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## **The international leadership agenda for councils**

UK local leaders are becoming increasingly active across national frontiers.

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In his influential book, *If Mayors Ruled the World*, Benjamin Barber argued that the nation-state was failing us on a global scale largely because it is 'utterly unsuited to interdependence'.

Published in 2013 his subtitle - *Dysfunctional Nations, Rising Cities* – was prophetic. A glance at the current political chaos in Westminster lends support to his claim that nation states can collapse into quarrelsome, short-term infighting.

Elected local authorities, he argues, tend to be more pragmatic, more inclusive and more responsive. His analysis shows how city mayors, singly and jointly, are responding more effectively to international problems than national governments.

There are three overlapping reasons why city and regional leaders are becoming increasingly active in international, place-to-place networking, learning and exchange.

### **International lesson drawing**

International lesson drawing for public policy is a key driver. This involves examining experiences in cities and regions in one or more other countries in order to discover relevant new insights for policy and practice.

The adoption of a waterside approach to urban regeneration provides a good example of successful international lesson drawing. Civic leaders in Baltimore, notably Donald Schaefer when he was Mayor (1971-87), had a significant impact not just on the Inner Harbour area of the city, but also on regeneration practice more widely. Mayor Schaefer showed great vision in recognising that the decaying dockland area at the heart of the city was actually full of potential.

The transformation of Baltimore Inner Harbour, from an unsafe, polluted dockland, with many empty warehouses, into a vibrant tourist destination with a wide range of attractions, is now recognised as a classic example of waterside urban renewal.

During the last thirty years regeneration plans in many other countries, including Birmingham's Brindleyplace and Cardiff Bay, have drawn insights

from the Baltimore experience and, of course, Baltimore has learnt from exchanges with cities in other countries.

International place-to-place lesson drawing can deliver a number of benefits for policy makers. First, experience abroad can act as an invaluable source of practical and useful ideas. Second, while localities may be faced with common problems, it is clear that these problems do not produce identical policy responses. It is the differences in responses that different localities make to shared problems that can provide stimulating, even inspiring, insights for civic leaders. Third, in a world in which unprecedented numbers of people are now migrating across national boundaries cross-national exchange can lift the level of local inter-cultural knowledge, awareness and understanding.

### **International relationship building**

A second motive for reaching out across borders is international relationship building. Such relationships can be binary pairings, as in sister-city or town-twinning arrangements, or clusters of cities focussing on a particular topic or theme, for example, tackling the climate change emergency.

Since the late 1980s interest in international policy exchange between cities and localities has grown rapidly and, in some cases, these exchanges have led to the creation of robust international networks bringing cities together.

Here's an example. In 1986 EUROCITIES was a new grouping of six big European cities. Now it has 190 members, including 45 partner cities outside Europe. It campaigns for enhanced recognition of the role of cities in EU policy making. Also, it provides support to city leaders and administrations so that they can collaborate in many policy areas – for example, culture, economy, environment and mobility. EUROCITIES operates a first class service for its members, providing access to news, projects, events, webinars, case studies, publications and so on.

### **Enhancing place-based power**

The third purpose of international collaboration, and it is now very much on the rise, is to expand the power of place in our globalising world. The extraordinary growth of place-less power, meaning distant decision-makers, often working for multi-national companies who are not expected to care about the consequences of their decisions for particular places and communities, has diminished the power of elected place-based leaders in many countries.

The growing centralisation of legal and fiscal power within some nation states, and the UK provides an unhappy example, is a further driving force that is weakening the power of place in some countries.

Faced with external threats of this kind many local government leaders are fighting back by working with colleagues in other countries to strengthen the power of place, cities and city regions in the dynamics of global governance.

Two examples of current international initiatives illustrate the possibilities for enhancing the power of place in our globalising world.

Launched in The Hague in 2016 the Global Parliament of Mayors (GPM), as proposed by Benjamin Barber in his book, aims to strengthen the role of cities in global governance. The most recent Annual Summit of the GPM, held in Bristol in 2018, passed a number of declarations relating to city leadership, migration, urban security and health. The GPM resolution on 'Empowering cities to cope with global challenges' was presented to the UN-Habitat Assembly in Nairobi, Kenya in May 2019.

GPM's migration declaration related specifically to the Global Compacts on Migration and Refugees that the UN was in the process of drafting. Members of the GPM and other city leaders called for the full and formal recognition of the role of local authorities in the implementation, follow-up, and review of both compacts.

In 2018 Marvin Rees, Mayor of Bristol, became the first mayor to take part in UN negotiations on the Global Compact on Migration. He argued that the leaders of cities and networks of cities should be equal partners with national governments in shaping international policy. As the Global Compact was being adopted in Marrakesh in December 2018 a new Mayors Migration Council (MMC) was launched to elevate the voice of cities in international deliberations concerning refugees and migrants.

In our rapidly changing world it is important that local leaders not only deliver good collaborative governance locally. They also need to shape the international context within which their localities will flourish or decline.

Regardless of whether Brexit proceeds or is rejected in favour of 'Remain and Reform', it is clear that wise local leaders will strengthen their participation in international diplomacy in the period ahead.

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*His recent book is **Leading the Inclusive City**. More:*

<https://policy.bristoluniversitypress.co.uk/leading-the-inclusive-city-1>

Useful sources relating to international networking:

EUROCITIES: <http://www.eurocities.eu>

European Urban Research Association: <https://eura.org>

Global Parliament of Mayors: <https://globalparliamentofmayors.org>

Mayors Migration Council: <https://www.mayorsmigrationcouncil.org>

