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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.

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, among which the oldest was created in 1913.

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

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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.

- From 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.
- 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.

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 21st century, but that chapter will be part of the next centenary.

To read the full document, please click [here](#).

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