



### What's in a centenary?

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Numerous international groups of local and regional authorities exist today as they have existed throughout the last century, among which, UCLG is currently the most solid and generalised in its activity. However the plethora of unique initiatives and activities today has been a permanent feature over the past 100 years: during the twenties, an American named White travelled Europe to defend his 'League of Cities' project; in 1936-1937, a couple of swindlers based in the Paris region (France) created an *Union Internationale des Municipalités* to pocket the contributions of gullible Mayors; immediately following the Second World War, French and German Mayors engaged in twinning activities to resolve the conflict between their countries; in London in 2005, representatives from several megalopolis came together to reach a decision on climate change and to later create the Cities Climate Leadership Group (C40) in 2006.

Throughout the 20th century, associations of local and regional authorities not only tackled general issues, covering topics such as peace or European reconstruction, but also specialist thematic issues. Recently, city networks on the field have multiplied as have the issues they address, from educational policies to the defence of the environment or urban lighting. Although contact between local and regional authorities had already begun organically in various forms (correspondence, study trips, lectures), it was in 1913 that it took the permanent, regulated and systematic form of the association. For 100 years different associations have not only sought to defend the urban interests before the national and international public and authorities, but also to circulate knowledge, experience, ideas, technical and political procedures among cities, and to implement an inter-municipal framework capable of superseding national states. 100 years of activities, questions, debates, and organisation. 100 years celebrated today by United Cities and Local Governments, an organisation created in 2004 as a result of the fusion of several groups of local and regional authorities, among which the oldest was created in 1913. As researchers, we have worked on these inter-municipal activities from the end of the 19th century up to today, which makes it possible for us to take stock of this period on the date of this centenary.

It was in Ghent (Belgium) in 1913 that the first International Congress of Cities took place. This congress, organised in the framework of the World Fair, focused on the study and transformation of urban municipal life. Among the organisers of this event were the key figures of Brussels internationalists of the early decades of the century. They participated to various arenas in the capital of Belgium: they were members and leaders of the Workers' party, the Freemason lodges, the social sciences research institutes, and the numerous international associations dedicated to the sharing of knowledge, such as the (International Institute of Bibliography). In all

these fields, they had nurtured projects that sought to supersede the national framework as the basic cell for public action. The *Union Internationale des Villes*, founded during this congress of 1913, followed four objectives that echoed these other commitments: represent ideas and interests concerning municipalities and municipal topics; connect municipal administrators from various countries; pool technical resources to improve the welfare of urban dwellers; study municipal life. The ambition was to develop an in-depth knowledge of the city in its entirety on the premise that, “everything happens in the city”. Indeed, many leaders of the Union share one reflection: the 19<sup>th</sup> century had been characterised by an unprecedented urbanisation. The city would therefore become, “a centre where all the modern activities of man will be carried out and come together”, from education to work and assistance to economics (in particular through services operated directly or indirectly by municipalities). These mutations, according to the founders, required the sharing of knowledge, experiences and demands. This *Union Internationale des Villes* became the International Union of Local Authorities as of the 1920s (in order to integrate British local governments) and it is this same Union whose centenary is celebrated today as one of the founding organisations of UCLG.

The objectives defined in 1913 may seem familiar if we compare them to those of UCLG today. Yet, it would be misleading to conclude that inter-municipal activities have been stable over the last 100 years. The world of international local and regional authorities has been marked by a number of changes, hesitations, and struggles. Changes in the interlocutors of the inter-municipal movement: national governments, inter-governmental organisations (from the League of Nations to the United Nations and the World Bank), and subnational structures such as the European Union. Hesitations over questions relating to the best method for action and fields to be promoted by the association, with an on-going tension between a technical project (sharing experiences) and a political project (affirming the autonomy of local and regional governance and working to extend its reach). Struggles, or even feuds, like that of the 1960s when the United Towns Organisation and the International Union of Local Authorities – organisations that have since united to form UCLG - quarrelled to obtain United Nations’ attention in the context of the Cold War. Celebrating a centenary should not lead us to flatten out this history into a narrative of seamless international collaboration.. It would be equally misleading to apply such neat view on the individual history of an organization. Taking as example the International Union of Local Authorities, 100 years of history instead reveals the changing balances within the organisation: between nations and regions, between political sensitivities, between types of cities and between the occupational profiles of its individual leaders.

Without going into too much detail in this short introduction, let’s take for granted that the history of the international municipal movement has been plural and contradictory in its forms and methods. One thing, however, remains true: for 100 years, local and regional authorities and their representatives (leaders or staff members) have found meaning in the activities that bonded municipalities across national spaces. For sure, it was not always the same local and regional governments who joined, nor from the same countries and regions of the world and international associations of local and regional governments weathered hard times for financial, political and human reasons, but inter-municipal activities never ceased, including during the two

world wars of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. To help us understand what makes the centenary celebration possible today, we must look at the motivations of those that joined the movement.

Within the limits of this introduction it would be impossible to elaborate an extensive typology of purposes and motivations. We will simply attempt to suggest the range of such motivations based on 3 observations.

- During economic crises, the importance given to the inter-municipal networks was surprisingly high – as witnessed during the inter-war years and in the early 1980s. During this second period, for instance, engagement in international municipal activities was a strategic choice for some British cities that faced the deindustrialization process. This led elected local representatives and local economic managers to adopt new economic strategies. In concrete terms, this meant diversifying activities, orientating the city toward service activities and giving it a new image. In order to do this, it was essential to find the financial resources that Conservative national governments were retrenching. The work of creating a new image of the city was undertaken precociously by the Chambers of commerce, then by elected representatives who invested in the international, in particular at the European level. Birmingham is a good example of a city that symbolizes this economic motivation to commit to international networks: its representatives played a fundamental role in the creation of the Eurocities city network, and at the same time they revamped the economic role and image of their city thanks to a major influx of subsidies provided by the European Commission. Engaging with international associations of municipalities was also a mean to obtain tangible resources.
- These resources can also be symbolic in the early 20th century, certain urban local authorities were looking to avoid the weight of the central States by participating in an international network. The unions of cities – with their conference, congress and study visits – offered municipalities an expertise that they would otherwise not have been able to generate through their own limited technical and administrative apparatus. Faced with their national governments, German or Italian municipal associations stated their claims on the basis of international comparisons they had access to thanks their membership into an international association. French local authorities, and their individual leaders such as Henri Sellier, made a similar use of international references during the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. At the end of the 1980s, the city of Barcelona offers another famous example of the manner in which the international was used to revamp the status of one town. The objective was to reverse the centralization that was implemented during the Franco regime and affirm the greater outreach of Barcelona compared to the Spanish capital, Madrid. But, it was also a rivalry in Catalonia itself that explained the search for support and visibility at international level. Namely, the struggle between the city of Barcelona and the Generalitat of Catalonia, which led Mayor Pasqual Maragall and his team to commit to the organization of major events (the 1992 Olympic Games) and to take the lead into inter-municipal activities in order to connect domestic partners under the aegis of the City of Barcelona (university networks, local management representatives, the Chamber of commerce, etc). More recently, participation in the inter-municipal networks has been the opportunity for

municipalities to defend their calls for decentralisation and the autonomy of local governments, , in particular through the connections of international municipal associations with the European Union or the United Nations' Agencies. Participating in an international association of local authorities is a way to object to national institutions and legislations that are unfavourable for local and regional authorities.

- When one follows the international activities of specific cities during the past 100 years, there are periods in which the involvement in international groups is more intense. Reforming municipal teams or new Mayors, more often than not, play the international card to build their programme and/or justify changes that they wish to introduce in their town/city. Conversely, participation in international groups also allows for foreign expertise to be mobilized in order to legitimize existing policies. More widely, for elected representative and municipal technicians, joining a municipal association and participating in its events makes it possible to acquire information or knowledge that can be used on the domestic scene. And, for a Mayor or elected representatives it is also a way to build an international status that can lead to national government responsibility. Finally, in the context of the last few decades, joining an inter-municipal network has been a way to take part in the international competition between towns to attract investment and/or tourism: the participation to inter-municipal activities is seen as one of the things a creative and innovating city should do, and it gives access to a whole sphere of events, awards and connections with an international visibility. This has been one major incentive behind the growth of city networks in recent years.

Research is underway on the inter-municipal practices in Asian, South American or African cities relating these particular incentives and in the context of their specific urban conditions at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, but that chapter will be part of the next centenary.

#### Reading suggestions

Ewen Shane and Saunier Pierre Yves, (eds), *The other global city. Explorations into the transnational municipal moment 1850-2000*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2008

McCann Eugene and Ward Kevin (eds), *Mobile Urbanism: Cities and Policymaking in the Global Age*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011

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