Reactions of Local and Regional Governments to the UN75 Report 8 October 2020

This virtual event was convened in the context of the 75th Anniversary of the United Nations (UN75). It discussed, among other things, the findings of two reports: “The Future We Want, The UN We Need – Update on the Work of the Office on the Commemoration of the UN’s 75th Anniversary” and the “Visioning Report UN75: The Role of Local and Regional Governments in the Future Global Governance of the International System.’ The latter report was drafted by the Global Taskforce of Local and Regional Governments (LRGs) on behalf of the constituency, as part of the global consultation organized by UN Secretary-General António Guterres on the occasion of UN75.

The event considered the best ways to take the findings of the reports forward at the local, regional and global levels. It also convened LRG and high-level UN representatives to discuss priorities for “recovering better” following the COVID-19 pandemic. In addition, the event addressed long-term LRG priorities, and what a renewed and networked multilateral system would look like.

LRGs are at the forefront in fighting the COVID-19 pandemic, building back better, climate action, and implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Thus, they should have a formal seat at the UN table, participants emphasized during the event. In this regard, proposals included giving UCLG observer status at the UN and establishing a UN General Assembly of Local Governments.

More specifically, event sessions addressed:
- immediate priorities for recovery from the pandemic and the need for improved access to basic services (healthcare, safe water, sanitation and education), greater international solidarity, tackling inequalities, and rebuilding a more inclusive economy;
- long-term priorities, such as the climate crisis, gender equality, decentralization, post-COVID 19 green economic recovery, and reducing corruption; and
- international cooperation and the UN, and proposals for a renewed multilateralism.

The event was organized by UCLG and took place on 8 October 2020 in a virtual format due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Brief History

LRGs debuted their high-level political engagement with the UN in the post-COVID-19 era during the 2020 High-level Political Forum for Sustainable Development, which took place from 7-16 July. Through three events, LRGs discussed their role, needs, and challenges during the COVID-19 crisis. They also highlighted new tools they have developed to further their contribution to implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

The first event, “UCLG and UN Habitat: VLR Series Launch,” marked the launch of the first volume of the VLR Series, “Guidelines for Voluntary Local Reviews’ (VLRs).” The VLR Series aims to provide guidance, definitions, and technical support to any local or regional government seeking to engage in the VLR process. The series is an integral part of work to be undertaken by the UCLG Community of Practice. This work seeks to increase awareness of local and regional government co-ownership of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (2030 Agenda). The virtual launch event highlighted that localization of the 2030 Agenda is even more important in light of the COVID-19 pandemic to ensure no one and no place is left behind in its aftermath.

The second event, “Local and Regional Governments Day Event: Accelerating Transformation from the Ground-up in a Post-COVID Era,” presented the benefits of establishing a joint
agenda between local, national and international levels to bolster local action and accelerate implementation of the 2030 Agenda. During the event, LRG representatives highlighted the need for investments that support universal access to essential public services, green recovery, and revamped multilateralism to achieve the SDGs in the post-COVID-19 era. The event also marked the launch of the UCLG report “Towards the Localization of the SDGs.”

The third event, “Third Local and Regional Governments Forum on the 2030 Agenda: The Decade of Action – Bolstering Change from the Ground-up,” identified essential elements for kicking off the Decade of Action from the perspective of the LRG constituency in the post-COVID-19 recovery phase. The Forum emphasized the importance of multilevel governance, sound local finances, decentralized cooperation, and territorial cohesion in the post-COVID-19 era. Participants shared examples of ways LRGs can catalyze the bottom-up transformation towards sustainability and resilience that will be necessary during the recovery. The Decade of Action calls for accelerating sustainable solutions to the world’s biggest challenges, related to, among others, poverty, gender, climate change, inequality and closing the finance gap.

In 2020, on the occasion of UN’s 75th anniversary, in the midst of a pandemic that disrupted the debut of the Decade of Action, UN Secretary-General Guterres called for unity and accelerated action for all the people of the world. He convened a global consultation to discuss priorities and to find out what people want and need from the UN moving forward.

On 21 September 2020, the UN General Assembly (UNGA) organized a high-level event to commemorate UN75. Under the theme, “The Future We Want, the UN We Need: Reaffirming our Collective Commitment to Multilateralism,” the event aimed to:
- present the outcomes of the UN75 initiative – the world’s largest conversation, launched in January 2020, to gather public opinion and crowdsourcing solutions to global challenges;
- chart a way to take forward the findings for building a better world for all; and
- reinvigorate multilateral action to tackle global challenges.

During the meeting, UN Member States adopted the Declaration on the Commemoration of the 75th Anniversary of the UN. The UN Secretary-General launched the UN75 report, which summarizes the findings of the global consultation.

Building on the momentum created by the high-level commemorative event, the Global Taskforce of LRGs announced, on 25 September, the international municipal and regional movement, which the Taskforce convenes, had joined the UN75 global conversation to ensure the voices of cities and regions around the world are represented. Specifically, the Taskforce announced the LRG constituency had participated in the UN75 global consultation by launching a report on the state of multilateralism in 2045.

The report, “Visioning Report UN 75: The Role of Local and Regional Governments in the Future Global Governance of the International System,” calls for a new generation of multilateralism that treats local democracy as central for peaceful societies. It notes the COVID-19 pandemic has shed light on some of the current multilateral model’s shortcomings. It recalls the need for cooperation between different spheres of government and different actors. The publication also highlights that LRGs are ready to ensure the future livelihoods of the communities they represent drive global policies, and that the dreams and expectations of people “truly shape actions and decisions.”

The report’s recommendations aim to support a future in which communities are central to the transformation towards a renewed multilateralism. It explains that such a future would create a world, which ensures the provision of public services, promotes local consumption and production patterns, and supports an inter-city system that builds on the strength of cities and regions.

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Setting the Scene

Opening the discussion, Ada Colau, Mayor of Barcelona, Spain, and UCLG Special Envoy to the UN, underscored the need for international solidarity, focusing on poverty eradication and reducing inequality. She emphasized that “access to universal
health care is non-negotiable.” Noting democracy and the survival of human rights are in jeopardy, she called for a new global governance that puts people at the center.

Fabrizio Hochschild, UN Under-Secretary-General and Special Adviser to the UN Secretary-General on the Commemoration of the UN 75th Anniversary, noted the global consultation had reached more than one million people. He said the UN75 report was based on data from more than 1000 UN75 dialogues and an artificial intelligence analysis of social media in 75 countries. He emphasized the consultation’s revelation that, despite the polarization spread in our societies by social media algorithms, people are united in their basic demands. People’s fears and hopes are similar, he said, and local governments are best suited to meet their needs.

Immediate Priorities for Recovery from the Pandemic

Maimunah Mohd Sharif, UN-Habitat Executive Director, presented the “UN Secretary-General’s Policy Brief on COVID-19 in an Urban World.” She said the policy brief underscores the need for: tackling inequalities and development deficits; strengthening the capacity of local governments and enhancing multi-level coordination; and ensuring a green, resilient, inclusive and gender-responsive recovery. She said multilateralism should be based on three principles, namely partnerships, solidarity and co-creation, and multi-level governance.

Íñigo Urkullu, President of the Basque Government, Spain, and Secretary General of Regions4, highlighted the need for public and personal commitment to tackle the pandemic. He spoke about the importance of public investment in healthcare, education and social protection. Urkullu further emphasized the need to transition to a circular economy and local consumption.

Yolande Hendler, Secretary General, Habitat International Coalition, lamented the Visioning Report lacks inclusion of habitat and housing rights among the short- and medium-term priorities for LRGs. She said linking short- and long-term priorities is critical and encouraged further focus on the climate justice-housing rights nexus.

Wim Dries, Mayor of Genk, Belgium, said the COVID-19 crises showcases the importance of the 2030 Agenda. He underscored that city-to-city cooperation enhances the delivery of basic services in a transparent and democratic manner. Dries underscored the need for a renewed UN system that engages local governments. He explained the UN should support local governments in addressing climate change challenges.

Magnus Berntsson, Vice-President, Region Västra Götaland and Regional Minister for Environment, Sweden, and President of the Assembly of European Regions, observed that COVID-19 has both revealed and widened existing inequalities. He emphasized that local and regional governments should ensure no one is left behind by taking responsibility for providing basic services. He said no one is better placed than local governments to understand and respond to the needs of the most vulnerable. Berntsson called on Member States, cities, regions and civil society to coordinate and collaborate “for a safe future for all.”

Long-Term Priorities for the Future We Want

Mpho Moruakgomo, Chair, Commonwealth Local Government Forum, said decentralization must become the new normal, citing the need for proximity production and consumption and a circular green recovery. He called attention to work on building robust and resilient local governments and transparent institutions. He said supporting local economic development will be essential for a sustainable, green recovery.

Carola Gunnarsson, Mayor of Sala, Sweden, and UCLG Vice-President, spoke about three priorities identified in the UN75 report: environmental protection and access to basic services, which she said can only be achieved with the support of local governments; gender equality; and localizing the international agenda. She explained that a dedicated seat for LRGs at the UN would enable the constituency to express its views and ensure they are considered by UN Member States. Therefore, she said, UCLG should be granted observer status at the UN.

International Cooperation and the UN We Need

Johnny Araya, Mayor of San Jose, Costa Rica, and UCLG Co-President, underscored the importance of dialogue between all levels of governments, which he said should be guided by the principle of solidarity. He stressed LRGs will be able to infuse global intergovernmental discussions with the creativity needed
to find solutions to current challenges only if they have a seat at the table.

Berry Vrbanovic, Mayor of Kitchener, Canada, and UCLG Treasurer, said 2020 and beyond should be based on a new system of democratic collaboration and equity. He underscored the need for decentralized cooperation to build back better and stronger after the pandemic. He also called for a seat for LRGs at the UN table.

Miquel Royo Vidal, Director General of Global Affairs, Government of Catalonia, Spain, noted the need for more coordinated action to prevent the current economic recession from becoming an economic collapse. He stressed the governance of economic recovery must take place through cooperation among all levels of the government. He said the regional dimension is essential to the policy integration needed for SDG implementation and a resilient recovery.

Vasu Gounden, Executive Director, African Centre for the Constructive Resolution of Disputes, noted that 75 intergenerational dialogues, held on the occasion of UN75, identified future priorities, namely healthcare, water and sanitation, and education. He suggested the UN create a “second chamber,” so that, by 2045, two UN chambers exist: UNGA and the UN General Assembly of Local Governments.

Thembisile Nkadimeng, Mayor of Polokwane, President of the South African Local Government Association, and UCLG Co-President, emphasized that equality, especially gender equality, must be at the heart of the development process. She called for including women in formulating and monitoring public policy. She underscored the need for strong local governance that respects the principles of decentralization, subsidiarity and responsibility. She emphasized “the only way forward” is co-creation with local communities and stakeholders, including the private sector, to ensure a holistic approach.

Ashok Sridharan, Mayor of Bonn, Germany, and President, ICLEI – Local Governments for Sustainability, said LRGs should strengthen their collaboration with the UN through: annual dialogues between the Global Taskforce of LRGs and the UN Sustainable Development Group; collaboration between the UN Regional Commissions, host cities, and regional governments and networks; and engagement with UN Resident Coordinators.

Closing Remarks

In conclusion, UN Under-Secretary-General Hochschild mentioned UNGA’s adoption of the Declaration on the Commemoration of the UN’s 75th Anniversary, which mandates the Secretary-General to develop concrete recommendations on ways to “upgrade the UN.” He said the Secretary-General will commence a new consultation for crafting the recommendations and present them to UNGA in 2021. Hochschild invited UCLG to advance recommendations discussed during the event related to a more formalized role for LRGs in the UN. He thanked all who attended the event.