

Networking for sustainability

Transnational municipal networks and their contributions to and challenges in working on sustainable urban development

A blog by Lara Hendriks

Sustainability is a comprehensive term and covers a wide range of approaches and ideas. It offers endless opportunities to learn and exchange. But how to organize this exchange? Who gets a seat at the table? And how do you keep this exchange useful for all participants?

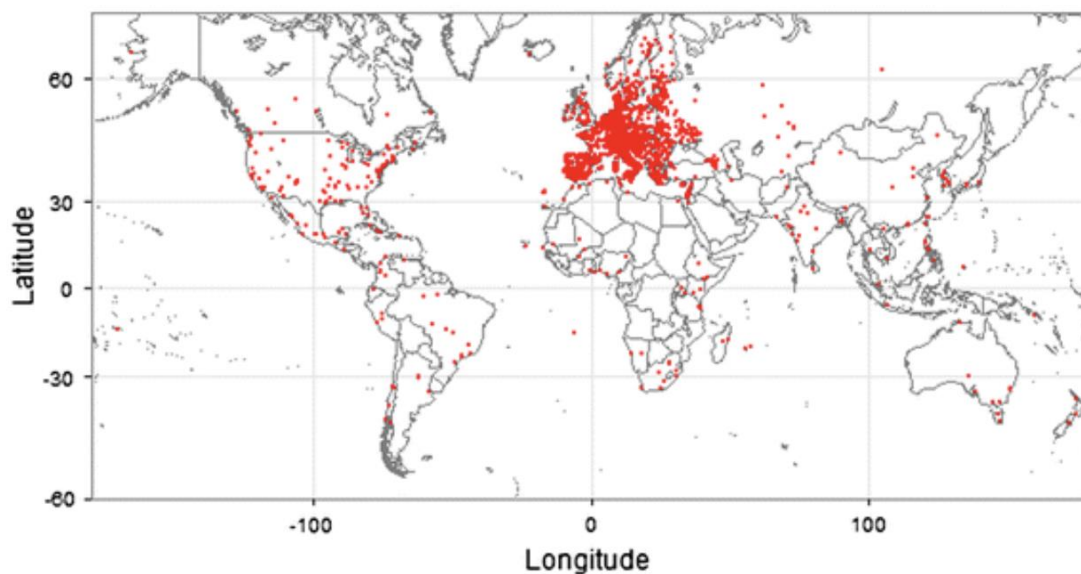


Source: Local and Regional Governments Forum, 16 July 2018, New York @UCLG-CGLU/Joel Sheakoski

‘Think globally, act locally’ is a well-known phrase within the field of sustainable development, indicating that global problems, such as climate change, require action from the local level (Gordon, 2013). More than half of the world’s population is currently living in urban regions, and urbanization rates are still high (Madlener & Sunak, 2011). Cities are increasingly collaborating through city networks (Davidson, Coenen, Acuto, & Gleeson, 2019). Transnational municipal networks (TMNs) are a specific type of city network where local governments exchange knowledge and create new connections (Bansard, Pattberg, & Widerberg, 2017).

Although the importance of involving the local level in sustainable development is increasingly acknowledged, less is known about the role and added value of TMNs in sustainable urban development, with their role in the Global South being especially underexposed. Transnational governance is mainly initiated, taken up, and researched in countries in the Global North, based on Northern case studies and experiences (Bulkeley et al., 2012; Schroeder & Janda, 2009).

Regions and cities in transnational municipal networks on climate mitigation (Bansard et al., 2017)



In addition, urban characteristics are highly diverse and especially in cities in the Global South, urban dynamics are poorly understood (Goldthau, Eicke, & Weko, 2020). Whereas some see TMNs as a promising addition to governance mechanisms for sustainable urban development, others have pointed towards problematic aspects (Bansard et al., 2017; Bouteligier, 2013). This leads to the following research question: *how do transnational municipal networks contribute to sustainable urban development in cities in the Global South?*

The research is theoretically embedded in academic debates on urban governance, decentralization, Southern urbanism, network governance, city-to-city cooperation, TMNs and their Northern bias. The research is a combination of a desk research and case study design, with two case studies: the networks ICLEI and UCLG. Both networks have classic TMN-characteristics (Haupt, 2019) and are represented in both the Global North and South.

Results

Interviews were conducted with people involved in the networks and (academic) experts. A SWOT-analysis was used to identify strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats in TMNs.

Strengths

Most interviewees identify transnational learning and exchange of knowledge, best practices, experiences, and resources as the main added value of networks. The “peer-to-peer” learning method, where practitioners learn from practitioners in other places, is at the core of transnational networks; they bring knowledge together, scale up initiatives and function as knowledge brokers. Another strong aspect of TMNs is that local and regional governments are their main partners. While the main policy-making and the allocation of resources usually happens at the national and international level, implementation happens at the local level. The local level is “where sustainability is given a physical form”, according to one of the interviewees. The local level is the closest level of governance to its citizens, meaning they can better understand the social or sustainability challenges that citizens face. Lastly, almost all interviewees mention that one of the most important aspects of TMNs is that, by bringing local governments together, they strengthen their position in relation to their individual national governments and other powerful actors in the (inter)national arena.

Weaknesses

TMNs are transnational, which implies that practitioners are brought together from different countries, with different languages. This comes with language barriers, literally and figuratively. Interviewees mention that participation of members in certain regions and localities is limited, since they cannot all read the publications and documents without the extra costs of translators. More figuratively, for transnational knowledge sharing, people need to understand each other’s ‘language’, the cultural contexts they are from. As one of the interviewees explains, “skills, knowledge and cultural awareness vary from local government to local government” and not all local administrators are equipped actors for processes of knowledge exchange. Also, knowledge is contextual and applicability and usability of that knowledge for other contexts remains unclear. It is difficult to translate experiences and best practices to other contexts, which can limit the extraction of lessons. Lastly, based on literature, it is expected that there are some power imbalances that bias the work of TMNs. This was mostly seen in the differences in resources and funding, meaning that actors that can offer the most funding, are expected to have the most power over the agenda-setting.

Opportunities

With the rise of the number of city networks over the last decades, opportunities for collaboration between different networks arise. Networks can form strategic alliances in the international policy arena. Also, the rapid speed of urbanization that is going on is not merely a challenge, but also foremost a unique opportunity to shape these changing and expanding urban areas in a sustainable manner, with the currently available knowledge on sustainability and sustainable development. Lastly, where international municipal cooperation used to be quite anecdotic, international policies of municipalities are much more strategized nowadays. More and more networks, like TMNs, base their work on reciprocity and mutuality, and consider the dichotomy of North and South to be fading.

Threats

The threat that was most mentioned, is the fact that national governments still hold a very powerful position, compared to the local level. This is not necessarily a threat when they are willing to cooperate with local levels of government, but this is not always the case; the hands of cities and local governments are somewhat tied. Another threat is that most funds and grants are allocated to national governments and other national actors, and little of that money flows to cities. Even money that is allocated to local development sometimes does not end up at the local level. Another threat is that administrations change every few years, which threatens the continuity of networks. Networks constantly have to make new connections and agree on new priorities for the next few years. Lastly, there has been a proliferation of networks, also specifically on topics around sustainable development. Therefore, knowledge exchange can become too overwhelming and lose its effect. Also, competition between networks can arise when grants are offered for specific themes or projects.

Overview SWOT-analysis based on thesis data

	Helpful to achieving the objective (sustainable urban development)	Harmful to achieving the objective (sustainable urban development)
Internal origin (attributes of networks)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Transnational learning character • Local and regional governments as members • Empowerment of the local level 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Language • Contextuality of knowledge • Power imbalances
External origin (attributes of the environment in which networks operate)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Collaboration between different networks • Rapid urbanization • Strategized international municipal cooperation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Power of national level • Funding differences • Changes in administration • Number of networks

The findings apply to both the Global North and the Global South, but some elements have specific implications for the role of TMNs in the Global South. All in all, there are strong indicators that TMNs are a valuable addition to the existing governance mechanisms for sustainable urban development. Their unique potential mainly lies in the peer-to-peer learning method that is at the core of their work. With their local and transnational approach, TMNs connect local administrators and mayors from all over the world in a strategic manner. Another promising way TMNs work on sustainable urban development is the international advocacy work. The empowered position of local and regional governments in the national and international policy arena, offers great potential for sustainable urban development in the future. The local level is more and more acknowledged by national and international actors and TMNs function as shortcuts to important (inter)national policy partners, financial institutions, or other useful organizations.

However, there are also some issues when talking about the role of these networks, of which power differences and funding, and contextuality of knowledge are the most obvious ones. When members have unequal resources and funding opportunities, this can influence the agenda-setting in demand-driven organizations as TMNs. Although awareness of this issue is growing, in practice it remains hard to eliminate biases overall in transnational (North-South) collaborations. Also, the contextuality of knowledge appeared to be an issue, meaning that the usefulness of context-specific knowledge for other contexts can be questioned. Southern urbanism indicates that southern cities are very diverse and poorly understood. In addition, the capabilities and resources of local governments to participate in useful knowledge transfer are discussed.

Main take-aways

- Networks: TMNs should continuously find ways to reinforce strong points and confront weaknesses (e.g. empowerment of the local level to build a strong alternative to the powerful national level)
- Networks: TMNs should continuously find ways exploit opportunities and build response mechanisms to threats (e.g. strategize cooperation more on specific themes to prevent overwhelming numbers of approaches)
- Research: research on TMNs should move beyond the North-South dichotomy and study power dynamics within specific regions in the Global North or South (i.e. ‘zoom in’)
- Research: research should move beyond the perspective of the network and look at ways to measure impact of TMNs, for example by case studies or by interviewing members of the networks

Personal Reflection

Around 1,5 years ago, I started an inspiring internship at DRIFT, the Dutch Research Institute for Transition. Although initially online, they welcomed me to their projects and gave me a huge pile of inspiration about topics such as sustainability transitions, justice, power, and social innovation. It gave me a fresh dose of motivation to finish my Master Sustainable Development, with a thesis called *‘Networking for Sustainability: A thesis about transnational municipal networks and their contributions to and challenges in working on sustainable urban development in the Global South.’* In this blog, which the JUSTRA team kindly invited me to write, I summarize the research that I have conducted, and the most important findings.

A personal reflection on this thesis is the fact that the research is still executed by a researcher in an urban area in the Global North, while that was in fact part of the problem definition of the research. The positionality of the author therefore delivered some feelings of discomfort at times, especially when talking about issues in the Global South. In a sense, this research therefore replicates part of the problem identification. However, the aim of the research was to shift away from a Northern focus and identify implications of the work of TMNs in the Global South, on which research so far has been limited. The identified SWOTs apply to both regions, but the research did deliver some Global South-specific implications and can therefore still be seen as a valuable addition to the Global North-dominated academic debate on TMNs. It was first and foremost very interesting to hear perspectives from people working for these networks from all over the world.

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About the author

Lara did research internships at Milieudefensie and DRIFT, where she got inspired to learn more about the topics of transition, energy, justice and innovation. She is still working in the energy transition field but moved from academia to practice, in a job focused on the built environment. Together with municipalities, she helps residents to make their houses more sustainable, through a wide range of practical projects and by giving information and advice.