilities include services (e.g. health, education, housing, water distribution, public transport, etc.), infrastructure (e.g. sanitation, local roads, public space, etc.), buildings (e.g. building regulation, rental accommodation regulation, etc.), urban planning (e.g. land use management, infrastructure planning, etc.), and other key areas such as local economic development and tourism (UCLG, 2013, p. 14). In comparison with other tiers of government, ineffective leadership is felt in a more tangible way in the daily life of the communities precisely because of the role of local governments in service provision (Rapoport et al., 2019, p. 83). The relevance of urbanization in the global South[30] implies that urban governance policy gearing towards an equitable, highly productive, and low-carbon economy might significantly contribute to global sustainable development (Revi, 2017, p. ix).

The shift from the negative to the positive effects of urbanization, however, is still more at a rhetorical level than at a practical one. With the current urbanization and urban population growth rates, the global challenges ahead of us will mainly translate into solutions to be found and applied in cities in Asia, Africa and Latin America (Kissack, 2013, p. 9). The agglomeration economies enabled by urban settlements lower the costs necessary to achieve the positive effects of urbanization, yet they depend on the local governments'

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[30] This text acknowledges the controversial dichotomy global North/global South, but maintains the terminology to point to the concentration of inequality that characterizes the global South (Moodley, 2019, p. 34).

capacities to leverage these lower costs, while closely collaborating with their local communities (Satterthwaite, 2016b).

In this context, local governments engaging in city networks experience first-hand the dynamics associated with collaborative endeavors and the bidirectional local-global nexus. City networks enhance information, knowledge, expertise and access to resources and partners, which are often more difficult to obtain if acting individually; catalyze for concrete action; strengthen their members' capacities; position members both at the national and global level; pool resources and wills to act as a group in the achievement of common goals; and influence world affairs as their members focus on foreign affairs (i.e. city diplomacy[31]), bypass traditional scales, and establish formal relations with global actors (Acuto, 2013a; Acuto et al., 2017b; Bouteligier, 2014). City networks may be conceptualized as the formalized organizations that local governments establish to span different scales and achieve the operational complexity required to address global phenomena at the local level beyond the capacity of the state (Curtis, 2018, p. 88). The pairing of cities' capacity to generate and circulate the flows that weave globalization with the bourgeoning trans-boundary collaborative networking of city governments constitutes cities as unique domains of political action (Douglass et al., 2019, p. 5).

Several authors have pointed out how this reinvigorated local-global nexus illuminates novel dynamics and analytical clues. Acuto (2013b, pp. 148-150) underlines that the increasing importance of global cities should not be embraced within international relations literature as an analytical replacement for the state, but rather as an invitation to appreciate the cross-cutting dimension inherent in the spatiality of global governance. While traditional diplomacy is inherently a means that states deploy for separate ends, the goal of institutionalizing transnational interactions in an organized fashion is, for cities, an end per se (van der Pluijm, 2007, p. 28). For instance, as an additional example of novelty in terms of traditional inter-state dynamics, Lee (2013, p. 109) observes that the paradigm of the "tragedy of the commons" (Hardin, 1968, p. 1243), so widely diffused within public policy and international relations studies, does not find empirical confirmation in the ambitious

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[31] City diplomacy is defined as "the institutions and processes by which cities, or local governments in general, engage in relations with actors on an international political stage with the aim of representing themselves and their interests to one another" (van der Pluijm, 2007, p. 6).

greenhouse gas emission targets (and their consequent implementation plans) set by cities scattered across the world to fight climate change.

## 1.5  Globalized urbanization in times of pandemic

While writing this dissertation, a viral pandemic has shaken our lives and changed the world. As per my own doctoral experience, the global impact of Coronavirus 2019 (COVID-19) on human mobility has, first of all, disrupted the methodology and work plan, obliging me to re-think the research design and embrace distance-based methods, as I will explain in the fourth chapter. Yet the 'largest quarantine in human history' (Markel, 2020) has also, and perhaps at the deepest level, (apparently) unsettled the merits of the core arguments of my research. As the virus shifted from outbreak to pandemic, countless pundits have predicted the death of cities. Meanwhile, voices have also arisen signaling the end of trans-boundary movements. While the pandemic is ongoing and much time will be required to disentangle the multi-dimensional impact of the virus in each domain of social life, this last section of the chapter sets out a different intellectual endeavor as it seeks tentatively and succinctly to reflect on the impact of COVID-19 on the two fundamental driving forces of city networks: urbanization and globalization. As Fernández de Losada notices (2020), the very factors that have allowed cities to start being acknowledged as fundamental players in the 21st century global era – density and connectivity – have now become its structural weakness.

Around the 1990s, several authors (e.g. Naisbitt, 1995; Negroponte, 1996), confronted with improvements in communication, forecast the end of the need for cities and the rise of a "space-less world" (Gaspar & Glaeser, 1998, p. 136-137). In contrast, technological innovation has made our world more information-intensive, making the face-to-face interactions enabled by urban agglomerations the key mechanism by which to ensure that complex knowledge exchange is deployed through learning and communication (Glaeser, 2011, p. 38). As Polèse (2009, p. 39) eloquently puts it: "[n]ot all information can be shared electronically, and most probably never will".

As population density has become a critical factor during the COVID-19 crisis, cities are once again questioned as forms of socio-spatial organization. This is just the reiteration of a much older anti-urbanist discourse that has emerged at disparate moments, such as during, for instance, within the US

history, the tense moments of the Cold War nuclear arms race (calling for human settlements with lower density) or in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks (questioning the skyscraper as a high-rise potential target) (Campanella, 2020). The core argument is that human settlements with a high population density are more vulnerable to epidemics because they increase the chance of interpersonal contacts. Nonetheless, this argument contributes to concealing a different set of compelling pre-existing problems. In its study of 284 Chinese cities, the World Bank observes that, aside from confirming the relevance of factors concerning specific connectivity with Wuhan, cities with the highest infection rates were those with relatively low population densities (Fang & Wahba, 2020). Against the dramatic death toll from COVID-19 in the city of New York, characterizing the density level, as the Governor of New York Andrew Cuomo (2020) did, as "destructive" allows our attention to be fixed only on a fragment of the problem. In New York, specifically, race and income are the largest factors in determining virus deaths, after age (Schwirtz & Rogers Cook, 2020). On a global scale, for many of the one billion people living in often dense slums or informal settlements lacking infrastructure and basic services (including access to basic health care), lockdown policies and physical distancing are overturned by the compelling needs generated by precarious jobs and a lack of social safety nets (Wahba et al., 2020). For the "urban majority" in the global South – where most of the global urban population is located – the (Northern) lockdown measures are basically not possible (Bhan et al., 2020). As McFarlane (2020) warns, it is the combination of high population density and high rates of poverty and the associated lack of urban basic provisions that determine the real impact of the virus.

Indeed, our own emotions as urban dwellers (and urbanists), observing the emptied city centers during the lockdown, are undeniable. The widely proclaimed 'new normality' will change our cities. Yet these changes are far from deterministic. Decisions, to be clear, will be taken within a context of severe economic contraction, with estimates of over 100 million people pushed into poverty due to the impact of the pandemic (Gerszon Mahler et al., 2020) and local governments expecting to have 15%-25% less revenue in 2021 (Wahba et al., 2020). The shifting scenarios, some as speculation and others in their incipient deliberative phase, vary widely and touch upon different aspects of urban life. For instance, to name a few, tele-working and suburbanization might contribute to affordable housing, de-gentrification, and the reshaping of

business districts; cities might opt to increase their food self-sufficiency from global supply chains; or labor markets such as the health sector might be disrupted by the development of artificial intelligence solutions that may reduce the exposure of those on the frontline of (future) pandemics. How the 'new urban normal' will be is yet to be seen. Some ideas will materialize along complex processes of appropriation and contestation, while others might ultimately lose relevance once out of the heat of the debate.

Yet the common threads underlying all these possible scenarios is that cities are also an integral part of the solution. Ali and Keil (2012, p. 355) contend, with regard to the 2003 Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) outbreak, that both the spread and response to the virus unfolded through social and information networks embedded in the larger network of global cities. This is because the opportunities and threats associated with density are instantiations of a defining characteristic of human societal development: urbanization. Dating back over the history of human civilization, the city stands out as the specific socio-spatial environment created by human beings to control the natural environment by altering "the conditions of possibility for human life" (Magnusson, 2011, p. 22). Cities as a whole have long been the cradle of infectious diseases and yet, after transitional periods of decay, have always revived as adaptive entities. As a matter of fact, modern urbanism as we know it today was initially pioneered by engineers who sought to address public health issues and the spread of diseases in 19th-century cities (Sennett, 2018, Chapter 2). Urban life will continue driving human society and the current estimation that we will reach almost 7 billion urban dwellers by 2050 (UNDESA, 2019, p. 9) is the most solid evidence of this. To understand the magnitude of this historical phenomenon, we should consider that in the early 19th century, at the beginning of the Industrial Revolution, only 3% of the population was urban (Raven et al., 2010, p. 582) and that this percentage has been relatively stable (epidemics apart) for the last millennium (Smith, 2012, Introduction). As there are no substantive arguments that may counter the current massive trend, the post-COVID-19 socio-spatial urban design will still revolve around densely populated and compact cities as a normative model for basic services provision, ecological restoration, and economies of scale. Thus, the global pandemic will not bring about the end of the city, but rather an even more compelling argument in favor of its political agency at the global level.

The foundations of globalization have also been questioned, yet according to a substantially different process both in terms of kind and degree. Border closures and their connection with claims of nationalist backlashes, EU-level frictions around the economic recovery plan, criticism and heated politicization of the World Health Organization's (WHO) response to the outbreak, and particularly, the overall lack of international coordinated action to tackle the pandemic in its initial stages have been interpreted as different signs of a comprehensive process of de-globalization. Along the same lines, the overall different degrees of response across countries have indicated the rise of Asia and the fall of the current liberal international order and its leading architect, the US.

Yet this is precisely where COVID-19 has impacted in a substantially different way. The perception of the city has shifted from strategic actor to threat over an impressively short time span, while the longevity of globalization as a historical development has been called into question since the outset of the 21$^{st}$ century, as discussed above. In this sense, "[n]ot every crisis is a turning point" as the COVID-19 impact on, for instance, the role of the state or the deepening of great power competition is actually accelerating a historical process already at play, rather than reshaping our world (Haass, 2020). Besides the debate about whether the correlation between liberalism, globalization and, in general terms, global governance is misplaced (Barnett, 2019), the COVID-19 is substantiating crucial, and to a certain degree unheard, lessons about our political institutions.

Confirming the historical trend presented earlier, the COVID-19 crisis has solidified the return of the state. Public sector universal health coverage has proven to be better equipped to handle a pandemic than privatized health care systems (Meuleman, 2020). "Small government" countries, that in the last decades have embraced outsourcing and austerity-driven budget cuts, have been overwhelmed by the pandemic in comparison with governments that have invested in public sector capabilities and capacities (Mazzucato & Quaggiotto, 2020). The return of the state is associated with a call for policies touching upon different aspects of social life and political orientations, from the establishment of universal basic income and strengthening of public health care to government- or corporate-driven technology-based tools of mass surveillance.

The country-level response to the global pandemic has further shown how "rapid and unprecedented systemic transformation" is possible if framed as crisis, though the specificity of local cultural contexts is an obvious factor within this (Meuleman, 2020). Yet this effort has not permeated the supranational institutional architecture. Here as well, the global pandemic has amplified the pre-existing gap between the growing need for efficient global governance institutions and the actual reinvigoration of anti-globalist nationalist agendas. Unsurprisingly, the voices that have blamed globalization for the current situation have omitted to mention that pandemics have existed historically even before the current degree of globalization. The health crisis has vividly displayed the need for international cooperation in an interconnected world, while at the same time bringing to light how this mismatch lies beneath other pressing trans-boundary contemporary challenges such as climate change, migration, and rising inequality. At a subtler level, the urgent need to join forces in a collaborative framework has highlighted the compelling call for engaging in a "fundamental rethinking of the meaning of 'national interest'" (Lopez-Claros et al., 2020, p. 14).

As the last decades have demonstrated, contextual elements can weaken globalization, which is, nonetheless, a historical process of interconnectedness that will continue underpinning human society. Until it is proved otherwise, cities will continue being on the frontline of global emergencies such as COVID-19. Facing the call to both compete and collaborate, cities will still be driven by the need to learn from and pool resources with other cities through networked dynamics embedded into complex webs of multilayered governance and increasing blurred separations between state and non-state actors.

Networks between city governments and a wider range of actors from public, private, and community sectors will continue being fundamental to enhancing urban resilience to crises (Bai et al., 2020). The fact that virtually all major global city networks have quickly developed initiatives or even repurposed their working focus in order to support their members' responses to the pandemic is the clearest testimony to the importance of collective efforts in terms of both mitigating the impact of the outbreak and preparing for the aftermath. Furthermore, while virtual platforms and remote working have enabled and actually boosted information exchange, the limits of "Zoom diplomacy" (Heath, 2020) to accommodate the complex interactions that

ultimately underpin policy networking seem to suggest that face-to-face global working relations will be quickly restored in a post-COVID-19 scenario.

## 1.6  Summing up

At the intersection between the structural transformations of globalization and urbanization, several reasons account for the decision of cities to step into the international arena. The unprecedented challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic and the ongoing strengthening of nation-states as dominant political actors have re-contextualized but not undermined the key role of cities in a globalized urban world.

The growing global role of local governments and their networking structures does not exist in a vacuum. It exists within an emergent complex landscape of global governance that transcends the traditional Westphalian monopoly of international relations as inter-state relations.

In this framework, city networks are increasingly partnering with intergovernmental organizations bypassing the traditional scale of the state. Despite its growing work, the body of literature on city networks has not yet devoted much empirical attention to this specific set of relationships. My dissertation taps into this literature gap by focusing on the global sustainability and development agendas adopted by the international community in the 2010s as a central element organizing the practices and relations between city networks and intergovernmental organizations.

A key output of city networks, learning is proposed heuristically to grasp the relationship between city networks and global agendas. The next chapter will review the intersection between city networks, global agendas, and learning, pointing to the analytical importance of the discursive construction of policy learning.

# 2 Learning through city networks

## 2.1 Stepping into the global arena

The forces underpinning the increasing importance of cities and their networking structures at a global level have been presented. The importance of learning to address this thriving phenomenon and its key relationship with intergovernmental organizations and their global agendas will be the main subject of this second chapter. As will be clear by the end of the literature review, learning is a promising analytical approach to uncover the emerging dynamics of this specific dimension of global governance. Prior to delving into the theoretical framework of learning, we need to dig deeper into the global governance debate.

As we already know, city networks and international organizations intersect in the changing landscape of global governance. Their relationships are inscribed within a multilevel system where local, national, regional, and global political processes are closely interwoven. Two related approaches stand out within the range of institutional connections between supranational and subnational governmental tiers, questioning traditional hierarchical relations: multilevel governance and orchestration.

Emerging from the studies on European integration (e.g. Marks, 1992), multilevel governance[32] focuses on state rescaling, highlights the blurred boundaries between domestic and international affairs, views national governments as gatekeepers between supranational and subnational actors, and emphasizes the policy-making coordination in both vertical (i.e. between actors across territorial levels) and horizontal (i.e. within the same level and between state and non-state actors) terms (Flinders & Matthews, 2011). Understanding cities as part of a multilevel governance system, this approach stresses the upward and downward flows of power and competences impacting policy processes and legal frameworks (WBGU, 2016, pp. 15-17). More in tune empirically with dynamics inherent in Western countries[33] (Bulkeley & Betsill, 2003, p. 18), multilevel governance[34] is advocated by local governments and its

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[32] See Piattoni (2009) for a conceptual and historical review of this notion.
[33] See, for instance, Brunet-Jailly (2011) for an appraisal of multilevel governance relations between the US and Canada.
[34] Resuming an observation sketched in the previous chapter, the degree of integration within the EU as a regional multilateral organization leads some authors to equate this community to a

partners to reform public policy decision-making structures by a call for this concept to be rooted in the principle of subsidiarity and respect for local autonomy, as well as through the establishment of structured dialogue mechanisms (UN, 2015b, p. 1). The two flows of decision-making processes emanating from the state explain the increased engagement of supranational actors as well as their connection with complementary devolution towards subnational levels (Smith, 2019, p. 134). The paradigmatic example of the EU shows how multilevel governance potentially allows local governments to mobilize their legitimacy, knowledge, and governance capacity to leverage entry points into supranational policy-making processes and institutions (Heinelt & Niederhafner, 2008, p. 173).

Stemming from the literature on new public management and new domestic governance (Schleifer, 2013), orchestration is a non-traditional mode of governance where an international organization acts as an orchestrator and collaborates with an intermediary actor to influence the target actor (Abbott et al., 2015, p. 4). As the orchestrator and the intermediary pursue shared goals that could not be achieved individually, the orchestrator promotes multi-actor engagement in soft and indirect governance, where the orchestrator does not firmly control the intermediary's activities and the cooperation of the latter is on a voluntary basis (Abbott et al., 2015, pp. 3-6). In light of the increasing role of transnational networks within global governance, orchestration is promoted as an instrument to reinvigorate global collective action, as it counters the slow evolution of multilateral processes, addresses the increasing interdependence of global policy, and leverages the growing complexity of international cooperation (Klingebiel & Paulo, 2015, p. 1). By providing material (e.g. financial assistance) and/or ideational (e.g. political endorsement) support to the intermediary, the orchestrator may enlist a wide range of intermediaries to influence either state or non-state actors (Abbott et al., 2015, p. 14). City networks and their members suit the roles of intermediaries and targets respectively: city networks join forces with the orchestrators in pursuit of global agendas adopted by the international community; and their members are enlisted in order to supply global public goods without direct intermediation by the state.

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complex system of multilevel governance and/or to an emerging supranational structure (Higgott, 2006, p. 623).

Both multilevel governance and orchestration, to a different degree, raise concerns, in particular in terms of accountability. Multilevel governance, echoing the initial reflections on the shift from government to governance, challenges the traditional notion of democratic accountability (Flinders & Matthews, 2011, p. 1025), as a "Faustian bargain" emerges in so far as principles of democratic government are traded off for purported gains in terms of governance efficiency (Peters & Pierre, 2004, p. 76). In a different light, orchestration is seen as the conceptual evolution of the increasing number of private sustainability governance initiatives (e.g. Fairtrade, Forest Sustainability Council, etc.), which are purported to strengthen the international regulatory system and contribute towards sustainability, but are not aligned to shared notions of representative democracy (Schleifer, 2013, p. 533).

The linkage between accountability and non-traditional institutional relations between supranational and subnational levels is, indeed, a central element within the discussion around global governance. The very people affected by global policy-making "often have at best indirect means of holding decision-makers from government, business or civil society spheres accountable" (Bexell & Jönsson, 2017, p. 17). Citizens who experience first-hand the impact of transnational challenges are trapped between Westphalian-based representation and the lack of access to global public fora (Stone & Moloney, 2019, p. 18). Concurrently, discussions concerning the reform of global governance institutions and the public sphere are equally troublesome. Gleckman (2018, p. 9), for instance, observes how the ongoing debate around the evolution from a multilateral government-centric system into a multistakeholder-centric system provides a key platform from which to raise corporations' claims to their right to participate in global governance and public policy decisions. A discussion on accountability within the wider context of global governance will feed the remainder of this chapter, as it leads us to ponder over the legitimacy of the actors and the ownership of the policies at stake.

## 2.2 Feeding the local-global nexus

International organizations provide material and ideational support for city networks, which, in return, support the engagement of their members.

International organizations are increasingly aware of the need to count on the expertise and engagement of cities so as to tackle contemporary global challenges (Klaus, 2018, p. 1). The conceptual approach of orchestration helps illuminate the relationship between international organizations and city networks within the shared mobilization towards the achievement of global agendas.

Through a kaleidoscope of local-specific contexts, cities step into the international arena and convey messages that tap directly into the complex relation between local and global dynamics. For instance, there is wide evidence of city-to-city relationships that are born out of calls for solidarity and citizens' activism from within their communities. Yet conflict-resolution activities geared towards the promotion of international legal orders, for instance, might turn out to be motivated by the goal of preventing refugees from those conflict areas from seeking asylum in the city engaged in such twinning relationships (van der Pluijm, 2007, p. 15).

At first glance, most of the conveyed messages revolve around economic claims. Contemporary cities are the cradles of wealth, innovation and productivity, as well as the spaces of urban poverty expansion (Curtis, 2014a, p. 3). The economic rationale underpinning the international opening of cities is, hence, intrinsically related to the entrepreneurial turn of urban governance (Harvey, 1989), prompting the application of the notion of competitiveness, initially inherent in private sector organizations, to the governmental realm, as cities engage in inter-urban competition and place-based strategies. The attraction of resources, talent and attention (Richards, 2017, p. 43) lies beneath the economically driven rationale of the 'city hall goes abroad' phenomenon (Hobbs, 1994). The effects of this entrepreneurial turn are even more complex if we take into account that city networks, far from decreasing inter-urban competition, are instrumental platforms on which cities are differentiated from each other and deploy marketing strategies (Pflieger, 2014, pp. 332-333). The foreign enterprise of cities is, thus, the result of the "pathways of neoliberalization" that Brenner and Theodore (2005, p. 103) identify as central elements of the contemporary urban condition.

This observation opens up a necessary short excursus on the understanding of the city from the perspective of political economy. The association between the material transformation of cities and the evolution of global capitalism derives from the pioneering works of Castells (1972/1977)

and Harvey (2009) in the 1970s. The sociologist and geographer showed, from a Marxist standing, the merits of integrating a political economy perspective into urban studies (Ribera-Fumaz, 2009, p. 449), by underscoring the close linkage between urbanization and the historic evolution of industrial capitalism (Friedmann, 1986). These authors, jointly with other key urban scholars, have contributed to the development of a critical theoretical genus that is specifically committed to developing a critique of the ideology, power, and exploitation within and among cities (Brenner, 2012). Storper and Scott (2016)[35] identify three key influential approaches within contemporary urban studies: planetary urbanism,[36] assemblage urbanism,[37] and postcolonial urban analysis.[38] From different standings, assemblage theory and postcolonial urban theory come together in questioning the purportedly key explanatory role of the relationship between urbanization and capitalism which is moved forward by much urban scholarship.

The economic rationale, however, accounts only partially for the active participation of cities in transnational relations. Besides the central and highly debated neoliberal dimension, the increasing internationalization of urban policies is also a sign of the redistribution of political authority across different tiers of government (Pinson, 2019, p. 63). In parallel with their fundamental role as nodes of the world economy, cities are gaining international significance

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[35] They in turn advance their own analytical understanding of the city. The "urban land nexus" (Scott & Storper, 2015, p. 8) builds on the logic of agglomeration dynamics as a key element of any urbanization process, as well as on the associated specific characteristics of land use, location, and human interaction. This analytical framework allows cities to be studied according to five different dimensions: level of development, resource allocation rules, forms and levels of social stratification, cultural norms and traditions, and authority and power (Scott & Storper, 2015, pp. 10-12).

[36] Building on the work of the influential critical urban scholar Lefebvre (1970/2003), planetary urbanism (e.g. Brenner, 2014a) conceptualizes cities as territorial outcomes of larger processes of urbanization. Elements such as capital accumulation, state regulation, common resources privatization, or socio-environmental degradation are interpreted as constitutive processes of the contemporary global urban condition (Brenner & Schmid, 2014).

[37] Assemblage urbanism (e.g. Farías & Bender, 2010) emerges from the work of Deleuze and Guattari (1980/1987) and is deeply influenced, among several contributions, by the actor-network theory of Latour (2005). It views the city ontologically as a complex relational assemblage of heterogeneous human and non-human elements, calling methodologically for an ethnographic approach to account for its continuous becoming rather than for an external explanation of it, as assemblages emanate from the interactions among its component parts rather than from the individual properties of the parts (Farías, 2011a; Farías, 2011b; McFarlane, 2011).

[38] By drawing attention to the dangers of subsuming the empirical heterogeneity of urban experiences to ambitious universalisms, postcolonial urban theory (e.g. Robinson, 2006) raises the need to overcoming the traditional conceptual views in urban theory based on the experiences of a few global North cities, and calls for renewal of the discipline's conceptual and methodological resources in order to grasp the contemporary historical relevance of the unprecedented urban transformations experienced and enacted by cities in the global South (Ong, 2011; Robinson & Roy, 2016).

because of their increasing political engagement in global policy processes (Garcia-Chueca & Vidal, 2019, p. 15). The increasing role of cities on the international scale is inscribed in a wider conceptual understanding of the process of globalization that goes beyond the purely economic dimension.[39] Nijman (2016, p. 224, emphasis in the original) fully captures this characterization by distinguishing between a "global *private* city", as illustrated by the influential body of literature on the spatial concentration of corporations that interweave the global interconnected economy, and a "global *public* city", denoting the specific global reach of local governments engaging in transnational actions.

The fact, as noticed above, that globalization affects all human settlements beyond the iconic nodes of the global economy explains the increasing importance of global networks shaped by cities beyond economic activities. On the one hand, this implies that cities, interested in innovative ways of raising their international status, may leverage their key internal policies and share them as value-added elements capable, in return, of enhancing their reputation, instead of embarking on more common city marketing and branding strategies (Fernández de Losada & Garcia-Chueca, 2018, p. 3). On the other hand, as "defenders of universal values such as human rights" (Leffel, 2018, p. 504), local governments, even of small settlements, can engage in global politics not through efforts geared towards enhancing their hierarchical position as global economy nodes, but as local enforcers of norms sanctioned by the international community (Blank, 2006, pp. 926).

The inherent differentiation between local economic and political drivers of global action outlines a complex scenario that is further deepened by the different discourses that feed the global arena. The reemergence of the local scale coexists with the fact that "local problems cannot be solved entirely at this level", as Jessop summarizes (1998, p. 40). Cities are compelled to play a central role in addressing the nexus of local and global issues, facing calls for sustainability and competitiveness, social equality and liberalization, all at the same time (Edelenbos & van Dijk, 2017, p. 6).

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[39] It should be noted that, as trans-boundary processes disseminate goods and persons across the planet, they also drive cultural globalization, as images, principles, and values travel across the planet (Appadurai, 1996).

## 2.3  Interests and relationships on the global scale

Acuto (2013b, pp. 149-150) argues that global cities have contributed to the evolution of world politics as policy-making shifts towards less traditional institutional venues and practices, as exemplified by the increasing importance of local governments and their networking structures. In the evolution from the traditional inter-state system to global governance and the shift from government to governance, the relationship between power, authority, and legitimacy acquires increased importance (Bulkeley, 2012, pp. 2428-2429). Hierarchical hard governance models are increasingly complemented by soft governance models where ideational and material inputs replace legal enforcement and coercive measures, as exemplified by multi-actor orchestration (Abbott et al., 2015). The increase in the number of soft mechanisms in global governance is captured by the adoption of global agendas like the SDGs that do not constitute hard law international frameworks but ideational resources which aim to guide practice (Stevens & Kanie, 2016, p. 396). Soft power is at play as the capacity to influence others' preferences is not exerted by coercion but by the intangible force of persuasion (Nye, 2004). The replacement of coercion by persuasion is particularly relevant for transnational actors that are not confined by the sovereignty imperatives that sustain traditional international governance (Salomón & Sánchez Cano, 2008, p. 143). To be clear, hard governance mechanisms are not replaced, as demonstrated by the call to strengthen the juridical component of the multilateral system within the larger debate on the reform of global governance institutions (Lopez-Claros et al., 2020, p. 28). Soft governance mechanisms such as persuasion should rather be interpreted as the (highly necessary) other side of the coin of an institutional architecture that prevents cities from being member (states) of intergovernmental organizations and signing, as national governments do, 'hard power' legally binding treaties (Smith, 2019, p. 137).

As enhancing information, knowledge, expertise, and access to resources and partners is already an empowering effect that networking structures offer to their members, selected cities can obtain an additional benefit as they influence the direction of the city network and the activities to focus on (Bouteligier, 2013b, pp. 263-264). In line with the exercise of soft power, the engagement in actions is contingent on the efforts devoted by cities to pursue a specific definition of a policy problem within the network (Betsill & Bulkeley,

2004, p. 475). The engagement in solution-oriented activities and the prior discussion over the definition of the relevant policy problem is, in turn, contingent on the availability of specific skills and resources, which are necessary in order to access and exploit networking dynamics (Keiner & Kim, 2007, p. 1384). As Bouteligier (2014, p. 67) argues, with reference to C40 and its dominant discourse of neoliberal environmentalism, the exclusion from a city network does not imply automatic disempowerment, as it might also allow a city not to be subject to the dominant discourse and approaches embedded in the correspondent organization.

Yet the foreign entrepreneurship of localities is widely conditioned by the states and the complex forces at play. The struggle over interests is both internal and external to the networking organizations. On the one hand, while the UN as an international organization continues to represent the major site of global governance, it reproduces the structural tension of states intended to preserve their sovereignty while addressing cross-border public policy problems (Higgott, 2006, p. 620). On the other hand, it is the very awareness of the impact of globalization in cities' public policies that has increased the willingness by local governments to strengthen their ties and collaborate with each other (Fernández de Losada & Garcia-Chueca, 2018, p. 2). The contraposition between these two opposite forces is crystallized by the impossibility in the UN intergovernmental processes of protecting national sovereignty while at the same time strengthening the contribution of non-state actors (Graute, 2016, p. 8). Simply put, multilateralism has been outpaced by the growing number and relevance of international NGOs and multinational corporations that played a very minor role in the post-WWII context in which the founding principles of the UN Charter were drafted (Acharya, 2018, p. 784). The opening of the UN system to an increasing involvement of stakeholders is an indicator of this shift (Birch, 2018). State authority is not in zero-sum opposition with non-state actors and might even increase state power if diverse interests are successfully aligned through alliances (Avant et al., 2010, pp. 357-358). While states are no longer the sole key actors in the international field, they are not being replaced but displaced by rising actors such as cities and their networking structures, as traditional political processes are actually enlarged rather than shrunk by the emergence of governance dynamics (Acuto, 2013b, pp. 146-147). The fragmentation of the international institutional architecture translates into the emergence of actors and issues that actually

increase the demand for global governance (Acharya, 2018, pp. 788-789). The expanding number of formal intergovernmental international organizations and informal international organizations are testimony to the institutional growth of global governance organizational and networked policy domains beyond the traditional state (Stone & Moloney, 2019, p. 5). Opportunities rise within the networked complexity of state, international organizations, civil society, and business actors that weave global governance. Policy entrepreneurs, for instance, that invest in leadership and bargaining can play a brokerage role among organizations by framing policy solutions that respond to specific political problems (Eccleston et al., 2015).

The dynamics inherent in global governance reveal that authoritative governance is no longer the sole prerogative of states and that attention must be devoted to understanding the ways in which authority is granted to non-state actors (Bulkeley, 2012, p. 2434). For instance, within the Major Groups established at the UN Conference on Environment and Development in 1992 (i.e. Earth Summit) to represent key sectors of the society and contribute to the intergovernmental processes on sustainable development, the UN categorizes local authorities as one of the Major Groups of non-state actors (Graute, 2016, p. 3). Likewise, in the framework of the decentralization agenda presented above, the World Bank has boosted, through the signature of voluntary agreements on financial assistance in return for structural reforms, the development of local governments as private corporations, by focusing on self-funding, efficiency, and public services privatization (Blank, 2006, p. 909). Albeit within two different logics, these two cases share a common historical trait: local governments are not treated as genuine public institutions.

Local governments present key characteristics that differentiate them from the rest of non-state actors. Whereas civil society organizations and private corporations focus on the authority diffused by international norms for social or economic objectives, local governments rescale state authority towards international organizations and arguably more efficient territorial governments (Brütsch, 2012, p. 309). Despite the civil society mechanisms enacted by traditional international law to enable their participation in intergovernmental processes, local governments differentiate from civil society organizations. Across many countries, they are concomitantly political, public, and territorial organizations, as they are underpinned by democratic elections, deploy actions arguably in the public interest, and serve communities bounded

within a territorial delimitation respectively (Blank, 2006, p. 882). In this light, the understanding of local governments as democratically elected councils, in contrast to the wider notion of local governance, raises issues of global democratic legitimacy if we take into account that, in 2010, "only 12 of the 54 urban agglomerations with more than 5-m inhabitants were part of 'full democracies'" (Brütsch, 2012, p. 309).[40] Yet this global democratic deficit coexists with the observation that local governments integrate the respective governmental system of all UN member states (Graute, 2016, p. 8).[41]

The discussion on legitimacy at the subnational level is complemented by questions on legitimacy at the supranational level. In general terms, it should be noticed that the democratic legitimacy of global governance is complex even for 'traditional' actors, as we will see in the next chapter. This insight gains even more significance if we look at the very legitimacy of city networks. As formerly mentioned, the shifting to a governance model also underpins the expansion of networked configurations with private sector actors. In this context, concerns have been raised around those city networks that, still being integrated mainly by cities, in line with the foundational definition of these formalized organizations, are largely supported by corporate and philanthropic interests, mirroring the conformation of urban political spaces beyond the traditional polity where public and private interests are increasingly intermingled through experimental modalities of governance (Bulkeley & Castán Broto, 2013, pp. 372-374). Undoubtedly, there is an unsettling historical connection between the current localist rise of cities and their role in global challenges and the impact that the privatization of public services entails in terms of (local) governance capacity (Johnson, 2018, p. 36). While acknowledging the potential that lies in the expanding landscape of city networks, Fernández de Losada (2018, p. 2) points to a legitimacy differentiation between notoriously impactful relatively recent networks such as C40 and 100 Resilient Cities,[42] largely sponsored by philanthropic

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[40] Countries have been classified by Brütsch (2012, p. 309) according to the report by The Economist Intelligence Unit "Democracy Index 2010: Democracy in retreat" (The Economist Intelligence Unit [EIU], 2010), which identifies 26 'full democracies', 53 'flawed democracies', 33 'hybrid regimes', and 55 'authoritarian regimes'. In the 2017 edition of this report "Democracy Index 2017: Free speech under attack", the second and third category have increased in detriment to the other two categories: 19 'full democracies', 57 'flawed democracies', 39 'hybrid democracies', and 55 'authoritarian regimes' (EIU, 2017). While the EIU reports are by no means considered the unique reference for surveying democratic developments across the world, they are cited as an example of an authoritative resource to shed light on the complex landscape outlined by the relationship between local democracy and local government at the global scale.

[41] A more detailed account of this is provided in the sixth chapter.

[42] The recent evolution of the 100 Resilient Cities network is analyzed in the eighth chapter.

foundations, and traditional networks such as UCLG and Metropolis, where the governance structure comprises representatives of member cities that are accountable to their citizens. As a consequence, these recent networks are sometimes perceived as competitors because of the private actors' potential "*hidden agendas*", the common praxis of engaging members by invitation rather than through more representative procedures, and the ensuing fragmentation of the ecosystem of city networks within the context of the struggle for recognition by multilateral global institutions (Allegretti, 2019, p. 44, emphasis in the original). The higher level of financial and human resources of this second generation of city networks has certainly contributed to a transformation of the ecosystem from the initial focus on "public membership networks" into a more complex and hybrid global reality (Fernández de Losada, 2019, p. 24).

The conceptualization of local governments as political, public, and territorial organizations underpins the rising importance of cities and their networking organizations as non-state actors in the global arena. This uplifting profile stems from a complex yet retrofitting dynamic between the performative and procedural understanding of legitimacy. On the one hand, across a spectrum of several experiences the world over, local governments are envisioned as actors prioritizing "pragmatism instead of politics, innovation rather than ideology, and solutions in place of sovereignty" (Barber, 2013, p. 5). On the other hand, the structural impact of globalization across all spheres of life and the proximity of local governments to the needs of their communities implies that "whatever is left of political legitimacy, which is not much, is left mainly at the local level" (Castells, 2002, p. 552).

Cities are in a unique position to foster citizens' involvement through bottom-up processes that stress the linkages between local and global challenges and struggles, particularly if supranational actors are perceived as distant from the general public (Coll, 2015, p. 1). Cities are concomitantly *urbs*, *civitas*, and *polis*, as they embody the morphological dimension of their built environment, host the social connectivity enacted by their citizens, and constitute the territorial political-administrative organized entity respectively (Capel, 2003, p. 10). The internationalization and institutional fragmentation of local politics may provide an enabling environment to foster citizen engagement in public affairs (John, 2001, p. 3). In an urbanizing world, strengthened subnational governments can play a unique role if they closely

collaborate with local civil society in order to serve their communities through local goals and address transnational challenges through global goals (Satterthwaite, 2016b, p. 17).

Reiterating an idea shared earlier, the unresolved ambivalence between the bureaucratic and democratic conceptualizations of local government explains the paradox of being simultaneously a powerful and powerless actor vis-à-vis the state, and encompasses an advantage in terms of the global policy-making fora. Building on Rosenau (1990), Salomón and Sánchez Cano (2008, p. 132) argue that subnational governments behave as mixed "sovereignty-bound" and "sovereignty-free" actors. On the one hand, they are governmental actors sharing state sovereignty, possessing political and technical legitimacy as constituency representatives and public administrators, and accessing specific material and institutional resources; on the other hand, their foreign policy is not limited by state obligations, as they enjoy the flexibility to harness synergies with different types of institutional actors, and deploy typically non-state configurations such as transnational advocacy networks to convert their ideas into power resources (Salomón & Sánchez Cano, 2008, pp. 132-133). In other words, the multiplying effect of this type of non-governmental architecture is at the service of governmental actors that often do not have to face conflicts related to (state-centric) strategic interests (Toly, 2008, p. 347). As already discussed, this ambivalence simultaneously reinforces the key difference between local governments and civil society organizations in terms of legitimacy.

In spite of the central relevance of cities as global hubs for development and sustainability, and of local governments as governmental actors of proximity, the recognition by the international community, crystallized through the adoption of the key global agendas in 2015 and 2016, is still far from the claims of local leaders. The debates among advocates of a global urban development agenda, defendants of sectorial policies, and promoters of more spatially neutral and rural agendas have served a wider struggle of interests around the direction of national and international development policy and financing (Dick, 2016, p. 4). The recognition by the international agendas further relate to the relevance that global policy positions endorsed by the UN might have in general terms for development practice. For instance, while the statements reached under the auspices of the UN relevant agreements are key for the development of national urban strategies and city development

strategies (Parnell, 2016, p. 536), there is no evidence that the increases in fiscal flows to urban poverty could be linked to the relevant agreements reached at the 2nd UN Conference on Human Settlements in 1996 in Istanbul (i.e. Habitat II Conference) (Cohen, 1996; Satterthwaite, 1998). By the same token, the relevance of UN global policy positions should not be taken for granted universally for their capacity to ensure concrete advancements in the relevant field. Cohen (2015, pp. 41-44), for example, questions the impact of the Habitat III Conference, as he highlights how several policy areas addressed by the Habitat I (in 1976 in Vancouver) and Habitat II conference outcomes have worsened during the years of implementation of these agendas. Nevertheless, the definition, implementation, and monitoring of the global agendas encapsulate a key moment as the international community tables a global conversation where cities may claim and eventually enact their legitimate role as drivers of sustainable development. As global objectives such as the SDGs emphasize the importance of global public goods (i.e. goods such as the environment or health requiring global action and for the benefit of citizens from all states) (Langford, 2016, p. 172), cities can build on their increasing recognition within the UN sustainable development debate as a consequence of the demographic transition towards the urban era (Revi, 2017, p. xi) and emphasize "the spatial concentration of resources and flows" they represent (Parnell, 2016, p. 530). As argued more than once in this work, it is important to stress that claims for an increased profile of cities in international development policy and global agendas are also echoed by specific calls concerning the relevant role of local governments. In this regard, Misselwitz and Salcedo Villanueva (2015, p. 13) point out that "65% of the SDG targets are at risk should local urban stakeholders not be assigned a clear mandate and role in the implementation process". By the same token, the ownership of global goals relies on the relevance of targets and indicators for local policy-makers (Simon et al., 2016, p. 58).

Against the backdrop of the reinvigorating moment channeled by the global community, cities across the world have decided, through many of their networking structures, to leverage this political momentum and call for the localization of global agendas. As defined by UCLG, the object of study of this research and one of the city networks actively involved in this endeavor, "[l]ocalizing isn't the parachuting of global goals into local contexts. Localizing is implementing local agendas in cities and territories to reach local and global

goals. Localizing is a political process based on harnessing local opportunities, priorities and ideas" (Doc. 44, p. 14).[43] As global challenges are converted into urban issues, local governments deepen their "*self-understanding* and sense of *self-worth*" (Ljungkvist, 2014, p. 54, emphasis in the original) and claim political authority, mindful that the way a problem is framed will affect the actions deployed and the actors to be involved.

As anticipated earlier when discussing the increasing importance of the discursive dimension within urban politics studies, the way a policy problem is framed, hence, stands out as a key analytical element within the emerging relationship between the rising international role of cities and their networks and global agendas. This directs this theoretical journey to the body of literature on policy learning and leads us to delve into the understanding of knowledge as socially constructed.

## 2.4  Learning as a discursive construction

As identified above, learning is a key output that city networks offer to their members. While the drivers underpinning this increasing phenomenon have been exposed, the concept of learning is worth exploring, as it is key to understanding the relevance of global agendas for cities, big and small, scattered across the planet. As Freeman (2006, p. 368) argues, "learning is not only the what and the how of public policy but also its why".

Before delving into the conceptual understanding of learning, a few words are needed to stress why this output is so important for members of city networks. If cities increasingly need to learn from each other within a globalized context, specific operative frameworks need to be put in place in order to 'broker between demand and offer' in what would otherwise be a vast planetary landscape of seemingly indistinguishable public policy experiences. City networks are institutional examples of "informational infrastructures" (McCann, 2011, p. 120) that frame and mobilize specific urban policy knowledge among a variegated geography of transfer agents. Broadening the analysis of international organizations by Broome and Seabrooke (2012, p. 9), it might be argued that city networks construct "cognitive authority" by replacing the context-dependent time-consuming policy lessons that stem directly from local knowledge with more efficient simplified interpretive

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[43]  See Section 4.3 for information on the organization of the empirical dataset in the dissertation.

frameworks that comprise generalized knowledge on problem diagnoses and policy solutions. Yet urban networking further allows for the exchange of valuable tacit knowledge stemming from long-term experiences and the practical insights of knowing "how to do things without reading instruction manuals" (James & Verrest, 2015, p. 78). Does this mean that city networks are a powerful conduit of cognitive processes? Yes, but they are even more than that. Without denying this fundamental added value, this section is devoted to introducing the nuts and bolts of learning processes from the perspective of the discursive construction of knowledge. This theoretical framework is proposed heuristically as the analytical lens through which the role of city networks in global governance can be grasped.

As might already be clear, knowledge is the conceptual lynchpin of learning. Prompted by its relevance within the information technology paradigm (Castells, 2010c), knowledge has been defined from different disciplinary standpoints. Departing from the traditional epistemological definition of "justified true belief" (Gettier, 1963, p. 121), knowledge is here conceptualized as a complex mix of information, experience, values, and insights that allows for the evaluation and incorporation of new experience and information (Davenport & Prusak, 1998, p. 5). As such, learning is the acquisition, processing, and employment of knowledge to make change (Campbell, 2009, p. 195). A complex concept, learning has both a political and practical dimension, since it can help dissect the processes through which "knowledge is created, contested and transformed" (McFarlane, 2011, p. 3).

The multi-disciplinary interest in the subject implies that several theoretical lenses may be adopted to study learning in and among cities: knowledge creation (e.g. Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995), knowledge management (e.g. Alavi & Leidner, 2001), knowledge networks (e.g. Pugh & Prusak, 2013), lesson drawing (e.g. Rose, 1991), policy convergence (e.g. Bennett, 1991), policy diffusion (e.g. Graham et al., 2013), policy transfer (e.g. Dolowitz & Marsh, 2000), epistemic communities (e.g. Haas, 1992), communities of practice (e.g. Wenger, 2010), policy communities (e.g. Miller & Demir, 2007), policy networks (e.g. Marsh & Smith, 2000), social learning (e.g. Hall, 1993), policy learning (e.g. Dunlop & Radaelli, 2013), policy translation (e.g. Prince, 2010), advocacy coalitions (e.g. Sabatier, 1998), discourse coalitions (e.g. Hajer, 1993), advocacy networks (e.g. Keck & Sikkink, 1998), norm entrepreneurs

(e.g. Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998), global civil society (e.g. Lipschutz, 1996) or policy mobilities (e.g. McCann & Ward, 2011), among others.

To be clear, these theoretical approaches are not exhaustive and can be distant from one another or overlapping. Betsill and Bulkeley (2004, p. 474), for example, approach theoretically transnational urban governance networks as epistemic communities, transnational advocacy networks, and global civil society. In another instance, the body of literature of policy transfer comprises research that uses the concept of 'policy transfer', as well as scholarly work that partially develops its analytical dimensions yet without using this term (Evans, 2019, p. 95). A key observation is, hence, required to limit and contextualize this analytical heterogeneity within the realm of public policy. Learning theories have traditionally addressed the complex relationship between power and knowledge, conceptualizing changes in ideas as the main determinant of policy change (Grin & Loeber, 2007, p. 201). However, as for what the relationship between city networks and intergovernmental organizations concerns, mainstream policy studies have traditionally embraced "methodological nationalism" and prioritized official state actors as the main locus of attention (Stone & Moloney, 2019, p. 8). Meanwhile, early policy studies have deployed a rationalist understanding of knowledge transfer that prioritizes mechanistic assumptions rather than accounts emphasizing the empirical complexity of learning in policy change (Stone, 2012, p. 487). Scholars from different disciplines have developed critical theoretical views to address the reification of "state-centeredness" (McCann, 2011, p. 112) and the positivist underpinning of bounded rationality (Freeman, 2006, p. 382). Key to urban research, policy mobilities focus on "the processes, practices and resources brought together to construct, mobilize and territorialize policy knowledge" (Baker & Temenos, 2015, p. 825). Closely intertwined and tied to the increased attention on the role of non-state actors, the analytical lens of policy translation addresses the fluid transformative process from its generation to the interpretation of policy knowledge, stressing the chaotic rather than rational nature of policy processes in which "the *acceptance* of the idea is more politically relevant than the idea itself" (Stone, 2012, p. 489, emphasis in the original). This critical appraisal leads to policy learning being envisioned as an unsystematic assemblage that catalyzes the mutually constitutive nature of policy as territorial and relational, being both

intrinsically related to local interests and dependent upon intersubjective interpretive relations (Wood, 2016, p. 402).

As can be grasped from the theoretical debate and its evolution, learning is characterized by an inherent contraposition between positivist and constructivist approaches. According to the conceptualization of policy learning, a learning process may be considered both rational and discursive (Betsill & Bulkeley, 2004; Lee & van de Meene, 2012). In a similar vein, Benz and Fürst (2002, p. 24) identify successful learning processes as the integration of a cognitive component related to the efficient "generation and … processing of information" and a political component stemming from the proper "management of conflicts and cooperation". According to rational understanding, individuals are rationally motivated and goal-oriented but, bounded by their cognitive capacity to comprehend the complex world around us, find in scientific and technical information a key element conducive to belief and policy change (Weible & Sabatier, 2007, p. 130). As per the discursive conceptualization, discourse plays a key role in political processes as it creates meanings in the framework of the very construction of the policy problem and hence within the identification of the policy goals to pursue (Hajer, 1995, p. 159).

While both elements are intertwined and essential to explain policy learning processes, this dissertation proposes to focus attention on the discursive perspective. The first chapter identified urban politics as a key space in which to grasp the complex relation between global and local political worlds, noticing how discourse is increasingly recognized as a source of power in the urban realm. Concurrently, we also saw that the traditional spatially-bounded understanding of the city is evolving towards an appreciation of the increasingly richer social relations developed among urban centers. The discursive construction of knowledge is here proposed as the lynchpin by which to address the relationship between city networks and global agendas, harnessing the interlinkage embedded in the social construction of urban and global politics. This emphasis is further in line with the importance of first-order arrangements in global governance, whereas the political decision about who has the legitimacy to frame a public problem is distinct from (and

precedes) the second-order arrangements on the institutions needed to accomplish the policy goal (Anheier, 2019, p. 770).[44]

The constructivist understanding of learning points to a complex process where both the actors' interests and identities are molded through and during the interaction (Checkel, 2001, p. 561). The contraposition to the rationalist model, hence, shifts the attention to the definition and interpretation of policy problems through language, narrative, and symbolism (Scholten, 2017, p. 346). This standpoint is inscribed within the argumentative and interpretive turn, which highlights the interpretive dimension of policy analysis, stressing how language, discourse, and rhetoric contribute to constructing our knowledge of society (Barbehön et al., 2015, pp. 236-237). Discourse analysis is aligned with constructivist ontology and allows the power of ideas in social theory to be harnessed. Along with other post-positivist strands such as actor-network theory and policy mobilities, interpretive policy analysis is a particularly suitable approach for dissecting the transfer of urban policy ideas from the analytical standpoint of the constitutive power of discourse, tracing the linkage between the construction of meaning and the institutionalization of practices (Healey, 2013, pp. 1510-1511).

Countering the initial identification of political science with the assumptions embedded in natural sciences, constructivism claims that it is the perception of interests, rather than material interests per se, which, codified into cognitive filters continuously interacting with their context, informs behavior (Hay, 2011, p. 70). From being conceptualized as reflecting actors' strategic interests to being constitutive of interests, ideas emerge as drivers that allow individuals to process their preferences, which in turn feed the discursive interactive processes contributing to policy change (Schmidt, 2011, p. 48). Ideas and discourse are connected by a mutually reinforcing linkage as constitutive of the ideational and interactive dimensions of discursive processes: the former stands for the ideas about values, rules, and practices that structure the cognitive and normative components of meaning-making, while the latter stands for the policy formulation and communication that, in return, produces and legitimates these policy ideas (Schmidt & Radaelli, 2004, p. 193).

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[44] See Kooiman and Jentoft (2009) for the initial theorization on first- and second-order governance.

Discourse does not exist in a vacuum. It is both a product of and an influence on the social reality (Barbehön et al., 2015, pp. 236-237). Discourse, defined as the "ensemble of concepts and categorizations through which meaning is given to phenomena", which is produced by social practices and in turn reproduces them, structures the way in which "policy actors perceive reality, define problems, and choose to pursue solutions in a particular direction" (Hajer & Laws, 2006, p. 261). Even when not sharing core beliefs, discourses endow actors with a normative orientation that allows the surrounding reality to be understood as much as changed (Fischer, 2003, p. 104). The power embedded in the information, ideas, and strategy allows us "not only to influence policy outcomes, but to transform the terms and nature of the debate" (Keck & Sikkink, 1998, p. 2). If interests are constituted by discourses, in the process of creating new meanings, identities and cognitions, "practical reality might change too" (Hajer, 1995, p. 68).

## 2.5  Summing up

An inter-disciplinary journey has led us to come to grips with the research problem at the center of this dissertation. The international rise of cities and their networking structures point to the evolution towards a global governance model characterized by the emergence of non-state actors and new governance mechanisms. In this emerging landscape, questions on legitimacy and ownership of public policy assume reinvigorated relevance.

We have further seen how the international role of cities and their networking structures do not revolve simply around economic globalization, but mirror a more nuanced reality of local political ambitions that outflank municipal boundaries. Cities may stand out internationally beyond their role as nodes of the global interconnected economy, while transnational mobilization is not just a matter of iconic global cities but rather of a larger spectrum of urban settlements.

Learning has been proposed heuristically to address the relationship between city networks and global agendas, building upon its relevance as a key output that city networks provide to their members and, at the same time, tapping into the literature gap identified within the scholarly production on this subject. Conceptualized through a positivist or constructivist lens, learning

lies at the intersection of power and knowledge, and is a key determinant of policy change.

The next chapter develops the analytical framework of the dissertation. Building on the retrofitting dialogue between theory and empirical analysis, it outlines the notion of discursive empowerment through institutionalization in the context of the conceptual relationship between legitimacy, frame, political opportunity, empowerment, and institutionalization. It contends that the constitution of ideas and interests through discourse and the creation of meaning through institutionalization are enabling conditions of empowerment.

# 3 Discursive empowerment through institutionalization

## 3.1 Legitimacy, frame, political opportunity, empowerment, and institutionalization

Two interwoven endeavors are ahead of us. On the one hand, the theoretical framework of discursive policy learning is heuristically proposed to address the relationship between city networks and global agendas. On the other hand, the empirical case study of the city network UCLG and its work on the localization of global agendas is identified to contribute to the theorization of the relationship between city networks and global agendas.

We can identify five conceptual associations between theoretical and empirical components of the research problem that structure the analytical framework: the *legitimacy* of a city network, the *frame* as a social construct elicited by the *political opportunity* that the global agendas entail for local governments, and the *empowerment* that city networks bestow on their local government members as the result of processes of *institutionalization*. These five concepts are presented in the remainder.

Legitimacy is defined as the "generalized perception or assumption that the actions of an entity are desirable, proper, or appropriate within some socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs, and definitions" (Suchman, 1995, p. 574). This oft-cited definition is broad enough to accommodate these nuances and relate them to the global governance debate, as it explicitly stresses the importance of legitimation. Due to the conceptual importance of legitimacy, a dedicated section in this chapter will distill the theoretical framework of legitimacy and identify specific insights that inform our approach to the object of study.

Frames are socially constructed processes that provide "conceptual coherence, a direction for action, a basis for persuasion and a framework for the collection and analysis of data" (Rein & Schön, 1993, p. 153). Originating in the interstices between psychiatry, anthropology, and epistemology (Bateson, 1955), and central to the development of symbolic interactionism (Goffman, 1974), the concept gained relevance in political science with Rein (e.g. Rein, 1976) and his collaborator Schön (e.g. Schön & Rein, 1994), who proposed in

their latest conceptual development frame analysis as an argumentative approach by which to solve policy problems and controversies. This endeavor is paralleled in social movement literature where framing is conceptualized as "signifying work or meaning construction", as organizations and activists create new interpretive frames that might differ from and even challenge existing ones (Benford & Snow, 2000, p. 614). Frames connect "facts, values, and action" (Hajer & Laws, 2006, p. 258), and bridge the gap between the identification of a given policy problem and its proposal for action (Laws & Rein, 2003, p. 174). Framing rests on a fundamental narrative quality, as it connects a specific depiction of reality with a call to action through storytelling (van Hulst & Yanow, 2016, pp. 100-101). Frame storylines give coherence to the analysis of the policy problem and enable "the frame holder to make a graceful normative leap from is to ought" (Rein & Schön, 1996, p. 89).

Conceptualized in various and even conflicting ways within social sciences, empowerment refers to "the distribution of power to lower levels of a hierarchy" (Vashdi & Vigoda-Gadot, 2011, p. 773). Scholarly production has mainly approached empowerment using three dimensions: the tangible distributive outcomes achieved with, for instance, greater access to a given service, the shifting processes where the knowledge and needs of a given community are granted greater legitimacy and heard in decision-making processes, and capacity building for a specific community of individuals (Elwood, 2002). In line with the analytical approach of this research, the notion of empowerment refers here to the "power that develops and is acquired" (Sadan, 2004, p. 73) and, in its discursive dimension, to the capacity of "institutionalization of meaning" (March & Olsen, 1989, p. 39). As with the discussion on legitimacy, the relevance of the theoretical ramifications of power and institutions to our object of study deserve to be explored in detail in this chapter.

Political opportunity structures refer to promising mechanisms within the political environment or external resources that might lead collective actors, not limited solely to social movements but including both state and non-state actors, to embark on confrontational politics with authorities or opponents in relation to specific claims (Tarrow, 2011, pp. 32-33). A political opportunity is not a purely socially constructed entity, but its transformative or constraining possibilities are partially influenced by the frame holders (Benford & Snow, 2000, p. 631). The success of these interest groups depends on organizational

resources and capacities, but also on the ability to identify the best institutional venue (i.e. venue shopping) or level of government (i.e. political construction of scale) to influence policy (Princen & Kerremans, 2008).

Legitimacy, frame, political opportunity, empowerment, and institutionalization are not variables of a hypothesis for theory testing. Except for institutionalization, they have all been identified at the beginning of the research process, but the way they ultimately interrelate so as to create a coherent conceptual scheme stems from a retrofitting dialogue between theory and empirical analysis. This chapter aims to provide a comprehensive presentation of the resulting analytical framework. As will be clear by the end of the chapter, the analysis will be underpinned by a specific political science perspective, which is one of the main contributions of the dissertation to the ongoing scholarly debate on city networks and their place in global governance.

## 3.2 Discourse as language in social contexts

The analytical articulation of frame and legitimacy unfolds in the realm of discursive constructions. Building on Weiss (1989), Daviter (2007, p. 656) identifies policy frames as 'advocacy weapons' that point to the definition of political issues as a fundamental component of policy-making processes. The importance of frame as a social construction process relies on the fact that the elements that will be emphasized and neglected within the problem definition will be contingent on the normative implications of the theoretical perspective of reality adopted and the interests that underpin it (Rein, 1983, pp. 97-98). As frames are constitutive of representations of ideas through discourse (Schmidt, 2011, p. 48), discourse analysis is the most appropriate approach by which to grasp the power of the frame holder.

Broadly defined as the "study of language as it is used in society" (Cook, 2008, p. 216) or in minimal terms as "language plus context" (Woods, 2006, p. x), discourse is a key element in a constructivist ontology, as it encompasses the conditions that lead a given utterance to be interpreted as meaningful and rational (Pedersen, 2011, p. 672). The linguistic perspective leads the constructivist analyst to focus on the inextricable linkages between language, thought, and action (Schneider et al., 2007, p. 131). This entails specific epistemological consequences. As words do not inherently hold meanings themselves which can be "discovered" and as meanings are constructed, as

social individuals, "in our own minds" (Woods, 2006, p. viii), contrary to an empiricist approach revolving around the isolation of variables and determination of causal relationships, the researcher must enter into the social context of action and grasp the social meanings through reflective and interpretive analysis (Fischer, 2003, p. 139). This brings us on to a discussion of the complexity associated with causality in interpretive approaches.

Interpretive analysis advances the relevance of causal mechanisms rather than causal relationships, as actions are no longer assessed as per their determinacy or indeterminacy but rather as per their plausibility or implausibility (Yee, 1996, p. 97). In a complex social world, meanings can reflect worldviews that have explanatory power, as long as actors' reasons for action are grasped in line with their context-dependent nature (Fischer, 2003, p. 101). By questioning the positivist epistemological approach to generalization, interpretive analysis unfolds through empirical investigations that stress the importance of explanatory factors in policy change such as credibility, acceptability, and trust (Fischer, 2003, p. 110).

The current research is based on a specific understanding of discourse and, consequently, discourse analysis. Contrary to discourse theory (e.g. Laclau & Mouffe, 1985), which envisions all social phenomena as discursive constructions, the discourse-analytical approach of this research conceptualizes discourses as constitutive of social phenomena, which, in turn, are constituted by social phenomena embodied as social practice (Pedersen, 2011, p. 674).[45] Without embracing its conceptual foci[46] and textual orientation, my study builds on the epistemological understanding of the role of language as an element of social life[47] proposed by critical discourse analysis.[48]

Language, broadly defined as semiosis (including image, sound and body language), is a dialectical element of social life, where texts, understood as instances of language, have causal effects, but not regular causality, and ultimately contribute to change (Fairclough, 2003, p. 8). Situating text between

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[45] See Hernández-Guerra (2014) for a review of discourse analysis methodological approaches.
[46] This analytical approach focuses on the relationship between discourse and power, paying particular attention to the related phenomena of enactment of, and eventual resistance to, abuse, domination, and inequality (Woods, 2006, p. xiv) .
[47] van Dijk (2015, p. 479) notices that "there is still a gap between more linguistically oriented studies of text and talk and the various social and political approaches".
[48] Furthermore, a cautious Foucauldian note on self-reflection is needed with notions such as "false consciousness" and "real interests", assumed by critical theorists, allegedly as autonomous researchers, by presuming what the research subjects' best interests are (Hardy & Leiba-O'Sullivan, 1998, p. 473).

the discursive practice, where text is produced and consumed, and the social practice, the latter implies studying, additionally, the non-discursive elements that constitute the wider context, mindful that linguistic analysis alone will not be able to grasp this specific dimension of the phenomenon being investigated (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002, pp. 86-87). This implies that, on the one hand, disciplines such as political science or sociology help define the research questions that are subsequently operationalized through discourse analysis, with the ultimate goal of shedding light on the link between text and social practices (Fairclough, 1992; Fairclough, 2003), while, on the other hand, rather than selecting them from an existing repertoire, methods are identified according to the theoretical process that has constructed the problem into an object of research (Fairclough, 2010, p. 234).

Whereas discourse is a key explanatory factor for policy change, focusing uniquely on analyzing discourse might miss "the basic fact that political discourse may conceal substance under rhetorical smoke" (Schmidt & Radaelli, 2004, p. 193). This reflection is confirmed by the fact that policy framing "always takes place within a nested context" marked by perceived shifts in its political and economic setting (Rein & Schön, 1993, p. 154). Change or continuity might also unfold from the interaction between the policy image embedded in values and beliefs and the institutional settings of policy action (Baumgartner & Jones, 1991, pp. 1046-1051). In the EU domain, for instance, city networks have increased access to key decision-making fora and resources by adapting to the "opportunity structure" offered by the enshrinement of the EU system in the principle of subsidiarity (Giest & Howlett, 2013, p. 343).

In brief, frames and their underlying storylines can be assessed by discourse analysis in combination with methods from other social science research disciplines. The underlying rationale in the approach to the social construction of the frame is that not all social phenomena can be converted into objects of linguistic analysis. Rather, the analysis must move back and forth between the ideational and interactive dimensions of discursive processes, focusing on the interplay between interests and material reality (Schmidt, 2011). The empirical amalgamation of discourse and practices points to a fundamental conceptual association, within the specific construction of our object of research, between discourse and institutions.

## 3.3  Ideas and interests in discourse

Deploying frames as a conceptual element of discursive policy learning within the relationship between city networks and global agendas requires more than a study of the argumentative constructions. The difficulty lies in the challenge of grasping both policy learning and its impact.

The connection between policy learning and policy change is complex both in theoretical and empirical terms due to the number of actors and dynamics involved in the process (Lee & van de Meene, 2012, p. 201). The relevance of local contexts, the shift from commitment to action, and the influence of external factors all contribute to hindering the process (James & Verrest, 2015, p. 80). Whereas learning is a key output clearly appreciated by city networks' members, the causal chain between a local government involved in a given city network's knowledge sharing activity and a specific project launched in the correspondent city cannot always be determined (Acuto et al., 2017b, p. 17). In wider terms, the assessment of the socio-economic local impact is empirically complex when the transfer process sustained by an inter-municipal relation implies a flow of intangible assets, such as knowledge or skills, that can be appreciated only by those individuals directly involved in the transfer (Nganje, 2016, pp. 673-674). The current research does not seek to follow how the engagement of city networks' members in their networking organizations is materialized in their correspondent local policy through the development of longitudinal and/or cross-case studies.[49] Yet we know that common membership in international organizations, for instance, is associated with higher degrees of policy convergence through mechanisms such as emulation, lesson drawing, or epistemic communities (Holzinger et al., 2008, p. 559), since international organizations host relational dynamics through which they socialize and diffuse norms (Greenhill, 2010). Learning occurs as interaction unfolds among members of transnational networks, both through formal collaborative initiatives and informal exchanges (Bernstein & Cashore, 2012, p. 592). The complex relation between policy learning and policy change is here contended, as previously discussed, by the claim that discursive transformation encloses the possibility of practical transformation. This positioning shifts the attention to the literature revolving around the

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[49]   See, for instance, Bulkeley and Betsill (2003) and Gordon (2020) for detailed empirical studies of this kind within the body of literature of city networks.

'ideational turn' (Blyth, 1997, p. 229) and interpretive analysis in policy studies. This implies a focus on the power of storylines to discursively transform the social world and potentially bring change in practical terms, acknowledging that "[t]o reject such beliefs as subjective, as positivists do, is to throw out the very stuff that is driving the struggle for change" (Fischer, 2003, p. 105).

Concerning interpretive analysis, the post-empiricist mediation between the policy analyst and the actors of the social reality opens up an approach where theoretical frameworks need to be confronted with the web of social meanings assigned by research participants to actions and events (Fischer, 2003, p. 142). This endeavor, however, must be undertaken cautiously. Focusing on the social meanings embedded in actors' everyday lives allows for a discovery of how politics address meanings that are not fixed either historically or culturally (Geertz, 1973). This research relies on the increasingly common understanding within social sciences of its own limited explanatory capacity, as it does not aim to "explain social outcomes, but only some of the conditions affecting those outcomes" (Almond & Genco, 1977, p. 493). Having said that, research quests requiring in-depth anthropological or linguistic investigations should always be wary of the "individualization" of politics and seek for a minimal capacity to universalize concepts (Badie et al., 2011, p. lv).

As per the ideational turn, this can be observed in the constructivist international relations notion of "[i]deas all the way down" in the constitution of interests and power (Wendt, 2003, p. 92). Ideas are rendered as key elements to understand change and continuity in social systems, as they embody the medium through which actors make sense of the social world and the material dimension that constitutes it (Blyth, 2011, p. 84). Actors' interests are not conceptualized as materially-given, nor is the behavior of actors explained solely in terms of instrumental self-interest (Hay, 2016, p. 529). Rather than being structurally determined, interests are mediated by ideas as the former reduces uncertainty and renders the latter "actionable" (Blyth, 2002, p. 39). An influential discourse must contribute to meaning-making and simultaneously contain cognitive arguments on the merits of a proposal from the perspective of the interests, and normative arguments appealing to values and that complement rather than contradict the cognitive arguments (Schmidt & Radaelli, 2004, p. 201).

The decision to reject neither ideas nor interests as analytical elements presents a drawback, which prompts us to unveil the crux of the matter. The

higher or lesser explanatory power of discourse lies in the fact that discourse cannot be analyzed in isolation, as it can hardly be separated from the interests, institutional dynamics or cultural norms that are intrinsically related to it (Schmidt & Radaelli, 2004, p. 206). This leads us to incorporate the conceptual framework of institutionalism and organizational theory, as it is there that the empowering dynamic can start to be located.

## 3.4  Institutions and creation of meaning

Institutionalism, today called neo-institutionalism, is a school of empirical political theory that emerged from the post-behavioral turning point and the shift towards a more interpretive and context-sensitive political science (Inoguchi, 2011, p. 2058). In response to accounts accentuating agency over structure, neoinstitutionalism emerged in the 1980s to balance the relation and provide explanatory power to institutions (Schmidt, 2008, p. 313). The three traditional approaches within institutional theory are: rational choice institutionalism (e.g. Calvert, 1995), historical institutionalism (e.g. Hall, 2010), and normative/sociological institutionalism (e.g. March & Olsen, 1989) (Hay, 2006a, pp. 58-59).[50] As also advanced earlier, these three approaches are complemented by a fourth newer institutionalism that, with certain differentiating nuances, we could identify as discursive institutionalism (e.g. Schmidt, 2011) or constructivist institutionalism (e.g. Hay, 2011).

Sociological institutionalism and discursive institutionalism are the two referential institutional approaches by which our object of study can be grasped, with the former having analytical centrality over the latter. This is yet cognizant of the common ground between the two strands within the scholarly debate. For Schmidt (2008), discursive institutionalists find, in sociological institutionalism, the central ontological commitment to build on the structurationist theory of Giddens (1984) and embrace the agency-structure relationship as mutually constitutive, envisioning institutions simultaneously as "constraining structures and enabling constructs" (Schmidt, 2011, p. 48). For Koning (2016), the works of sociological, normative, and discursive institutionalism are grouped within the label of ideational institutionalism,

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[50] The number of approaches within neo-institutionalism is not written in stone. See, for instance, Ansell (2006) for a theoretical overview of another approach within institutional theory: network institutionalism.

which constitutes, jointly with rational choice institutionalism and historical institutionalism, the main references of institutional theory.

Discursive institutionalism revolves around the identification of a specific "logic of communication" within the ideational rules and discursive practices that unfold empirically (Schmidt, 2008, p. 314). Discourses capable of exerting causal influence by promoting change must represent and convey ideas that are both "convincing in cognitive terms (justifiable) and persuasive in normative terms (appropriate and/or legitimate)" (Schmidt, 2008, p. 313). The constructivist viewpoint aims to help dissect complex institutional dynamics by bringing to the fore both path dependent and path shaping accounts of institutional change (Hay, 2011, p. 67).[51]

For sociological institutionalists, an institution is "a relatively stable collection of rules and practices, embedded in structures of *resources* that make action possible ... and structures of *meaning* that explain and justify behavior" (March & Olsen, 2011, p. 480, emphasis in the original). The defining principle of sociological institutionalism is the logic of appropriateness. It identifies, as a human guiding principle, a set of roles and identities that define the rules of appropriate behavior, learned through experience, and based on mutual, tacit understandings of "what is true, reasonable, natural, right, and good" (March & Olsen, 2011, p. 479). From this viewpoint, an organization is institutionalized when its behavior is culturally framed by rules, which are embodied by routines for actions and endow those actions with meaning (Brunsson & Olsen, 1993, p. 4). By showing the similarity or dissimilarity with another situation, language is the mediating process establishing which rules need to be evoked in each situation (March & Olsen, 2011, pp. 483-484). Political institutions create meaning as an inextricable pairing of action and interpretive order, particularly in the face of ambiguity, by resorting to previous understandings embedded institutionally (March & Olsen, 1989). Yet political decisions are far from deterministic, since they often evoke contingent and contested rules that ultimately leave significant room for agency (Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998, pp. 913-914). The logic of appropriateness is a

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[51] Building on the work of Habermas (1981/1984, 1962/1989) on communicative action and public sphere, Schmidt (2008, p. 314) identifies this capacity within the integration of "background ideational abilities" and "foreground ideational abilities", enabling agents simultaneously to make sense of their institutions, and think and behave as if they are outside them. This approach would thus apprehend the explanatory nuances of both continuity and change. Connectedly, two different modalities of discursive practice are enacted as agents construct policies through a coordinative discourse and legitimize the political ideas to the general public through a communicative discourse (Schmidt, 2008, p. 310).

structure-driven logic that does not deny and actually legitimizes, if effective, specific agent-driven practices of consequential utilitarianism. Despite their manifest rigidity, routines "embody collective and individual identities, interests, values, and worldviews" (March & Olsen, 1989, p. 24). The power of rules lies in the capacity to foster both unity and diversity, building on a contingent sense of belonging and common identity (March & Olsen, 2011, p. 485).

The normative mechanism of the logic of appropriateness is but one of the conceptual lenses through which to understand institutional realities in the context of our object of research. Scott (2014, pp. 144, 145, 147) identifies three non-mutually exclusive drivers of social organization that, in turn, underlie three different notions of institutionalization: 'increasing returns', which emphasizes the role of interests, associated with regulatory processes and incentive structures; 'increasing commitments', which emphasizes the role of identity, associated with coordination mechanisms and networked forms of organization based on mutuality; and 'increasing objectification', which emphasizes the role of ideas, associated with intersubjective consensus and embodying taken-for-granted beliefs on the very reality of the institutional world. The third pillar is particularly important for us as it offers a cultural-cognitive account whereby the impact of external cultural frameworks on internal interpretive processes is conducive to creating "frames through which meaning is made" (Scott, 2014, p. 67).

As might already be clear, institutions are here proposed as a fundamental analytical element in their capacity as building blocks that, properly constituted into formal organizations, comprise the polity[52] and outline the space where policy-making unfolds (March & Olsen, 2011, p. 480). Whereas the academic debate on the conceptual relationship between institutions and organizations goes beyond the scope of this dissertation,[53] there are some considerations worth pointing out for the approach to the empirical object of analysis.

Keohane (1989, p. 3) envisions the mission of institutions in the formal and informal definition of limitations on actors' behavior. Building on the understanding of organizations as entities devoted to the promotion of specific

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[52] Polities are the frames where public affairs are conducted, politics are played, and policies are formulated – politics are the practices, that is, the "rules, roles and their translation in actual behaviour", while policies are the "content of what is in the end to be achieved" (van der Wusten, 2012, p. 45).

[53] See Scott (2014) for a helpful appraisal of this topic.

rules, Higgott (2006, p. 611) posits that "[a]ll organizations are institutions, but not all institutions are organizations", since certain organizations might fulfil more than one institutional role, while an institution might lack an organizational form. Observing the heterogeneity of terms used (e.g. institution, regime, bureaucracy, etc.), Ahrne and Brunsson (2008, p. 43) embrace the concept of organization to signify if human interaction is organized or not through a social form of formal organization. An organization, which is by definition endowed with a membership, hierarchy, autonomy, and a constitution, creates a 'local order' that is different from the surrounding environment, which is often observed with a certain degree of incertitude (Ahrne & Brunsson, 2008, p. 49). The relationship between institutions and organizations encompasses a wide range of diverging opinions[54] and relates to different understandings of the nature of these concepts and their embeddedness in modern culture.[55]

Embracing a normative or cultural-cognitive understanding of institutions, and adopting an institutional or organizational lens are, of course, more the result of an analytical standpoint vis-à-vis the object of study than the *discovery* of a theoretical superiority of one account over the other. Indeed, this dissertation argues that there are many convergence points between these perspectives, and aims to deploy and harness them in the empirical stage. Yet this research does situate its inquiry in the neoinstitutionalist strand of political science, and aims to provide analytical insights about institutions and the embedding institutional environments that shape governance (Peters, 2016). In this sense, I subscribe to the centrality of institutionalization (i.e. "the emergence of institutions and individual behaviors within them") as the analytical lens through which to study human actions in different forms of social life – from a specific organization to the society at large (March & Olsen, 1998, p. 948). Often unnoticed because of their high degree of routinization, institutions are fundamental in our increasingly complex and conflict-prone

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[54] If we assume that culture creates common norms for interaction and that institutions are patterns of action that rely on taken-for-granted accounts of reality, organizations may be conceptualized as the antithesis of both, since organizations embody orders that are created as the result of deliberate decisions and not taken-for-granted assumptions (Ahrne & Brunsson, 2008, pp. 50-51). At one extreme, we have a clear-cut differentiation epitomized by North (1990, p. 4) in the catchy sport analogy whereby the institutional game rules are distinct from the actual organizational players. At the other extreme, the distinction and disembeddedness from the surrounding environment is suppressed as organizations are understood as practices at the core of modern culture (Dobbin, 1994).

[55] A more general definition of culture that helps appraise its fundamental role in social science is as "the socially inherited body of learning characteristic of human societies" (D'Andrade, 1996, p. 277).

modern societies (Anheier, 2019, p. 779). As Parsons (1960, p. 41) eloquently states, organizations are: "the principal mechanism by which, in a highly differentiated society, it is possible 'to get things done,' to achieve goals beyond the reach of the individual".

Connecting the dots, we have observed the fundamental explanatory power of institutionalization, as the process by which identity- or idea-based conceptions of human behavior are enacted through routines and practices that are profoundly related to meaning-making. Legitimacy, understood in its cognitive and normative dimension, that is, as both an alignment with cultural-cognitive frames and a reflection of normative values, is inherent to these institutionalized activities. The perception of consonance with normative and cognitive arguments unfolds in the intersubjective discursive constructions of agents within institutions, deeply influenced by both structures of meaning and resources. The institutional perspective coexists with the notion of an organization that deliberately aims to create an order that is different from its surrounding environment. This last observation is even more relevant if we take into account that, as we will see, our object of study, UCLG, is an example of a meta-organization, that is, a membership-based organization composed of other organizations rather than individuals (Ahrne & Brunsson, 2008).

We may now move to grasp how institutionalization is conducive to empowerment. As Castells (2009, p.10) asserts, "society is defined around values and institutions, and what is valued and institutionalized is defined by power relationships". Yet, as reiteratively argued, power cannot be explained solely on materialist grounds but along ideational lines too. This is where legitimacy comes into play.

## 3.5 Discursive legitimation and institutional embeddedness

Legitimacy, coercion, and self-interest are essential concepts of sociology that explain social control (Hurd, 2007, pp. 34-35). The modern debate around legitimacy dates back to the foundational work of Weber (1921/1978) and his social theory on power, legitimacy, and authority.[56] We will narrow our attention to the global governance arena, where legitimacy is preferred to coercion and self-interest as a less costly and more abundantly available

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[56] See Clegg (2011) for a sociological discussion of the relationship among legitimacy, authority, and power that begins with Max Weber's theory and expands upon following power theorists.

resource with which to influence behavior and ensure compliance with rules (Hurd, 2007, pp. 35-40).

Our starting point is the earlier definition by Suchman (1995, p. 574), which is inscribed within the sociological perspective on organizational legitimacy. It should first be noted that legitimacy is granted as a result of an intersubjective process whereby social actors assess the normative acceptability of an actor or action (Reus-Smit, 2014, p. 345). Its intersubjective nature implies that legitimacy claims have an inherent relational quality: they "have value for an individual *because* they appear to have value for others" (Hurd, 2007, p. 150, emphasis in the original). While legitimacy is the property of a given organization or policy, the argumentative interactive process among actors that grants legitimacy is called legitimation (Rousselin, 2016, pp. 199-200). As we will see, this interaction is embedded in institutional terms, hence the fundamental connection with the processes of institutionalization presented in the previous section.

Bernstein (2011, p. 20) defines the more fine-tuned concept of political legitimacy as "the acceptance and justification of shared rule by a community". This definition, which seeks to avoid the traditional contraposition between normative and empirical accounts of legitimacy,[57] focuses on the possibility of grasping the legitimation strategy of any institution within its community, thus extending our gaze beyond the traditional unit of analysis of the state (Bernstein, 2011, p. 20). Transcending, once again, methodological nationalism, non-state actors can legitimate (or delegitimate) actors and actions, rather than being only agents of consent of top-down legitimation activities enacted by state and inter-state actors (Bäckstrand & Söderbaum, 2018, p. 105).

The sources of legitimacy are a fundamental, critical component of global governance. An influential theorization is advanced by Scharpf (2006, p. 1), in his conceptualization of input and output legitimacy, about governing processes and procedures that are "responsive to the manifest preferences of the governed" and policies that "represent effective solutions to common

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[57] Legitimacy is traditionally envisioned by political theorists and sociologists in different ways, as the former stresses the normative justification for a decision to be taken and implemented, while the latter emphasizes the subjective belief conducive to factually accepting such a decision (Haus, 2014, p. 125). Legitimacy from a normative standpoint focuses on the "*the right to rule*", while in sociological terms an institution is legitimate "when it is widely *believed* to have the right to rule" (Buchanan & Keohane, 2006, p. 405, emphasis in the original). This contraposition is disregarded on the grounds that, while analytically separate, both accounts are related empirically (Tallberg et al., 2018, p. 10).

problems of the governed" respectively. An oft-cited referent on the use of force in world politics, Hurrell (2005) identifies three additional sources of legitimacy that complement procedure and effectiveness: adherence to substantive values, raising their justification on the basis of shared principles or objectives; possession of specialist knowledge or expertise; and persuasion, understood as the argumentative process of legitimation through which the complementary sources of legitimacy are mobilized.[58] The input-output coupling, that lays the foundation for Western democratic legitimacy, is essential as it taps into the core challenge faced by (international) political institutions as they often experience a trade-off between procedure-based and performance-based legitimacy (Higgott, 2006, p. 628). In world politics, the former is closely related to international law and the notion of democratic, consensual decision-making processes, while the latter is closely related to the degree of effectiveness in providing solutions to shared problems (Williams, 2013, p. 47). Contrary to what is commonly believed, effectiveness is not necessarily the overriding source of legitimacy in contemporary society. While it fails to accomplish the primary goal of its mission (i.e. securing world peace), the UN is trusted more than its member states' governments because of its universal and inclusive decision-making procedures (Steffek, 2009, p. 316). Connecting with the first- and second-order governance arrangements illustrated above, trade-offs that emerge in any type of governance system are ultimately solved by framing the political problem and hence the legitimacy of the actors involved, which actually influence policy outcomes (Anheier, 2019, p. 770).

As a rule of thumb, the number of policy areas that are "taken for granted" as responsibilities of supranational governance institutions are "the best indicator of a successful legitimation process" (Steffek, 2003, p. 267).[59] Yet specific factors contribute to the overall opacity of legitimacy within global governance institutions. Whereas states transfer their legitimacy to the

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[58] Recent developments have further advanced the theorization of the sources of legitimacy in global governance, as is the case for Scholte and Tallberg (2018), who propose a typology where procedure and performance are assessed as per their specific democratic, technocratic, and fairness qualities.

[59] The national sovereigntist attempts to delegitimize international governance need to be contextualized. Being, for diametrically opposed reasons, the target of nationalist backlashes or transnational civil society demands reveals the relevance gained by international bodies. Whereas technocratic decision-making processes on common goods that take place outside public discourse are expressions of depoliticization, international institutions are increasingly politicized as the rise of political authority beyond the state requires legitimation (Zürn et al., 2012, p. 70).

international organizations they constitute, the institutional legitimacy of the latter may be insubstantial if many of their constituent states are non-democratic (Buchanan & Keohane, 2006, p. 413). Nonetheless, the democratic deficit that purportedly undermines the legitimacy of supranational institutions is misplaced, as it conflates the territorially-bounded legitimacy of sovereign state governments and the specific form of legitimacy underpinning international organizations (Steffek, 2003, pp. 250-251). The controversy around granting legitimacy in global governance lies in the difficulty of identifying accountability within the growing diversity of global policy-making actors involved (Clark, 2003, pp. 91-92).[60] When non-state actors join state actors along the fluid transformation of global governance, the traditional inter-state architecture integrates norms[61] proceeding from different social realms, while acknowledging new forms of political agency (Clark, 2007, pp. 180-181). Non-state forms of institutional legitimacy emerge and complement the delegation of sovereign state authority as being the highest form of legitimacy in global governance (Bernstein, 2011, p. 25).

The proposed solution to confer democratic legitimacy on global governance is equally problematic. Legitimacy claims change extensively across time and space (Goddard, 2006, p. 40). It might be argued that there are no universally shared normative principles. This has become evident, for instance, in the far-reaching consensus on the obligation for UN peace operations to respect international humanitarian law, paralleled by substantial disagreement around whether these peace operations should also promote liberal democracy (Williams, 2013, p. 49). Yet it is fair to state that overarching principles such as peace and development are present globally across cultures. The universality of democracy, in contrast, is more complex if we acknowledge that its cultural roots and Western inception imply a specific focus on individualism and rights (Morlino et al., 2017, p. 81). Nonetheless, as Sartori (1995, p. 101) contends, this origin "does not entail that it is a bad invention, or a product suitable only for Western consumption". It is rather the West's

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[60] In contemporary global politics, acknowledging the absence of a global sovereign implies a recognition of the rise of complex institutional settings that are challenging for democratic forms of political control and governance (Macdonald, 2018, p. 404).

[61] As Finnemore and Sikkink (1998, p. 891) notice, sociologists prefer using the term 'institutions' to refer to the same behavioral rules encompassed by the term 'norms' (more common in constructivist political science), although there is a difference in the sociological account: "the norm definition isolates single standards of behavior, whereas institutions emphasize the way in which behavioral rules are structured together and interrelate".

monopoly over the interpretation and ways of achieving these universal ideas that is increasingly contested in the global arena (Acharya, 2018, p. 786).

Brassett & Tsingou (2011, p. 13) suggest that in the absence of an overarching authority, the discourse of legitimacy may represent a "Trojan horse", as standards against which to judge global governance practices are tabled. The expansion of the bases of global governance legitimacy may, for instance, complement globe-spanning notions of democracy and efficiency with a clear effort to critically question Western legacies and embrace interculturality (Scholte, 2011, p. 118). As legitimation reproduces the contradictions embedded in capitalist society, it further raises the possibility of discussing what is considered political within the debate on global governance legitimacy (Brassett & Tsingou, 2011, p. 14).

By internalizing social norms, the power of legitimacy relies on its capacity to constitute actors' identities and conceptions of interests (Hurd, 2007, p. 2). This brings to the fore the fundamental linkage between legitimation and discursive construction. Legitimation discourses rely on discursive practices that mobilize normative standards (Schneider et al., 2007, pp. 132-133). In turn, legitimacy claims must be conveyed within social norms, that is, they need to be institutionally embedded (Reus-Smit, 2014, p. 345). Legitimacy is embedded in our societies as globally institutionalized norms define the standards of appropriateness that regulate what is justifiable (and what is not) in society (Bernstein, 2011, p. 25).[62]

The normative indeterminacy underpinning human value systems elicits controversy and competition among global actors on which principles of legitimacy are appropriate (and inappropriate) (Clark, 2003, p. 94). A transactional process of negotiation of norms and its promoters takes place along these lines. For instance, constituencies are empowered and their interests gain greater representation when higher-order actors identify them as potential allies within their internal power struggle and justify this shift on normative grounds such as inclusive representation (Symons, 2011, p. 2569). Actors might not necessarily comply with all the norms invoked and legitimation strategies appealing to identical norms might yield different

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[62] While held at the individual level, legitimacy beliefs draw upon contemporary structurally embedded norms (e.g. sustainable development) that constitute the backdrop of principles against which to assess the adherence to several sources of legitimacy (Scholte, 2018, pp. 75-76).

results when deployed by various actors (Clark, 2005, p. 247).[63] Beliefs may be influenced but not fully determined by normative persuasion within a complex process where the norms feeding into the legitimacy claims are mediated by power, politics, and consensus (Clark, 2005, p. 254).

The institutionalization of specific legitimation discourses within global governance will depend on the contingent values of society, including the different criteria held by multiple social constituencies (Bernstein, 2011, p. 24). As the degree of complexity of global governance increases, legitimacy is conceptualized with regard to "audiences", specifically to encompass both traditional states and the wider set of societal actors (Tallberg & Zürn, 2019, p. 586). Importantly, both state and non-state actors may be simultaneously both producers and audiences of legitimation practices (Bäckstrand & Söderbaum, 2018, p. 106). As a social practice that connects an institution with its membership, the community at large, or other institutions, legitimation may be practiced by the ruler as self-legitimation or by the ruled as validation of the authority (Zaum, 2013, p. 10).

Legitimacy is a critical element in the shift towards global governance, as non-state entities join traditional actors and soft governance mechanisms complement hard governance models.[64] Importantly, there is a connection between a logic of appropriateness and the empowering dimension of discourse. Acharya (2004, p. 1), for instance, refers to norm localization as the two-fold opportunity provided to local actors to reconstruct international norms "to ensure a better fit with prior local norms" and harness the localized norm to "enhance the appeal of their prior … institutions". Finnemore and Sikkink (1998, p. 908) point to the work of norm entrepreneurs who "frame their issues in ways that make persuasive connections between existing norms and emergent norms", by mobilizing support for particular standards of appropriateness.

Connecting the dots, we have observed how a constructivist and sociological institutionalist account explains the conceptual connection between legitimacy, institutions, and power. Powerful actors can deploy a

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[63] What is key in conferring legitimacy is not the substance of the legitimacy claim but the context. As Goddard (2006, p. 40) remarks: "whether or not an actor's claim is legitimate depends on that actor's position within a set of social and cultural institutions".

[64] The rise of non-traditional actors is more important than what it might seem at first sight. Non-state actors like private transnational regulatory organizations actually benefit from higher flexibility than traditional state actors like intergovernmental organizations that are increasingly competing for resources in a crowded institutional environment (Abbott et al., 2016).

higher amount of resources to influence the beliefs of those who may be subject to specific power relations and in a condition to legitimate specific institutions (Beetham, 1991, p. 104). Institutions bear great importance as explanatory factors of discursive processes of legitimation. Yet legitimacy is, in turn, central in explaining the forms of power in global governance. Drawing on the oft-cited four-fold conceptual framework developed by Barnett and Duvall (2005, pp. 3-4), we can observe how discursive legitimation and institutionalization are closely related to two out of four of the types of power: institutional and productive. On the one hand, global governance encompasses norms and mediating institutional arrangements that empower specific actors to the detriment of others; on the other hand, discursive practices and knowledge systems confer meaning, constitute, and legitimize social subjects (Barnett & Duvall, 2005, pp. 15-22).

We will consider in detail the productive power of discourse as well as other insights from the theories of power in the next section. This theoretical journey takes us to the last step, as we seek to understand how legitimizing discourses and mediating institutions intersect empowerment. As we shall see, empowerment cannot be separated from its conceptual counterpart: domination.

## 3.6  Power and institutionalization

The contemporary notion of empowerment mainly refers to the process by which power is developed and acquired. This section delves into the theories of power, as it is here that fruitful insights can help illuminate our approach to the object of study. Key to promoting or obstructing political change, the analytical complexity of power derives from the fact that it cannot be observed directly. It may be grasped through its effects, which, conversely, cannot be handled as mechanisms of causal regularity or decoupled from the social reality in which it is embedded (Haus, 2018, p. 57). As Lukes (2005, p. 30) points out, power is an "essentially contested concept", since the very definitions that inform the debate around it derive from different value-assumptions that inevitably lead to different uses of the concept. We will look precisely at these definitions to attempt to derive clues for our analysis.

From the 16th century on, with Machiavelli (1532/2011), power has been a fundamental concept in modern thinking. A central guide to grasping the

evolution of this debate through history is Lukes (2005) and his conceptualization of the three different dimensions of power as: the resources deployed to influence the results of decision-making processes; the access to these relevant processes; and the production of meaning for legitimizing purposes (Hardy & Leiba-O'Sullivan, 1998, pp. 453-458).

In the first dimension (e.g. Dahl, 1957), power is located in the behavior of agents within an observable conflict (Lukes, 2005, p. 19). This conceptualization builds on the work of Weber (1921/1978), who ties the notion of power to that of domination, as the manifestation of a command-obedience relationship. It further relates to the debate between elite theorists and pluralists over the location of ruling actors, whether in one elite or scattered among different groups (Haus, 2018, p. 60). Weber is particularly important for the evolution of this debate as he sees in the non-coercive obedience of a command an example of authority, that is, a legitimate form of domination (Clegg, 2011, p. 216). Interestingly, Weber's emphasis on conflict and asymmetry leads to the understanding of politics as power struggle and the state as an organization of political power (Haus, 2018, p. 57).

In the second dimension and in line with the debate between elitist and pluralist theorists (e.g. Bachrach & Baratz, 1970), power also resides in non-decision-making, that is, the ability to prevent specific potential issues from being tabled in decision-making processes, still on the basis of observable conflicting interests (Lukes, 2005, pp. 24-25). If the first dimension relates to coercive power, this second dimension points to blocking power, whereby an actor prevents another from doing what they want to do, which is a key aspect of the dynamics of agenda setting in public policy (Birkland, 2007). The selection and transformation of some issues into political issues and the suppression of others builds, as Schattschneider (1960, pp. 66, 71) eloquently argues, on the understanding of an organization as the "mobilization of bias", since the "definition of the alternatives is the supreme instrument of power".

In the third dimension, Lukes (2005, p. 28, emphasis in the original) focuses on the latent contradiction between those exercising power and the "*real interests*" of those excluded, who might not even be aware of their interests. This perspective builds on the concept of ideological hegemony (Gramsci, 1971), since the legitimation of the structure of power relations stems from normative and cultural assumptions (Hardy & Leiba-O'Sullivan, 1998, pp. 456-457). It is a theoretical model whereby counterfactual reasoning can

help grasp how individuals would eventually act without dominating power relations, in an attempt to raise the bar in terms of the empirical task of analyzing power and discerning between consent and manipulation (Haus, 2018, p. 61).

Recent debates particularly revolving around the work of Foucault (1980, 1983, 1991, 1975/1995) have enriched this theorization and led to the identification of a fourth dimension of power (Digeser, 1992). Rejecting both a determinist understanding of power and the objectivity of the researcher, Foucault (1983) emphasizes subjectification, that is, the process of objectification by which social actors are converted into social subjects. This account of subjectivity opens up to the conceptualization of power as a network of relations and discourses that subjugates both dominant and subordinate actors, and where meanings and resources are still mobilized, but without necessarily obtaining the expected results (Hardy & Leiba-O'Sullivan, 1998, pp. 458-460). In the inextricable relation between power and knowledge, truth is not external to power, but is inscribed within the "régime of truth" of each society, that is, "the types of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true" (Foucault, 1980, p. 131). Foucault observes complex forms of disciplinary power that have expanded through institutions to the whole society in order to supervise the application of the concept of normality in disparate areas such as medicine, penology, or human sexuality (Sadan, 2004, pp. 56-57). Along with demystifying the perceived monopolistic role of state apparatuses in the spectrum of power relations, Foucault also prompts us to overcome the traditional negative connotation of power, and observe that its success relies on the positive qualities it encloses, as it "traverses and produces things, it induces pleasure, forms knowledge and produces discourse" (Foucault, 1980, p. 119).

The fundamental nature of power in everyday life implies that power is a central analytical component of disparate disciplines of social sciences.[65] Yet, with the exception of the fourth dimension, the theories of power just presented revolve merely around the notion of domination. As Arendt (1970,

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[65] We may locate, for instance, theoretical references to power in urban studies, institutionalism, and city networks. In his theorization of the urban regime, Stone (1993, p. 8) adopts a "social production model of power", which derives from collaborative endeavors among actors with common purposes. In institutionalism, Stinchcombe (1968, p. 162) posits that concerted social power is the defining criterion by which to set the values that define legitimacy. Lastly, in the transnational rise of cities, Nganje (2016) argues that localities seek to obtain network power, conceptualized by Grewal (2008, p. 26) as the ability to set and influence the standards that regulate global networks of cooperation among interconnected people.

p. 40) notices, by tracing back to the notions of isonomy and civitas in ancient Athens and Rome, there is an alternative traditional conceptualization of power that is not founded on the command-obedience relationship. A modern rapprochement of these two perspectives is provided by Mann (1986, p. 6), who builds upon Parsons (1960) and characterizes social power as the convergence of a distributive aspect – a zero-sum game of power of an actor over another actor – and a collective aspect – where individuals cooperate and enhance their joint power over third parties or nature. Both aspects are intertwined because the implementation of collective goals requires organization and the distributive power tendency to coordination and supervision, which implies that those at the top of social stratification have "*institutionalized*" their control through social norms, while those at the bottom lack collective organization to modify this status quo or, in the author's terms, have been "*organizationally outflanked*" (Mann, 1986, p. 7, emphasis in the original).[66]

In brief, there are two main opposing conceptualizations of power:[67] power over or domination, that we have already presented, and power to or empowerment, to which we now turn (Haugaard, 2012, p. 33).[68] Parsons (1960, p. 220) understands power as a "generalized facility", that is, the ability to mobilize society's resources for the accomplishment of publicly identified goals. It refers to the capacity to secure the realization of "binding obligations" within a collective organization system that, in turn, legitimizes the collective goals from which the obligations emanate (Parsons, 1963, p. 237). Through the analogy of wealth and the possibility of distributing it across society, Parsons (1960, pp. 41-44) rejects the prevailing approach to power which focuses on the effect of the power holder over the other groups, and envisions it from a functional perspective as a necessary and desirable facility of organized societies. In his view, power is both coercion and consensus, and, within specific circumstances, positive-sum power dynamics might take place, ruling out, hence, the zero-sum condition assumption as constitutive of all power systems (Parsons, 1963, p. 258). From a different intellectual enterprise that

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[66]  Interestingly, among the sources and organizations of power identified throughout history and against materialist determinists, Mann (1986, p. 22) includes ideological power, highlighting the importance of concepts and meaning to make sense of the direct perception of reality, of norms as shared understandings to morally guide our social relations, and of aesthetic and ritual practices that encompass what cannot be grasped by rational science (e.g. religious myths).

[67]  This dichotomy has also been studied by Göhler (2009) through the notion of transitive power (i.e. power over) and intransitive power (i.e. power to).

[68]  Haugaard (2012, p. 33) includes Mann (1986) in the literature of power as domination, and identifies Clegg (1989) or Giddens (1984) as examples of scholars that have attempted to bridge these two perspectives.

attempts to disentangle the nature of violence, Arendt (1970, p. 44) underlines the importance of power as the human ability "to act in concert", noticing, against a basic individualist account, that being in power derives from the empowerment of a certain group of individuals and is not the property of an individual. Power is an absolute rather than instrumental concept that needs no inherent justification (as is the case with the concept of peace), whereas a government, as institutionalized power, employs its power to achieve goals that can obviously be discussed, but mindful that power as such is not the means to an end, but "actually the very condition enabling a group of people to think and act in terms of means-end category" (Arendt, 1970, p. 51). As Pitkin (1972, p. 277) notices, Arendt's conceptualization of power as the fundamental political question of 'who rules whom'[69] challenges the linguistic tendency to use terms such as power, authority, and influence interchangeably. Nonetheless, Arendt warrants (1970, p. 52), power needs legitimacy, since it is the very act of individuals gathering and acting in concert that grants legitimacy, rather than any subsequent action that might result from it.

The dialogue between these two contrasting conceptualizations of power is complex. Castells (2009, p. 13) argues that, against naïve utopias that are empirically non-existent, the empowerment of a determined group of social actors is inevitably related to their empowerment against another group of social actors. Lukes (2005, p. 34) contends that Parsons' and Arendt's conceptualizations of power remove coercion from the theoretical equation of power, which implies that power no longer captures relationships but capacities. Therefore, positive-sum power dynamics, even when responding to the needs of the majority of a group, unfold in settings without conflicting interests that should be regarded as empirical examples of influence and not power (Lukes, 2005, p. 35).[70] Haugaard (2012, p. 34) claims that the same empirical process could be regarded as both domination and empowerment. This relies on the exercise of discerning between normative and empirical arguments, since in the former, the exercise of power might be justified by the observer, while the latter must be inscribed within the belief of the research participant embedded in the object of study (Haugaard, 2012, p. 34).

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[69] This appraisal of power is very much in line with the highly influential definition of politics as 'who gets what, when, how' by Lasswell (1936).

[70] In a different exercise of theorization, Pansardi (2012) posits that power over and power to do not constitute two different conceptualizations of power, but rather two distinct components of social power – a concept that emphasizes the embeddedness of power in social relations.

For instance, in the second dimension of power and building on Giddens (1984, p. 25), who argues that all structural constraints preclude certain types of interaction while at the same time facilitating others, Haugaard (2012, p. 39) notices that unpredictable interaction might hamper collaborative endeavor, making routine socialization a fundamental learning process which must be constrained internally in order to avoid external constraint. If this social process is deployed to exclude the actors' particular interests, rather than favoring an actor's interests over those of others, this could be normatively laudable, demonstrating how the structural constraint of organizing issues is a necessary condition for positive-sum coercion (Haugaard, 2012, pp. 40-41). In the understanding of the organization as the mobilization of bias as "the precondition of politics as something more sophisticated than coercion", Haugaard (2012, p. 39) claims, in connection with Arendt and the notion of government as institutionalized power, that the second dimension of power, if gearing towards a just representation of all the actors' interests, invalidates Foucault (1980, p. 123) and his understanding of politics as the continuation of war by other means.

The conceptual relationship between power and empowerment should now be clear. In recent decades, Foucault has been particularly determinant in influencing this debate and opening it to new insights. On the one hand, despite the intellectual prominence given to power, Foucault's contribution to empowerment is limited, since he rejects the ability of autonomous subjects, that is, human agency, to change social relations (Sadan, 2004, p. 66). He further alerts that those human phenomena that have managed to uphold their freedom from the prevailing web of power/knowledge relations have done so precisely by avoiding organizing themselves through institutionalization (Sadan, 2004, p. 160). More concretely, the discussion lies within the spectrum between the effect of power on the subject's autonomy (e.g. our interests) and the effect of power on the subject's agency (e.g. our very capacity to have interests), with Foucault probably referring to the second deeper effect (Digeser, 1992, p. 980). On the other hand, in their work on business management, Hardy and Leiba-O'Sullivan (1998, p. 467) contend that empowerment practices associated with the fourth dimension of power might be beneficial, as the transformation of individuals into subject performed by power enables a sense of identity, meaning, and reality. Not surprisingly, Haugaard (2012, p. 33) maintains that Foucault should be regarded as a power

scholar of both domination and empowerment, but from the particular standpoint that power is positive empirically, as a socially productive force, but not normatively.

To conclude, "power is not itself a resource" (Giddens, 1984, p. 16). Connecting with what we have seen in the previous chapters, it can be associated in specific circumstances to positive-sum dynamics, as is the case for the emerging global governance landscape where governance dynamics are enlarged rather than shrunk. In order to harness this window of opportunity within the current political system, power must be understood as both a productive force and the result of organizational outflanking. The obligatory passage point of institutionalization is legitimacy, whereby meanings are constructed through discourses that emphasize the normative and cognitive claims to empowerment. In a political system where, despite the emergence of soft mechanisms and non-state actors associated with governance rather than a government model, inter-state configurations are still the key power holders, empowerment dynamics stand as a contrasting empirical force to domination dynamics.

## 3.7  Summing up

Five conceptual associations structure the analytical framework of the dissertation: the *legitimacy* of a city network, the *frame* as a social construct elicited by the *political opportunity* that global agendas represent for local governments, and the *empowerment* that city networks bestow on their local government members as the result of processes of *institutionalization*. These five concepts outline the notion of discursive empowerment through institutionalization and build on the retrofitting dialogue between theory and empirical analysis.

The analytical articulation of frame and legitimacy unfolds in the realm of discursive constructions. Yet understanding discourses and social phenomena as mutually constitutive requires the discourse analysis to be connected with the analysis of institutional dynamics that are inextricably related to the ideas and interests conveyed through discourse.

Constituting ideas and interests through discourse is an enabling condition of empowerment insofar as the cognitive and normative claims to legitimacy are embedded in routines and practices of institutionalization that are

profoundly related to meaning-making. Understanding power as both a productive force and the result of organizational outflanking, this institutionalist insight can be harnessed by those organizations that approach global governance as a positive-sum power reality led by inter-state configurations in their capacity as power holders. The focus on discursive constructions and institutionalization, as well as the intersection with theories of power and legitimacy, outline a specific political science perspective that aims to contribute to the ongoing interdisciplinary efforts devoted to the study of cities and their transnational networking endeavors.

The theoretical part of the dissertation comes to an end. The next chapter will present the methodology and additional analytical considerations that are worth taking into account. The subsequent chapters will present the findings from the empirical research and place them in a wider theoretical perspective.

# 4 Methodology and analytical framework

## 4.1 Justification for the research project and object of study

My dissertation aims to contribute to scientific knowledge by improving the evidence and analysis (Davis & Parker, 1997, p. 64) of the burgeoning phenomenon of city networks. It seeks to contribute to the study of the growing international role of cities in both empirical and theoretical terms.

This section undertakes two interrelated tasks. Firstly, it situates the current project in terms of existing empirical research and reviews the scholarly texts that adopt the world organization of UCLG as a unit of analysis.[71] While the multi-disciplinary overview below does not pretend to be an exhaustive survey of all the peer-reviewed papers and book chapters that address UCLG, it does, however, provide an idea of the diversity of works that have covered the organization with sufficient empirical attention.[72] With differences of emphasis, these texts often address UCLG in connection with larger samples of units.[73] Secondly, the section identifies the overarching topics and implications emerging from this body of literature, and relates them to the research problem and analytical framework at the center of the dissertation.

In overall terms, scholarly work has approached UCLG as a representation of the expanding international role of cities. It should first be clarified that the transnational dynamism of subnational governments, also conceptualized in terms of city diplomacy (van der Pluijm, 2007) or paradiplomacy (Tavares, 2016), constantly intersects with other urban actors in global governance, as shown by the growing relevance of city networks like UCLG in the knowledge

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[71] The survey aggregates search results from seven scientific databases (Directory of Open Access Journals, JSTOR, ScienceDirect, Scopus, Springer Link, Taylor & Francis Online, Wiley Online Library). It comprises scholarly productions in English and Spanish.

[72] A few articles fall outside this strict categorization and are worth noticing as they introduce us to the work developed by specific consultation mechanisms of the UCLG network. For instance, Bosch (2009) presents Agenda 21 for Culture, a global commitment by cities and local governments for cultural development, adopted by UCLG as a reference document for its program on culture developed by the UCLG Culture Committee. Kehoe (2009) lays out the mission and work developed by the UCLG CIB Working Group, which includes information sharing to fill information gaps between municipal international cooperation (MIC) and association capacity building (ACB). The Federation of Canadian Municipalities (FCM) (2010) dissects the rationale and policy recommendations put forward in the UCLG Position Paper on Aid Effectiveness and Local Government, developed by the UCLG Capacity and Institution Building (CIB) Working Group and adopted by UCLG in 2009.

[73] It should also be noticed that UCLG is additionally covered in the context of the several studies that aim to map city networks operating at the global level either in general terms or specifically in the field of climate action (e.g. Acuto & Leffel, 2021; Castán Broto, 2017; Fernández de Losada, 2019; Lee & Jung, 2018).

production and circulation of urban policy (Tomlinson & Harrison, 2018) or in the possibility of constructing a large-scale city policy database to accelerate the achievement of SDG 11 (Rozhenkova et al., 2019).

The activities developed by the wide network of UCLG depict a landscape where policy learning and cooperation are intertwined components of the same process. Such is the case of decentralized cooperation projects inscribed within the Brazil-Mozambique South-South development cooperation (Nganje, 2016), the knowledge transfer processes hosted by city-to-city learning relationships in Southern Africa (Moodley, 2019), the promotion of decentralization as a key element of cooperation and a territorial approach to development (Gutiérrez-Camps, 2013), and the linkage of local governments with international processes in the specific context of human rights promotion (Diaz Abraham, 2017).

Scholarly work has also examined UCLG and the expanding international role of cities against the backdrop of the multilateral institutional architecture and its state-centered logic. This strand of literature addresses the growing involvement of local governments in international organizations (Alger, 2014) and their attempt to participate in and influence the emerging global governance arena (Herrschel & Newman, 2017). It focuses on the rising political articulation of local authorities in the international arena vis-à-vis more powerful actors (i.e. national governments) (Salomón and Sánchez Cano, 2008), the networked efforts towards a higher recognition of the role of local governments in international development aid (Grasa & Sánchez Cano, 2013), and the contraposition between the bottom-up quest for the international community's recognition of the role of local governments in aid effectiveness and the defense of sovereignty and power over global governance models exerted by national governments (Brütsch, 2012). Two specific scholarly works stand out here because of their specific constructivist approach and focus on discursive strategies. Nijman (2016) connects the global representativeness of UCLG with language, norms and practices that have, traditionally, been monopolized by foreign policy and international law principles. Galceran-Vercher (2019) compares UCLG and the Global Platform for the Right to the City to examine the role of city networks as norm entrepreneurs in the global governance arena.

Lastly, recent scholarship has also started to survey the efforts carried out by UCLG, its members, and partners in the initial stages of the localization of

the SDGs. This strand has paid attention to the establishment of cross-sector partnerships and multi-stakeholder initiatives to support local and regional governments (Wahyuni, 2019) or the imbrication of national policy frameworks, raising awareness imperatives, and funding needs in the development of local initiatives in the UK (Jones & Comfort, 2020).

Connecting the dots, the existing empirical research on UCLG acknowledges the entwinement of city networks with other international and transnational actors in the urban realm of global governance. It takes note of the analytical relevance of the relationship with the multilateral institutional architecture and the centrality of policy learning in the daily lives of city networks, yet it does not pay sufficient empirical attention to how the UN global agendas adopted in the 2010s and a wider conceptualization of policy learning, as both a cognitive and discursive process, may contribute to disentangling this research problem. My dissertation intends to add to the scholarly production on city networks and global agendas, and to the specific theoretical link among these through discursive policy learning. Within the growing literature on city networks, this work attempts to increase scholarly attention on the rich empirical diversity of contributions on cities and their networking structures to the UN global agendas, particularly beyond the climate change regime that, so far, has achieved central academic relevance. As previously outlined, while policy learning in city networks constitutes an emergent corpus within the larger growing body of literature on city networks as units of analysis, the specific scholarly effort to link this with the relationship with international organizations and global agendas does not mirror the dynamism currently unfolding in empirical terms.

On the one hand, my research seeks to broaden the studies that focus empirically on UCLG and add a single-case study to the growing literature on city networks. On the other hand, in line with the thread running through the first chapters and building on the potentiality that lies in the fringe among disciplines, it attempts to show the analytical purchase in deploying the theoretical framework of discursive policy learning as a specific political science contribution to bridge the existing conceptual gap between international relations and urban studies.

Building on the retrofitting dialogue between theory and empirical research, the analytical framework of discursive empowerment through institutionalization aims to contribute to the ongoing interdisciplinary efforts

devoted to the study of cities and their transnational networking endeavors by focusing on the analytical complementarity of discursive constructions and institutionalization, at the intersection with theories of power and legitimacy. As this analytical perspective is uncharted within the body of literature on city networks, my dissertation is guided by the requirement for originality, defined as "encountering an established idea or viewpoint or method in one part of your discipline (or in a neighbouring discipline) and then taking that idea for a walk and putting it down somewhere else, applying it in a different context or for a different purpose" (Dunleavy, 2003, p. 40).

## 4.2 Research strategy

The research project has as starting point the problem it intends to study, and not a specific theory or method to deploy. The first step has been to identify the most suitable approach to the empirical unit (Della Porta & Keating, 2008, p. 33). The decision to deploy discursive policy learning aims to provide a discrete theoretical contribution to the discipline interstices between urban studies and international relations. The drive of the research lies in the emerging importance of cities and their networking organizations in global governance, and the will to increase scholarly attention devoted to this research problem.

The dissertation follows a model of abductive theory construction. Theoretical expectations have been generated at the beginning of the research process, providing the lens through which to frame the approach to the object of study, suggesting which themes and research participants to focus on, as well as the positioning of the researcher within the study (Creswell & Creswell, 2018, Chapter 3). Prior to embarking on my doctoral program, I worked for over 10 years in the organization that constitutes the current object of study. This professional experience has provided me with a "preunderstanding" of the unit of analysis (i.e. specific insights that have been developed prior to the research project) (Gummesson, 2000, p. 57). Such pre-existing empirical knowledge has fed the initial task of accommodating these insights within the current academic discussions and defining the initial theoretical expectations. Subsequently, the insights emanating from the empirical analysis have allowed me to develop a theoretical explanation of the process of discursive empowerment enacted by UCLG to the benefit of its members, which has just been presented as an analytical framework in the third chapter. Still, within the

limitations of generalizability for an idiographic explanation (Babbie, 2011, p. 21) and as will be clear from the next chapter onwards, this study presents interesting takeaways both in terms of evidence and analysis not only for other city networks but, in general terms, to help unveil the growing dynamism of cities within the shifting landscape of global governance.

The research has been structured as a case study. This method is particularly appropriate for addressing the characteristics of real-life events such as organizational processes or international relations, and is amenable to different sources of evidence and blurred boundaries between the phenomenon and its context (Yin, 2018, Section 1.1). Case study pays special attention to the existing relationship between abstract concepts and observational data (Blatter & Haverland, 2012, p. 26). It places great importance on theory development, using the theoretical expectations at the beginning of the research process as a template to compare the results emanating from data collection (Yin, 2018, Section 2.2). The current dissertation and its use of case study relies on the importance of context-dependent knowledge, stemming from the practical experience and insights of real-life situations rather than from the quest for predictive theories and universals (Flyvbjerg, 2006, p. 223).

Case study as an investigative approach is characterized by a certain degree of confusion regarding its procedures and attributes. Moving through opposing ontological and epistemological stances, case study may have an ultimate goal of allowing "inferences about *regular* causal relationships" (Rohlfing, 2012, p. 1, emphasis in the original) to be drawn, on the one hand. Refraining from summarizing and generalizing outcomes, it might also aim to tell a "story in its diversity, allowing the story to unfold from the many-sided, complex, and sometimes conflicting stories that the actors in the case have told me" (Flyvbjerg, 2006, p. 238), on the other hand. Proposed as either a research method or, in a wider sense, a research paradigm, case study is commonly envisioned as a social science research inquiry alternative to experiment and survey, which focuses on a low number of cases investigated, extracts detailed information for each of them, and often processes this information as qualitative rather than quantitative data (Hammersley & Gomm, 2000, p. 4).

The current research design builds on the analytical merits that the identification of UCLG as a case study implies for the inquiry of the bourgeoning phenomenon of city networks as actors of global governance. The

specificity of the research problem warrants the adoption of a single-case study rather than multiple-case studies, which are often preferable in order to increase external validity and the generalizability of the findings (Yin, 2018, Section 2.4). In other words, rather than a random sample or any other representativeness-oriented selection, the research has opted to produce deep insights stemming from a single case, building on the expectations about the content of the empirical unit of analysis (Flyvbjerg, 2006, p. 230).

This approach leads us to stress another key aspect within the current research design. Noticing a gap between ontological assumptions and epistemology among several international relations scholars, George and Bennett (2005, p. 264) call on us to reorient the attention to a problem-driven research agenda, by reclaiming the importance of causal explanation via causal mechanisms and middle-range theory.[74] From the initial work of Merton (1967) onwards, middle-range theories aim to bridge the gap between highly abstract theories and empirical findings detached from theoretical frameworks, stressing the importance of focusing on delimited aspects of the social phenomena involved in the object of study. As Bennett and Checkel (2015, p. 11) argue in ontological terms with regards to mechanism-based explanation, causality cannot be observed but inferred and, despite the level of sophistication of the instruments of observation and theories deployed, "[t]he boundary between the observable and unobservable worlds is like the horizon", as there will always be a portion of reality that remains unobservable.

This brings to the fore the epistemological dialogue between explanation and interpretation. As Hay (2006b, pp. 78-79) points out, ontological assumptions[75] antecede epistemological and methodological decisions and not the other way round, since empirical evidence cannot dictate ontological positionings.[76] The adoption of specific ontological and epistemological

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[74] To be precise, the call for middle-range theories is not unique though and is conveyed from different positions. In a constructivist account, Kratochwil (2008, p. 92), for instance, highlights the relevance of middle-range theories, as productive analytical resources that may counter the risks incurred by generalizations in their attempts to avoid idiosyncratic logics.

[75] Taking into account the existing confusion between ontology, epistemology, and methodology within social science research, this dissertation adopts the understanding of constructivism as a distinctive ontological position (Corbetta, 2003, p. 14).

[76] Hay (2006b, p. 94) stresses that post-positivist accounts of political analysis suggesting "complex" and "realistic" rather than "simple" and "parsimonious" analytical assumptions should not be unilaterally and automatically embraced if the latter encloses a pragmatic catch. Hay (2006b, p. 86) further offers an illustrative example of the distinction between empirical and ontological elements when he notices that we might all "agree on the precise chain of events leading up to the French Revolution … whilst disagreeing vehemently over the relative significance of structural and agential factors in the explanation of the event itself".

viewpoints is inscribed within the discussion on the nature and knowledge of reality. This, in turn, leads us to unpack the analytical significance of the concepts of institution and frame within the debate on the constitution of ideas, interests, and identity in social theory.

Our starting point is a call to a "weak" constructivism (Sayer, 2000, p. 63). Underpinned by a realist rather than idealist account, it posits that, even though elements of the social world are socially constructed, "once constructed they are realities which limit the textual (or 'discursive') construction of the social" (Fairclough, 2003, p. 8). Similarly, institutions might not be material as they are socially constructed, but are real since they exert causal influence in political reality (Schmidt, 2008, p. 318). Following Scott (2014, p. 76), this post-positivist position rules out both a radical materialist perspective and a postmodernist idealist view, building on Rorty (1989, p. 4) and the need to distinguish "between the claim that the world is out there and the claim that truth is out there". Key is the constructivist emphasis on the difference between matters of brute physics and biology, and matters of culture and society (Searle, 1995, p. 27). This leads to an identification of "brute facts", which exist independently from the existence of human institutions, and "social facts" and particularly their subset "institutional facts", which require human institutions for their existence (Searle, 1995, pp. 2, 5). This means that "in order to *state* a brute fact we require the institution of language, but the *fact stated* needs to be distinguished from the *statement* of it" (Searle, 1995, p. 2). This constructivist take underpins the epistemological role of the concepts of institutions within the analytical framework.

Throughout the construction of our object of analysis, institutions compel us to pay attention to the socially constructed nature of identity and interests, along the lines of top-down or bottom-up legitimation processes (Schmidt, 2008, p. 320). Concurrently, the duality of structure is key to approaching institutions to capture their constraining and empowering effects (Giddens, 1984, p. 25), but also with the aim of monitoring both idealist and materialist accounts of social reality (Scott, 2014, p. 58). In this regard, the constructivist analysis of institutions must focus on material reality and interests rather than on "material interests", since material reality is the backdrop with which actors conceive their interests that are, in turn, conceptualized as subjective responses to material conditions (Schmidt, 2008, p. 318).

At first sight, frames, like beliefs and discourse, are conceptual tools that policy analysts deploy to grasp how actors allocate meaning to phenomena (Hajer & Laws, 2006). By the same token, Wagenaar (2011, p. 85) notices that, despite the different terminology, the work of Hajer on discourse coalitions is similar to that on frames. In this sense, the initial conceptualization of frame by Rein must be contextualized. Among the different reasons for the limited contribution of social science research to public policy-making, Rein observes that complex social phenomena present unstable context-dependent regularities that, in any case, can be meaningful only if filtered through interpretive frameworks (Wagenaar, 2011, pp. 82-83). In this context, the ambiguous assemblage of frames, interests, and actions implies that the nature of the frame cannot be derived logically, but can be determined only on an empirical basis (Rein, 1983, p. 99).[77] When Wagenaar (2011, p. 88, emphasis in the original) inquires if frames are "actually *in* social reality to be discovered and found by the analyst. ...[o]r are frames a conceptual shorthand for an interpretation *about* social reality", he identifies in the former a hermeneutic approach to meaning which stems from a realist account of interpretive analysis, while the latter includes the action dimension of frames and embodies a constructivist account of interpretive analysis. This translates into the understanding of meaning as both an act of interpretation and an object to be interpreted (Wagenaar, 2011, p. 89). This dissertation embraces both approaches, as it acknowledges the need to factor in the role of the interpreter and deploys a hermeneutic understanding of meaning in its empirical analysis, as will be shown in the next section.

## 4.3  Data collection and analysis

Methods have been identified according to the theoretical process that has constructed the problem into an object of research. Since this identification stems from the central requirement to focus on the intersection between discursive and institutional practices, the research draws upon different techniques for data collection and analysis. This approach lies in the belief that

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[77] As Hajer and Laws (2006, p. 259) point out, this explains the difference in terms of empirical generalizability between the frame analysis of Rein and Schön (1977) that do not focus on hypothesis testing and confine epistemologically to their case as unit of analysis, and the work of Snow and Benford (1992) in social movement literature, where hypothesized relationships are tested between frame models and specific events.

a social scientific endeavor should be led by considerations stemming from the research problem rather than the methodology (Flyvbjerg, 2006, p. 242).

Data collection and analysis rely on qualitative methodology. As discursive policy learning is proposed to grasp the emerging role of city networks in global governance and the drive underpinning the increasing international engagement of cities and their networking organizations, the research conclusions presented hereafter do not emanate from the findings per se, but rather from their embeddedness within a wider interpretive logic (Fischer, 2003, p. 191). The interpretation builds on the accounts of social reality conveyed by the research participants, hence the decision to include the original wording in the presentation of the empirical analysis through direct quotations with double quotation marks from written or oral statements as well as anonymized interviews.[78]

The empirical research is deployed through several sub-units of analysis, sources of data collection, and sources of evidence. The sources of evidence are document analysis, participant and direct observation, and elite interviews. Counting on several sub-units of analysis through an 'embedded' research design allows the risk associated with a 'holistic' design, which could potentially lead the research towards such a level of abstraction that data might tilt the direction of the entire case study (Yin, 2018, section 2.4), to be decreased.

The original idea of striking a balance between the sources of evidence has been disrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic and its global impact on human mobility. Face-to-face elite interviewing relies, at least in my case, on the possibility of participating in in-person gatherings and, in particular, social events, which provide an unparalleled opportunity to ask for and often obtain precious slots for conducting interviews. The move from in-person to distance-based data collection techniques has tilted the balance, significantly increasing the importance of document analysis and direct observation over interviewing. Due to the large dataset and for the sake of simplicity, the dissertation omits individual references to each of the empirical sources of information. Annex I details the textual and semiotic dataset of 154 documents, in addition to the fieldwork that has been conducted through 13 in-person or virtual meetings and four elite in-depth interviews, which are listed in Annex II.

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[78] When required, these citations are translated into English by the author. Terms or sentences in italics or single quotation marks are used to highlight parts of the dissertation that the author wishes to emphasize.

Document analysis has been conducted on samples of material produced by UCLG and relevant partners with different formats such as reports, working documents, statements, declarations, videos, news, social media, and websites. When combined with other qualitative research methods, the analysis of textual and semiotic material contributes to triangulation and the corroboration of the data collected through different sources of evidence, thus reducing the impact of potential biases within single-case studies (Bowen, 2009, pp. 28-29). This method brings in a hermeneutic approach to meaning, stressing the idea that, by closely looking at policy texts, we may grasp the meanings that actors instill in the artifacts they produce (Yanow, 2007a, p. 114). The analysis focuses on the legitimation discourses embedded in the intersubjective constructions that constitute the communication process (Galceran-Vercher, 2019, p. 25). Qualitative-interpretive analysis identifies and relies on specific sources of inference within the empirical universe, namely the researcher's own experience, the situation of text production, and the text itself (Mayring, 2000, Section 3). By including material published across time, document analysis has been geared specifically towards grasping the diachronic component of institutional discourse.

Participant observation as a research method stems from the need to pay attention to context-specific meaning-making (Yanow, 2007a, p. 113). It responds to the interpretive commitment to prioritize complexity and context rather than causal inference (Boswell et al., 2019, p. 59). Whereas participant observation is commonly related as a method of ethnography,[79] the time dedication and research participants' availability that this approach commonly requires among investigators in terms of fieldwork goes beyond the scope and possibilities of this research. Intensive participant observation may simply not be feasible for research projects that focus on political and governmental elites (Boswell et al., 2019, p. 62). However, within the available limits, participant observation has been carried out at the organization's in-person events as both spaces of social interaction between the researcher and the informants and objects of direct observation, without which the context of the analytical insights could not be grasped (Taylor & Bogdan, 1987, p. 31). In this regard, the organization's in-person meetings can be envisioned as contained microsociological fragments of space, time, and individuals where it is possible

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[79] Concisely defined as the "study of the culture that a given group of people more or less share" (Van Maanen, 1996, pp. 451-452).

to grasp the formal interaction, informal interaction, and actors' interpretations that are triggered by the researcher through informal conversations or interviews that generally take place back-to-back with the observation moments (Corbetta, 2003, p. 257). Within this specific approach, "ethnographic sensibility" has attempted to retrieve the meaning of the research participants' actions and locate them within their broader context (Boswell et al., 2019, p. 60). I was lucky enough to conduct participant observation during two research trips prior to the COVID-19 pandemic: 1) UN High-level Political Forum (HLPF), July 2019, New York, US; and 2) UCLG World Congress, November 2019, Durban, South Africa. The identification of the fieldwork meetings was geared towards illuminating the overall dynamics of the organization (i.e. UCLG World Congress), as well as the interface between UCLG and the UN fora, where the conversations on the implementation of global agendas are taking place (i.e. HLPF). While my research focuses on the global agendas recently adopted by the international community as a whole, my fieldwork has emphasized the institutional context of the SDGs. As indicated earlier, the contribution of cities and their networking organizations to the Paris Agreement and the overall climate change agenda is receiving scholarly consideration. In this light, the evidence of the intertwined commitment by pro-active cities – from large metropolitan areas to small towns, from developed to developing countries, hence reasserting the relevance of both *global* and *ordinary* cities[80] – and UCLG towards the implementation of the SDGs deserves analytical attention, as a specific dimension of the overall phenomenon of rising cities in global governance. As the main platform for the follow-up and review of the SDGs, UCLG and other key networks gathered under the Global Taskforce of Local and Regional Governments (GTF) organized a delegation of local and regional government representatives to the HLPF in order to present the results of their research work on the contribution of cities and regions to the implementation of the SDGs.

The impact of COVID-19 on human mobility put a halt to the possibility of conducting additional research trips for participant observation and elite interviews. When UCLG and the widest range of transnational actors shifted to online conferencing, the chance for virtual participation in open meetings

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[80] The best testimony to the entrepreneurial spirit of networked urban governance and contribution to the global agendas beyond the climate change regime is provided by the Voluntary Local Reviews (VLRs), which will be presented in the sixth chapter.

without the traditionally associated travel expenses and time consumption significantly increased the number of sources for data collection. Indeed, meetings are fundamental in empirical research in terms of their characterization as social contexts where the meanings and values of specific discursive practices are conveyed and uttered (Fischer, 2003, p. 73). Besides the obvious constraints in terms of formal and informal social interaction with and among the research participants, virtual open meetings entail an additional more subtle limitation, as meeting participants tend to improvise away from the 'script' less than during in-person meetings. This provides weaker leverage in terms of access to research participants' viewpoints and interpretive insights.

Concerning the in-depth interviews conducted prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, the sources of data collection were political and high-level technical representatives of UCLG members. Resorting to semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions has been identified as the appropriate style for elite interviewing (Leech, 2002a, p. 665). As Dexter (cited in Leech, 2002b, p. 663) points out, whereas in standardized interviewing, when researchers are looking for answers, they are confined by their own presuppositions, in elite interviewing, the interviewers are eager to let the interviewees show them the nature of the research problem at stake.[81] As per the type of questions, interviews included "*specific grand tour*" questions, as a focused approach to a topic well known by the interviewees and that, posed across interviews, could provide a comparative perspective (Leech, 2002a, p. 667, emphasis in the original).

In terms of data analysis, it is important to highlight the abductive logic of moving back and forth between the theoretical expectations and empirical analysis. Empirical analysis has unfolded through content analysis in order to use theory-based categories to produce an initial list of codes to apply to the empirical data (Miles et al., 2014, Chapter 4). In a deliberately over-simplified look, content analysis can be seen as more in tune with a deductive logic, while grounded theory (e.g. Corbin & Strauss, 2008) stems from an inductive logic (Gray, 2004, p. 328). An inductive approach to the object of study starts with the classification of the amount of empirical data into classes and then outlines the conceptual structure of classification, that is, the distinguishing

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[81] In line with American Psychological Association (APA) Style, the 'he'/'she' generic third-person pronoun is replaced by the singular 'they' in a gender-neutral sentence. This further contributes to hiding the identity of the interviewee and honoring the confidentiality agreement.

characteristics of typologies identified throughout the empirical data (Corbetta, 2003, p. 254). In line with the tenets of qualitative methodologies, this research simultaneously included inductive coding in order to welcome social meanings that had not initially been foreseen by the investigator, and add complexity and depth to the inquiry (Ruiz Olabuénaga, 2012, p. 69). The "[a]bductive reasoning" underlying the coding process implies that the theory-based deductive approach to the field is grounded in the meanings conveyed by the research participants and captured through an inductive logic (Bryman, 2012, p. 401). In this context, the interrogation of the relationship between the empirical data and the theoretical expectations has been blended methodologically with coding techniques that focused on meaning-making and discursive construction (Gläser & Laudel, 2013). The outcomes of the rigorous analysis of the empirical dataset proceeding from the sources of evidence of participant and direct observation and interviewing[82] have then guided the analysis of the larger dataset of documents. The reflective interpretive approach of the current research unfolds by intentionally blending the themes emanating from the empirical data with the theoretical expectations.

A last important remark should be made on access to the field. The ideal research field is the one where investigators quickly establish rapport with informants and gather relevant data (Taylor & Bogdan, 1987, p. 36). This has been both to my advantage and disadvantage in terms of the research setting. With more than 10 years of professional experience at UCLG, I was quickly accepted as a participant observant and interviewer. This affected the dynamics inherent in the social interaction embedded in the interviews since some interviewees recognized me as an *internal* colleague, while at the same time my identity influenced my relationship with the object of study. To be sure, the possibility of comprehending the social world inscribing the object of study is contingent on the capacity of the researcher to get along with the context and, hence, understand the research participants' viewpoints (Flyvbjerg, 2006, p. 236). After all, participant observation is an ideal method when researchers aim to study a social reality in which they have taken part themselves (Corbetta, 2003, p. 238), as is my case. The understanding of the researcher as a participant is what, in the interpretive account, is termed as the "co-construction" of evidence (Yanow, 2007b, p. 409). Nevertheless, scholars like Taylor and Bogdan (1987, p. 36) recommend investigators pay special

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[82] This stage of qualitative data analysis was carried out with the software package of MAXQDA.

attention when they select research settings that present some sort of direct personal or professional involvement. In this respect, as in the field of action-research, there is also the role of the "practitioner-researcher", who develops a research project "within and often on behalf of their organization" (Gray, 2004, p. 243). This is by no means my case. Participant observation can take place to multiple degrees between participant and observer, whereas the analyst may behave like a member of a group that shares routines with the actors as well as a researcher (Yanow, 2007b, p. 410). The variation between a complete observer and a complete participant reflects the spectrum of possibilities enacted by the researcher's degree of involvement with the research setting (Bailey, 2007, p. 80). The key is precisely maintaining a balance between "insider" and "outsider" status (Gray, 2004, p. 242). This is particularly true when both the research participant and analyst are familiar with the institutional discourse and, thus, the "institutional capture" prevents the researcher from unveiling what is underneath the informant's everyday life experiences (Smith, 2005a, p. 225). The shifting role from policy learning actor to academic researcher on policy learning can unlock the benefits deriving from the specific positionality of having 'insider' access to (often elite) policy actors and an 'outsider' critical approach to their practices (Wood, 2016, p. 397). This positioning is, indeed, underpinned by the consideration that knowledge is never value-free and, hence, by the need to embrace a general reflective stance (Fischer, 2003, p. 124).

The disadvantages related to my specific situation concerning the research setting have been addressed in an open and rigorous way, by providing visibility to the role of the researcher and the critical, reflective position vis-à-vis the object of study. The reflexive stance on the researcher's positionality stems from the awareness that we are never "unsympathetic to our subjects" (Wood, 2016, p. 397). It actually harnesses the social constructivist stance on the insights deriving from a transactional approach where the researcher is personally interacting with the case (Hyett et al., 2014, "Definitions" section). Reflexivity, understood as a reflective conversation with data, is a source of knowledge, as the researcher self-consciously interrogates their personal assumptions and their embeddedness in various social contexts (Hibbert et al., 2014, p. 280). Latent preconceptions arising from personal experiences are acknowledged within the interrogation of the empirical material in order to simultaneously mitigate potential bias and harness potential insights (Tufford

& Newman, 2010, p. 81). Demystifying the concerns of the researcher directly involved in the activities that are the object of their fieldwork can make these key aspects of the research process visible to the reader (Kouw & Petersen, 2018, p. 5s).

## 4.4 Diagram of the analytical framework

After presenting the methodology and in order to ease the presentation of the empirical results from the next chapter onward, it is important to provide a synthetic recap of the conceptual scheme of legitimacy, frame, political opportunity, empowerment, and institutionalization. As the analytical framework of discursive empowerment through institutionalization presented in the third chapter emanates from the retrofitting dialogue between theory and empirical data, the reader might now have a better sense of the actual interrelation of these five concepts.

*Table 1* Diagram of the analytical framework
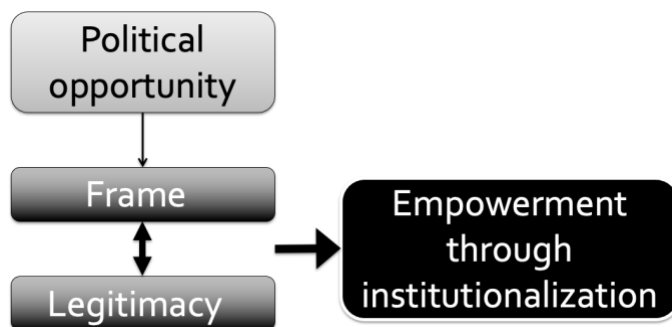


Political opportunity
Local governments' engagement in the global arena is analyzed according to the relationship established with international organizations, whether balanced, passive, or instead, characterized by a local pro-active initiative (Herrschel & Newman, 2017). As an increasingly important tool for the implementation of the global agendas, the guidelines of orchestration provide insightful elements to grasp the bidirectional local-global nexus (Abbott et al., 2015), particularly in terms of negotiation of interests and power relations between the intergovernmental organizations and UCLG.

Frame

Policy framing is understood as a specific device revolving around a storyline, that is, as a generic narrative constructed so as to connect the analysis of a policy problem with a catchy normative leap (Rein & Schön, 1996). It relies on key characteristics of discourse coalitions such as the credibility of and trust in the actors aiming to consolidate their definition of reality (Hajer, 1995). It further depends on the motivational capacity to mobilize actors in collective endeavors (Benford & Snow, 2000). The accommodation of ritual practices that provide stability or the adaptability to changing contexts are some of the key qualities required during the discursive construction of the localization of global agendas.

Legitimacy

Legitimacy is, analytically, a two-fold concept, as it is both global and local. Legitimacy and legitimation are sought from a global perspective both in terms of UCLG members and the overall organization (Bexell, 2014; Rousselin, 2016). At the same time, legitimacy plays a key role in urban politics, as it targets local or extra-local arenas (Betsill & Bulkeley, 2004). Above all, legitimacy is constitutive of power and its discursive construction and the mobilization of normative standards is institutionally embedded (Barnett & Duvall, 2005; Reus-Smit, 2014; Schneider et al., 2007). The trade-off between procedure-based and effectiveness-based legitimacy is a central challenge for global governance institutions (Scharpf, 2006).

Empowerment through institutionalization

In theoretical terms, empowerment is understood as 'power to' – which cannot be dissociated from 'power over' – and channeled through institutionalization dynamics (Arendt, 1970; Brunsson & Olsen, 1993; Foucault, 1980; Mann, 1986; March & Olsen, 1989; March & Olsen, 2011; Parsons, 1963; Scott, 2014). The productive force of the localization discourse, the understanding of global governance as a positive-sum power setting, and organizational outflanking are fundamental mechanisms within this process. Empowerment is assessed against the backdrop of claims voiced by local and regional governments through their networking organizations.

## 4.5  Initial interpretive expectations

Prior to presenting the results of the empirical research, it is important to sketch out, briefly, the initial expectations. In the continuous interplay between theory and data, it may be informative for the reader of the dissertation to know what the investigator expected to encounter in the field. This is particularly relevant since it is from the dialogue between theoretical expectations and empirical analysis that interpretive insights might be generated and ultimately contribute to the body of literature on city networks and the related domains of urban studies and international relations. In this sense, contrary to the third and the rest of the fourth chapter on the analytical framework and methodology, the initial draft of this section has been laid out chronologically at the beginning of the phase of empirical analysis within the research process.

Legitimacy and frame are expected to be the central themes in the analysis of the implicit and explicit statements by both the political and technical representatives of the UCLG members, as well as within the perspectives conveyed by the UCLG partners. This last category of social actors is particularly relevant, since there is a wide diversity of constituencies and heterogeneity of perspectives within it, such as civil society organizations, agencies of intergovernmental organizations, national governments, private sector, and development banks. To be more precise, legitimacy and frame are expected to deploy analytically in distinct ways.

In a nutshell, legitimacy in global governance is expected to appear as a discursive resource that emanates from its four main sources: application of democratic procedures, adherence to shared values, reference to specific expertise, and efficiency in problem-solving. Because of the rich internal diversity of the organization's membership, democratic legitimacy is not expected to play such a key role as an initial Western-centric approach (i.e. the very positioning of the researcher writing this dissertation) might presume. This is obviously a problematic aspect inscribed within a contested debate on a global scale. Whereas the outset of the century-old municipal movement is clearly related to specific geographies and understandings of (Western) liberal (local) democracy, this movement has undoubtedly reached a global scope, which implies that it encompasses different political rationalities embedded in different historical traditions. This leads me to consider the importance that an effectiveness-based legitimacy might have in the discursive dynamics of local

government representatives on the global and regional scale. Interestingly enough, a technical understanding of legitimacy as public administrators (rather than politicians) seems to be widely embraced as a defining characteristic of local government leaders. This is often associated with claims about the proximity-based pragmatic nature of local leaders, in contrast allegedly to the irresolute nature of national leaders, particularly in the face of increasing trans-boundary challenges such as climate change or migration flows. This ensemble of elements leads me to ponder over the analytical significance of the legitimacy of UCLG members. As non-state actors and their networking configurations enter into force and complement traditional actors in the management of transnational public affairs, the legitimacy of local governments vis-à-vis private actors acquires strategic importance in the 'shifting sands' of the emerging global governance landscape. Yet this asset can be weakened or even unsettled if the claims to legitimacy are confined to claims of democratic legitimacy.

Concerning frame, the reflection unfolds differently. Frame is both a conceptual lens through which to interpret social reality and an object of social reality. The social construct of frame is conceived as the analytical framework that operationalizes discursive policy learning, proposed heuristically to grasp the relationship between city networks and global agendas. Through a self-reflexive approach, the different claims to legitimacy enacted through discursive practices may inform the attempts to build a frame that connects a specific interpretation of a policy problem and its proposal for action. The crux of the matter is expected to be found in the process of social construction, through the *internal* heterogeneity of interests embedded in the diverse membership of UCLG, and in the way this relates to the *external* heterogeneity of interests related not only to the intergovernmental institutional architecture officially in charge of global agendas but also with regard to other partners such as civil society organizations and the private sector. I expect the social construction of the frame to be simultaneously associated with collaboration and competition dynamics, inscribed within logics of power as both empowerment and domination. Lastly, the heuristic approach of discursive policy learning is not meant solely to be located in the advocacy work of UCLG vis-à-vis the intergovernmental organizations officially in charge of the global agendas, but also in the other organizational working areas such as learning or research.

Importantly, as I discuss in the conclusion when the reader is capable of fully understanding the tight relationship between the analytical framework and the empirical research, the overarching explanatory role of the institutional logic of appropriateness is absent in the initial interpretive expectations. It is only through the retrofitting dialogue between theory and analysis underpinning the abductive logic that the capacity to institutionalize the production of meaning emerges as the conceptual lynchpin that explains why the frame of the localization of the global agendas on its own cannot account for the discursive empowerment that the organization bestows on its membership. The relevance of procedure-based legitimacy, the necessity to control the risks associated with the diversity of interests of the membership, and the capacity to have members recursively producing specific legitimizing talks are key hints that allow me to start weaving conceptual relationships around the explanatory relevance of rule-based institutionalization when going into the empirical material.

# 5  Unity in diversity

## 5.1  A global policy meta-organization

UCLG is the largest organization of local and regional governments in the world. Its stated mission is "[t]o be the united voice and world advocate of democratic local self-government, promoting its values, objectives and interests, through cooperation between local governments, and within the wider international community" (Doc. 34, p. 2).

The organization is "the inheritor of a century-old movement" (Doc. 36, p. 33).[83] Mayors and city representatives decided to consolidate inter-municipal relations in a structured fashion by establishing the Union Internationale des Villes (UIV) in 1913 in Ghent (Belgium).[84] Despite the two world wars of the 20th century, conflicts, and crises, the international municipal movement continued to grow. Another major organization was then created with the establishment of the United Towns Organisation (UTO) in 1957 in Aix-les-Bains (France).[85] In the post-WWII context, these organizations engaged in promoting long-term peace by focusing on developing municipal training programs (particularly for IULA) and fostering development cooperation (particularly for UTO). Following the call of the World Assembly of Cities and Local Authorities held immediately before the UN Habitat II Conference in Istanbul in 1996 to establish a single voice for cities and local governments globally, the unification of IULA and UTO led, jointly with the support of the city network Metropolis, to the creation of UCLG in 2004.

UCLG is both a product and enabler of globalization. It is a meta-organization: an umbrella organization representing over 70% of the world's population, with over 250,000 members, among towns, cities, and regions, and over 175 associations of local and regional governments in 140 UN member states. The organization has a decentralized structure composed of nine sections: seven geographically-defined (Africa, Asia-Pacific, Eurasia, Europe, Latin America, the Middle East & West Asia, and North America), one

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[83] See Saunier and Ewen (2008) for a historical review of the transnational municipal movement and Saunier (2009) for a short historical excursus on the process leading to the establishment of UCLG.

[84] In 1928, the organization changed its name to the International Union of Local Authorities (IULA).

[85] The organization was initially called the Fédération Mondiale des Villes Jumelées (FMVJ).

metropolitan section (Metropolis) and one section dedicated to regional governments (Forum of Regions). A fundamental role is further played by the world secretariat, which is responsible for the day-to-day running of the organization at the global level. While they are part of the world organization's operational structure, sections may be established as independent legal entities, setting their own constitutions, governing bodies, policies, and administrative affairs. As we will see, the sections outline a highly differentiated institutional landscape. The diversity embodied by the UCLG sections mirrors the multi-scalar complexity associated with the institutional development of subnational governments. The multiplicity of actors and processes at play implies that the impact of global drivers of change such as the globalization of the economy, the boost of the post-bureaucratic state, or the greater involvement of the private sector in the public realm varies widely according to each local context (John, 2001, p. 13). The "historical 'starting conditions'" of each country's political system (Wollmann, 2020, Conceptual Scheme of Analysis section) have played a decisive role in this regard.

As does any organization, UCLG has a governance structure. Groups of members are gathered in statutory decision-making bodies that are in charge of both the internal and external affairs of the institution. The principal governing bodies are the World Council and Executive Bureau, which comprise 342 and 116 members, and meet once and twice each year respectively. The members of these governing bodies must have a political mandate from a subnational government, and are nominated through a decentralized electoral process that is conducted according to the constitution and electoral procedure rules adopted by the organization. The Executive Bureau initiates proposals and carries out the decisions of the World Council, the primary policy-making body of the organization, which, among other duties, elects the Presidency of the organization every three years.

The world organization is currently led by a collegial presidency with Ilsur Metshin, Mayor of Kazan (Russian Federation), as Governing President. The Presidency further comprises mayors of cities from Canada, China, Costa Rica, France, Morocco, Netherlands, Philippines, Spain, and Turkey in their capacities as Co-Presidents, Treasurers, Special Envoys, and Honorary President of the organization.

As policy development is a fundamental component of the work of the organization, over 20 consultation mechanisms have been established in order

to gather members around specific thematic priorities. These mechanisms are called policy councils, fora, committees, working groups, and communities of practice. The organization and scope of these mechanisms also depict a variegated institutional scenario. The recently established policy councils comprise representatives with a political mandate who develop policy recommendations around strategic issues and report to the Executive Bureau. The fora comprise political representatives generally around a specific type of membership that are led by a member. Committees include political representatives that work on policy areas that feed the formal policy positions to be discussed within the governing bodies. Working groups and communities of practice cluster technical representatives and practitioners for learning exchanges and program implementation. Together, these mechanisms address a plethora of topics of relevance in urban governance such as capacity building, crisis management, housing, local finance, migration, mobility, multilevel governance, social inclusion, transparency, or urban strategic planning.

According to its strategic plan, the city network has five main working areas: advocacy, implementation, learning, monitoring and reporting, and strengthening the network. In a nutshell, the organization aims to enhance the influence of local and regional governments in the global arena, particularly around the recognition of their role in global development agendas. It further seeks to highlight efforts by the UCLG membership to achieve the global agendas at the local level. It supports learning by promoting decentralized cooperation and peer-to-peer relations, including capacity-building of subnational governments for the achievement of the global agendas. It has set up a framework for monitoring and reporting activities on the implementation of the global development agendas from the local perspective. Lastly, it seeks to enhance political participation and shared ownership across the network.

Therefore, the localization of global agendas constitutes the conceptual lynchpin of the strategy of the organization that guarantees a close interrelation among the different working areas. The localization of global agendas embodies a social construct that proposes a local-global nexus as a "prescriptive" policy solution that addresses a simple "diagnostic" set of political problems (Rein & Schön, 1996, p. 89). The narrative comprises three fundamental claims. It asserts the impossibility of separating global development agendas on the ground at the local level, the need to integrate

them into each dimension of policy-making, and the imperative of building global solutions upon the existing wealth of local experiences and perspectives.

In a meta-organization, members (i.e. local and regional governments) freely apply for membership, share some kind of similarity, and maintain most of their autonomy (Ahrne & Brunsson, 2008, p. 3).[86] The organization's mission to represent the interests of all its members is what leads us to grasp the institutional core at the intersection between unity and diversity. Framing the global agendas as a call for localization allows the institutional core added values to be activated and the organization to be provided with a strategic, common, and overarching objective. This, in turn, unearths the fundamental relationship between UCLG and the UN. The next chapters present and disentangle this phenomenon.

## 5.2  Organizing diversity

UCLG is a membership-based organization. In 2017, membership fees accounted for 31% of the annual income distribution. Additionally, specific members provide financing for committees and working groups of the organization, while host members cover the costs of the statutory meetings that are held on a regular basis.

The membership to the organization is institutional. It is decided by the governing authority of the city or region that wishes to join the organization. The governing authority may decide to apply as an individual direct member through the payment of an annual membership fee that is calculated through a formula that takes into account the size of the population represented by the member and the rate of the country's economic development. UCLG currently counts over 1000 cities from over 90 countries as direct members. The governing authority may also decide to apply to the correspondent section. In this context, specific agreements are signed in order to provide the member with the opportunity to file a joint application to both the world organization and sections. Conversely, the membership is also open to the relevant associations of subnational governments. As such, almost every existing local government association in the world is a member of UCLG and is represented by the organization at the global level. Lastly, there is a third category of

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[86]  As one of their case studies, Ahrne and Brunsson (2008, p. 37) actually point out that the meta-organization Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions (SALAR) is, at the same time, a member of two other meta-organizations: CEMR and UCLG.

membership for local government organizations open to international associations of local governments with a specific sectoral or thematic scope, as in the case, for instance, of the International Association of Francophone Mayors (AIMF) or the Union of Ibero-American Capital Cities (UCCI).

The institutional structure of UCLG as a membership-based association implies that the size of the organization is underpinned by an equally significant degree of internal diversity. This diversity is instantiated along different lines, which, in turn, are characterized by the display of specific patterns of power relations across the membership. In so far as members are the *raison d'être* of the city network, the underlying internal power relations are the defining characteristics of the organization.

An initial clear-cut source of internal diversity stems from the consideration that UCLG represents the interests of both local and regional governments. This institutional dimension is the result of a gradual historical shift both in terms of discourse and practice. We might observe, for instance, how the political declarations adopted collectively as outcomes of the organization's triennial congresses have increasingly included, since the creation of the organization in 2004 up until now, references to the role and perspectives of regional governments.[87] The UCLG Constitution was amended in line with this in 2013 in order to establish the dedicated section we mentioned in the previous section, that is, the Forum of Regions. Interestingly, this section was initially led by the partner Organization of United Regions / Global Forum of Regional Governments and Associations of Regions (ORU Fogar), which then decided to withdraw from this role. The decision by ORU Fogar is inscribed within the complex and often competing dynamics of institutional representation and ownership in global governance. Cities and regions are, indeed, differentiated yet complementary actors across the wide range of country-specific systems of subnational governance. Regions may vary broadly in institutional and geographical terms, from territorial jurisdictions representing small populations to governing authorities of the size and population of, for instance, the Indian states or Chinese provinces. Whether in federal or unitary countries, regions are, hence, defined as the intermediate governments between the national (state or federation) and local levels. This all-encompassing definition leads UCLG to group regions, small towns, and

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87   See Doc. 27, Doc. 28, Doc. 31, Doc. 35, Doc. 39, and Doc. 66 to access the political declarations of the triennial congresses.

rural municipalities under the banner of "territories" (Doc. 42, p. 223). This focus calls for a "territorialized" approach to development (Doc. 48, p. 25), where the linkages between urban, peri-urban, and rural areas play a central role. Yet local governments continue to play a predominant role in the world organization in comparison with regional governments. Historical and contemporary considerations underpin this uneven institutional landscape and corroborate the strategic relevance of the city (and not the region) in the urban age, as we saw in the initial chapters.

A second overall source of internal diversity stems from what the organization defines as the "constituencies" from within the membership (Doc. 38, p. 7). In this context, the members of intermediary cities, local government associations, and peripheral cities gathered under the dedicated UCLG Fora presented in the previous section represent different constituencies. These categorizations are neither exhaustive nor mutually exclusive. Members may also identify themselves, for instance, as political representatives of a member pertaining to a specific section or committee.

Constituencies further intersect with an overarching grouping that lies in the institutional differentiation between national associations of local governments and individual cities. Local government associations have been described as "the infrastructure of the movement" (Meet. 4), with cities and local governments representing the most visible elements of it. Local government associations are fundamental for aggregating the various individual voices of their membership into a coherent set of policies to advocate vis-à-vis national governments. National associations, regional sections, and the world organization are closely interrelated. They can be conceptualized as the amplifying platforms that articulate into one voice the perspectives of local governments at national, regional, and global levels respectively. In this light, as one interviewee suggests, the uniqueness of national associations and regional sections' membership could constitute a world organization per se. Conversely, large cities have been informally described by one interviewee as "sexier" in comparison with other constituencies. Their resources and media resonance allow them to experiment locally and play a leading role in the global advocacy deployed by the organization.

Yet these differentiated perceptions over the centrality of specific constituencies within the network are not solely limited to the pairing of local government associations and large *global* cities, to use the specific notion

widely employed in urban studies. Other constituencies aim to modify the dominant power relations within the network. The intermediary cities, defined by UCLG as settlements with a population ranging between 50,000 and one million people and that play a central intermediary role within a territorial system, are a case in point. As such, the election of Mohamed Boudra, mayor of Al Hoceima, a city of approximately 56,000 inhabitants in Northern Morocco, to President of UCLG in 2019 is celebrated by Mohamed Sefiani, Mayor of Chefchaouen (Morocco) and President of the UCLG Forum of Intermediary Cities, as the rightful recognition of this constituency within the world organization: "[i]t's time to see a mayor of an Intermediaty [*sic*] City elected President of UCLG" (Doc. 22).

This leads us to identify a third source of internal diversity. As we noticed above, sections present varying degrees of institutionalization that are closely related to heterogeneous geographical and historical processes. This variegated landscape corroborates the actual scope of the term 'global' we referred to beforehand, as a scale beyond the international that does not presuppose an equal distribution across countries or regions.

The European section, the Council of European Municipalities and Regions (CEMR), for instance, was established in the 1950s, over half a century before the creation of the world organization, and brings together more than 130,000 municipalities and regions. Conversely, the sections North America and the Forum of Regions do not have dedicated structures and their secretariats are hosted by the FCM and UCLG World Secretariat respectively. Latin America is not currently represented by a unique section, but by a dialogue mechanism, the Coordination of Local Authorities of Latin America (CORDIAL), which groups together the main city networks of the region.[88]

A closer look within rather than across sections confirms the same disparate reality. Sections like UCLG North America and UCLG Asia-Pacific (ASPAC), for instance, do not count as key members with a significant number of cities proceeding from countries that because of their geopolitical force and urban relevance, should, in principle, play a more substantive role as is the case for the US and India respectively. By the same token, cities from countries with clear regional geopolitical and urban relevance, as is the case for Turkey and

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[88]   In this context, Metropolis stands out as a different case that yet confirms the internal diversity of the world organization as a whole. Constituted in 1985, Metropolis is a UCLG section with a global rather than regional scope, with all its members representing large cities or metropolitan areas.

the Russian Federation, play a predominant role in the correspondent sections of UCLG Middle East and West Asia (MEWA) and UCLG Eurasia in comparison with cities from other countries of the regions.

The asymmetric power relations that unfold within and across the uneven geography of the sections acquire additional significance in the context of a meta-organization where sections compete with each other in order to increase their power at the global level. In a concerted endeavor like UCLG, members never decide to *run solo* and rather cluster and *forge alliances* with other members along common characteristics. While these coalitions are to be found in all the modalities of constituency we have seen, sections play a fundamental political convening role because of the very decentralized institutional structure of the world organization.

A clear, recent example of how these power relations are materialized is provided by the election of the UCLG Presidency in 2019. As the UCLG Constitution states: "[t]he President and Co-Presidents act on behalf of the World Organization, not of a specific Section" (Doc. 34, p. 6). The constitution, in turn, stipulates that the Vice-Presidents will be nominated by the relevant sections. Nevertheless, this institutional arrangement is discursively re-defined by the relevant sections. As the current president took the baton from the 2016-2019 UCLG President Parks Tau, back then President of the South African Local Government Association (SALGA), UCLG Africa asserted in a press release that: "[w]ith the election of Mohamed Boudra, Africa is entering its second consecutive term as President of UCLG for the period 2019-2022" (Doc. 25, p. 2). The consecutive elections of Parks Tau and Mohamed Boudra confirm the growing global importance of the African continent and its urban dimension, as well as the successful mobilization of its membership within the inter-municipal organization.

Yet this official statement also outlines the complex geography of power relations that sustain the world organization. The re-interpretation of the institutional role of the presidency enshrined in the constitution confirms the power struggle among sections and within the world organization. As the UCLG World Secretariat is defined as "the executive arm of the Organization" (Doc. 52, p. 23), this means that power relations are also inscribed in the relations between the world secretariat and the sections, as well as the rest of constituencies of the network. As an interviewee observes, "UCLG as world

organization and UCLG as world secretariat" are often implicitly, yet erroneously, understood as a single notion.

Lastly, a fourth source of internal diversity cuts across the previous main forms of diversity we have identified. The fact that, as the UCLG Constitution stipulates, the organization has "no affiliation to any political party" (Doc. 34, p. 2) implies that, in principle, the organization accommodates virtually any political ideology embraced by a local or regional government representative that is actively participating in the work of the network. In other words, UCLG is a global policy organization constituted by members that embody the broad diversity of political ideologies that exist along a continuum that ranges from liberal-democratic states to authoritarian regimes. To be clear, this affirmation relies on the wide initial definition of ideology by Connolly (2017, p. 2) as "an integrated set of beliefs about the social and political environment", rather than the equally valid, but narrower critical conceptualization of Thompson (1984, p. 4) as "meaning ... [that] serves to sustain relations of domination". In this sense, it might even be argued that UCLG encompasses the wide global range of political rationalities that underpin local governance, understanding political rationality as the "discursive matrices within which the activity of government is articulated" (Miller & Rose, 2008, p. 30).

The intersection of the multiple sources of internal diversity, as well as the underlying power relations, outline a city network that presents a high degree of complexity. This correlation of forces might put in jeopardy the quintessential capacity of organizations to act as *one voice*, by coordinating the interaction among their members so that they behave as one single actor vis-à-vis the surrounding environment (Ahrne & Brunsson, 2008, pp. 48-49). In other terms, diversity can be the triggering factor undermining the organizational legitimacy of UCLG. Exploring how diversity is converted into a core institutional added value is the purpose of the next section.

## 5.3  Unity in diversity as a logic of appropriateness

Constituencies do not constitute identities. These categorizations are context-dependent since political representatives often wear *double hats*.[89] In contrast, such a degree of diversity translates into a complex multiplicity of interests.

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[89] The adjective 'double' is actually a euphemism. In the global governance arena, a local leader may be associated simultaneously with different constituencies within UCLG, as well as with other organizations within the larger 'ecosystem of networks'.

Scott (2014, pp. 150-151) argues that interests, identity, and ideas are the three central elements of institutionalization, yet warns that they are always entwined in empirical terms. In a different yet converging argument, political action cannot be explained exclusively in terms of a logic of appropriateness or logic of consequences since actors concomitantly "calculate consequences and follow rules" (March & Olsen, 1998, p. 952). The difficulty of isolating explanatory logics in political action derives from the fluid nature of legitimacy. At its most basic level, individual legitimacy beliefs can easily shift, as is the case when, for instance, short-term utilitarian logics are overturned by identity attachments (Dellmuth, 2018, p. 38). Within the context of the expansion of soft power and non-binding norms in global governance, the logic of appropriateness dovetails with mechanisms of persuasion, and dimensions of normative and cognitive legitimacy, in contrast with a focus on the logic of consequences, mechanisms of coercion, and regulative legitimacy.

UCLG copes with the potential *ungovernability* that derives from the interest-based logic of consequences within an *organization fraught with diversity* by actively pursuing an identity-based logic of appropriateness. To be clear, the logic of consequences and logic of appropriateness drive the behavior of UCLG members, and instantiations of both can be singled out empirically. Arguably, however, the logic of appropriateness plays an overriding role. This logic, as we will see in the next chapters, is constantly reproduced by routinized actions and the circulation of a core set of ideas that are sustained by an intersubjective consensus that spans the whole membership of the city network. This intersubjective consensus is actualized by the frame of the localization of the global agendas. The explanatory combination of identity- and idea-based modalities of institutionalization within the logic of appropriateness should not be surprising. After all, as Scott (2014, p. 65) notices, the theorization of rules outlined by March and Olsen (1989) includes both normative and cultural-cognitive elements.

In a nutshell, the logic of appropriateness is geared towards the creation of an organizational *local order* that can be synthesized as: *harnessing diversity, strengthening unity*. The city network, as an institution, discursively transforms the diversity of its membership and reduces its complexity. Aspects of the social experience need to be selectively appraised in order to facilitate communication and exchange among members over complex policy issues. Yet

clarity, as we will see, requires, at the same time, the counter-effect of ambivalence.

Local and regional leaders participating for the first time in a meeting organized by the network of UCLG may be reluctant to understand the usefulness of these transnational endeavors. "I was a bit skeptical" an interviewee confessed me. A mayor attending this type of meetings brings along "a textbook", that is, a concrete list of problems that the represented municipality is experiencing. Yet "problems are quite similar" and are shared by the rest of the municipalities. As Begoña Villacís, Deputy Mayor of Madrid, explains in the context of the immediate municipal response to COVID-19 and of crises that "do not come with an instruction manual": "I want to be helped and I want to help" (Meet. 3). The notion of facing similar problems and exchange "among peers" (Doc. 43, p. 30) is not solely the enabling condition for cognitive learning. It further lays the common ground for joining forces for common solutions. As an interviewee explains, "when you table a problem … and put it in the frontline of the political agenda … many municipalities that often shut up [engage and] participation starts". In other terms, UCLG members are keen to renounce their *local particularisms*. Yet this is possible only once specific 'institutional guarantees' are provided. Members' behavior relies on fundamental mutual expectations that need to be routinely re-instantiated by means of coordination and coherence. This implies the need to tackle the threat stemming from the multitudinous co-existence of members' self-interests. This coordinative effort must be subsumed by a higher order of logic. The diversity of local particularisms needs to be mobilized within the call for *global unity*.

The overarching logic of unity is a routinized institutional practice that underpins the everyday life of the organization, from regular exchanges and working relations among practitioners in the multifold secretariats involved in the city network to outstanding moments of interaction among leading political figures. Yet nowhere is the overarching logic of unity clearer than when it is visibly under pressure. The two last elections of the President of UCLG are a clear example of that. The electoral process is clearly geared towards consolidating the institution on the grounds of procedure-based legitimacy. The Presidency of UCLG is elected "by the World Council every three years on the basis of a simple majority to ensure they have a full democratic mandate

conferred to them by local elected officials from across the world" (Doc. 52, p. 20).

Two candidates ran for the post of President at the 2016 UCLG World Congress in Bogotá (Colombia): Ilsur Metshin and Parks Tau, who ultimately won the election. Both candidates received significant support, in line with the coalitions of members that tend to emerge in collective endeavors such as UCLG, as discussed beforehand. The electoral contest, however, was not limited to the merits of each candidate and their working proposals. In contrast, two diverging opinions across the membership arose through a heated debate on the eligibility and definition of voting rights. The call to maintain the unity of the organization ultimately put an end to the discussion over the validity of the rules of procedures collectively adopted. As an interviewee vividly reminisced about the election day: "I put my hand on my heart, we were scared. In a moment I told myself: 'UCLG might get split'. I saw two groups and happily we stayed united". As the then Secretary General of UCLG, Josep Roig, noticed, the elections proved to be "an exciting exercise of democracy" of a "vibrant and alive network whose members care about and are deeply committed to [it]" (Doc. 40).

The 2019 UCLG World Congress in Durban (South Africa) saw a different materialization of the institutional values of unity and diversity. The election of Mohamed Boudra unfolded in an unprecedented context due to the number of candidatures received. Among the other three candidates to the post of President, Ada Colau, Mayor of Barcelona, decided to withdraw her candidature calling for the unity and strength of the organization, Fernando Medina, Mayor of Lisbon, did not reach the second round of the voting process, and Ilsur Metshin did not engage in the second round as a last-minute agreement on a "presidential ticket" had been reached among the candidates (Doc. 61, p. 7). Along with the election of the co-presidents and treasurers, it was decided to enlarge the Presidency of UCLG by establishing "special portfolios" (Doc. 68). These positions were appointed to the three candidates introduced above, with Ada Colau, as special envoy to the UN, Fernando Medina, as special envoy for local development, and Ilsur Metshin, as Chairperson of the United Nations Advisory Committee for Local Authorities (UNACLA), the advisory body that aims to strengthen the dialogue of UN-Habitat, the UN agency in charge of cities, with local and regional

governments.[90] The enlargement in terms of size and complexity of the Presidency of UCLG at this congress and, indeed, gradually since its creation in 2004 signals the increasing political interest among the members in leading the organization and the consequent 'diplomatic' need to accommodate and balance as many interests as possible. This is the logic beneath the acclamation of a "strong, cohesive and diverse leadership" (Doc. 68), as well as the celebration that "for the first time in the history of the Organization, there had been an agreement on a 'collegiate presidency'" (Doc. 77, p. 63). As Mohamed Boudra summarizes, the congress in Durban can be called "the congress of the union, of the African union … and of all the sections" (Doc. 23). Interests, along the complex power geography outlined by the nodes of the network, are intentionally subsumed by a logic of unity and diversity.

The qualitative shift between the two electoral processes exemplifies the consolidation of a rule-based logic. Even in a context with ostensibly fiercer competition, the 2019 elections did not engage substantively in procedural terms. By evoking the 2016 elections, members identified in the rejection of procedural contestations the most appropriate rule for the situation at hand, and embraced it. Yet, as discussed earlier, "reasoning by analogy" (March & Olsen, 2011, p. 483) is far from totalizing, nor does it obliterate agency. The enlargement and reconfiguration of the presidential team, thus accommodating the logic of consequential utilitarianism of the candidates running for the Presidency of UCLG, has been interpreted as a necessary action to guarantee and re-instantiate the overarching logic of 'unity in diversity', which constitutes a fundamental source of legitimacy for the organization. In turn, the 2019 elections provide an additional rule for the complex repertoire of interpretive and behavioral codes that underpin the organization.

As we saw with the dialogue mechanism established in Latin America, the institutional commitment to unity applies on both the global and regional scale. The statement by Mohamed Boudra helps us understand how the nature of both the challenge and solution within the commitment to unity present a high degree of parallelism between the world organization and the African region. The commitment to unity in diversity is a trans-scalar endeavor. As an interviewee ponders, the creation of a global "united voice" in the 2000s could be pictured "in oversimplified terms", as the "merger of the Anglophone and

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[90] Currently in a process of revitalization, "UNACLA is the only representational mechanism approved by a UN resolution to facilitate the engagement of local and regional governments with the UN System" (Doc. 53, p. 2).

Francophone", in reference to the historical international legacy of the institutional work developed by IULA and UTO respectively. The reference to the 'African union', pronounced in South Africa by a Moroccan mayor taking the global-scale baton from a South African outgoing president, is a legitimating (celebratory) gesture precisely towards the historical process of unification of the African municipal movement, which has experienced firsthand the consequences of this dichotomy in terms of colonial legacy. Among several efforts geared towards unification, a UCLG Pan African Electoral Assembly, for example, took place in Abuja (Nigeria) in 2010 under the auspices of the world organization. The assembly agreed on the procedures for the designation of the members of the bodies and elected a new leadership for the African section of the world organization. In other terms, the regional scale reproduced the same modality of procedure-based legitimation we have observed on the global scale.

Harnessing diversity as the inseparable other side of the coin in terms of strengthening unity is not only a matter of political leadership. Constituencies are institutionally prioritized as key criteria that guide the distribution of resources within the organization. This could materialize through the allocation of a meeting slot or speaking role to a specific constituency or representative within the tight program of a global gathering where the participants' requests often exceed the actual capacity to accommodate the requests in their entirety. The triennial congresses of the organization, referred to as the World Summit of Local and Regional Leaders, expand this notion by increasingly incorporating the richness of this diversity in the design of the program for each gathering. Importantly, the idea of diversity does not refer solely to the membership, but further includes the partners of the organization. In the 2019 congress of Durban, civil society partners led a specific segment of the program – called Town Hall track – and produced policy recommendations that were included as political outcomes of the event. This opening has been discursively presented as "co-creation" (Doc. 60, p. 2), both in terms of the diverse contributions to the congress program and definition of the organization's work, as well as to the need to promote participatory and multi-stakeholder engagements in urban and territorial governance.

Managing the internal diversity of the membership and even opening up to 'accommodate' the external diversity of the partnerships can only be possible by repeatedly re-instantiating the common and unifying identity of the local

government members. Brütsch (2012, p. 309) asserts that city networks tend to emerge firstly around common values rather than common interests. This overturns one of the central claims of the international relations strand of the English School (e.g. Bull, 2012) whereby the members of the international society of states are more likely to share common interests rather than common values (Brütsch, 2012, p. 309). Indeed, UCLG confirms the primacy of common values over common interests. Yet this is contingent on a rule-based institutionalization that guarantees that fundamental mutual expectations over members' behavior, either individually, as constituencies, or coalitions, are met. This is what cements the organization as a "network of networks" (Doc. 32, p. 17).

Not only is the logic of appropriateness in line with the overall evolution of the global governance arena, it is, further, particularly relevant for a global policy network such as UCLG and its need to cope with a structural limitation that is at the same time a catalyst for the organization. As we have outlined earlier, the lack of formal 'inter-state' recognition of cities has led local governments to harness civil society mechanisms in order to enhance their profile internationally within intergovernmental processes. This is the case, in legal terms, for UCLG, which is not recognized by international public law as an international intergovernmental organization and, in contrast, is regulated by Spanish private law (Salomón & Sánchez Cano, 2008, p. 144).[91] Not surprisingly, UCLG mobilizes standards of appropriateness that are a fundamental resource of the transnational advocacy networks in which NGOs often play an active role. This implies that a logic of appropriateness is central to UCLG both in terms of its internal institutionalization and external advocacy vis-à-vis the intergovernmental institutional architecture. As we will see, UCLG is a platform that amplifies the legitimacy of the identity of its members. Emphasizing the very discursive elements that allow UCLG to consolidate as a *united organization* is a key element in the frame of the localization of global agendas.

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[91] The headquarters of the world organization is in Barcelona (Spain).

# 6 Localization of global agendas

## 6.1 Localization as a political and collaborative project

The unity of the organization and the identity of its members cannot be fully harnessed if they are not assembled with a dedicated purpose. This drive is provided by the framing of a political opportunity structure. The frame has been named by the very object of study, UCLG, as 'localization'. Hence, it is both an object of reality socially constructed by the actors being studied and an interpretive framework deployed by the researcher to grasp social reality. The political opportunity structure is constituted by the UN global agendas and, in particular, the 2030 Agenda. The framing of the 2030 Agenda is succinctly illuminated in the political declaration of the last UCLG congress: "[m]aking this global agenda our own is what we understand by *localization*" (Doc. 66, p. 3, emphasis in the original). Jan van Zanen, Co-President of UCLG, Mayor of The Hague, and President of the Association of Netherlands Municipalities (VNG), provides an exemplary starting point from which to disentangle the construction of the localization frame. During the Local and Regional Governments' Day organized during the HLPF 2020 under the title "Accelerating transformation from the ground-up in a post-Covid era", he called local and regional governments to play a fundamental role in order to "re-build our societies together with our communities and to transform the current context into a world of international cooperation and solidarity with the SDGs as common language, as a framework, you could say" (Meet. 8).

The notion of the localization of global agendas is not exclusively mobilized by local governments, but also by actors pursuing a territorialized approach to development and sustainability. In scholarly terms, the concept of localization has often been associated with the debate about globalization to differentiate the former from processes with a (locally) delimited spatial scope (Held et al., 2003, p. 68). An important reference is provided by Hines (2003, p. 2) and his call for economic localization as an alternative path to reverse the profit maximization drive of globalization and its adverse effects. In this sense, scholars have underlined how the SDGs may legitimize the neoliberal roots of the challenges they aim to address, as shown, for instance, by the shift from 'traditional' Official Development Aid (ODA) into a less accountable development finance architecture as a result of the increased involvement of

the private sector (Mawdsley, 2018, p. 194). In this sense, understanding the SDGs as a common framework is a shared notion in the development arena, including the growing contribution of corporate actors.

Conversely, the localization of global goals predates the adoption of the SDGs in 2015. Yet the institutional efforts carried out by UCLG to increase the role of local governments in the achievement of the goals adopted in 2000 has revolved only partially around the notion of the 'localization of the MDGs'.[92] The localization of the MDGs is built, in turn, on the widely acknowledged experience of over 6,000 Local Agenda 21 initiatives, which translated the outcome of the 1992 UN Conference on Environment and Development in Rio de Janeiro to the local level. Nonetheless, the localization of the MDGs was mainly understood as a technical endeavor within the multilateral institutional architecture. It revolved around the "strategic and practical role" local governments were called upon to play within the "disaggregation of nationally adjusted global goals" at the subnational level (Doc. 89, pp. 6, 11). The frame of the localization of the SDGs by UCLG marks a departure from that. As an interviewee eloquently summarized it, the 2030 Agenda is "after all a political project" in that it enables a different narrative to be generated. The VLRs are an ideal, recent example to illuminate this phenomenon.

Since 2016, the HLPF has asked member states to submit their Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs) to review the state of implementation of the SDGs. Even without an official mechanism within the UN institutional architecture, local governments have decided to develop their own reporting systems to assess the achievement of the SDGs in their territories. VLRs have been developed by large metropolises such as Los Angeles or Taipei but also by smaller cities such as Mannheim (Germany) or Santana de Parnaíba (Brazil).[93] Following the pioneering VLRs by New York City and three Japanese municipalities – Kitakyushu, Shimokawa, and Toyama – in 2018, an increasing number of subnational governments have followed and embarked on this effort. The VLRs are understood as "more than monitoring mechanisms", as "political tools" to align local policy-making and promote community engagement (Meet. 7). As Francisco Resnicoff, Undersecretary of International and Institutional Relations of Buenos Aires, highlights, the process of

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[92]  See, for instance, Eslava (2015, pp. 56-61) for an account of the meeting at the UN Headquarters between the then UN Secretary-General, Kofi Annan, and a mayoral delegation organized by UCLG on the occasion of the Millennium+5 Summit in 2005.

[93]  See Ortiz-Moya et al. (2020) and Doc. 85 for a detailed overview of several VLR initiatives.

localization of the SDGs is even more important than its result, stressing how the complex mission of conveying the importance of incorporating this framework both within the local government and beyond is inherently "political, because it involves creating a narrative" (Meet. 7). This effort, at the same time, strives to change the power relations in the other tiers of governance. The VLRs complement the ongoing advocacy by local government associations to include local achievements in the VNRs and emphasize the role of local governments within national commitments. They further provide an additional institutional resource to make cities' efforts visible, raise their perspectives on the global arena, and "change the conversation" (Meet. 7).

Therefore, the discursive construction of the VLRs as "part and parcel of the localization movement" (Meet. 7) embodies a political rationality that is diametrically opposed to the 'traditional' account of local government as the local technical implementation of inter-state agreements and national ownership. It epitomizes a growing 'sense of self-worth' among cities and local governments in terms of their political role in global issues. As an interviewee explains, understanding the local relevance of the 2030 Agenda is, first of all, a "pedagogical effort", since "the firsts [*sic*] that must understand it is ourselves". This pedagogical effort implies simultaneously uncovering and orchestrating the political agency of cities in the global urban era. An underlying relational ontology of the city as a node in a wider city network sustains this account. In other terms, an important source of legitimacy for cities stems from the consideration that they step into the global arena through collaborative configurations rather than individual engagement. In this context lies the fundamental legitimating role of UCLG as a platform that promotes, accommodates, and organizes this networked orchestration. This legitimating power must, of course, be continuously (re)validated by the organization's members and partners.

For instance, among the frontrunner cities of 2018 identified above, the city of New York launched the VLR Declaration during the 2019 UN General Assembly in order to promote the localization of the SDGs through this reporting mechanism. Penny Abeywardena, Commissioner for International Affairs of New York City, explained how the creation of the VLR stemmed from the entrepreneurship of "showcasing American leadership on the SDGs" (Meet. 7). The entrepreneurship of New York City involved, of course, several partnerships, in line with the networked reality underlying global governance

that we have observed above. Nonetheless, this is also an expression of the political ambition and resources of what could be defined a *global 'free riding' city*. In line with what we have learned before, global cities present unique characteristics that allow them to gain visibility in the international arena by selectively joining or detaching from collaborative endeavors and relying on their individual positioning. In the case of New York and its legitimating status as 'first mover', for example, the VLR conceptual development was built also on exchanges with high-level officials from multilateral institutions, taking "advantage of hosting the largest diplomatic corps and the UN" (Meet. 7).

Nonetheless, as one interviewee vividly summarizes, entrepreneurial global cities "can shine once, but don't have the legitimacy". In 2020, UCLG and UN-Habitat decided to scale up the mechanism globally by jointly developing a series of guidelines and normative resources to support subnational governments and promote their engagement in the VLR process. The institutionalized collaborative impetus and long-time broadly-recognized efforts to construct and promote the wider notion of the localization of global agendas provided a powerful platform for policy diffusion. This degree of mobilization is, of course, for the benefit of all cities. Outstanding as a reference in a specific policy field is a political goal that encompasses all cities, large and small, in the global networking arena (Martinez, 2020, p. 9). The fact that the representative of New York City decided to actively participate in the institutional launch of these guidelines is testimony to the organizational legitimacy of the promoters. The Guidelines for VLRs, as well as other related initiatives such as the establishment of a UCLG Community of Practice on VLRs, provide evidence of the continuous institutional efforts to be carried out in order to uphold this perception of legitimacy.

Yet the VLRs are just a part of the overarching strategy for the localization of global agendas. They allow the underlying political agency that the 'common language of the SDGs' offers to local governments to be understood. Specific institutionally-embedded discursive elements need to be produced and reproduced in order to sustain the frame as a social construction. We now turn our attention to them.

## 6.2  Identity and organization as sources of legitimacy

As argued earlier, the common and unifying identity of the local government members constitutes the 'discursive glue' of the organization. It allows the diversity of interests harbored by a global meta-organization like UCLG to be encompassed. Of course, it might be argued that the members' identification with the (overlapping) constituencies and alliances populating the network could also put the unity and governance of the organization in peril. Yet the discursive character of the construction of identity provides a sound, although not infallible, control mechanism. This is where, as formerly indicated, the normative and cultural-cognitive elements of institutionalization show their empirical amalgamation.

To be more precise, identity-based institutionalization unfolds through the routinized circulation of specific cognitive frameworks. In other terms, the idea-based institutionalization operationalizes and is subsumed under the logic of appropriateness of unity in diversity. There are two broad sets of ideas that constitute the fundamental source of legitimacy for the membership of UCLG. They are at the core of the sense of identity of the local government members and relate to their governmental nature and relationship with the citizenship respectively.

Before proceeding to present these two sets of ideas, a caveat is needed. Cultural-cognitive institutionalization emphasizes the construction of interpretive frameworks of social reality revolving around 'taken-for-granted' assumptions. Indeed, ideas as engines of institutionalization serve an ideological purpose, in the narrow understanding of meanings as devices at the service of power we mentioned earlier (Scott, 2014, p. 150). After presenting the overall 'internal' geography of power relations within the network in the previous chapter, we now direct our attention to these cognitive frameworks in order to grasp the 'external' relationship between UCLG and its surrounding environment. These ideational elements are themselves the result of a process of social construction within the network and encompass elements which represent the common identity of the organization's members. Rather than honing in on the details of the process of identity construction, for what is ultimately a wide social consensus revolving around a 'minimum agreement', we focus on the defining elements and consequences of this shared basic self-understanding, since this is the analytical cornerstone by which to appreciate

how the identity of the membership is firstly constructed and then mobilized so as to be a fundamental source of legitimacy.

The first common characteristic of local and regional governments is that they are part of the governmental system of almost all UN member states.[94] Therefore, as previously mentioned, UCLG members share a concern about the erroneous conflation at the international level with non-state actors, in particular civil society organizations. The correspondence between local government and local democracy is yet more nuanced. Along with the appointment of local officials in several countries, "some sort of local elections are held in 149 of the 193 UN Member States" (Doc. 06, p. 8). Two different but potentially entwined sources of procedural legitimacy arise: as a "sphere of the state" (Doc. 06, p. 8) and as local democracy. These two interpretations emanate from within the political continuum, ranging from liberal-democratic states to authoritarian regimes, that cuts across the political rationalities of the UCLG membership. These intertwined sources of legitimacy further embody the ambivalent yet productive conceptualization of local governments as bureaucratic and democratic entities that we previously touched upon.

The second common characteristic that constitutes the unifying identity glue for the UCLG membership is the "governance of proximity" (Doc. 66, p. 3). The relevance of the local level within the implementation of the SDGs that we learned about in the second chapter emanates from the direct responsibilities of local and regional governments in public policy areas such as basic service provision, environmental protection, mobility, and urban and territorial planning. This identity feature is deployed though the reproduction of two discursive utterances (and its variations): local and regional governments "as the closest level of government to citizens" (Doc. 13, p. 37) and "at the frontline" for their communities (Doc. 78, p. 10). The first discursive element pairs the representativeness and responsiveness of localities with their nimbleness in terms of pragmatism and innovation. The second discursive element focuses on the local impact of trans-boundary phenomena and is particularly attuned to the logic of disaster risk response, crisis management, and resilience, as we will see within the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. As an interviewee shared, "[i]f there is a flood, first of all people go to meet the mayor and not the [national] president". The governance of proximity

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[94] Except for Nauru, Saint Kitts and Nevis, Saint Lucia, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, and Singapore.

emphasizes the vantage point of governance institutions with "experience on the ground" (Doc. 06, p. 8). Building on the historical normative justification for local self-government by Mill (1861/1962), this account stresses how local governments, despite all their defects, allow citizens to identify the accountable decision-makers in the elusive context of contemporary governance (John, 2001, p. 16). On the opposite end of the input-output continuum, the governance of proximity confers legitimacy due to the pragmatic basis of its effectiveness.

This, however, should not be understood solely as a city deploying techno-managerial 'policy solutions' within an increasingly depoliticized context (Swyngedouw, 2009, p. 611). The city may also constitute the local space of 'political discussion' over values and interests (Clarke, 2012, p. 39). In this sense, the governance of proximity further provides a trans-scalar interpretation of the local-global nexus. It aims to scale up the context-based perspectives and experiences of local communities concerning the challenges and opportunities brought about by global policy-making and trans-boundary phenomena affecting their daily lives. Furthermore, as formally organized political institutions, subnational governments play a fundamental role on behalf of their local communities. Within their specific jurisdictional authority, they are bearers of "territorial rights" (Miller & Moore, 2016, Introduction). Yet the clear dominance of supra-local jurisdictional frameworks brings into focus the characterization of political responsibility at the local level to call for a paradigmatic shift. It asserts that local leaders are not meant solely to think about and act on their local communities, but also to build on and scale up the vision of their local communities collectively in an interconnected world. The ambivalent constitution of localities as bureaucratic and democratic entities is, once again, at play. The local government is concomitantly a component of the state apparatus "but also a democratic representative of the urban *public* sphere" (Nijman, 2016, p. 224, emphasis in the original).

These two overall characterizations are fundamental elements in the discursive construction of the frame of the localization of global agendas. The proximity to communities, governmental nature, and/or democratic mandate constitute the 'universal' identity of the UCLG membership. Concurrently, they provide the repertoire of arguments that feed the linkage between the diagnosis of trans-boundary political problems and the prescription of local policy solutions contributing to both global and local goals. As noticed above,

however, the local contribution to the global agendas has an inherent political rather than technical dimension: it aims at "ensuring that local experiences are the ones that define the content of the agendas" (Doc. 69, p. 39). Within this discursive construction, the UCLG membership 'offers' its identity-based legitimacy to the multilateral system and its global agendas.

Yet, as observed earlier, there is a parallel source of legitimacy that does not involve the UCLG members but the organization as a whole. If the 'internal impact' of the logic of appropriateness of unity in diversity is appreciated by the members of the organization by means of a process of identity construction, it is now possible to apprehend the 'external impact' of the logic of appropriateness, as partners validate UCLG as the institutionalization of a 'single, united voice'. Within a complex global governance landscape characterized by the increasing emergence of hybrid configurations, multilateral institutions find, in UCLG, 'political, public, and territorial organizations' that are "ready to contribute" (Doc. 05, p. 32). The networked orchestration accommodated by the organization allows the international community to access a diversity of local experiences and commitments in a "representative, responsive, and effective way" (Doc. 06, p. 9). The responsiveness and effectiveness rely on the legibility of both the organization and its membership to their partners, hence the importance of a 'common language' such as the SDGs. The repertoire of identity-based arguments stemming from the membership of UCLG feeds the local-global nexus facilitated by the organization by means of the linkage between the diagnosis of political problems and the prescriptive commitment to policy solutions. As Jacqueline Moustache-Belle, Former Mayor of Victoria (Seychelles) and Former Co-President of UCLG, stated while addressing the second session of the Preparatory Committee of the Habitat III Conference in 2015 in Nairobi (Kenya): "our delegation does not come here to make statements about our local political situations. We come here to find solutions, with you, for a sustainable future" (Doc. 06, p. 9). Therefore, the adoption of rule-based behavior by the UCLG members stems from a sense of membership in a specific political community with clear organizational benefits, both in internal and external terms.

As the connection between the internal and external dimensions of the logic of appropriateness is clear, we now focus increasingly on the external domain and the relationship between UCLG and its multilateral partners. As

we will see, unity in diversity and the localization of the global agendas are mutually reinforcing elements of a pairing institutional process.

## 6.3 Multilateralism as DNA

The analysis of the relationship between UCLG and its partners provides an additional layer of diversity to the institutional environment of the organization. In broad terms, the rubric of partner encompasses other local and regional government networks, multilateral institutions, national agencies, and civil society organizations. These partnerships vary widely in terms of historical background, degree of synergy, and resource allocation. The creation of the GTF offers a paradigmatic example of partnership, which further unpacks the nuts and bolts of the localization of global agendas.

Established in 2013, the GTF is a coordinating mechanism facilitated by UCLG that brings together the major international networks of local and regional governments. The mechanism includes over 20 members among thematic and generalist networks with a global or regional scope, such as C40, AIMF, Arab Towns Organization (ATO), ICLEI, ORU Fogar, or UCCI, including both the world organization and sections of UCLG. The mechanism further includes over 20 partners from among UN institutions, hybrid networks, civil society organizations, and corporations such as Shack/Slum Dwellers International (SDI), Suez, United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), or World Urban Campaign. The very creation of the GTF is seen as a historical achievement for the municipal movement, as local and regional governments became the only UN non-state stakeholder equipped with a single mechanism to develop informed inputs and jointly contribute to all major UN policy processes. The institutional recognition of the "organized constituency of local and regional governments" (Doc. 60, p. 12) is leveraged as a legitimacy claim to shift from present ad hoc consultation processes to structured consultation, encapsulated through the metaphorical call for a "seat at the global table" of international policy-making (Doc. 57, p. 13).

Within the changing landscape of the ecosystem of networks introduced beforehand, the GTF materializes the strategic decision by UCLG to adopt a collaborative rather than competitive approach towards other city networks. The mechanism embodies the decision to transcend the institutional interests of UCLG to the benefit of the broader constituency gathered within the

coordinating mechanism. From a wider perspective, for UCLG, it is both a source of organizational legitimacy and a target of substantial institutional resources. The propagation of the notion of a 'network of networks' from the institutional scale to the constituency scale raises the profile of UCLG as a 'steering network', which, nonetheless, does not preclude other city networks from benefitting from the specific legitimating status that derives from leading roles. The mechanism is a fundamental piece of the discursive construction of the organized constituency of local and regional governments, which further relies on the historical legitimation conferred by the 'century-old municipal movement' of which UCLG is the inheritor. In turn, the activities developed across the working areas of the organization also aim to contribute to this 'extra-institutional objective'.

For instance, the last editions of the triennial flagship report – the Global Observatory on Local Democracy and Decentralization (GOLD) – as well as the Local and Regional Governments' Report to the HLPF published annually since 2017 are developed by the UCLG research team, but aim to contribute to the broader constituency and include specific inputs from networks involved in the coordination mechanism.[95] Likewise, the organization's learning team has embarked on producing a series of training modules on the localization of the SDGs, which are produced by UCLG, as facilitator of the GTF, in partnership with UN-Habitat, UNDP, and Barcelona Provincial Council.[96] By the same token, the "sister organization" ICLEI (Doc. 50, p. 45), for example, has been the focal point of the Local Governments and Municipal Authorities (LGMA) Constituency to the UNFCCC since 1995. ICLEI's representative role among local and regional government networks is now strengthened as the LGMA works "on behalf" of the GTF in the climate agenda[97] (Doc. 21). In line with this, other members of the GTF have been invited to undertake a similar role in other global policy areas. Entwined power relations of domination and empowerment unfold in a coordinative mechanism where the members validate the legitimacy of the most active members, while simultaneously raising the overall legitimacy of the constituency vis-à-vis their partners. As an interviewee summarized, it is a "positive competition".

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[95] See Doc. 09, Doc. 12, Doc. 14, Doc. 17, Doc. 29, Doc. 30, Doc. 33, Doc. 42, and Doc. 56 to access the whole series of cited research reports.
[96] See Doc. 86, Doc. 87, and Doc. 88 to access the cited learning tools.
[97] ICLEI also undertakes a similar leading role in the United Nations Convention on Biodiversity (CBD) and the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD).

The establishment and consolidation of the GTF has strengthened a longer historical shift in the framework of the relationships between UCLG and the UN system. The higher degree of recognition and visibility of the organization within the multilateral institutional architecture is among the key achievements identified across the membership. One interviewee captures the progress by recalling visually the UN meetings where mayors had to sit in the area dedicated to "cities and NGOs". Again, the discursive glue of the membership's identity as governmental, democratic, and proximate is cognitively basic and a strategic catalyzer.

The very process of creation of UCLG is deeply tied to the UN. The call to establish a single united voice on the eve of the Habitat II Conference in Istanbul in 1996 was inscribed within an increasing connection between the forerunner networks of UCLG and UN-Habitat, at the time called the United Nations Centre for Human Settlements (Habitat). The global networks of local governments found, in the latter, their "front door" to increasing their political influence within the UN system in a multilateral context of increased openness to transnational actors, including local governments (Salomón & Sánchez Cano, 2008, p. 135). Since then, the struggle for recognition by the UN member states has been a winding road. For example, the report of the Panel of Eminent Persons on United Nations-Civil Society Relations, informally called the Cardoso Report, recommended, in 2004, that "[t]he United Nations should regard United Cities and Local Governments as an advisory body on governance matters" (Doc. 90, p. 52), yet the recommendation was not endorsed (Willetts, 2006).

The 2010s decade saw a shift in the relationship with the multilateral system. Importantly, this qualitative evolution revolved around the political opportunity structure enabled by the institutional processes related to the UN global agendas on development and sustainability adopted in 2015 and 2016. A higher degree of recognition of the local and regional government perspectives materialized into deeper engagement with UCLG at the UN top-level secretariat. In this context, the UN Secretaries-General Ban Ki-moon and António Guterres appointed, in 2012 and 2017, the UCLG Presidents Kadir Topbaş and Parks Tau as members of the High-Level Panel of Eminent Persons on the Post-2015 Development Agenda and the High-Level Independent Panel to Assess and Enhance the Effectiveness of UN-Habitat respectively. Nonetheless, in a wider sense, the overall constituency of organized networks

of local and regional governments has enhanced its political influence and impact. Notorious examples are the fundamental contribution to the successful campaign for a stand-alone urban SDG, which materialized in the adoption of SDG 11 to "[m]ake cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable" (UN, 2015d, p. 24), and the unprecedented mobilization on the occasion of the 2015 UN Climate Change Conference and the adoption of the Paris Agreement, where cities adopted climate targets more ambitious than those adopted by their national counterparts.

Yet the clearest achievement as an organized constituency has been the organization of the Second World Assembly of Local and Regional Governments in 2016. Building on the legacy of the first edition in 1996, it visibly showed the growing relevance of subnational governments in the edifice of multilateralism. More concretely, it highlighted the historical shift from the kickstarting unification process of the municipal movement in the context of a gathering ahead of the Habitat II Conference to the consolidation of a world assembly that was widely acknowledged as one of the central moments of the Habitat III Conference official program. The reference to the world assembly in the conference outcome document – the New Urban Agenda – as well as the inclusion of several recommendations presented by the city networks[98] reflected the increased intergovernmental acceptance of the contribution of local governments to sustainable urban development. As the second world assembly is acknowledged as "the most inclusive political representation mechanism of our constituency" (Doc. 10, p. 22) and, in turn, is convened by the GTF, the steering capacity of UCLG, as facilitator of the coordination mechanism, is further validated within the larger objective of building an extra-institutional global political representation of local and regional governments. The decision to institutionalize the World Assembly of Local and Regional Governments beyond the Habitat III process allows its legitimating power to be deployed and to further structure the political contribution of the constituency to global agendas.

As already stated, UN-Habitat is the most important partner of UCLG within the multilateral institutional architecture. Not surprisingly, two recent gatherings of the World Assembly of Local and Regional Governments have

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[98] Chief among them is the inclusion of the 'right to the city', a concept promoted in partnership with civil society organizations that builds theoretically on the foundational work of Lefebvre (1968/1996) and the vindication of the collective right to both inhabit and reshape the city (Harvey, 2012, p. 137).

been held within the 2018 and 2020 editions in Kuala Lumpur and Abu Dhabi of the World Urban Forum, the biennial forum on urban issues hosted by UN-Habitat. This alliance further explains the discursive positioning in favor of UN-Habitat within the UN-wide debate on the effectiveness of the agency not only as a vital instrument for the New Urban Agenda but also in terms of its "lead role in defining and monitoring the urban dimension of the SDGs" (Doc. 15, p. 1). However, the alliance between the UN-Habitat and the organized networks of local governments implies a deeper historical connection. Joan Clos, former Mayor of Barcelona (Spain), President of Metropolis, and Chairperson of UNACLA, was the first mayor allowed to address the United Nations General Assembly in 2001 (Salomón & Sánchez Cano, 2008, p. 138). Interpreted as a sign of the increasing recognition of the local government perspective, he was then appointed Executive Director of UN-Habitat in 2010. Maimunah Mohd Sharif, former Mayor of Penang Island (Malaysia) and active international representative of the GTF and its networks ICLEI, UCLG, and UCLG-ASPAC, took the baton at the helm of the UN agency in 2017. This further confirms the fundamental benefit that city networks provide to local and regional government leaders as individual political representatives in that they provide a "launch pad" for accessing the national and international policy scale (Bunnell et al., 2018, p. 1065).

Nonetheless, UCLG understands the broader UN system as its institutional inter-state counterpart. In this regard, it has varying degrees of collaboration with UN agencies and frameworks beyond UN-Habitat. This is not surprising. The self-construction of the UCLG membership and its generalist organization relies on the understanding of local governments beyond urban affairs and this, in turn, feeds into the frame of the localization of global agendas as a discursive construction that exceeds the domain of the New Urban Agenda or the urban dimension of the SDGs – not to mention the sole SDG 11. For instance, UCLG and UN Women have signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) that has focused recently on SDG 5 and particularly the expansion of women elected at the local level. Likewise, in a different policy area, UCLG, in collaboration with the Global Fund for Cities Development (FMDV), has embarked on a joint initiative with the United Nations Capital Development Fund (UNCDF) and created an International Municipal Investment Fund (IMIF) to assist localities in accessing finance and mobilizing public and private resources. Concurrently, the Sendai Framework, which has among its seven global targets the increase

in the "number of countries with national and local disaster risk reduction strategies by 2020" (UN, 2015c, p. 12), has referred to UCLG within the call to support inter-municipal cooperation and learning for disaster risk reduction. These examples suggest that, in turn, several UN offices beyond UN-Habitat understand local governments and the networking organized platform hosted by UCLG as their key partner. This explains, in the context of the global conversation on the future of multilateralism launched by the UN for its 75th anniversary in 2020, the UN Secretary-General's decision to ask UCLG to facilitate a visioning report from local and regional government perspectives.

During the global consultation held in the framework of the virtual edition of the 2020 UCLG Executive Bureau, which included among others the presence of Fabrizio Hochschild, Secretary-General's Special Adviser for the UN 75th Anniversary, Ada Colau, Mayor of Barcelona and UCLG Special Envoy to the UN, encapsulated the core element deployed by the organization in its discursive representation within the international institutional architecture: "multilateral comes up naturally for us" (Meet. 5). This, in turn, leads us back to the beginning of our chapter. International or, to be more precise, transnational cooperation and solidarity are fundamental discursive components of the municipal movement that perform like a mirror reflecting the values enshrined in the UN Charter. Not surprisingly, the UN secretariat resonates, to a certain degree, with the rationalities of the staff of policy organizations like UCLG, confirming the increasing complexity and specificity of "transnational administration" and "international civil servants" in global governance (Stone, 2017, p. 96, 97). The edifice of multilateralism finds, in UCLG, the members' legitimacy stemming from their governmental nature, democratic mandate, and proximity to their communities. It further finds, in UCLG as an organization, the legitimacy stemming from its procedural and diverse representation, legibility, and commitment. Not surprisingly, UCLG discursively connects with international law as it "mimics the language, imagery, and even structure of the United Nations and like the UN, it is involved in a wide range of issues" (Nijman, 2016, p. 230). Unlike many other city networks, UCLG is a generalist organization beyond thematic specializations (Alger, 2014). Furthermore, the diagnostic-prescriptive linkage encapsulated in the localization frame resonates with the wider political problem-policy solution diagnostic-prescriptive linkage that global agendas

are imbued with by international organizations as script devices of "rhetorical legitimation" (Halliday et al., 2010, p. 77).

Legibility and commitment constitute the overarching outputs of an effective and responsive capacity of orchestration. The logic of appropriateness of unity in diversity provides an overall representative legitimacy that needs to be iteratively validated by the members and partners. The localization of global agendas is the other dialogical component of this strategy. Both members and partners validate the effectiveness of the logic of appropriateness by appreciating how the 'increasing commitments' to unity in diversity are translated into tangible gradual improvements within the relationship in the context of the multilateral institutional architecture. In other words, reprising the recent work of Gordon (2020, p. 12) on C40, rule-based institutionalization is driven by the "causal mechanism of recognition", as members experience the organizational benefits stemming from the routinized circulation of specific cognitive frameworks about their identity and the local-global diagnostic-prescriptive frame.

To be sure, this advancement is fundamental with regard to the UN system, but encompasses other supranational actors too. Together with C40, UCLG is the co-convener of Urban 20 (U20), an initiative launched in 2017 which aims to coordinate a joint position among mayors of cities from G20 member states and formulate recommendations to national counterparts. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and UCLG have co-led, since 2017, the World Observatory on Subnational Government Finance and Investment, which analyzes the financial capacities of subnational governments in 130 countries. Even more importantly, UCLG and the European Commission (EC) signed a strategic partnership in 2015 attached to a multi-year operating grant that supports the city network's working plan. The agreement has been defined as "historic" (Doc. 37, p. 44), being the first-ever partnership with the EC on the role of local and regional government networks in international development cooperation. At the global level, the EU further recognized "UCLG as the unique generalist Organization that represents Local Authorities" (Doc. 37, p. 44).

To conclude, by strategically leveraging the organization's unity and diversity, UCLG deploys the membership's legitimacy when advocating for the recognition of local governments in global governance. Hence, the localization of global agendas is the fundamental political opportunity structure through

which UCLG seeks to influence the state-centric entrenched interests embedded in the global governance architecture, as well as to justify the organization's work with respect to its members. UCLG empowers its members by bestowing organizational legitimacy as a discursive resource. The efforts of local governments active in the pre-existing global city networks, as well as the favorable conditions within the UN when straddling the 20th and 21st centuries have clearly contributed to that. In this sense, the multilateral institutional architecture constitutes the *condition of possibility* for this empowering effect and a central component of the organization's overall mission. The fact that "UCLG is the UN of cities and territories", as Maimunah Mohd Sharif eloquently phrased it (Meet. 5), is contingent upon the very creation of the organization. However, the fact that UCLG has been 'hard wired' as the multilateralist (local) counterpart of the UN is by no means a historically determinist account. The present situation is rather the result of a chain of interpretations and events against the backdrop of the historical legacy of the municipal movement.[99]

The next chapter concludes the analysis of UCLG as the contingent association of a logic of appropriateness and the social construction of a frame. It will do this by delving into the defining elements of the empirical amalgamation of discursive constructions and institutional practices.

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[99] In other words, the evolution of the organization since its outset could have been different. This unpredictability further applies to the future of the organization.

# 7 Frame and institutionalization

## 7.1 Frame storyline and organizational legitimacy

It should be clear by now that the logic of appropriateness of unity in diversity and the frame of the localization of global agendas are two sides of the same coin. To be more precise, the frame actualizes the logic of appropriateness. The global agendas provide the fundamental context in which to capitalize on and mobilize the institutional added values of unity and diversity. The seamless correspondence between the logic of appropriateness and the frame stems from the fact that they rely on the same normative and cognitive sources of legitimacy. The identity-based institutionalization that maintains united an organization fraught with diversity corresponds with the social construction of a frame that is coping with and harnessing ambivalence. In other words, they both suggest a sense of unity. We will dedicate this section and the next one to dissecting this process, paying continuous attention to the close interlinkages between institutional and discursive elements.

The 'localization of the global agendas' is a catch-phrase[100] that serves as a vehicle for the "discursive reduction of complexity" (Hajer, 2003, p. 105). Its fundamental quality relies on a storyline that incorporates and connects changes and multiple themes, while providing a sense of coherence to the diagnostic-prescriptive narrative (Rein & Schön, 1996, p. 89). As for the taken-for-granted nature of the cultural-cognitive framework we referred to above, these discursive practices are intersubjective instruments of productive power. The storyline constitutes an "ordering device" that harnesses ambivalence through narratives that structure relations and construct shared meaning among actors with diverging accounts of social reality (Hajer & Laws, 2006, p. 252). In this sense, the concept of 'actor' includes both UCLG members and partners, as partners are part and parcel of the strategy. The localization frame is an 'advocacy weapon' that aims to exert influence over the definition of the trans-boundary political problems and policy solutions that multilateral institutions are addressing within the political opportunity structure generated by the global development agendas. Importantly, the discursive potentiality

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[100] Jones and Comfort (2020, p. 4) notice that "[i]n some ways, the phrase localising the SDGs slips easily off the tongue".

that lies in ambivalence can only be leveraged if inscribed within a coherent frame in terms of diagnostic-prescriptive narrative.[101]

As already discussed, it is not possible to separate the discourse from the practice in empirical terms, since they are both inherently institutionally-embedded. However, it is possible to single out, for the sake of analysis, three discursive properties that play a key role in the construction and reproduction of the storyline: its "experiential commensurability" (Benford & Snow, 2000, p. 621), "inter-textuality" (Hajer, 2009, p. 63), and adaptability. We will introduce them one at a time in the remainder, further expounding on the third property since adaptability plays an overarching discursive role within the frame of the localization of global agendas.

Firstly, the storyline must resonate with the everyday experiences of local and regional governments in order to ensure the members' validation and consequent mobilization for the localization frame, and, in turn, in order to persuade partners of the "political will and capacity" of the city network (Doc. 11). This is where the 'advocacy weapon' shows its deep interconnection with the other two fundamental organizational outputs of the city network: research and learning. The legibility elicited by the 'common language' of global agendas must be internalized and socialized. The research agenda of the organization strives to gather members' first-hand information and researchers' analysis on the implementation of global development agendas in order to ensure a local bottom-up complementarity with the national official inputs to the UN monitoring and reporting processes. The learning agenda has developed a toolkit to enhance local and regional governments' capacities to localize the SDGs, by raising awareness of the key issues of the sustainable development agenda, supporting the integration of the 2030 Agenda principles into urban and territorial planning, and the involvement of local and regional government associations in national and subnational reviewing. In short, the research and learning organizational outputs are fundamental in simultaneously feeding, capitalizing on, and consolidating advocacy endeavors by contributing, in discursive and practical terms, to the increasing salience of the localization frame across the membership and partners.

Secondly, power is derived by repeatedly evoking, often in subtle emotional terms, other discursive practices embedded in historical events imbued with

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[101] Neoliberalism is perhaps the most emblematic contemporary representation of the possibilities that discursive adaptability offers (Carstensen & Schmidt, 2016, p. 324).

meanings. Recalling not only the decisions but the collective efforts attached to in-person conferences are key moments of institutionalization. Reprising a previous example, the decision to host the sessions of the World Assembly of Local and Regional Governments in the largest global gatherings of UCLG and UN-Habitat (i.e. World Summit of Local and Regional Leaders and World Urban Forum respectively) allows participants to draw upon the wider momentum built around these gatherings, simultaneously conferring additional legitimacy to these gatherings and building on their legitimacy status to raise the profile of the World Assembly. Importantly, evoking individual situations can be as empowering as recalling collective endeavors. In one of the most challenging moments of the COVID-19 response, the Executive Director of UN-Habitat wished the UCLG political representatives participating in a virtual meeting in 2020 luck by stating: "I know that is very challenging down there. I was there before and I will always be with you, mayors" (Meet. 7). At first glance, this statement addresses the local-global nexus and rejects the warning call to avoid equating, in exclusive terms, the global scale with the notion of 'above' and the local scale with 'below' (cf. Smith, 2005b). Yet, in line with the previous example, it discursively constructs the level of partnership with UCLG, both in terms of the organization and membership, by building an experiential linkage between the personal previous circumstances of the UN agency's chief officer and the current individual situations of the mayors attending the virtual event.

Thirdly, adaptability means leveraging the opportunities that ambivalence encloses in political terms within the sound construction of the diagnostic-prescriptive narrative. In other words, discursive regularities emerge across statements that are tactically conceived for the particular constituencies and audiences where they will be uttered. A comparative look at the statements concerning the 2030 Agenda and the New Urban Agenda may provide a clear example of discursive adaptability within the context of the localization of global agendas. The implementation of the New Urban Agenda is reiteratively understood as a connection and means for the achievement of separate multilateral agreements, and in particular, the sustainable development, climate and resilience agendas adopted in 2015. The Habitat III outcome document is defined, for example, as a "lynchpin", "key enabler", "accelerator", "cornerstone", or "vital mechanism" with regard to the localization of the complementary global frameworks (Doc. 10, p. 39; Doc. 13, pp. 6, 33, 37; Doc.

15, p. 1; Doc. 19, p. 3; Doc. 45, p. 3; Doc. 47, p. 10; Doc. 51, p. 45; Doc. 55, p. 9; Doc. 62, p. 28). In a different light, the 2030 Agenda is identified as the "most ambitious" agenda (Doc. 13, p. 32) and instrument for the establishment of a new social contract. This allows us to observe a specific dimension within the discursive property of adaptability: transversality. The global development agendas are understood as inseparable "on the ground" at the local and regional levels (Doc. 10, p. 17). Their seamless integration in policy-making and action is presented as the central element to ensure that global solutions build on local experiences. Transversality plays a central conceptual role in the diagnostic-prescriptive linkage of the localization frame. As the global agendas have tangible, immediate effects on the urban and territorial scale, cities need to contribute to their definition and implementation: "[w]e need to address all of the universal development agendas as one if they are to be achieved" (Doc. 55, p. 7).

The adaptive nature of the localization frame does not refer solely to the UN global agendas agreed upon in 2015 and 2016. The political ambition of UCLG with regard to the multilateral institutional architecture implies having both a reactive and proactive approach. While aiming to include its inputs in the state-centric international agreements that ultimately affect the everyday lives of local communities, the organization simultaneously develops its own narrative. This is the logic that has underpinned the GOLD IV Report "Co-creating the Urban Future" in 2016 (Doc. 42), launched a few days before the formal adoption of the New Urban Agenda. Organized in line with the membership's constituencies of metropolitan areas, intermediary cities, and territories, the agenda was built with the support of scholars and through consultations with members. It emphasized the role of local and regional governments within the implementation of the New Urban Agenda, yet within the context of an agenda that is "by and for Local and Regional Governments" (Doc. 41, p. 30). The subtle discursive line between reactive and proactive positions aims to embrace global agendas while protecting local ownership vis-à-vis state-centered multilateralism. The amalgamation of globalist and localist narratives is the ultimate expression of the trans-scalar interpretation of the local-global nexus that UCLG and the ecosystem of city networks as a whole display.

In a wider sense, the organization's narrative repeatedly incorporates new elements in order to be fit for changes in the surrounding environment. The

unprecedented challenge brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic is a clear, current example that deserves a closer look. Only Target 3.3 of the SDGs (UN, 2015d, p. 18), adopted in the mid-2010s, includes a reference to epidemics, but it does not mirror the gravity and scope of the (then forthcoming) COVID-19 pandemic: "[b]y 2030, end the epidemics of AIDS, tuberculosis, malaria and neglected tropical diseases and combat hepatitis, water-borne diseases and other communicable diseases". As with many other aspects of social life, the global pandemic has shifted the priorities and concerns of the international development community as a whole. Actors that have legitimized their role within the context of global agendas are seeking to show the merits of these pre-existing frameworks in tackling the challenges of the 'new normality'. The consensus built around the definition of global agendas is a source of institutional stability that is highly demanded in the current global crisis. For the "Decalogue for the post COVID-19 era" charted by UCLG, "the SDGs remain, now more than ever, a valid reference to frame the transformational measures being implemented" (Doc. 70, p. 3). Consistently with what we observed above, transversality is further actualized within the COVID-19 context as follows: "[t]he pandemic is demonstrating that all development agendas need to be addressed as one" (Doc. 16, p. 2).[102]

It is important to remember that transversality as an expression of discursive adaptability can be traced back in every domain of global policy and is not a defining characteristic of UCLG. It is produced and reproduced along with other city networks and partners in general. The multi-stakeholder alliance that advocated for the inclusion of a stand-alone urban SDG in the 2030 Agenda is a case in point. The successful inclusion of SDG 11 stemmed simultaneously from a coherent narrative on urbanization as a concentration of problems, cluster of innovation, and polity driver of change, and a conflated yet productive conceptualization of the city as an agglomeration of proximity, hub of wider geographies, and scale for integrated action (Barnett & Bridge, 2016, pp. 1195-1197). Again, coherence and ambivalence are powerful drivers when embedded in efficient institutionalization.

As indicated earlier, UCLG deploys the political opportunity embedded in the post-COVID-19 conjunction to legitimate its positioning and claims within

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[102] Building on Palonen (2003, p. 175) and his theorization following Weber (1949, 1921/1978, 2009), we might argue that the discursive construction of the pandemic response within the localization of global agendas may be understood as "politicking", that is, a conceptualization of politics where the struggle for power is confined within pre-existing shares in the distribution of power.

global agendas in order to pursue the empowerment of its members. Nonetheless, as a true advocacy actor, it further leverages the pandemic crisis as a window of opportunity to call for normative transformations. Claudia López, Mayor of Bogotá, for instance, warned against the threat of the discourse of "go[ing] back to normality" as she pictured that the most challenging moment of the pandemic crisis brought at the same time "clear, blue sky [with] no pollution in our city", distinguishing between the conjunctural challenge of the pandemic and the "structural challenge of humanity: climate change" (Meet. 9). The discursive representation of COVID-19 as a "magnifying glass" of pre-existing inequalities and shortcomings (Meet. 4) allows us to 'raise the bar' by calling for a transformation of the current development model and a call to "bend the curve of the current unsustainable trajectory" (Doc. 16, p. 2). Therefore, in another instantiation of discursive adaptability, compelling needs that are high on the political agenda inscribed within the pandemic response are accurately blended with transformative policies that transcend the initial post-COVID-19 recovery phase. As such, the need to preserve public service provision (including health care) and reduce the digital divide, as well as to ensure adequate housing and basic services for the more vulnerable population, are complemented by calls, for instance, to adopt a global green deal or protect human rights through local democracy. As mentioned earlier, this normative transformation is always institutionally embedded in the existing frameworks of multilateralism, whereas "[t]he 2030 Agenda represents an opportunity to renew the social contract, to rethink relationships" (Doc. 66, p. 3).

In another exemplification of the mirroring of discursive constructions between UCLG and the multilateral institutional architecture, the alignment of the call to normative transformation advanced by transnational municipal networks and embedded in the achievement of global agendas is facilitated by the very nature of intergovernmental frameworks. Given that sustainability is an "intrinsically normative" idea, frameworks like the SDGs or the Paris Agreement provide normative orientations that stem from linkages among ethical, socio-political, and scientific arguments (Schmieg et al., 2018, p. 785).[103] This confirms the importance of practices of institutionalization

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[103] Schmieg et al. (2018) analyze the normative orientation underpinning the SDGs, the Paris Agreement and, interestingly, the Pope Francis' Encyclical Laudato Si', which represents the first-ever Papal encyclical addressing environmentalism. See Latour (2016) for an analysis of this encyclical.

entwined with discursive constructions that emphasize the alignment to specific normative orientations in order to uphold their legitimacy claims and, hence, calls for empowerment.

This commitment to normative transformation is aware, as this research continuously emphasizes, of the empowering discursive possibilities inscribed within an ecosystem that understands the production of narrative and its underlying "language in use" (Gee, 2014, p. 1) as the cornerstone of any political strategy. This is eloquently captured in the learning exchange taking place at the very beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic response process in March 2020 when Puvendra Akkiah, Manager of Integrated Development Plans of eThekwini Municipality (South Africa), warned about the need to shift the terminology from "social distancing" to "physical distancing and social solidarity" (Meet. 3). 'Social distancing' and 'physical distancing' are two different "terms of political discourse", in reference to "an institutionalized structure of meanings that channels political thought and action in certain directions" (Connolly, 1974, pp. 1, 2). As formerly argued, the global pandemic has fueled an anti-urban discourse that is ultimately unfounded and detrimental to the already daunting challenge of global sustainability. The shift in terminology leads to a different identification of the political problems and, hence, policy solutions within reach. This discursive construction was further institutionalized a few months later when the virtual edition of the 2020 UCLG Executive Bureau of Rome in May took place under the theme "physical distancing, social closeness" (Doc. 82).

We have noticed how the discursive properties of experiential commensurability, inter-textuality, and especially adaptability can be tactically deployed within an institutional strategy. We have further observed how exogenous events can be framed as windows of opportunity to call for normative transformations. It is important now to recall that the quality of the storyline per se cannot account for discursive empowerment in the relationship with the multilateral system. It is blended with complementary considerations of an institutional nature. The storyline further intersects with the power status that stems from the legitimacy of the organization and its members. This ultimately performs as a differentiator within the discursive space embedded in the variegated institutional landscape outlined by the international development community at large.

An example related to the specific connection between city networks and the multilateral institutional architecture around the global pandemic can illuminate this dimension. The virtual edition of the 2020 UCLG Executive Bureau included the intervention of Tedros Adhanom, Director-General of the WHO, the UN agency responsible for the management of the global pandemic, who acknowledged that the "COVID-19 pandemic highlights the crucial role of mayors and local authorities as guardians and promoters of good health and well-being" (Meet. 5). It is important to highlight that this key statement, which acknowledges the role of cities and local governments in the pandemic response and legitimizes UCLG as a representative organization in a context of shifting international priorities, emanates from a mutually beneficial recognition. During that very session, Sami Kanaan, Mayor of Geneva and President of the UCLG Working Group on Territorial Prevention and Management of Crises, further addressed the audience from the special perspective of a city that experiences "first-hand the benefits of multilateralism",[104] and called for a stronger UN that collaborates directly with cities to support "pragmatic solutions for daily life within cities" (Meet. 5). His support went yet deeper: "specially the WHO has been crucial in this crisis, but the budget of the WHO is equal as the main hospital in Geneva. They definitively need more money and recognition, and not less as some governments proposed unfortunately" (Meet. 5).

The statement by the mayor of Geneva highlights two fundamental aspects that are discursively constructed as inseparable by networked platforms like UCLG that strive to increase cities' decision-making power in the global governance institutional architecture. On the one hand, it aims to further consolidate the strategic relevance of cities in the urban age by tapping into a set of core ideas that local governments in a coordinated and routinized fashion produce, reproduce, and circulate about the key role of subnational governments in the achievement of the UN global agendas. On the other hand, it firmly takes the side of multilateral institutions in a historically shifting moment where the US government, the "hegemonic sponsor" of the post-WWII liberal world order (Ikenberry, 2018, p. 15), suspended its national funding to the WHO and criticized the organization for its "alarming lack of independence from the People's Republic of China" (Doc. 24). The transnational 'sense of self-worth' of cities, channeled and amplified by a

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[104] Geneva hosts the second largest UN center after the UN headquarters in New York City.

networking institution that is increasingly perceived as legitimate within the global governance arena, provides local government leaders with an enabling platform to deploy their political agency in terms of policy issues that have long exceeded the monopolistic notion of national sovereignty.

## 7.2  Meaning and action through routine and leadership

After understanding how UCLG discursively deploys adaptability to leverage the political value stemming from ambivalence, we now shed light on the organizational mechanisms set in motion to simultaneously harness and cope with the risks associated with ambivalence. Remarkably different discourses might contribute to the same institutional strategy as much as a discourse might serve a different institutional strategy without changing in its form. This is the empirical complexity deriving from what Foucault (1976/1978, p. 100) described as the "tactical polyvalence of discourses". As the core thesis of the dissertation argues and in direct connection with what was exposed in the previous section, rule-based institutionalization complements and synergizes with the social construction of the frame towards a 'discursive reduction of complexity'. Rules provide interpretive schemata that facilitate actions and endow them with resources, ultimately contributing to dispelling ambiguity. As the sociological institutionalists March and Olsen (1989, p. 40) – to which much of this research is theoretically indebted – sum up: "[m]eaning is constructed in the context of becoming committed to action". The institutional reproduction of the logic of appropriateness that sustains UCLG is conveyed through two central factors: routines and leadership. While singled out conceptually for analytical purposes in this section, these two facets are empirically entwined.

First of all, we need to direct our attention to the risks associated with ambivalence in discursive spaces. We will observe two instantiations: a concrete statement embedded in a specific spatial and temporal situation, and a reference to a specific set of discursive practices. The content of these examples should not be taken literally but rather as the representation of specific phenomena along the intertwined lines of discursive and institutional analysis. The crux of the matter is the fundamental indeterminacy of behavior in situations where more than one logic can be evoked, as "[r]ules … provide

parameters for action rather than dictate a specific action" (March & Olsen, 2011, p. 484).

During the global consultation on the UN75 process organized by UCLG to which we referred earlier, Amarsaykhan Saynbuyangiyn, Mayor of Ulaanbaatar (Mongolia), took the floor to present the perspective of the Eurasian region. By looking at the path towards the 100th anniversary of the UN and prior to providing specific inputs on the role of local and regional governments within the global governance architecture, the mayor expressed the hope that peace would prevail and ongoing conflicts be resolved, highlighting how "the prize of these 75 years of peace is immensely high" (Meet. 5). Yet he supported this claim by emphasizing that "the 75th anniversary of the UN is first of all the 75th anniversary of the great victory in the WWII", stressing the important role of the Soviet Union against the Nazi regime (Meet. 5). Unfortunately, as social scientists engaged in qualitative research know, the digital technology that has allowed in-person gatherings to be replaced with virtual meetings during the most challenging moments of the COVID-19 pandemic has also involved serious limitations in terms of ethnographic analysis. Nevertheless, despite the constraining conditions of the teleconferencing application, it is safe to assume that more than one attendant found part of the statement odd. In overall terms, recalling the imperative of global peace by celebrating the victory of one front over the other is unusual. It is even more unexpected in the context of a forum that is striving to renew, and hence protect, international cooperation over the dysfunctionality (and risks) associated with national sovereignties in the face of increasingly complex trans-boundary problems. In this sense, recalling that "Mongolia played also an important role in helping the Soviet army" (Meet. 5) is rather the instantiation of state-centric geopolitical increasing tensions observed beforehand.

The analysis of the transnational relevance of mayors as city government leaders illustrates a second example of the risks associated with the tactical polyvalence of discourses. In a nutshell, mayors and presidents of regional governments are the 'visible interface' of the construction of advocacy weapons we have referred to. The oft-cited debate on the difference between mayors of 'global cities' and smaller cities is also, although not exclusively, a matter of visibility. In the urban age and within the flourishing field of city networks, mayors increasingly perceive their 'appeal', as they learn the nuts and bolts of this ecosystem, as well as the opportunities that these platforms offer as a

'launch pad' for their cities and/or political careers. As individuals highly experienced in narratives, local and regional leaders can quickly adapt previous discursive constructions to different organizations and institutional strategies, particularly if properly briefed in advance by practitioners.

This is more problematic than it might seem at first if we consider the intertextual nature of ideational resources and discursive constructions. In a transnational context where actors are constantly framing the political debate so as to resonate with pre-existing norms, it "is very hard to predict beforehand which of these new ideas will carry the day" (Risse, 2013, p. 438). As already stated, the tactical polyvalence of discourses is double-edged. This is precisely where one interviewee positioned UCLG within the evolving ecosystem of city networks, noticing a risk stemming from the "philanthropies that provide concrete spaces to mayors for issues that are interesting for them". This observation refers to the case of lengthy gatherings that need to accommodate and balance a high volume of requests for active participation in order to uphold the diverse representativeness of the organization in contrast to more recent urban networking configurations that are free from the imperatives of this legitimation strategy. This consideration is, furthermore, reinforced as philanthropies tend to have larger financial resources to support the mobilization of mayors particularly from the global South, which are often perceived as fundamental elements of legitimation within the international development community. Against the risk of 'free riding', the 'institutional loyalty' of political representatives cannot rely solely on the allocation of speaking slots at multitudinous events.

As argued before, UCLG copes with the political ambivalence of the discursive space by repeatedly reproducing the logic of appropriateness. These rules simultaneously empower and constrain actors by regulating the allocation of resources (e.g. mobilizing attention, assigning responsibilities, designating time slots, earmarking funding, etc.) so as to ensure diversity while preserving unity. There are, indeed, other examples of behavior indeterminacy that neglect the institutional logic of appropriateness, with a greater or lesser degree of subtlety. Yet, for the time being, they have not acquired a critical mass. They are rather overshadowed by the tangible effects that the logic of appropriateness of unity in diversity yields for the members, including those that in specific situations evoke other behavioral logics.

Through this specific lens, the vast majority of the statements uttered by the political representatives reproduce the institutional logic of appropriateness. These discursive practices build on the taken-for-granted core ideas about the UCLG membership as governmental, democratic and proximate actors, and then present a diagnostic-prescriptive local-global narrative about political problems and policy solutions that simultaneously feeds and underpins the frame of the localization of global agendas. Importantly, in parallel with the reproduction of the source of legitimation of UCLG as membership, and therefore as organization, these statements present a remarkable degree of diversity in the way they pursue particular political interests. For instance, the COVID-19 response may be inscribed within the peacebuilding strategy of the municipality in a post-conflict country. Yet for a city in the Asian region, the pandemic may emphasize the urgency to "build back better" (Meet. 5) in light of the importance that urban resilience has in the most risk-prone region of the world. The health and social crisis has also been deployed to intensify the call for direct local access to funding bypassing "all the incumbencies and roles of the national government" (Meet. 5). The examples proceeding from the empirical analysis are countless and exceed, of course, the pandemic moment. Local governments and local government associations may present the localization of global agendas so as to highlight past, present or future activities where they have invested significant institutional resources. A discussion around local democracy can be framed in terms of proximity and economic support to citizens and the most vulnerable when uttered by a city representative of a local government in an authoritarian regime. In sum, UCLG harnesses the tactical polyvalence of discourse and productivity of power by facilitating a platform where actors with potentially diverging accounts of social reality are allowed to 'bring grist to the mill' within an overarching construction where each single discursive appropriation of the logic of appropriateness simultaneously benefits both the collective membership, its organization, and the institutional strategy it serves. To be clear, these forms of discursive legitimation are harnessed by all the actors involved, including the UCLG partners, that is, GTF members, international organizations, national bodies, civil society organizations, and the private sector.

The examples outlined above are illuminating of the empowering and constraining possibilities enabled by the "ubiquity of routines" (March &

Olsen, 1989, p. 24). Routines are rules that are repeatedly re-instantiated and that transcend the natural turnover of individual political representatives within the organization due to electoral cycles and other political-institutional dynamics. As a result of gradual, historical processes of knowledge accumulation and expertise, they are powerful mechanisms since they embody the unifying, common identity of the UCLG membership underlying the institutional core added value of unity in diversity.

Institutional routines cannot regulate mutual expectations over members' behavior without trust in the frame holder. UCLG relies on the legitimacy of its leadership, which is assembled at both the political and technical levels. To be more precise, the political leadership builds upon the groundwork of the technical secretariat in order to steer the organization. In this context, the UCLG World Secretariat plays a fundamental role at the global level as it builds upon the mandate received by the members to fulfil "a creative role in inspiring the agenda of the deliberative and decision-making bodies, and in the implementation of the decisions of these bodies" (Doc. 52, p. 23). Less exposed to the inherent political and institutional fluctuations of the membership over time, the secretariat holds valuable institutional knowledge that is key in assisting the achievement of organizational objectives and navigating the complex landscape of global governance. The "small but mighty" secretariat (Doc. 92) enacts rules containing tacit and codified knowledge to ensure members' continuous commitment to orchestration within the logic of unity in diversity. As Stinchcombe (1997, p. 17) eloquently phrased it: "[t]he guts of institutions is that somebody somewhere really cares to hold an organization to the standards and is often paid to do that". Importantly, this logic may be found with a remarkable degree of variety at different scales of the organization, for instance at the level of sections and national associations of local governments. Their technical nature within a political system implies that this power could easily be weakened if the two fundamental sources of legitimation are undermined. If the members of the governing bodies perceive that the secretariat is performing activities without proper consultation (i.e. input legitimacy) or is not delivering the agreed objectives (i.e. output legitimacy), the legitimacy and hence trust in the frame holder could be in jeopardy. Routines counter threats in the context of discursive ambivalence and shifting power relations by enacting the input- and output-legitimacy of

the organization. Importantly though, the responsibility to ensure and display this legitimacy is borne by the network's leadership and groundwork.

Referring to the theoretical debate on power, in an organization that is strongly committed to accommodating networked orchestration, routines and leadership outline a reality where domination and empowerment are dialectically united. The global (networked) agency of cities that underpins UCLG and city networks in general is fundamentally driven by power dynamics (Acuto, 2019, p. 133). As the establishment and consolidation of the GTF largely shows, the more UCLG deploys its legitimacy status to amplify the voice of other actors, the more its legitimacy as a facilitating network increases. Of course, this also implies the deployment of the relevant power status to pursue the organizational goals by balancing different interests amidst the internal power relations that are embedded institutionally. This is, again, another re-instantiation of the overarching institutional logic of appropriateness of unity in diversity. Allegretti (2019, p. 43) properly captures this 'accommodating mindset' in UCLG as a "globally 'heavy' structure" that incorporates "flexible 'light' spaces", as is the case of the Forum of Peripheral Local Authorities (FALP) which emerged within the World Social Forum at the beginning of the 21st century and evolved into the institutionalized UCLG Forum of Peripheral Cities. Being a meta-organization implies transforming part of your organizational environment into your membership-based organization, or in layman's terms "[p]arts of a possibly troublesome environment are replaced by an organization with more or less troublesome co-members" (Ahrne & Brunsson, 2008, p. 57).

Lastly, the capacity of rules to structure institutionalization is contingent upon their simultaneous embeddedness in structures of meaning and resources. The amalgamation among these two could be defined as 'meaning in action' (Wagenaar, 2011), understood as the most tangible expression of the institutionalization of discourse in specific practices. In other words, the persuasiveness of a rule relies on the empowering consequences of the institutional core added value of unity in diversity. In a political ecosystem that essentially revolves around continuous, various, and intersecting discursive struggles, showing the local tangible materialization of the narrative construction provides compelling evidence.

The most notorious example of this is international solidarity. Discursively identified as a founding value of the century-old municipal movement,

solidarity has been at the center of numerous decentralized cooperation initiatives in the forerunner networks and among UCLG members since the foundation of the organization. From local government reconstruction in the aftermath of the earthquake in Haiti in 2010, the support to municipalities hosting Syrian refugees in 2013 and afterwards, or the international call for rehabilitation following the earthquake and tsunami in Sulawesi (Indonesia) in 2018, these initiatives tend to focus on multilateral coordination and resource pooling. The establishment of the UCLG Working Group on Territorial Prevention and Management of Crises and the recent creation of a UCLG International Solidarity Fund are signs of this ongoing effort of institutionalization and networked orchestration. These multilateral efforts present a significant degree of orchestration in terms of synergies and pooling of resources. Of course, bilateral solidarity ties are equally important across the network. Undoubtedly, as already discussed, in addition to its genuine discursive dimension, empowerment is also associated with engagement in collaborative endeavors and access to material resources that are retrievable through the wide network of members and partners.

For instance, while discussing the experience of her own city within the pandemic, Madelaine Y. Alfelor-Gazman, Mayor of Iriga (Philippines) and UCLG Treasurer, acknowledged that joining UCLG and UCLG-ASPAC was a catalyst moment that allowed simultaneous access to knowledge that helped their policy-making, but also "friends who gave their aid and support" (Meet. 8). Concretely, she thanked Li Mingyuan, Mayor of Xi'an (China) and UCLG Co-President, who was also participating as a speaker at the event, and the city of Guangzhou, a historically active member of the network in China, which donated medical equipment like Personal Protective Equipment (PPEs), disinfectant, and thermal scanners to cope with the crisis. As the expression of a broad shared value, solidarity is a key element of transnational legitimation for both cities and their networking organizations (Martinez, 2020, p. 7). By pairing meaning with action, the statement "solidarity is in our DNA" (Doc. 67) acquires greater legitimacy. As already noticed, it establishes a normative bridge between the traditional edifice of state-centered multilateralism and the increasingly institutionalized transnational efforts of local and regional governments.

The transnational 'sense of self-worth' of cities, channeled and amplified by a networking institution that is increasingly perceived as legitimate within

the global governance arena, provides local government leaders with an enabling platform from which to deploy their political agency on policy issues that have long exceeded the monopolistic notion of national sovereignty.

## 7.3 Rules as guardians of stability and promoters of change

Routines, both in discursive and practical terms, provide institutional stability and a sense of purpose. They contribute to the consolidation of "interpretive communities" where members increasingly share the way they interpret social reality (Yanow, 2007a, p. 115). Nevertheless, this does not obliterate the capacity of rules to explain change (cf. Schmidt, 2011).

Broadly speaking, changes over time may be grasped as transformations enacted by the organization in terms of either policy content or institutional rules. We have already singled out instantiations of both within the dissertation. The exposition of VLRs illustrates how the frame of the localization of global agendas can actually maintain its name and substantially change its content, from a technical account deeply influenced by the multilateral institutional architecture in the context of the MDGs (2000—2015) to a political endeavor steered by UCLG and other city networks around the political opportunity structure of the SDGs (2015-2030). Conversely, we have observed how appealing to the institutional logic of appropriateness of unity in diversity settled the dispute around the validity of the rules of procedures in the framework of the 2016 elections, and how evoking and re-instantiating this logic in the fiercer competition of the 2019 elections avoided procedural contestations and led to the consensual decision to enlarge the presidential team.

The two cases presented hereunder provide two additional examples of how the rule-based institutionalization of UCLG accommodates change over time. Following the exposition above, they illustrate the transformational dynamics in terms of content and rules. While expounded separately for the sake of analysis, as we will see, they are empirically entwined.

The first example relates to the procedural and decision-making rules of the organization, which in UCLG fall under the rubric of "statutory affairs" (Doc. 52, p. 19). As an interviewee shared, "people did not care much" about what were ultimately perceived as "relatively easy" processes. However, in recent years the overall perception has shifted as statutory affairs have

increased in complexity and interest. Attention to these procedures should not be interpreted solely in response to the expression of members' interest in the power relations that simultaneously unfold through and are shaped by the governance rules. From a wider perspective, the 'ubiquity of routines' is testimony to the members' acknowledgement of the organization's capacity to mitigate contingency and unpredictability through rule-based action. In procedural terms, the UCLG Constitution and UCLG Electoral Procedural Rules set the framework for the functioning of the organization and the election of its governing bodies since the very establishment of the city network in 2004. However, the organization decided to adopt the UCLG Code of Conduct and UCLG Conduct of Elections in 2019 as two additional referents[105] recalling the values guiding the practices of the organization and the main electoral rules respectively. These frameworks are two re-instantiations of the institutional strategy of codifying a growing number of aspects of the organizational reality. They signal a shift in the organization's strategy to equip itself with regulating tools fit for an increasingly complex environment. Interestingly though, while these practices are unequivocally inscribed within a logic of procedure-based legitimacy, procedures are not the sole main factor of legitimation. Connecting with the theoretical debate on sources of legitimacy in global governance, we may notice how UCLG further appeals to substantive values as sources of organizational legitimacy. The values of dignity, integrity, transparency, equality, and solidarity that are enshrined as main pillars of the organization and presented in the UCLG Code of Conduct are a clear example of that. To be clear, these values are not new in the institutional discourse. Yet there is a clear attempt to transform the organization over time.

The second example, gender equality, provides a valuable case on how the organization evolves over time in terms of policy-making. Building on the work developed by the forerunner organizations prior to the establishment of UCLG in 2004, the organization at large promoted gender equality and the contribution of locally elected women in the 2000s particularly at the level of sections, with networks of women active in Africa, Latin America, and Metropolis, and the adoption of the European Charter for Equality of Women and Men in Local Life by CEMR in 2006. The 2010s brought a qualitative leap on a global scale, while confirming the importance of relying on procedural changes in rule-based logic. One among many of the consultation mechanisms

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[105] See Doc. 34, Doc. 65, Doc. 58, and Doc. 59 to access the cited documents.

presented earlier, the UCLG Committee on Gender Equality was "upgraded" (Doc. 26) to a Standing Committee in 2011. The decision to differentiate this mechanism from the other committees and convert it into a permanent statutory body followed the request by women representatives within one of the governing bodies of the organization (i.e. the UCLG Executive Bureau gathered in Rabat (Morocco) in 2011). Confirming the close interlinks between content and procedures in the chronological transformation of the city network, the standing committee has, broadly speaking, a twofold purpose: it aims to represent the political voice of locally elected women globally and promote gender equality institutionally within the very organization. It is important to stress how the establishment and enhancement of concrete activities such as fostering the participation of women in local decision-making and monitoring the implementation of the SDG 5, which we saw earlier, or partnering with grassroots organizations for capacity-building lies at the intersection of leadership and rules, as is the case for the request and following decision to 'upgrade' the committee on gender equality in 2011. Only though this lens we can explain the transformation of the organization over time. In 2013, members decided to amend the constitution in order to include the Chairperson of the UCLG Standing Committee on Gender Equality as an ex-officio member of the UCLG Presidency against the lack of real progress towards parity in the organization's political representation. In 2019, the organization presented the "All-UCLG Gender Equality Strategy" (Doc. 63, p. 29), which includes concrete activities and an allocated budget for gender equality mainstreaming and promotion of women's participation again along the notion of dual progress in political and institutional terms, through policy development and external relations on the one hand, and promotion within the organization, its governance structure, activities, and secretariats on the other hand.

Gender equality should not be interpreted as a case apart. It is part of a larger trend towards the increasing relevance of human rights within the agenda of the organization. As Galceran-Vercher (2019, p. 32) observes in her analysis of the promotion of the right to the city, this concept has shifted from not being mentioned among the strategic priorities of the organization for the 2010-2016 period to be presented in the 2016-2022 strategy as a central theme to be developed by one of the four (now five) policy councils (i.e. UCLG Policy

Council on Right to the City and Inclusive Territories).[106] These episodes give us a hint of longer gradual changes where joint efforts of the political leadership and its technical groundwork play a catalyst role as both guardians and changers of the institutional rules. As we have seen, procedure-based legitimation strategies are the most important mechanism to ensure that rules are constructed and embraced, unleashing the power of routines as a repository of accumulated knowledge and source of institutional stability.

## 7.4  Normative transformation in an interpretive order

We have seen how, by means of institutionalization, an organization acquires higher legitimacy and taken-for-grantedness (Goetze & Rittberger, 2010, p. 38). The reiterated celebration of the organized diversity of the constituency and the high relevance conferred on the leadership of the city network seem to confirm that the UCLG membership fully endorses the organization's decision to prioritize legitimation drawing upon procedural aspects rather than performance. This is due to the fact that discursive practices aim to construct common assumptions about the nature of cities, the landscape of global governance, but also the very nature of the organization. This is the ultimate understanding of an "organizational reality" as "shared meaning" (Boyce, 1995, p. 107).

This last section lays out what it implies to shift the analysis of a city network like UCLG from consequential reasoning to a logic of appropriateness. It does so by reflecting on the dialogue between the conceptualizations of politics as instrumentality and interpretation. Adopting an instrumental perspective allows the potential evolution of frames to be observed as a consequence of the transformation of its nested contexts. Embracing an interpretive approach allows the analytical purchase of the concepts of productivity of power, tactical polyvalence of discourses, and rule-based institutionalization to approach a meta-organization like UCLG and its embeddedness in the equally complex landscape of global governance to be deployed. Focusing on the symbolic dimension of the construction of political activities sheds light upon the hypocrisy that is inevitably brought out by the legitimation strategy of the organization, as well as on the possibility of promoting normative transformation, which is an additional re-instantiation

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[106]  See Doc. 72, Doc. 73, Doc. 74, Doc. 75, and Doc. 76 to access information on the policy councils.

of the capacity to promote changes within the logic of rule-based institutionalization.

At one level of analysis, this research embraces an instrumental conceptualization of politics (e.g. Lasswell, 1936). Actors are continuously endeavoring to attract scarce resources in interest-based struggles where different discursive constructions and institutional venues are competing. The frame of the localization of global agendas is ultimately a strategy to mobilize members, seek their validation as an internationally representative organization, and capture political attention within the edifice of multilateralism. In the long-term, political opportunity structures must be renewed once frameworks such as the global agendas have completed their institutional course. In this context, the global agendas generate expectations and are assessed along consequential lines.

The subtle discursive line between reactive and proactive positions along the spectrum between local ownership of state-centered multilateral frameworks and localist narratives we referred to earlier may even tilt in the near future. The incipient debate on the definition of the strategic priorities of the organization for the 2022-2028 period around the notion of the "Pact for the Future" might confirm that (Doc. 80, p. 5). The new strategic axis would still discursively construct the organization in relationship with the multilateral institutional architecture by "reflect[ing] the commitments of the municipal movement gearing towards the 100th anniversary of the United Nations" (Doc. 80, p. 11). Yet its three main components (i.e. "a Pact for People", "a Pact for the Planet", and "a Pact for Government and Democracy" (Doc. 80, p. 15)), which partially evoke the five critical dimensions of the 2030 Agenda (i.e. people, planet, prosperity, peace, and partnership), may mark the transition from the frame of the localization of global agendas to an emerging narrative. The discursive representation of the current context as a "foundational moment" (Doc. 79, p. 24) where local and regional leaders as "sentinels of communities' hopes, dreams and expectations" (Doc. 77, p. 11) strengthen their partnership with civil society and gear up "towards an equality-driven municipal movement" (Doc. 61, p. 10) signals a higher proactive role in the localist political definition of the position of UCLG, as both an organization and its membership, within global governance. The call for a reformed inclusive multilateralism where cities and their networking structures would play a stronger role remains and is upheld by choices and

consequential reasoning about the current availability of political opportunities and underlying legitimacy claims.

Yet, in parallel with this approach, there is a second level of analysis. The current research further highlights the symbolic nature of politics as "instruments of interpretive order" (March & Olsen, 1989, p. 48). The development of identity and the sense of belonging to a community as the interpretive backbone of the organization are as important as the concrete output achieved by the organization. Normative arguments and procedure-based legitimacy are mutually reinforcing within the context of rule-based institutionalization. Of course, resorting to symbolic analysis does not obliterate the material background within and against which the ideational explanation unfolds. As pointed out earlier, substantial organizational resources are tirelessly invested in order to uphold the logic of appropriateness.

The analysis presented in this research focuses on the iteration between two facets of policy development. First, we have the productivity of power and tactical polyvalence of discourses. To a certain extent, the discursive capacity to obfuscate the relationship between the 'abstract global' and the 'concrete local' is what allows the organization to be such an attractive platform for mayors and subnational leaders. This confirms the difficulty of tracing back the effects of discursive policy learning in a trans-scalar configuration like UCLG. A mayor might participate as a guest speaker in a 'showcase meeting' organized by an international organization and present the pro-active commitment of their city to the achievement of the UN global agendas. An important element of the resulting 'launch pad' visibility stems from the enduring efforts of a network with a variable geometry of actors to strive to harness the political opportunity structures that lie within the local-global nexus. Even without mentioning any organization's name, deploying the frame holder's catch-phrase of, for instance, "localization" (Meet. 2) or "global movement" (Meet. 1) allows the mayor to retrieve institutionally-embedded discursive practices and legitimation strategies within the complex landscape of global governance. Connecting with Green (2017) and her research on 'pseudo-clubs' in climate governance, a large part of the outcomes generated by city networks benefits subnational governments as a whole, regardless of whether they are members of the organization or not.[107] Interestingly, the reason for the difficulty of

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[107] In a wider perspective, the organizational benefits of city networks go beyond the realm of subnational governments. For instance, the research reports produced by UCLG are an

tracing back the empirical ramifications of the chain of linkages between the statement and its consequences may be flipped too. An interviewee, for instance, observes that cities tend to minimize, in terms of legacy, the transformative tangible experience of Agenda 21 as instantiation of the impact of a global agenda at a local level. In this sense, discursive ambivalence allows a collective process of self-affirmation to be embarked upon whereby members of the constituency increasingly enhance ownership of the multilateral global agendas and their contribution as local and regional polities.

Second, rule-based institutionalization aims to simultaneously control the risks and harness the opportunities associated with the productivity of power and tactical polyvalence of discourses. Ambivalences can be accommodated and provide flexibility and effectiveness within the construction of a repertoire of cognitive and normative claims to legitimacy. For instance, while a key argument for supporting learning exchanges stems from the observation that cities share common problems, the solutions that are tabled in terms of urban governance continuously stress the importance of avoiding "one-size-fits-all" approaches (Doc. 88, p. 38). Similarly, even though mayors are often portrayed as pragmatic leaders, rule-based institutionalization contributes to shifting the attention in terms of the conception of politics from instrumentality to interpretation. The institutionalization based on 'increasing commitments' is also a process that is geared towards increasing mutual dependency between the organization and its membership. The continuous, either genuine or deferent, calls by the membership to acknowledge the enduring orchestrating efforts by the organization's leadership and secretariat are complemented by the compelling need to be validated by the membership. As the Secretary General of UCLG, Emilia Saiz, stated on behalf of the world secretariat's team in the first months of the COVID-19 crisis and its multi-dimensional disruption: "[w]e remain active and as creative as we possibly can to ensure that UCLG remains meaningful and relevant to you all!" (Doc. 83). The participation of over 90 cities in the virtual learning exchanges on the pandemic response organized during the initial months of the outbreak in 2020 by UCLG, Metropolis, and UN-Habitat – on which part of this

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important source of information about the global state of local and regional governments for both practitioners and scholars.

dissertation draws[108] – are a tangible indicator of the degree of resilience achieved in this institutionalization process.

The iteration between these two facets of policy development sheds light upon the importance of symbolism within the construction of political activities. This, in turn, enhances the relevance of the 'organization of hypocrisy' as an asset in political competition and expression of the contradiction between 'talk, decisions, and actions' (Brunsson, 1989). Hypocritical behavior is a means of survival in an organization that draws its legitimacy upon the (united) global representation of its diverse constituency. Yet UCLG does not seem to be an additional re-instantiation of the gap between rhetoric and reality observed in international organizations (e.g. Weaver, 2008). More than the institutional gap between ideology and action, the organization reproduces the inherent contradictions of its members as local and regional polities. Nonetheless, the amplifying nature of UCLG as a platform implies that these contradictions are reproduced in a trans-scalar configuration. A clearer example of this is the potential gap between the celebratory statement of a local and regional leader, for instance, on a specific policy in an intergovernmental forum and the current reality on the ground.

A closer look rather suggests that UCLG is normatively committed to ensuring a certain degree of self-criticism in its orchestrating work. This undoubtedly has a clear difference in comparison with similar conversations that take place at the national level, within, for instance, ministerial dialogues. A clear indicator of this political disposition, which can be traced at different levels of the organization, is provided by the alliances that are proactively or reactively built with civil society across a variety of topics. Even when institutional dynamics may establish specific power relations in terms of domination, civil society organizations are more reluctant to provide legitimation if their normative claims are unheard. Certainly, scrutiny over the potential trade-off between economic and social values is critically required in an institutional landscape characterized by novel governance dynamics beyond traditional political actors (Davidson, Coenen, & Gleeson, 2019, p. 702). Yet this normative stance goes beyond the synergies of partners. Members may exert pressure on supranational actors and mobilize normative claims to validate or question their legitimacy even when these multilateral bodies

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[108] See Doc. 84 to access the content of the 17 sessions organized in the framework of the Live Learning Experiences.

provide them with material and ideational support. Although, for instance, the EC as the executive branch of the EU is a strategic partner of local and regional governments internationally, the former might still condemn the lack of unity and solidarity that the latter should in principle enact, as observed in the initial EU discussions on cooperation and recovery to cope with the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. In this sense, protecting the membership-based character of the organization is a mitigating mechanism to preserve independence with respect to eventual donors, also in terms of normative positions.

The three chapters presenting the empirical analysis of UCLG as the contingent association of a logic of appropriateness and the social construction of a frame come to an end at this point. The last chapter before the conclusion will reiterate the main empirical findings and present them from a wider theoretical perspective that sways between international relations and urban studies. The chapter will pay special attention to the merits of seeking an interdisciplinary dialogue at the intersection of the converging political and geographical accounts that inform the study of urban politics (Acuto, 2020, p. 2).

# 8 Global networked urban governance

## 8.1 Policy circulation and political transformation

As argued earlier, framing the localization of global agendas constitutes the external domain of the wider institutional logic of appropriateness that sustains UCLG. As with rule-based institutionalization, the localization storyline contributes to building trust and consensus within an ecosystem of actors that does not share the same frames of reference (Hajer, 2009, p. 62). We have also noticed that the framing name 'localization' has not been assigned by the researcher to structure the interpretation of social reality. It has rather been adopted by the object of study to construct the political opportunity structure brought about by the global agendas adopted in the mid-2010s. While the term 'localization', although with a substantially different connotation, predates this generation of UN agreements, the fact that "UCLG has been the very first local government organization to embrace the global agendas as the coordinating axis of its strategy" (Doc. 69, p. 39) confirms the paramount importance of the localization frame within its institutional logic.

Yet the condition of 'first mover' within the localization of global agendas drops a hint about the specificity of UCLG in comparison with other city networks. The legacy of the century-old municipal movement, the favorable conditions within the UN when straddling the 20th and 21st centuries, the size and complexity of its global decentralized structure, and its current recognition as a generalist rather than thematic organization within the edifice of multilateralism characterize and differentiate UCLG across the larger ecosystem of city networks. While this remains relevant in terms of generalizability, yet a historical look leads to a recognition of nuances in terms of this assertion.

As outlined throughout the dissertation, the main organizational outputs of advocacy, learning, and research are inherently blurred. They all substantiate the pervasiveness of knowledge (and power) in a global organization like UCLG that is constantly striving to change the narrative about the definition of political problems and policy solutions within reach. Policy learning has been the first output to emerge as a concrete element of municipal exchange, preceding the consolidation of the entrepreneurial turn of inter-urban competition at the end of the 20th century. Cooperation emerged as the

"flip side of the search for competitiveness" since the 19th century when Northern cities facing common problems arising from rapid urbanization developed knowledge relationally by exploring solutions being implemented elsewhere (Hietala, 2008, p. 193). As Saunier (2002, p. 527) points out, the current city networks do not constitute a recent phenomenon, but are rather the gradual outcome of a history of urban policy circulation that has remarkably outlived the inherent fluctuations in active municipalities and actors across a timeframe of over a century. This is, after all, the legitimating power that UCLG discursively evokes as 'inheritor of the century-old municipal movement'.

Nonetheless, we can extract another correlated lesson from the history of urban policy circulation. For over a century, municipalities have promoted a "universalist discourse whose very terminology may not always be universally understood", encompassing the central role of local governments in the urban future, the acknowledgement of the diversity of local contexts, and the need and possibility for knowledge exchange (Saunier, 2002, p. 522). The degree of similarity between the historical development of inter-municipal relations and our research on the localization of global agendas in the early 21st century is impressive. They both confirm the strategic leverage of ambivalence within the universalism-particularism discourse along the local-global nexus, yet with a clear historical difference between the late 19th century and the contemporary world in terms of the degree of global urbanization. Furthermore, this historical comparison provides an additional sharper clue. Inter-municipal relations have prospered over the 20th century because of their depoliticized and technical character. However, our research clearly shows how the frame of the localization of global agendas is first of all an attempt to raise the profile of subnational governments within global governance in light of their political agency rather than technical capacity. In brief, global urban governance is both a story of policy circulation and political networking. After all, as previously considered, the transnational rise of cities relies on an ambivalent conception of localities as both bureaucratic components of the state and autonomous democratic entities. This means that some of the conclusions extracted from this research may help shed light on studies that focus on city networks that are purportedly more policy implementation-oriented.

As McCann (2013, p. 20) argues, the competitive and collaborative international drivers of cities must be expanded into a more complex scenario

which includes the political objective of standing out as a leading figure in a specific policy field. The complex interconnection among these three drivers explains the transnational entrepreneurship of cities. This implies that the current stage of 'strategic urbanism' is fueled by the importance of economic objectives within the relational dynamics of city networks (Davidson & Gleeson, 2015, p. 26). Yet it also means that cities may deploy the amplifying power of their networking structures to either engage in technical-oriented governance or advance normative diffusion with the aim of transforming politics (Toly, 2008, p. 349). A clear example of the former is the adoption by cities like Barcelona, Montevideo, or Montreal (and its presentation at the HLPF 2018) of the "Cities for Adequate Housing: Municipalist Declaration of Local Governments for the Right to Housing and the Right to the City" (Doc. 54), which seeks to empower local governments in their regulation of the real estate market and fight against socio-spatial segregation. Traditional advocacy areas such as decentralization and climate change are therefore complemented by calls for mobilization around issues such as the role of local governments in migration governance and housing provision (Galceran-Vercher, 2019, p. 40). The consolidation of global networked urban governance also means that the diversity of policies of relevance for local governance gain international presence.

## 8.2 Legitimacy in a membership-led organization

We have seen how, while UCLG presents defining characteristics that make it unique, city networks share key dimensions because of the very nature of their organizational outputs and common history. This certainly provides interesting analytical clues with which to disentangle a phenomenon – the rise of cities and their networking structures in the global arena – that is flourishing and requires further empirical research.

This section takes the baton by briefly comparing two city networks – UCLG and C40 – within the specific perspective of their funding structure. C40 is selected because it occupies the top-end of financial resources within the ecosystem of city networks. We refer here to the research report by the UCL City Leadership Lab (Acuto et al., 2017a, p. 14) that we already mentioned in the first chapter. As we will see, understanding the funding of the organizations

within the ecosystem of city networks further illuminates the analytical pertinence of the discussion around legitimacy.

The UCLG World Secretariat implemented an annual budget of € 3.3 million in 2017. While this sum fluctuates and the annual income has increased over recent years, recalling the quick overview provided in the first chapter, this means that the size, complexity, and recognition of the organization is translated into a financial status which is higher than that of many other city networks. This confirms that the structures of meaning that substantiate UCLG as an organization cannot be decoupled from the equally necessary structures of resources (including funding) that strengthen and cement the process of institutionalization. Yet UCLG is still located in a clearly differentiated category in comparison with the operating budget of C40 that totaled approximately US$ 25 million per year in 2018. C40 is primarily funded by philanthropic foundations, with Bloomberg Philanthropies, Children's Investment Fund Foundation (CIFF) and Realdania as major funding partners. This financial architecture, to be precise, has changed in recent years, as C40 has diversified the sources and typology of donors (e.g. L'Oréal, UK government) (Acuto & Ghojeh, 2019, p. 710). As per UCLG, for instance in 2017, 63% of the organization's income proceeded from membership fees and the partnership with the EC.[109] Within the 35% of the annual budget corresponding to programs, the European Climate Foundation was the only non-public donor among international, national, and subnational actors such as Barcelona Provincial Council, the French Development Agency (AFD) or UN-Habitat.[110]

Climate is not the only area significantly influenced by the financial power of philanthropic foundations. The second large domain is resilience. Between 2013 and 2019, the Rockefeller Foundation invested US$ 164 million in the 100 Resilient Cities network, an initiative aimed at building urban resilience to increasing natural and man-made shocks and stresses. The philanthropic foundation's decision to cease funding in 2019 and the conversion into a platform, called the Global Resilient Cities Network, with a clearer bottom-up "city-led" approach (Doc. 04, p. 1) gearing towards financial sustainability is a reminder of the risks associated with overreliance on private sector funding in public policy.

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[109] UCLG has recently signed a grant agreement with the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (SIDA). Along with the partnership with the EC, these two grants currently constitute a significant part of the annual budget of the organization.

[110] See Doc. 01, Doc. 02, Doc. 48, Doc. 49, Doc. 63, and Doc. 81 for additional details and updates about the financial information provided in this paragraph.

Higher financial capacities and freedom from the imperatives of a legitimation strategy stemming from diverse representativeness provide a valuable asset to city networks that mainly rely on philanthropic funding. As an interviewee noticed: "they are truly 'hands-on' and implementation-oriented". Therefore, following the argumentation of the dissertation, we may conclude that, in theoretical terms, UCLG (or Metropolis) and C40 constitute global-scale subnational instantiations of two opposing models of legitimation: as input or procedure-based legitimacy and as output or effectiveness-based legitimacy. Yet the empirical reality is more complex than this theoretical analysis might suggest.

Firstly, there is an implicit cognitive frame, which is largely shared across the UCLG network, that discursively constructs 'procedural-based legitimacy' as 'legitimacy' and 'effectiveness-based legitimacy' as 'effectiveness', that is, as a concept that is inherently different from 'legitimacy'. This theory-practice mismatch is an expression of the gap between the critical stance of social scientists and the "theories-in-use incorporated within the conduct of day-to-day social life" (Giddens, 1984, p. 335). The implicit cognitive frame that is widely diffused across the network is, in fact, corroborated in scholarly terms by the conceptualization of international organizations as constant conflict between two imperatives of effectiveness and technocracy on the one hand, and legitimacy and politics on the other hand (Klabbers, 2016, p. 133). From the perspective of political philosophy, this mismatch suggests that in a municipal movement born at the beginning of the 20th century in Europe, the concept of legitimacy is closely tied to the prerogative of democratic legitimacy underpinning Western liberalism. This consideration applies to both the organization and its membership. If the UN, as we saw in the third chapter, is considered a legitimate international organization on the grounds of its input legitimacy, UCLG is also validated by its members (and partners) because of the inclusiveness of its decision-making and governance procedures. By the same token, the presence of some sort of local electoral processes in almost three-quarters of the UN Member States, as mentioned earlier, contributes to equating local government with local democracy. Again, the tactical polyvalence of discourse allows the common and unifying identity of the local government membership to be constructed as governmental, democratic, and proximate. This is particularly important within the context of the sheer number of authoritarian and hybrid regimes in the global arena.

Secondly, the legitimacy of UCLG as an organization is not limited only to the procedural dimension. The multilateral institutional architecture is also keen to collaborate with UCLG because of its orchestrating responsiveness. In other words, the legibility and commitment of the network – which is the fundamental rationale for the frame of the localization of global agendas – are indicators of its output legitimacy. The diverse representativeness of the organized constituency within the GTF, which is facilitated by UCLG, offers an effective 'one-stop' platform for any multilateral actor interested in engaging in collaborative endeavors and joint legitimation strategies with subnational governments. At a different level of analysis, legitimation arguments are not based solely on procedural considerations or high-minded principles. Within the discussion on the transformation of global governance that UCLG is promoting, for instance, the political debate on opening and closing borders "is not about solidarity any longer, but it's about efficiency. It's about doing things well for everybody" (Meet. 4). Still with evident hierarchies, this specific turn from a normative to a pragmatic stance gives us a more nuanced landscape where procedural, consensual and democratic perspectives, shared values and goals, and effectiveness are empirically intertwined as theoretical sources of legitimacy claims.

The analytical lens of legitimacy in the study of city networks within the landscape of global governance is incomplete if it is not linked to the economic drivers underpinning the relevant organizations. In other words, it is through the 'strings attached to funding' that the analytical lens of legitimacy can give us additional clues. Davidson and Gleeson (2015, p. 21) provide a compelling argument by noticing that C40, despite its specific focus on the climate agenda, is bolstering an ongoing discourse of "neoliberal urbanism" that does not suggest substantial behavioral changes attuned with the imperatives of the current environmental crisis. As per UCLG, in line with the commitment to normative transformation and alliances with civil society that we have outlined, the organization is promoting the diffusion of existing global norms, as exemplified by the concept of the right to the city as an alternative to the hegemonic urban paradigm (Galceran-Vercher, 2019).

Yet the consequences of public policy funding are larger and more complex. In a membership-based association or, to be more exact, a city network like UCLG that receives additional significant funding from public donors but that pays special attention to maintaining its independence as a membership-based

organization, the power relations revolve mainly around the membership, which is the *raison d'être* of the city network. As emerges from our research, the logic of appropriateness of unity in diversity aims to simultaneously harness and control the conflict of interests that stems from an association where all members are (formally) equal. As discussed earlier, there are asymmetric power relations across the different parts of the network that can be traced back concurrently to different scales of analysis, among the leadership and secretariat and the rest of the organization, across sections, and across constituencies. Yet these patterns of domination are contained within the very membership of the organization and do not provide leverage to external partners without the legitimacy of political, public, and territorial organizations.

Sassen (2018, p. 151) once provocatively asked: "[w]ho owns the city?". In the era of global networked urban governance, we should ask ourselves: 'who owns the agenda of the networks?'. In the case of UCLG, the response is straightforward, even when framed within the relevant power relations embedded in the organization: its membership. To be clear, the transnational action of UCLG members is itself the result of the complex and variegated configurations of power relations that unfold in their own local context. As we will explore later on, having the membership as a whole in the driver's seat does not surmise any kind of inherent progressive policy. The term 'municipalism' refers to the call for empowerment of democratic local self-governments at the global level, contrary to a more situated notion of 'municipalism' (e.g. Spain) that focuses on radical democracy (Roth, 2019, pp. 56-58). The core rationale of the municipal movement, as framed in this research, is that cities have their reasons for stepping into the international arena. In other words, they have their own agendas. Whatever the political ideology and entrenched interests that sustain their foreign endeavors, their transnational agendas are what feeds and justifies the existence of a city network like UCLG. This is the ultimate democratic characterization of a membership-led organization.

## 8.3 Transnational local interests and policy learning

The research infers that the global rise of cities cannot be explained solely on the grounds of their demographic and economic significance at the intersection between globalization and urbanization. In fact, other accounts such as

planetary urbanization may certainly be better suited theoretically to describing the contemporary variegated, multiscalar processes of global urban transformation that outflank the territorially-bounded 'traditional' understanding of the city (e.g. Brenner, 2014b). Many of the urban processes we here refer to take place analytically in spatial contexts "where the non-city may also be significant" (Angelo & Wachsmuth, 2015, p. 20).

Nonetheless, this dissertation does revolve around the city as a basic unit of urban analysis, a traditional concept whose "tenacity" outlives the ideological representation of normative imaginaries (Wachsmuth, 2014, p. 75). To be clear and at the risk of oversimplifying, since the pioneering works of Castells (1972/1977) and Harvey (2009) on urban political economy in the 1970s, the city has been predominantly constructed in ideological terms by elite coalitions as a "growth machine" (Logan & Molotch, 2007, p. 50). Undoubtedly, growth-first strategies may increase social inequality and environmental degradation within the context of urban development (McGranahan et al., 2016, p. 21). Nonetheless, the elite-led internationalization of cities does not respond to a unitary totality, but it is rather the outcome of a dynamic process of power negotiation within a heterogeneous urban elite (Pinson, 2019, p. 72). This is precisely why the concept of the city gains (or rather maintains its) relevance, as both actor and site of transformation. Cities are spaces constituted by place-based actors endowed with political significance that, and which is particularly important for our concerns, can find in global agendas a political opportunity structure through which to mobilize their claims (Barnett & Parnell, 2016, pp. 95-96).

This leads us to critically reflect on the international role of local governments. In general terms, we need to be wary of the synecdoche of equating cities with local governments. This implies extending our gaze to a wider spectrum of local actors that are currently shaping global governance. As McFarlane (2011, p. 5) reminds us, it is more appropriate to refer to the city as "assembled through a variety of sites, people, objects and processes" that simultaneously reproduce it and contest it. SDI, for instance, is a translocal coalition of community-based organizations that has been particularly successful in influencing the housing and tenure policies of international development agencies such as UN-Habitat (Pieterse, 2008, p. 115). Transnational networks of urban poor grassroots organizations are gaining centrality in the global urban debate shifting housing policy – in a similar

fashion to the evolution of the localization discourse – from a technical problem to a power-laden political issue, where distribution of resources and representativeness are equally important (Herrle et al., 2015, p. 195). At the same time, while contemporary institutional fragmentation and public policy complexity have generated a vacuum that has fostered the prominence of local political leaders (John, 2001, p. 16), it is important not to conflate the wider relational geography of translocal relations with the narrower landscape outlined by the international dynamism of city leaders (Martinez et al., 2021, p. 1017). From a comprehensive perspective, the degree and complexity of formal and informal transnational connections enacted by urban actors and the increasing relevance that multi-stakeholder partnerships have in international cooperation warn us to treat the institutional reality outlined by city networks as just one view of a wider geography of global urban governance (Acuto & Leffel, 2021, p. 1771).

Conversely, local leaders may deploy transnational municipal networks to legitimate their local policy initiatives and "speak back" to their local communities about the recognition received by global urban fora (McCann, 2013, p. 14). The transnational entrepreneurship of mayors may be inscribed within a wider shift from local input legitimacy to local output legitimacy, whereby coalition building and resource mobilization around unifying efforts such as city branding or large urban projects are more important than the traditional construction of an electoral base (Béal & Pinson, 2014, pp. 304-305). International 'positioning' is key for mayors engaged in 'political branding' that taps emotionally into collective identities and promotes innovative forms of electoral mobilization, while building alliances with the private sector and civil society organizations geared towards policy implementation (Pasotti, 2010). The alliances among local growth elite coalitions and local political representatives may then deploy the international rising role of cities and the amplifying power of their networking structures as an important mechanism through which to marginalize local actors contesting the policies at stake as well as to counter local opposition political parties.

This reality undoubtedly intersects the networking dynamics that sustain UCLG. Besides the obvious potential conflicts of interests with elite-led growth coalitions, this is even more relevant in the case of organizations, which unfold operationally – at least in the pre-COVID 19 era – through global- or regional-scale meetings that imply international business trips. The local political and

mediatic pressure on the allocation of municipal budget lines for these types of expenses is inscribed within a wider discussion over the profitability of these types of engagement. This is what brings one interviewee to mark a clear line and distinguish active participation of representatives in international networks from "diplomatic tourism" funded by taxpayers. The discussion on the illegal benefits afforded to officials in positions of public trust revolves around corruption and the growing distrust of citizens in public institutions. This major concern is addressed by UCLG through calls to fight corruption in subnational governance and public policies, not least by establishing a UCLG Community of Practice on Transparency and Open Government. In line with the degree of normative transformation signaled more than once in this dissertation, this effort is also carried out within the very organization by institutionalizing a "UCLG Anti-corruption code" as part of the UCLG Code of Conduct presented earlier, which defines the "forms of corruption" and "[o]ther behaviours against integrity" (Doc. 58, p. 2).

This line of argument against the backdrop of the understanding of the city as an 'urban assemblage' lies beneath the decision to focus on transnational networks of local governments rather than transnational networks of other place-based actors like local grassroots organizations. The transnational dynamism of a city government cannot be dissociated from the synergies with other governmental and non-governmental, both profit and not-for-profit, actors that unfold across manifold scales of action. Competitiveness, collaboration, and the political ambition to be a leading figure among peers outline a continuum broad enough to accommodate a wide range of different, and perhaps even contradictory, reasons for city governments to step into the international arena. In other words, the transnational-oriented interests of elite-led urban growth coalitions might be blended with other political rationalities. Conversely, as formerly suggested, (local) governments are forms of institutionalized power that can either promote or obstruct political and social change. In this light, urban leaders play a fundamental institutional role as politically accountable actors at the helm of the local government that "generate support for purposes relevant for the city in general" (Haus & Heinelt, 2005, p. 29). The diffusion of normative changes and civil society claims accommodated by a city network is fundamental since political and social (local) transformation is not possible without the commitment 'on the ground' of the local government members of the organization (Galceran-

Vercher, 2019, p. 34). This dimension, which we can even trace back to the universal aspiration of municipal authorities at the beginning of the 20th century, is after all what underpins the legitimation strategy of local governments in the recognition of their global agency.

Yet, by no means does this imply conferring on local governments an essentialist characterization as progressive polities. As Purcell (2006) aptly warrants, we need to avoid the 'local trap' of assuming the local scale is a scale inherently more democratic than other scales. Rather, Russell (2019, p. 1000) rejoins, the local scale must be reframed as the space where "politics of proximity" can unfold and unleash their transformative power. After all, the governance of proximity and the consequent degree of relationship with the citizens is one of the central characteristics constituting the unifying identity glue of the UCLG membership within the institutional logic of appropriateness. Again, harnessing discursive ambivalence allows the actual materialization of this source of legitimation across different cities and political rationalities globally to be glossed over. At the same time, as already pointed out, the frame of the localization of global agendas counters the potential parochial perspective that the politics of proximity might prompt. The organizational outputs of legibility and commitment deriving from the institutional core added value of unity and diversity are a fundamental incentive for the multilateral institutional architecture.

Once the multiplicity of drivers underpinning the transnational move of city governments is clear, it is important to point out an additional aspect that has underpinned this dissertation. Either through face-to face interactions or (more importantly in the COVID-19 era) virtual exchanges, networking structures like UCLG are constituted by "abstracted relations" that are instrumentally deployed as a means to other ends (James & Verrest, 2015, p. 71). Viewed in these terms, it is easier to picture the complexity of local interests fueling the transnational entrepreneurship of city governments and their local leaders, and the amplifying possibilities enabled by their networking structures. This heterogeneity, as the logic of unity in diversity dictates, is beneficial. As an interviewee highlights, large cities thrive on raising their profile globally and establishing relationships with the UN, while smaller cities are more interested in the impact of transnational networking on public policy on a day-to-day basis. This further relates to the need for small cities to join forces in networking endeavors in comparison with the wider range of

opportunities for the 'free riding' of global cities. As climate governance shows, smaller cities often require networking and upscaling configurations in order to follow the example of a smaller subset of more international-oriented leading cities (Kern, 2019). At the same time, cities whose transnational entrepreneurship relies on the "political conviction of the mayor", to quote the words of one interviewee, are always threatened by electoral changes and other fluctuations in terms of local leadership, while those cities that envision the international action as "something inherent" in their public policy maximize their networking opportunities strategically and engage across a longer timeframe.

Lastly, as we have discussed at the beginning of the chapter, politics and policy are deeply entwined in the dynamics of global networked urban governance. As the 'localization' of the Paris Agreement shows, cities facing common challenges can make an impact as they accelerate replications and commit to common quantifiable outcomes (Johnson, 2018; Gordon, 2020). If we understand the latter as an example of a learning process oriented towards policy alignment, then we can interpret the frame of the localization of global agendas constructed by UCLG as the instantiation of a learning process that prioritizes political alignment. This by no means implies neglecting the substantive technical-oriented exchange developed around, for instance, the subnational monitoring and reporting of the SDGs. After all, this is a substantial contribution to urban knowledge production underpinning the follow-up of the 2030 Agenda and its focus on translating global urban complexity into (statistical) comparable information (Robin & Acuto, 2018, p. 85). Yet it implies underscoring a specific organizational emphasis within the objectives of the learning process.

This takes us back to the second chapter and the proposal to analytically deploy discursive rather than cognitive policy learning as a heuristic tool with which to grasp the relationship between city networks and global agendas. Stating that city networks have "collective learning in their DNA" (Meet. 3) refers precisely to the empirical reality of learning about a policy solution while framing it in a specific way as a political problem. Inter-municipal learning exchanges can be pertinently conceptualized as being constituted by the exchange of "codified", "embedded", and "tacit" knowledge (van Ewijk & Baud, 2009, p. 220). It is possible to picture this perspective on networking as a continuum stemming from codified-based inspiration-oriented public

discussions (e.g. showcasing your city or specific urban initiative for circulation as a 'policy model' (Peck & Theodore, 2010)) to tacit-based behind-closed-door frank exchanges (e.g. learning around the equally valuable knowledge on mistakes and policy failure rather than only around best practices (Macmillen & Stead, 2014)).

Our research provides a complementary analytical viewpoint. It suggests that complex discursive constructions enable simple cognitive exchanges: once an alignment takes place in terms of discursive learning, spaces of cognitive exchange are opened up. This conceptualization builds on the conflation of processes of acquisition of knowledge (i.e. learning) and processes of exchange of knowledge that often unfold in the discursive constructions of city networks and their own outputs (Haupt et al., 2020, p. 155). It is possible to glimpse a clear vantage point from this perspective on a platform like UCLG that accommodates and blends the contributions of and exchange between narrative-based political representatives and evidence-based technical representatives. While these learning processes might not be comprehensive in terms of (cognitive) knowledge exchange, they are still transformative as they include the active participation of both subnational political and technical representatives.

We are now able to grasp the analytical purchase deriving from the decision to focus the dissertation on the discursive component of learning processes. Rather than analyzing the iteration between discursive and cognitive dimensions, which, for instance, is common in the analysis of policy learning in public policy studies (e.g. Harnisch, 2019), the research adopts the analytical entry point of the discursive production of meaning as the heuristic tool to unveil the logic of appropriateness of unity in diversity and the frame of the localization of global agendas as two sides of the same process of institutionalization. It is within this analytical perspective that the discursive construction of the definition of the political problem and identity of the political actors underpins and informs the ensuing cognitive exchanges.

## 8.4  Politicization across state-centered framings

As this research reminds us, local governments cannot be apprehended through the "methodological localism" inherent in the analytical oversight of the fundamental influence of supra-local governmental actors (Brenner, 2009,

p. 121). The importance of the global agendas at the local level stems from the understanding of the need to embed the governance of proximity in a framework of multilevel governance (Gallicchio, 2019, p. 30). Rudd et al. (2018, p. 193) are right when stating that "urbanization is … more than localization", prompting us to look also at practices beyond formal governance, and scales of analysis and intervention beyond the local. This section resumes the reflection on the multiplicity of conflicting interests and the call for a supreme institutional commitment to unity in diversity in order to unveil the overlapping state framings that underlie UCLG and that are reproduced, although in a nuanced way, in the reproduction of the traditional North-South divide. The complex relationship between cities and states leads us to ponder over the contribution of UCLG to the ongoing debate around the depoliticizing trends currently unfolding in global governance.

As we have repeatedly noticed, the diversity of interests is a permanent challenge for an organization that predicates unity as its institutional mission. One interviewee, for instance, observed an increasing "geopolitical polarization". If, in a positive light, the organization is perceived as an "instrument of power", at the same time, the current trend of "regional fragmentation" poses a "threat to the organization and even more in the present time". This reality, the interviewee ponders, "is very much linked to the geopolitical needs of the states the cities belong to". The reference to the challenge associated with the 'present time' points to the complex embeddedness of a city-centered network in a (still) highly consolidated inter-state system. The crux of the matter lies, again, in the ambivalent characterization of local governments as both bureaucratic and democratic entities. Being an integral part of the state does not predetermine the specific relationship between the local government and its national counterpart.

Despite the perception of confrontational dynamics emerging from the dissertation, the relationship between the city and the state should rather be grasped as the outcome of a process of mutual adaptation of these two levels to a shifting governance landscape (Pinson, 2019, p. 77). Local governments complement their international sustained claims to empowerment with structural (as well as informal) relationships with national governments, which are out of reach for most non-governmental actors. Localities may be supported politically or economically by national governments in their transnational efforts and may well be strategic elements within larger inter-

state dynamics. After all, the retreat of the state at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century has caused national governments to renovate their influence on local politics so as to "develop other measures to achieve … [their] ends" (John, 2001, p. 15). The inherent 'sovereignty-free' characterization of local governments is also a resource for national governments pursuing their interests in the increasingly hybrid architecture of global governance. At the highest level of political representation, the presence within the UCLG Presidency of city mayors from 'great powers' and 'regional powers' (e.g. China, Russian Federation, Turkey) corroborates the current shift towards a "post-Western" decentered global political inter-state order (Acharya & Buzan, 2019, p. 264). In light of this, the threat of geopolitical fragmentation within the UCLG network confirms the strength of, and dependence on, the state and the inter-state shifting order.

In contrast, local governments may also harness the global and regional scope of networking organizations in the same way non-governmental advocacy networks do: in a "boomerang pattern" where pressure on the state is not exerted internally but externally through alliances between domestic and international actors (Keck & Sikkink, 1998, p. 12). The members of the UCLG World Council who gathered in Hangzhou (China) in 2017, for instance, recalled the incarceration of the former mayors of Dakar and Diyarbakir, Khalifa Sall and Gultan Kisanak respectively. Their statements of solidarity and concern for the threat to the "integrity of local government and representatives" (Doc. 46, p. 39) may well be interpreted as a source of transnational pressure for the relevant national authorities in Senegal and Turkey respectively.

In a different line of argument, the traditional North-South divide confirms, though in a nuanced way, the dominance of state-centered framings underpinning the city network. As seen earlier, the presence of city mayors from 'great powers' and 'regional powers' in the current presidential team outlines a variegated picture, which confirms the ongoing gradual shift away from the long-lasting core-periphery model of inter-state relations. A historical outlook at the 'turnover' of the leaders of the presidential team signals a rethinking of conventional state-centered hierarchies, as the subnational governments represented by the Presidents of UCLG have moved from France to Turkey then to South Africa, Morocco, and now Russian Federation since 2004. In recent times, cities from the global South have unequivocally enhanced their status within the hierarchies of the major city networks.

Nonetheless, as Bouteligier (2013b) and Davidson, Coenen, and Gleeson (2019) point out in the case of Metropolis and C40, the North-South divide is still reproduced in terms of the production and circulation of urban policy knowledge. This redirects our attention to the role of the secretariats as specific components of city networks that acquire particular relevance under the institutional intertwined effect of routines and leadership. Contrary to the decentralized structure of its geographical sections, UCLG confirms the traditional divide since the majority of the secretariats of its policy consultation mechanisms are located "along the Global North-Western axis" (Garcia-Chueca, 2019, p. 107).[111] This uneven geography is noteworthy particularly if we take into account that the bulk of opportunities and challenges of the current wave of urbanization is located in cities of the global South, which present distinctive characteristics in terms of demands and capacities (Nagendra et al., 2018). There is, for instance, a significant knowledge gap in terms of the availability of urban research and data, including studies on informal settlements, in cities of the global South (Bai et al., 2018). The need (and opportunity) to dismantle ingrained hierarchies as the ones associated with the North-South state-centered divide in the organizational life of city networks is more compelling than we might think. While recent discussions in urban theory have focused on the role of comparative studies and their Northern legacy, city networks and partnering international organizations have become the main referent for urban policy knowledge exchange for cities in many countries of the South (Tomlinson & Harrison, 2018, p. 1).

Generally speaking, the resulting complex landscape is one of confrontational transnational advocacy efforts that are inscribed within the pre-existing dominance of the state. Yet this conservative image seems to open up to nuances if we direct the attention from the state as dominant locus of

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[111] As we have already noticed, accommodating different degrees of mobilization within the network under the logic of appropriateness of unity in diversity is also reflected by different degrees of institutionalization across the components of the wide network. This implies that some consultation mechanisms have dedicated teams and others focal points. The majority of the secretariats of the UCLG Committees, UCLG Working Groups, UCLG Fora, and UCLG Communities of Practice are located in Europe or facilitated, either through dedicated teams or focal points, by the UCLG World Secretariat, which is equally located in Europe. To this assessment we need to add the UCLG Policy Councils and UCLG Standing Committee on Gender Equality, which are also facilitated by the UCLG World Secretariat. The UCLG Community of Practice on Urban Innovation coordinated by the city of Guangzhou is the notable exception in terms of subnational governments actively undertaking this role beyond the historical legacy of the North-Western areas. The focus on the secretariats rather than the chairs of the consultation mechanisms aims to unveil the geography of the organizations that are investing significant institutional resources, in line with the analytical centrality of routines in processes of rule-based institutionalization.

political agency to the hybrid shifting environment of supranational organizations. This leads us to address the fundamental discussion around depoliticization in global governance. In general terms, depoliticization refers to the demotion of collective agency and deliberation over a particular political issue (Hay, 2007, Chapter 2). In global governance, this is often associated with the shift away from formal processes of public accountability into the private sphere. Furthermore, Stone (2017, p. 93) aptly points out that, in addition to expanding technocratic tactics, depoliticization also stems from the lack of societal comprehension of the complexity of multiple global governance configurations in place. UCLG is part of this evolving global governance institutional architecture and confirms the depoliticizing tendency, while at the same time it strives to counter it. Both in terms of technocracy and the overall relationship with the society, our research unearths a continuum that sways between a politicized and depoliticized understanding of policy circulation across the network.

In terms of technocratic tactics Ilsur Metshin, for instance, posits: "[i]n such a turbulent world of politics, [UCLG] ... is a very good platform for the exchange of practices today. Municipalities, regardless of where they are located ... are engaged in the same problems" (Doc. 20). Therefore, the organization provides the "opportunity to gather outside of politics and conduct a dialogue" (Doc. 20). Yet the dissertation also shows how UCLG harnesses its institutional added value, mobilizes its membership and synergizes with its partners around political opportunity structures, and constructs complex discursive strategies of legitimation in order to enhance the political agency of local and regional governments vis-à-vis international organizations and national governments. In other words, as discussed earlier, it confirms how the political agency of state-centric processes is complemented rather than replaced by the intersecting hybrid configurations that are increasingly crowding the global governance arena. Dependent on state actors, platforms of networked orchestration like UCLG generate collective agency and contribute to ongoing efforts to frame specific political issues as a matter of public accountability. In this sense, the research confirms the limits of the technocratic turn in contemporary global governance and the merits of approaching the burgeoning phenomenon of city networks from a political science perspective (Gordon, 2020, p. 234).

Concerning the overall (lack of) societal understanding of the current complexity of global governance and its manifold configurations, one interviewee admits that most citizens do not know UCLG. This is a significant weakness if we take into account that the organization is purportedly at the service of local communities. In other terms, the legitimation strategies directed towards different audiences are intertwined and yet separate. This is an important observation both in terms of policy practice and scholarly inquiry. While we have here dissected how members and multilateral partners find UCLG legitimate, it is a different empirical question if the citizens of the local communities represented by the subnational government members of UCLG find the world organization legitimate, that is, in this case, relevant to their interests. The tireless work - as UCLG does – in constructing an increasingly tighter interrelation between the local and global scale seems to contribute to ongoing efforts to increase the societal understanding of the relevance of the global governance arena to our everyday lives. In this sense, the recent launch of the Local4Action HUBs aims specifically to showcase "locally-driven localization initiatives" (Doc. 71, p. 2) with monitored and scalable results that can actually broaden the empirical base to support the claims of subnational governments at the global level. This implementation-oriented logic takes up the intersection of discursive ambivalence and the frame of the localization of global agendas that we have repeatedly noticed. The trans-scalar interpretation of a local-global nexus allows local and regional leaders to benefit from amplifying platforms even when their initiatives on the ground might not mirror that. Yet the opposite is also true. There is an inherent tangible and concrete local dimension that feeds and is the *raison d'être* of city networks' advocacy. The institutionally-embedded storyline of the localization frames local initiatives so as to show their merits in an international light that is conceived from a state-centric perspective that would otherwise not fully consider them.

This is why global agendas such as the SDGs are so important: because they are a common language among cities, but also between cities and their citizens, as well as with states, supranational actors, and the rest of societal partners. Building on Johnson (2018, p. 37) and his conceptualization, "[p]erformative power" is here deployed by means of the legibility enacted by the common language of the global agendas and the related construction of a specific sense of identity. Connecting with Urbinati (2003, p. 80), we might conclude that, if

the shift from government to governance produces a consequent transformation from politics to policies, the framing of UCLG aims to harness and include the legitimacy of the political mandate of its members as a representation of collective subjects within non-binding yet transformative governance instruments such as the global agendas.

## 8.5  Legitimacy as a global governance actor

As we enter the final stretch of our journey, we need to look at the UN system and the multilateral world, which constitutes a key institutional referent in the daily organizational life of UCLG. In a global governance institutional environment characterized by an increasing number of state and non-state actors, international organizations both legitimate other actors and seek for legitimation (Zaum, 2013, p. 17). The UN in particular, as pointed out by Claude (1966, p. 379) a long time ago, embodies the international "custodian of collective legitimacy". Its relatively low profile in terms of material resources is compensated by a symbolic status that grants it the power to define the ideational resources and norms that dictate what counts as legitimate in the international political order (Barnett & Finnemore, 2018, p. 71). Yet, despite their central role in global governance, Barnett and Finnemore (2018, p. 74) acknowledge that the perception of the UN as a 'slow mover' might be the main trigger for the ongoing trend in the establishment of new state, non-state, and hybrid governance configurations in the global institutional arena.

The localization of global agendas is both a strategy that legitimates and seeks legitimation vis-à-vis the UN system. The frame reproduces this diagnostic-prescriptive argumentation with a bottom-up, coherent logic from the local to the supranational level. The fundamental legitimacy claim revolves around the commitment to the "co-creation of cities and territories" (Doc. 08, p. 3), which denotes a specific normative alignment in terms of local democracy and community engagement: it emphasizes a participatory form of governance, where the involvement of actors in policy-making is not just a manipulative tactic, but a precondition to mobilize the capacities necessary to define and achieve the policy objectives (Jessop, 2002, p. 55). Again, the 'co-creation' utterance is an example of the discursive construction of complex arguments into simple catch-phrases. At the national level, the storyline is re-instantiated by calling on institutional and legal frameworks to adopt multilevel governance

mechanisms that rely on effective decentralization, the principle of subsidiarity, and a territorial approach to development. At the global level, the call to reform the international institutional architecture is presented as a "transition from an inter-national to a networked multilateral system" that relies on collaborative relations across governmental actors both horizontally and vertically (Doc. 18, p. 15). The proposed reform further stresses the centrality of multi-stakeholder "co-creation and partnership mechanisms" with other societal actors (Doc. 18, p. 17). The crux of the proposal for the "future of multilateralism" lies in the recognition of the guidance of local and regional governments in the specific domain of the adaptation of global agendas to local realities (Doc. 18, p. 18). Importantly, this overall framing is not a distinguishing feature of UCLG, but encompasses and unites the legitimacy claims of the major global networks of cities and regions.

The governmental, democratic, and proximate identity of UCLG's membership, and the procedural and diverse representation, legibility, and commitment of the organization are the two intertwined sets of sources of legitimacy that the city network offers to multilateral actors. Legibility and commitment, as we have underlined, are fundamental components of the frame, hence the importance of the 'common language' of global agendas. The organization of networked orchestration stems from the 'political will and capacity', being just one instantiation of the storyline conveying the sense of urgency, pragmatism, and commitment of the "call to arms" of the local and regional government constituency (Benford & Snow, 2000, p. 617).

Furthermore, the identity of UCLG's membership and the localization of global agendas are tied conceptually by a constructivist understanding of the mutual constitution of agent and structure (Wendt, 2003, p. 183). Building on Nijman (2016) and her research on cities and the ideational structures of global society, we may argue that the identity of UCLG members as global policy actors is iteratively socialized by internalizing global (state-centric) agendas and the fact that they are recognized in social interactions as global policy actors. Beneath the decision to step into and interact within the international arena, there is a fundamental process of "reflexivity" around the (globalist) collective identity and consequent process of interest formation of the city (Ljungkvist, 2016, p. 17). As we have seen, the city network plays a constitutive role in this process of identity formation. This function is even more determinant if we take into account, as Gordon (2020, pp. 11-12) highlights,

that cities, neglected for centuries by the Westphalian system, have only relatively recently started to develop, in constructivist terms, an account of their (common) identity and contribution as global actors. Within the constructivist ontological debate between agency and structure, the logic of appropriateness in contrast with the logic of persuasion prioritizes the explanatory power of structural factors. Yet, as the trust in the frame holder and the ability of rules to promote simultaneously stability and change demonstrate, the logic of appropriateness unfurls through inherently constructivist dynamics of (discursive) learning and norms socialization (cf. Risse, 2000).

The centrality of orchestration in our analysis confirms the pertinence of the theoretical application of this concept to city networks proposed by Gordon and Johnson (2017). To be more precise, with regard to the three forms identified by the authors in the domain of global urban climate governance, UCLG enacts both "complementary" and "concurrent" orchestration (Gordon & Johnson, 2017, p. 10). It is simultaneously an intermediary city network that enlists its member cities and regions as targets within a context where the multilateral state-centered orchestrator provides legitimacy at the global level, but it is also an orchestration where an internal 'local order' – operationalized through the logic of appropriateness of unity in diversity – is secured so as to raise the legitimacy of both the organization and its membership, and raise its potential recognition among external multilateral partners.[112]

The case for concurrent orchestration provides us with an important clue if we analyze it in the context of "attaching conditions" that intergovernmental organizations often bring in as they simultaneously empower and steer intermediary actors (Abbott et al., 2015, p. 14). Whereas orchestration is a rising soft and indirect governance model in the global arena, in this very case, international organizations do not play a primary role in the process of molding the frame. The localization of the global agendas is rather steered in both discursive and institutional terms by UCLG and the GTF. It might be argued that the localization frame is ultimately an initiative that responds to the local and regional government constituency, yet the level of synergy with multilateral actors is an indicator of the degree of validation conferred on this

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[112] Contrary to complementary orchestration, concurrent orchestration is an example of the inductive dimension of abductive reasoning in the research process, as this had not been considered among the initial theoretical expectations. The insights emerging from the empirical research have rather been interpreted in light of (and thanks to) the conceptual framework outlined by Gordon and Johnson (2017, pp. 9-13).

strategy. This might be due concurrently to the rising power of cities and their networking structures in global governance as well as to the awareness across the UN system of the need to open the edifice of multilateralism beyond state-centered exclusionary framings.

## 8.6  Cities and the future of global governance

The previous discussion over (de)politicization and legitimacy (crisis) in global governance converges in a central phenomenon. The existent international institutional infrastructure is not evolving so as to be fit for the current process of globalization (Lopez-Claros et al., 2020, pp. 13-14). As both the state and market fail to address the public problems that have emerged along with globalization, free-riding must be prevented within a logic promoting positive-sum (power) relations (Anheier, 2019, p. 778). Whereas growing nationalist backlashes undermine multilateralism, cities organized through networking structures are emerging as vocal advocates of globalism. Paradoxically, UCLG members are defending the current international intergovernmental system, while key instances of the UN system still define local governments as non-state actors as a consequence of their narrow focus on formal nation-states.

The winding road towards multilateral recognition of the city network confirms the pertinent conceptualization of the "two United Nations" by Claude (1996, pp. 289-291), who distinguished, on the one hand, the corporate entity comprising the UN secretariat and specialized agencies, and on the other hand, the collectivity of UN member states. While the collaboration ties scanned in this research confirm the increasing recognition of UCLG within the first domain, the same cannot be said with regard to the second domain. Through its forerunner networks, local government organizations have held NGO Consultative Status with the United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) since 1947. In light of the governmental, democratic, and proximate identity of the membership, UCLG has strived to achieve Permanent Observer Status before the UN General Assembly. The attempt to establish a direct link with the political representatives in the UN's chief policy-making body followed the example set by the 'Other Entity' Observer Status granted in 2002 to the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU), "a world organization of parliaments" (Doc. 91, p. 1) dedicated to the promotion of global democratic governance and international cooperation. While daily work provides multiple access points to

intergovernmental organizations, the sanctioning of a formal status implies access to specific multilateral institutional venues and moving from ad hoc relationships to regular interactions (Vabulas, 2013, pp. 190-191). UCLG's lack of success, so far, in attempts to "upgrade" from ECOSOC General Consultative Status to General Assembly Observer Status is an indicator of the state-centric power relations that still sustain multilateralism in the face of supranational and subnational attempts at reconfiguring global governance (Brütsch, 2012, p. 315).

Observing the (higher) degree of success of transnational actors in the initial stages of the international policy cycle (and associated political opportunity structures) (Risse, 2013, p. 436), state-centric entrenchment is also a central factor behind the different degrees of impetus of city networks between the phase of definition and that of implementation of global agendas (e.g. 2030 Agenda, New Urban Agenda). In recent decades, the formal recognition of cities in official UN documents has increased but not at an enthusiastic "unprecedented" rate, which further reminds us of the divide between formal mention and actual partnership in implementation (Kosovac et al., 2020, p. 298). Certainly, this winding road confirms the challenging gap that exists when moving from increasing soft power to gaining structural power so as to actually influence (inter-state) international politics (Foster & Swiney, 2019, p. 21).

Lastly, we need to highlight that while the local scale is inherently as democratic as any other scale, local and multilateral actors identify and harness synergies around progressive policies. This is a direct consequence of the normative transformation that is institutionally embedded into the frame of the localization of global agendas. Stating that "the United Nations are more necessary than ever … as the common defender of human rights" (Meet. 5) is a globalist assertion that understands the need to shift towards a new paradigm of sustainability that is not limited to environmental issues, but includes social equality and a right-based approach. This utterance contends that the very role of cities and local governments, in an increasingly urbanized world, rests on the inherent inseparability of environmental and social challenges (Gilbert et al., 1996). This, in turn, leads to a call for the transformation of our current governance model. The enhanced dialogue with civil society that we have already described is part of this transformation and is inscribed within a shift discursively conveyed through the catch-phrase "from listening to cities to

cities are listening" (Doc. 64, p. 14), which signals the new institutional phase following the advocacy prominence around the call for 'a seat at the global table'. An example of that is the set of policy recommendations on "Addressing Informality in Cities" presented as part of the Town Hall track of the World Summit of Local and Regional Leaders of Durban (Doc. 03). The position paper was developed within a collaboration process led by Cities Alliance, a multi-stakeholder global network on urban poverty reduction and long-term partner of UCLG, with its NGO members Association of Volunteers in International Service (AVSI) Foundation, Habitat for Humanity International, SDI, and Women in Informal Employment Globalizing and Organizing (WIEGO).

In a deeper sense, when a UCLG member addressing a global forum calls for the "feminization of politics" (Doc. 07), not just for parity in decision-making positions but as a normative shift towards "putting life and care at the center" of the political debate (Meet. 5), the local level emerges as a governmental actor that is willing to rethink its own work within a wider call to rethink global governance. This dimension is even more relevant if, as Gordon (2020, p. 206) suggests, "we [do not] take the identity of cities on the world stage for granted". Mindful of the complexity that underpins the translation of global discourses into local practices, the mobilization of normative claims can certainly play a key role, among other sets of values and interests, in the political process of constructing the (transnational) identity of the UCLG members.

As Thembisile Nkadimeng, former Co-President of UCLG, Mayor of Polokwane, and President of SALGA, stated: "local democracy is at the core of who we are as a movement" (Meet. 6). Given that the Western sphere is the historical cradle of both liberal democracy and the international municipal movement, the commitment to "being more attached than ever to our origins" is ultimately a call to foster local democracy (Meet. 6). This is inserted within a larger historical transformation that, over the last 50 years, has boosted democratization across countries in Africa, Asia, Southern and Eastern Europe, and Latin America (Morlino et al., 2017, p. 93). It further confirms the city networks' capacity, along with other actors such as intergovernmental organizations and civil society, to contribute to the diffusion of culture-bound norms where the West (still) plays a central role (Leffel, 2018, p. 513).

Yet in recent times, liberal democracy has been increasingly questioned as a model on a global scale. In the decades ahead, in parallel with a changing

geography in the distribution of power and wealth, the current legitimacy crisis of intergovernmental organizations might evolve into a crisis on the transition from the existing universalist and solidarist liberal foundations to a focus on specific functional arrangements and a "more morally and culturally plural ideational landscape" (Acharya & Buzan, 2019, p. 283). This may imply, for instance, collaborative relations revolving more around economic aspects than political or ideological ones (Acharya, 2018, p. 783).

However, we also know that the dominance of the state as the locus of political agency will intersect with the increasing relevance of hybrid actors. The ability to blend discourses that fit into existing institutionally-embedded power relations and discourses based on normative claims into societal transformations, as well as the capacity to blend globalist and localist discourses, provides an important clue with which to hypothesize on how the future might look. The degree of internal diversity of interests in UCLG and the tireless capacity to accommodate them through a rule-based institutionalization that simultaneously harnesses and controls political ambivalence may well signal the capacity to adapt and actually leverage such a changing reality. UCLG might even demonstrate higher adaptive capacity and fit-for-purpose resilience than the UN system. After all, this is the sovereignty-free vantage of an actor in a world ruled (and still to be ruled) by a Westphalian order.

# Conclusion

## Political, public, and territorial organizations[113]

If it ever retreated, the state is back as the fundamental actor in the political arena at the beginning of the 2020s. The COVID-19 pandemic has only bolstered the ongoing strengthening of state-centered pillars such as sovereignty and nationalism. Yet the future global order will also include powerful actors beyond the Westphalian order. Forces unleashed in the second half of the 20th century are contributing to increasing the complexity of contemporary global politics. At the intersection of globalization and urbanization, cities have emerged as rising actors in global governance along with a wider range of non-traditional actors and complex hybrid configurations contributing to the governance of transnational public affairs.

Since the 19th century, Northern cities facing common problems arising due to rapid urbanization increasingly engaged in formal inter-municipal relations that hosted learning processes around policy solutions. Inter-municipal relations, back then and now, emerged from the mutually reinforcing need to both compete and cooperate in a relational geography that has recently observed the emergence of a third intertwined drive for transnational entrepreneurship, which is the local political objective of standing out as a leading figure in specific policy fields. Impressively, the progressive consolidation of inter-municipal relations, well before our days, anticipated the contemporary capacity to harness ambivalence by advancing a trans-scalar discourse that is both universalist and localist.

In this context, the century-old transnational municipal movement has found, in the rise of the urban age, a unique historical opportunity to raise the bar in the context of the international chessboard. The declaration of the "new urban millennium" (UN-Habitat, 2006, p. iv), proclaiming 2007 as the first time in human history when the global urban population exceeded the number of people living in rural areas, marked a historical moment that went beyond the shift of global demographic centrality to cities. Disparate factors, like the rise of iconic cities as control and command nodes of an increasingly deregulated globalized economy or the promotion of decentralization along a

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[113] See Section 2.3 for the explanation of this concept and the reference to Blank (2006).

democratizing and neoliberal agenda, have converged in placing cities globally as development actors and strategic sites. The increased power of the organized constituency of local governments must be interpreted as the successful capacity of the transnational municipal movement to discursively situate itself as an inextricable component of the urban age.

The social construct bridging the definition of a policy problem with its proposal for action around the political opportunities generated by the adoption of the UN global agendas in the 2010s is the underlying fundamental strategy of UCLG. This framing has a scalar dimension as it iteratively sways from the local to the global and vice-versa. The notorious catch-phrase 'think global, act local', originally attributed to Geddes (1915), is flipped by the political representatives and practitioners of the ecosystem of city networks as 'think local, act global'. This evolution is certainly an indicator of the degree of urban policy circulation through transnational municipal networks in the interconnected urban world in the early 21$^{st}$ century (Gomà, 2019, p. 153). Yet, in a deeper sense, it is testimony to the growing collective 'sense of self-worth' of cities, as they increasingly enhance ownership of their role as local polities in global processes. The localization of the global agendas stems from and reproduces properties which are both constraining and empowering, such as the ambivalent constitution of local governments as both bureaucratic and democratic entities, or their characterization as sovereignty-free actors struggling to increase their power in a state-centric global arena of sovereignty-bound actors.

Evolving from the conceptualization of subnational governments as technical implementers of multilateral agreements, the localization of the global agendas adopted in the 2010s is framed by the city network as a political project. Globalist and localist narratives are amalgamated through a subtle discursive line between reactive and proactive positions that aim to embrace the global agendas, as state-centered international agreements that ultimately affect the everyday lives of local communities, while protecting local ownership vis-à-vis state-centered multilateralism. The localization frame harnesses the political agency that the international consensus and common language of the global agendas offer to local governments. Increasingly perceived as a legitimate actor within the global governance arena, UCLG promotes, accommodates, and organizes the networked orchestration of the political

agency of cities in the global urban era around policy issues that have long exceeded the monopolistic notion of national sovereignty.

Manifestly visible in the establishment and consolidation of the GTF, there is a dialectical relationship between domination and empowerment at play. Power relations unfold in the coordinative mechanism as members validate the legitimacy of the most active members of the GTF, while at the same time increasing the overall legitimacy of the organized constituency vis-à-vis their partners. Both a target of significant institutional resources and a source of organizational legitimacy, the steering capacity of UCLG, as facilitator of the GTF, is validated within the larger objective of building an extra-institutional global political representation of local and regional governments that ultimately contributes to amplifying the voice and legitimacy of all the city networks within the GTF.

Different political ideologies and entrenched interests sustain the foreign endeavors of local governments. The transnational dynamism of a city government stems from assembled synergies with other governmental and non-governmental, both profit and not-for-profit, actors that unfold across manifold scales of action. Local and extra-local interests are assembled into configurations that are simultaneously territorial and relational (Ward, 2019, p. 97). As collective political entities, cites act internationally as pluralist rather than unitary actors (Bassens et al., 2019, pp. 10-12). The transnational-oriented interests of elite-led urban growth coalitions that have traditionally substantiated normative urban imaginaries are blended with other political rationalities. This is the ultimate meaning of the entwinement of competition, collaboration, and political leadership as drivers of transnational entrepreneurship. In this trans-scalar field, while the local scale is inherently as democratic as any other scale, local and multilateral actors identify and harness synergies around progressive policies. In line with the very nature of the intergovernmental frameworks, UCLG pursues a normative transformation that is institutionally embedded into the frame of the localization of global agendas. The renewal of the social contract and empowerment of local communities is framed within a call to rethink the governance systems, starting from the very level of urban and territorial governance.

Seamless correspondence around discursive practices such as international cooperation or solidarity outline a mirroring effect between the

transnational municipal movement and the UN. The unification process that led to the creation of the world organization and favorable conditions within the UN, when straddling the 20th and 21st centuries, paved the way for the constitution of UCLG as the multilateralist (local) counterpart of the UN. In this sense, the multilateral institutional architecture actually constitutes the condition of possibility for the discursive empowerment of the UCLG members and a central component of the organization's overall mission. The constitution of UCLG as the multilateralist (local) counterpart of the UN is the result of a chain of interpretations and events against the backdrop of the historical legacy of the municipal movement.

UCLG harnesses its institutional added value, mobilizes its membership and synergizes with partners around political opportunity structures, and constructs complex discursive strategies of legitimation in order to enhance the political agency of local and regional governments vis-à-vis international organizations and national governments. Paradoxically, against the growing nationalist backlashes undermining multilateralism, UCLG members are defending the current international intergovernmental system, while key instances of the UN system still define local governments as non-state actors within their state-centered exclusionary framings. In an increasingly crowded global governance arena, the political agency of state-centric processes is complemented rather than replaced by city networks. The productive force of the localization discourse generates political agency within a context that, through the intertwined enactment of domination and empowerment, pursues global governance as a positive-sum power setting led by inter-state configurations in their capacity as power holders.

At the intersection of globalization and urbanization, subnational governments will continue to play a fundamental role in policy-making on behalf of their local communities. In the current context of socio-ecological and health crises, networked urban structures will be increasingly important in the relational geography that underpins global governance. The effects of these crises unfold within a larger shift from sustainable urbanism to "climate urbanism", as Long and Rice (2019, p. 993) aptly notice when they observe an emerging neoliberal policy discourse whereby the imperative of climate resilience is reorienting the widely diffused 'three-pillars' rhetoric of sustainability. The close linkage between the current global wave of urbanization and the threat posed by anthropogenic climate change lays the

foundation for the ascending contemporary relevance of urban resilience (Allen et al., 2020, p. 476). The COVID-19 pandemic has only strengthened the urgency of the resilience imperative, while consolidating the return of the state and its role in the provision of basic services and global public goods. Cities and their transnational networked endeavors will continue expanding against the backdrop of these forces at play. Yet they might acquire additional relevance in light of a different yet complementary set of historical transformations.

In the years ahead, the empowerment of cities as global strategic actors will also translate into the consolidation of the city as a spatial locus of political struggles. Curtis (2018, p. 89) argues that, as a historical outcome of state and market forces, global cities will evolve in conjunction with the shifting liberal international geopolitical order and the contradictions in neoliberal capitalism. Yet, Curtis (2018, p. 88) rejoins that, precisely because of the very structural forces underlying the current process of massive urbanization, any political attempt "to re-embed the market in society" will unfold through new logics (either progressive or not) in global cities. At the intersection between the state as dominant locus of political agency and the rise of new actors, the legitimacy and effectiveness of subnational governments as political, public, and territorial organizations will be increasingly relevant, even more so within the increasing complexity of interests and overlapping agendas that hybrid configurations will continue to add to global governance.

## Nuts and bolts of institutionalization and frame

Analytically moving back and forth between discursive practices and institutions, the research does not revolve around the interaction of background and foreground ideational abilities of social actors that are key in the explanatory model of discursive institutionalism (e.g. Schmidt, 2011). Rather, the case study of UCLG shows the explanatory power of sociological institutionalism (e.g. March & Olsen, 2011).

In a meta-organization fraught with diversity and the potential conflict deriving from an interest-based logic of consequences, an identity-based logic of appropriateness is actively pursued. Proving the empirical amalgamation of normative and cultural-cognitive elements, institutionalization is constantly reproduced by routines and the circulation of a core set of ideas, that is, cognitive frameworks, that are sustained by an intersubjective consensus. This

set of ideas constitutes the fundamental source of legitimacy of UCLG as membership, as it is at the core of the sense of identity of the local government members and relates to its nature and relationship with citizens. The discursive construction of a common and unifying identity of UCLG membership as governmental, democratic, and proximate embodies a logic of appropriateness that coexists with a logic of consequences, but tends to override it. This is consistent with the hypothesis that associates rule-based institutionalization with environments where members share experiences, and the logic of consequentiality with situations that are required to rationalize and justify decisions (March & Olsen, 2011, p. 493).

The complementary fundamental source of legitimacy of UCLG as an organization emanates from its procedural and diverse representation, legibility, and commitment. UCLG members (and partners) validate the organization because of the inclusiveness of its decision-making and governance procedures. This is inherently in line with the core idea of the democratic nature of local governments that sustains the legitimacy of UCLG as membership. Legibility and commitment constitute the overarching outputs of an effective and responsive capacity of orchestration. Deriving from the institutional core added value of unity and diversity, they bestow output legitimacy on the organization and its membership, enabling a key incentive for the multilateral institutional architecture. The diverse representativeness of UCLG and, to a broader extent, of the organized constituency within the GTF, which is facilitated by UCLG, offers an effective 'one-stop' platform for any multilateral actor interested in engaging in collaborative endeavors and joint legitimation strategies with subnational governments. The logic of appropriateness of unity in diversity provides an overall representative legitimacy that needs to be iteratively validated by the members and partners.

Framing the UN global agendas adopted in the 2010s as a call for localization allows the institutional core added values of unity and diversity to be mobilized and the organization to be provided with a strategic objective. The social construction of the frame constitutes the external component of the wider institutional logic of appropriateness that upholds UCLG. In other words, unity in diversity and the localization of global agendas are a mutually reinforcing pair in a unique institutional process. Their seamless correspondence is a consequence of the fact that they both rely on the same normative and cognitive sources of legitimacy. The legitimation goal of

validation as a single, united voice targets both the members and partners of the organization. As with rule-based institutionalization, the localization of global agendas contributes to the discursive reduction of complexity. In other words, the logic of appropriateness and localization storyline converge in portraying a sense of unity.

The social construction of the frame aims to build trust and consensus within an ecosystem of actors that includes the UCLG network and encompasses a wider range of diverse partners. The fundamental quality of the localization storyline lies in the connection of multiple themes and the continuous incorporation of changes, while providing a sense of coherence to the diagnostic-prescriptive narrative that discursively links the identification of trans-boundary political problems with the proposal of local policy solutions around the political opportunity structure generated by the adoption of global development agendas.

The storyline harnesses political ambivalence through narratives that construct shared meaning and enable structuring relations among actors with diverging accounts of social reality. The legibility elicited by the 'common language' of the global agendas is internalized and socialized. The storyline resonates with the everyday experiences of local and regional governments in order to ensure the members' validation and consequent mobilization for the localization frame, while, in turn, persuading partners about the 'political will and capacity' of the city network. The discursive construction of the transversality of separate global agendas as inseparable on the ground at local and regional level or the embeddedness of the COVID-19 pandemic – an unequivocal example of an unforeseen change across the organization's surrounding environment – within the existing global agendas and the degree of legitimation achieved around their consensus are positive examples of the productivity of power as discursive practices confer meaning and legitimize social subjects.

Nonetheless, the tactical polyvalence of discourses depicts a double-edged scenario. This is where rule-based institutionalization fully deploys its complementary fundamental role, as a sound, although not infallible, control mechanism of the risks associated with political ambivalence and diversity of interests. Rules accommodate interpretive schemata that facilitate actions and endow them with resources, ultimately contributing to dispel ambiguity and ensure commitments. In a crowded and increasingly complex institutional

landscape characterized by fierce competition for resources, 'free riding' is a tantalizing possibility for members that glimpse the opportunities that city networks offer as a 'launch pad' for their organizations and/or political careers. In a discursive space where narratives can quickly be adapted to serve different organizations and institutional strategies, UCLG copes with political ambivalence by repeatedly reproducing its logic of appropriateness. Regulating the allocation of resources (e.g. mobilizing attention, assigning responsibilities, designating time slots, earmarking funding, etc.), these rules simultaneously empower and constrain actors so as to ensure diversity while preserving unity. Examples of behavior indeterminacy that neglect the institutional logic of appropriateness are evident, but they do not acquire a critical mass and are rather outweighed by instantiations (e.g. discursive practices of political representatives) that reproduce the institutional logic of appropriateness.

Yet institutional routines – which can facilitate both stability and change – cannot regulate mutual expectations over members' behavior without trust in the frame holder. UCLG relies on the legitimacy of the political leadership, which, in turn, builds upon the groundwork of the technical secretariat in order to steer the world organization. Following the imperatives of procedure- and effectiveness-based legitimacy, the world secretariat is key to assisting the achievement of organizational objectives, as it holds the tacit and codified knowledge that, enacted through rules, ensures members' continuous commitment to orchestration within the logic of unity in diversity.

The solid institutional pairing between the discursive construction of the UCLG membership's identity as governmental, democratic and proximate, and the diagnostic-prescriptive narrative of political problems and policy solutions around the multilateral global agendas offer tangible benefits to members. Each actor is allowed to 'bring grist to the mill' within an overarching construction where each single discursive appropriation of the logic of appropriateness benefits the collective membership, its organization, and the institutional strategy it serves. These forms of discursive legitimation are harnessed by all the actors involved, including the UCLG partners. From a wider perspective, deploying a frame holder's catch-phrase such as 'localization' allows institutionally-embedded discursive practices and legitimation strategies to be retrieved in specific venues within the complex landscape of global governance.

## Context of the research

This is the dissertation of a PhD candidate who decided to embark on a doctoral journey after working for more than 10 years in the organization that constitutes the dissertation's object of study: UCLG. Besides the advantages and disadvantages of this specific positionality (described in the fourth chapter), this is also the ultimate motivation for starting such an academic endeavor. Having the opportunity as a practitioner to work in and learn first-hand about the complexity of global governance, I started to wonder what the academe was saying about what was actually my daily (professional) life. Above all, I sensed that UCLG, and indeed city networks in general, were contributing, even if to a small degree, to re-shaping the way international politics had been carried out since the second part of the 20th century. My hope was that the academe could grasp such a historical change in the field of international relations. Yet as an urban planner myself, and indeed as further confirmation of the novelty of this phenomenon, I was aware that our daily work entwined typical inter-state configurations (e.g. entertaining diplomatic relationships, contributing to UN fora, etc.) with themes and actors that were eminently local. In other words, the *raison d'être* of my work was rooted in urban governance. The most intellectually puzzling question, however, always revolved around legitimacy. Despite the clear recent improvements in terms of recognition, I always sensed an unsolved contradiction between the non-state identification granted by the UN system as a whole and the actual work and sense of identity of the organization's members as a constitutive part of the state. The heterogeneous perspectives of the practitioners involved in the daily lives of city networks can certainly contribute to improving the evidence-based scholarly analysis of this novel and complex changing landscape, as Acuto and Leffel (2021, p. 1771) recently pointed out. In retrospect, my intellectual endeavor mainly aims to address the oft-cited gap between theory and practice.

Giddens (1984, p. 335) aptly warrants that "[t]he 'findings' of the social sciences … are not necessarily news to those whom those findings are about". This is an inevitable risk in such an intellectual endeavor. My research experience specifically offers confirmation of the possibilities that lie ahead in the complex linkage between theory and practice. Certain practice-based 'preunderstandings' about the object of study have been confirmed by the literature review and empirical research, others have been significantly

contextualized. This is the case for legitimacy, which plays a fundamental analytical role in the dissertation, as well as offering a valuable perspective for disentangling the multiplicity of initiatives unfolding within the ecosystem of city networks and the complex landscape of global governance in general terms. Yet at the same time, the empirical analysis has brought me to understand legitimacy beyond the procedural dimension that I had anticipated in terms of theoretical expectations, and appreciate how other fundamental sources of legitimacy in global governance, such as effectiveness and broad shared values (e.g. solidarity), are equally important and empirically amalgamated. In a different light, theoretical insights from studies on state-centric intergovernmental organizations but, even more, on transnational non-state networks have proved to be completely relevant for the analysis of networks like UCLG.

Nonetheless, the clearest (and intellectually fascinating) indicator of the additional light that scholarly debate can shed on practice-based 'preunderstandings' emanates from neoinstitutionalism. This confirms the analytical purchase of adopting an institutional lens (e.g. March & Olsen, 1989) to contribute to the body of literature on city networks (Acuto & Ghojeh, 2019, p. 710). Along with the focus on frames (e.g. Schön & Rein, 1994) and discourse coalitions (e.g. Hajer, 1995), this effort is inscribed within the wider goal of approaching the object of study from the theoretical framework of discursive policy learning, as a specific political science contribution to the ongoing interdisciplinary efforts swaying between international relations and urban studies.

As in an interpretive journey, the research demonstrates the analytical suitability of an abductive logic. The conceptual relationship between legitimacy, frame, political opportunity, and empowerment was identified at the beginning of the research process. Yet, it is only through the retrofitting dialogue linking theory and empirical analysis that the central explanatory role of institutions emerged, providing coherence to the conceptual scheme and outlining the notion of discursive empowerment as the result of a process of institutionalization. Remarkably, the localization frame, which played a key explanatory role in the initial theoretical expectations, is encompassed by the (sociological institutionalist) logic of appropriateness of unity in diversity. Rule-based institutionalization provides the indispensable counterweight for simultaneously disentangling and corroborating the discursive practices that

constitute the localization storyline. The absence of the explanatory role of institutionalization in the initial interpretive expectations offers the reader the analytical insights resulting from a reflective and sense-reconstructing research process. It is in this sense that the analytical intersection between material dimension and social construction of meaning set out in this research hopes to contribute to bridging the gap between academic knowledge and relevance to policy-makers (Parsons, 2015, pp. 151, 166).

Lastly, my dissertation presents clear limitations in terms of empirical research that need to be acknowledged, as they suggest four potential areas for future research. These possible pathways constitute different kinds of research endeavor, both in terms of kind and degree.

First, institutionalized transnational inter-municipal relations as we know them today certainly embody a resilient capacity, as a plethora of actors and organizations have intermittently played an active role, sustaining and, in turn, influencing the evolution of the municipal movement throughout a century of history. Yet specific local and regional governments and local government associations play a significantly stronger role within the relevant networks in comparison with other members. Interestingly though, as formerly noticed, this demarcation does not necessarily mirror the traditional state-centered North-South divide. Nonetheless, this implies that, in explanatory terms, my dissertation builds upon those very UCLG members that are actively engaged in institutionalized networking and does not mirror the widely differentiated degrees of mobilization within the network. Within the study of (membership-based) city networks it is fundamental, as Ward (2019, p. 94) recalls, "not [to] confuse formal equivalence with functional equivalence". As an example, this could be grasped by comparatively analyzing the contribution of specific geographical regions to global networked urban governance. This line of inquiry would contribute by shedding light on the multilayered and multidirectional power relations revolving around the components and constituencies of the city network (i.e. political leadership, world secretariat, sections, large cities, intermediary cities, etc.). Within this endeavor, the research on C40 by Gordon (2020) and his conceptualization of governance fields seems particularly appropriate for disentangling the political dynamics at play when a diversity of actors negotiate to forge the collective identity of the city network.

Second, across the expanding number of city networks, UCLG's financial status intersects with a unique setting in terms of organizational size, complexity, and legacy. Scholarly work could explore the generalizability of the findings of this research to other organizations within the ecosystem of city networks. The theoretical intersection of institutionalization and frame could be applied to disentangling other city networks within the variegated hybrid landscape of global governance, unravelling if and how interests, identity, and ideas drive discursive and institutional practices around distinct trans-scalar diagnostic-prescriptive storylines. Equally interesting, research could disentangle how analytical frameworks, that for instance accentuate policy implementation rather than political transformation, apply to UCLG and which complementary findings they yield. There is promising cross-fertilization in this specific line of inquiry, as urban governance is simultaneously constituted by politics and technocracy, and the boundaries between these two components are inherently blurred (da Cruz et al., 2019, pp. 7-8). After all, we have seen how techno-managerial policy exchanges are still political in nature, even though they discursively accentuate other equally important (cognitive) aspects of the learning process.

Third, as has already been pointed out, frames have fundamental theoretical linkages with discourse coalitions. The GTF and a diverse set of partners like UN-Habitat, SDI, Cities Alliance, or even national governments may be conceptualized as actors of a discourse coalition. They are engaged in the routinization of a "parlance of governance", which is ultimately marginalizing alternative accounts of reality (Hajer, 2003, p. 107). As already discussed, the ecosystem of the city network is populated by organizations that rely on diverging underlying normative imaginaries about the nature of the city. Yet their diverging agendas converge in the overarching objective of raising the recognition and power of cities on the global chessboard. By the same token, UN-Habitat has a different positioning in terms of the role of local governments in governance in comparison with other UN agencies and entities. Indeed, as the case of the UN Permanent Observer Status reminds us, powerful actors have a different position in the 'urban agenda' and the related claims of the municipal movement. Scholarly work could focus on the interaction of and struggle with competing discourse coalitions aimed at framing distinct political problems and hence the proposition of specific policy solutions. Such an endeavor would certainly contribute to bridging the gap

between studies on traditional inter-state politics and the rise of new global actors such as cities and their networking organizations.

Fourth, focus on discursive empowerment elucidates if ideational resources contained in global agendas percolate to the subnational government level. There is, indeed, a policy transfer and the real interest lies in how this process unfolds. The case study on UCLG identifies a proactive rather than reactive role that networked cities play in harnessing such multilateral consensus as political opportunity structures, that is, as openings for tabling a different kind of political conversation on multilevel governance and co-creation of public policies rather than discussions perpetuating the understanding of local governments as technical implementers of state-centric international agendas. Awareness of the complex causal chain between change in discourse and change in practice prompts us to ask how the discursive empowerment of cities engaged in the networking relationships orchestrated by UCLG impacts the lives of billions of urban dwellers who are arguably represented by the UCLG members in their capacity as mayors and local leaders at the helm of political institutions serving local communities.

Within the complementary perspective of norm entrepreneurialism and norm life cycle (Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998), city networks provide more analytical purchase for the empirical analysis of the first two stages of norm emergence and diffusion, rather than for the third stage of norm (local) internalization (Galceran-Vercher, 2019, p. 25). Longitudinal cross-case comparison from the pioneering work of Bulkeley and Betsill (2003) onward are valid examples of the merits of this different type of inquiry in the context of city networks. The ethnographic commitment to 'follow the policy' (Peck & Theodore, 2012) across translocal networked relations is an important methodological resource, particularly as it emphasizes the mutation of policies from their initial assemblage and circulation to their localization. My research adopts a global scale of analysis, as it embraces the 'location' of urban politics in the inter-city social relations embedded institutionally in UCLG as a specific organizational network, thus allowing sociological institutionalism to be adopted as the central conceptual lens. Yet urban fine-grained attention is equally relevant as a complementary gaze for the same object of study. A global policy organization like UCLG provides an ideal empirical case for policy learning as it crystallizes through the intersection of human interaction,

circulation of material and documentation, and gatherings (Wood, 2016, p. 396).

Interestingly, this line of inquiry reminds us, once again, of the importance of legitimacy in any discussion around global governance. If procedure-based legitimacy and effectiveness-based legitimacy imply an inevitable trade-off, then investigating the local adaptation of globally assembled policies (e.g. localization of the SDGs) being proactively circulated by a translocal network like UCLG, which is committed to normative transformation and prioritizes procedure-based legitimacy over effectiveness-based legitimacy, implies shedding light on another fundamental complementary dimension of the learning process. It requires a focus on how arguably normative claims to transformation underpinning discursive empowerment permeate from the city or region representatives directly involved in the networking activities of UCLG (e.g. mayors and local/regional leaders, international relations staff, etc.) to other functional areas of the local and regional government's administration. After all, the potential synergies with multilateral actors promoting progressive policies stem, first of all, from the *raison d'être* of the city network, which is the membership and the underlying translocal agenda of each of their members. This line of inquiry embodies a deeper analytical engagement with the local-global nexus that is at the core of the contemporary transnational empowerment of cities. Undoubtedly, members whose international engagement relies mainly on the individual conviction of the incumbent political representative will differ in the analysis from those cities, either large or small, from the global North or global South, that envision their active participation in UCLG, as well as in other city networks, like the expression of a strategic commitment that is inherent in city governments as a whole and responds to their growing global sense of self-worth.

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# Annex I – Documents dataset

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# Annex II – Meetings and interviews dataset

<u>Direct observation</u>

- Local and Regional Governments' Day at 2019 HLPF
  15 July 2019
  New York, USA

- Local 2030 – Local Action for Global Commitments
  16-17 July 2019
  New York, USA

- VLR Event (Meet. 1)
  17 July 2019
  New York, USA

- VNR Lab - Localizing the SDGs and VNRs: reporting on progress, challenges and opportunities (Meet. 2)
  17 July 2019
  New York, USA

- UCLG World Congress Preparatory Meeting
  14 October 2019
  Barcelona, Spain

- Live Learning Experience: Beyond the Immediate Response to the Outbreak – Building the Community (Meet. 3)
  25 March 2020
  Virtual meeting

- Live Learning Experience: Beyond the Immediate Response to the Outbreak - Learning Session with Local Government Associations: multiplying and upscaling of measures (Meet. 4)
  9 April 2020
  Virtual meeting

- UCLG Learning Webinar - Local and regional governments in the SDG reporting progress – Towards the HLPF 2020
  16 April 2020
  Virtual meeting

- UCLG Executive Bureau (Rome) – Global consultation on UN75 (Meet. 5)
  29 May 2020
  Virtual meeting

- Live Learning Experience: Beyond the Immediate Response to the Outbreak - Local Democracy (Meet. 6)
  18 June 2020
  Virtual meeting

- VLR Series Launch (Meet. 7)
  8 July 2020

Virtual meeting

- Local and Regional Governments' Day at 2020 HLPF (Meet. 8)
  10 July 2020
  Virtual meeting

- 3rd Local and Regional Governments Forum on the 2030 Agenda (Meet. 9)
  13 July 2020
  Virtual meeting

<u>Elite interviewing</u>

- Interview with a mayor, member of UCLG
  UN HLPF, July 2019
  New York, USA

- Interview with a mayor, member of UCLG
  UN HLPF, July 2019
  New York, USA

- Interview with a UCLG Section's Secretary General
  UCLG World Congress, November 2019
  Durban, South Africa

- Interview with a UCLG Section's Secretary General
  UCLG World Congress, November 2019
  Durban, South Africa

At the intersection of globalization and urbanization, cities have stepped into the international arena and engaged in networking formal organizations of policy-making and learning. Among these city networks, United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG) is the largest at global level and the inheritor of a century-old municipal movement. UCLG is increasingly perceived as a legitimate actor within the state-centric global governance architecture. It promotes, accommodates, and organizes the networked orchestration of the political agency of cities in the global urban era around policy issues that have long exceeded the monopolistic notion of national sovereignty.