Acknowledging Urbanization: A Survey of the Role of Cities in UN Frameworks

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Research Article

Abstract

Cities are playing an increasingly vital role in global sustainability. Yet there is still little systematic and international evidence on the recognition and formal role of cities in multilateral affairs. Where and how are cities acknowledged as part of global efforts? How do the United Nations frame this 'urban' contribution to major international processes and agendas? To offer some initial evidence-based pointers to this set of problems, we present an analysis of explicit references to cities in major UN frameworks (n = 32) underpinning the current Agenda 2030 on sustainable development. We investigate how cities are cited to determine the role, key themes and contextual trends framing the engagement between United Nations and cities. Contra arguments for the uniqueness of the current 'rise' of mayors, our review demonstrates a weak rise in the recognition of cities over time in UN frameworks and shows historical continuity in this acknowledgement since the 1970s. Our review confirms that two prevailing themes determining this are those of 'development' and the 'environment' but other issues (like 'infrastructure' and 'health') are following closely behind. It also highlights acknowledgment of cities as 'actors' is on the rise since the 2000s and raises fundamental questions as to the status of cities internationally. We argue it becomes imperative to more systematically and strategically think of the role of cities in the UN system, but also flag that raises fundamental challenges for multilateral governance.

Policy Implications

- Diplomats need to speak of and to cities more regularly: rather than a 'novelty', cities have been repeatedly called upon by the United Nations over the last 50 years, with a growing formalised recognition as international 'actors'.
- When establishing 'cities'-oriented projects and programmes, UN agencies and diplomats need to engage with a vast and already existing variety 'urban' recognitions, accounting for at least 1,246 acknowledgments in 32 UN frameworks since 1972.
- Connecting across sectors is fundamental: whilst climate is often the most visible domain of global city action, developmental issues have been as central as, if not even more important than, environmental ones in driving the acknowledgment of cities in global agenda.
- A high-level UN panel or expert review on the international status of cities in the UN system is needed: cities have been invoked by United Nations frameworks in a number of differing ways, as actors, as places or as issues, with limited indication as to their actual role and function.

Cities and the United Nations

Cities are becoming increasingly present on the world stage. They are now regularly acknowledged within international processes on issues such as climate change, poverty and sustainable development (Elmqvist et al., 2019). Numerous governmental and private sector actors are calling for greater attention to their role in addressing some of today's most pressing global challenges (Bloomberg, 2015; Rosenzweig et al, 2010). In 2015-16, the United Nations (UN) has recognised this by including an 'urban' sustainable development goal (SDG11) as part of its pivotal *Agenda 2030* and reiterated this via its 'New Urban Agenda', offering tangible

evidence as to the increasing emergence of a 'global' urban agenda (Elmqvist, 2018; Parnell, 2016). Academia has led on these calls, with major outlets like *Nature* and *Science* putting emphasis on this critical turning point ahead of, and following, the Habitat III summit in Quito in 2016 (Acuto, 2016a; McPhearson et al., 2016). Cities themselves have also been active in promoting this international profile. Major associations of local authorities like the United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG), ICLEI Local Governments for Sustainability and C40 Climate Leadership Group have been engaging with the UN system in a progressively visible manner across the last few decades (Gordon and Johnson, 2018). For instance, UCLG played a prominent role in the

SDG11 campaign and is a key bridge between cities and UN affairs. Yet this approach is not unique. ICLEI Local Governments for Sustainability was key in the establishment of a local dimension (known as 'Local Agenda 21') to the UN's Agenda 21 at the 1992 Rio Summit, a role which has been echoed through the impact of C40's convening power on the process for, and after, the Paris Agreement on Climate Change in 2015. Many in both academia and public discourse argue that cities carry the potential to be key players in international efforts undertaken to ensure sustainable development on a global scale (Acuto, 2013; Khanna, 2016; Oosterlynck et al., 2018). Along with the SDGs and the New Urban Agenda, UN agencies have widely recognised the importance of cities in, amongst others, the localization of the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction or the centrality of urban areas in health via the WHO Shanghai Consensus on Healthy Cities representing a trend that seems unlikely to subside. This international acknowledgement, however, has to date been treated either anecdotally or triumphantly, as an absorption of city interest's in world politics, or even as an item of note within bigger multilateral concerns (Johnson, 2018; Tallis and Klaus, 2018). Few evidence-based discussions linking global institutions to local actors are available today – in what could perhaps be one of the most pivotal connections of our time. Therein lies the goal of our essay: we argue it is necessary to ground this discussion on the global positioning of cities in more systematic evidence. In this spirit, we seek to offer an initial snapshot of that with reference to the role they have in the UN by beginning from the suite of multilateral frameworks that stands behind Agenda 2030, highlighting the key juncture we currently are at in defining the place of cities in the UN, whilst hoping to inspire more (evidence-based) work on this front.

Our starting point is the growing recognition of cities in today's major global agendas (Parnell, 2016; Revi, 2017). What status and what key areas of action have this recognition brought about for cities? How do we speak of cities in the formalized multilateral frameworks that constitute the edifice of today's international policy making? Has this changed over time, presenting a sudden rise of cities to global notoriety, or was this simply always the case? Are there any specific drivers of this acknowledgement, whether in fields of health, environment or elsewhere? Although the presence of cities in the international discourse has been increasing over the latter part of the 20th century, and continuing into the 21st, there is still a clear lack of systematic evidence as to the positioning of cities in the UN system and multilateral politics in general. What does it mean, for instance, to appoint former Mayor and C40 Chair Michael Bloomberg as special envoy for cities and climate change? How does formalising a 'healthy cities' agenda shape the operations of WHO and the direction of global health? Often these issues, where tackled, have been treated in relative siloes by different communities in environmental studies, culture or public health waking up to cities (Betsill and Bulkeley, 2006; de Leeuw, 2001; Pratt, 2010). Crucially, there seems to be a blatant discontinuity between the informal role of cities acting on the sidelines of UN processes, and their formalised role within official international frameworks (Alger, 2014; Rosenzweig et al, 2018). This is no small matter if we want to appreciate the role cities can explicitly play in global change. Here we aim to offer a preliminary empirical base for this conversation beyond anecdotal cases and media attention: we explore the ways in which official United Nations frameworks, and especially those shaping the contemporary Agenda 2030 for sustainable development, have engaged with the notion of cities in their formal documentation, while also highlighting the context within which cities are mentioned. Our goal is two-fold: enhance the evidence base for those, in academia and practice, aiming to understand the 'case for cities' in global sustainable development (Parnell, 2018; Acuto et al., 2018), and at the same time surface the fundamental questions emerging for multilateral politics as to the status that cities are being, and should be, afforded in addressing global challenges.

To be certain, the case for including cities in international matters has already repeatedly been made over much of the 2000s (Burdett and Sudjic, 2010; Elmqvist et al., 2018; Gleeson, 2014; McGranahan and Satterthwaite, 2014). Increasing rates of urbanization, along with the recognition that cities are central to the global economy (accounting for approximately 70 per cent of global GDP) have brought this role to the centre stage in world politics (e.g. Birch and Wachter, 2011). Urban areas are now recognised as central to 70% of greenhouse gas emissions and make up more than 60 per cent of the world's energy consumption (Watts, 2017). Urbanization also has other significant impacts on the environment such as deforestation, water pollution and waste management (Elmqvist et al., 2013). The continuous reiteration of these facts highlighted the position of cities as being the frontline to these issues, and thus presents a unique opportunity to address them directly as part of major multilateral efforts. Cities have, as noted above, sought to take direct action on these matters in the international sphere by way of increasing their impact through city networks such as ICLEI and C40 (Acuto, 2016a). These networks vary greatly in their reach, in geographical aspects as well as in member numbers, focus and purpose (Acuto and Rayner, 2016b; Kern and Bulkeley, 2009). These efforts show a capacity to take an active position on global challenges. Yet how does the multilateral arena, principally made up of states and UN agencies along with lending banks and international organisations, recognise this role? Our suggestion here is, at least as a stepping stone to a bigger research agenda, to focus on the formalized building blocks of the UN system to address these questions. We do this by advocating for and demonstrating the value of systematic comparative evaluations of the tangible acknowledgement of cities in UN frameworks – a database we make available for other researchers and policy makers to access as annex to this study.

Mentions in international agendas are not inconsequential nor easily written matters. As we argue by presenting our coded database of official UN texts, we should not underplay the extensive advocacy, hallway diplomacy and non-

governmental efforts that have gone into making the global 'case' for cities concrete in major UN frameworks like the Paris Agreement. Yet often the resulting multilateral documents, such the New Urban Agenda (NUA) or even the SDGs, have been criticised by many due to their attempts to clarify the normative and operational goals that had been left unspecified in the SDGs (Garschagen et al., 2018; Parnell, 2018; Valencia et al., 2019). Numerous commentaries point already at key challenges to the implementation of the urban dimension of the SDGs and even more so of the NUA, flagging shortcomings in the use and availability of indicators and timings for the evaluation process, limits in funding and many unanswered questions as to the role of cities in UN programmes (Barnett and Parnell, 2016; Caprotti et al., 2017; Klopp and Petretta, 2017; Acuto et al., 2018). Hence, it becomes important here to begin with a note of caution that should also be placed on the whole result of our analysis: city acknowledgments are a starting point, but implementation needs far more than formalized mentions. Nevertheless, the establishment of these documents and their focus on urban issues has been beneficial in bringing attention to cities in global policy making, and often greater acknowledgment of the effort of several different non-governmental stakeholders such as academia, NGOs and city networks (Revi, 2017).

We then propose a caveat in this regard: we do not want to argue that the amount of recognition that cities have in UN frameworks is by all means the only, nor the most important, dimension of analysis of the international placing of cities in UN affairs. As we have recognized elsewhere (Acuto et al., 2017) much happens either informally or semi-formally behind the scenes or as programme-level engagements of single UN agencies with specific cities. Hence, our focus here is to begin observing the 'bigger picture' more systematically. This is a call to go beyond individual sector domains or specific case studies, seeking to encourage a historically conscious, cross-sectoral and evidence-based discussion on cities in international affairs. Conscious that this is certainly a bigger research programme than a single essay could ever convey, we aim here to advocate for this type of approach by beginning with two key issues: First, does an increasing trend exist in cities 'rising' in terms of official acknowledgement? Evidence in both literature and several international fora like that of Habitat III in Quito in 2016, which has produced a 'New Urban Agenda' for the UN, seems to point at a momentous rise of cities to international prominence. Is this the case, at least when it comes to UN matters? And, second, if recognition is in fact in official UN frameworks, what is then the context within which these official references to cities are made? The popularity, in academia and media, of groups like C40 and ICLEI might seem to hint that environmental conversations take primacy above other sectors in driving the assumed rise of cities. Is this, again, the case in practice? And if not, what are the key themes that have put cities into the international spotlight of formalized UN statements? As we outline below, three initial findings emerge from our database in relation to these questions: rather than a 'novelty', cities have now long been part of UN frameworks; developmental issues have been as central as, if not even more important than, environmental ones in acknowledging cities in global agendas; and cities have been brought into these frameworks in a number of differing ways, as actors, places or issues, but their role as 'actors' has become increasingly recognised and raises fundamental and urgent issues for the UN and multilateral politics more in general.

Accounting for cities

To offer some preliminary reactions to these two areas of inquiry we set out to gather a first-of-a-kind database and through this, conduct a landscape analysis of major UN frameworks and agreements underpinning the contemporary Agenda 2030. We did this by focusing explicitly on the last 50 years of the UN system commencing the analysis in 1972 (with the Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage as a first explicit mention of cities), and concluding our sample with the 2015/16 documents of the New Urban Agenda, the SDGs and the Paris Agreement on Climate Change. Our focus was specifically on those frameworks that are both recognised as part of or leading to the current Agenda 2030, and categorising those which had at least one mention of cities and urban issues.

The initial step for the study was to conduct a landscape analysis of major UN frameworks in order to gain an understanding of how cities are addressed in the official UN language. To do so, UN documents (refer to the Appendix A for the full list) were combed for references to the 'urban'. These documents were then coded to stage a discourse analysis (Bryman, 2016). Overall, our database covers a set of 32 official UN frameworks, which we have analysed by undertaking a coded discourse analysis review of their explicit references to cities. In order to account for the representation of a seemingly widely varied discourses of these documents, our analysis ranged from an assumingly 'very' urban document like that of the New Urban Agenda to seemingly unrelated ones like the Doha Declaration on Integrating Crime Prevention and Criminal Justice. References to cities were counted by 'sections' within a UN framework, in order to avoid extensive double counting. This meant, in our view, seeking to centre our study on two analytical moves: using a broad sense of what counts as city to capture the widest 'urban' referencing formalized in UN frameworks, but at the same time ensuring the focus was not simply on counting how *many* references (simply by number of single-word appearances) but rather how pervasive this referencing is and what relationships it has with the wider positioning of the UN's activity. In order to obtain the total number of sections in each document, we also introduced a 'paragraph count' approach per framework.

This limited the time taken to complete a full count of sections and sub-sections, considering most sections were separated into paragraphs. For documents that did not have clear paragraph spacings that could be easily analysed, these were estimated based on the number of words in that

specific document, and the average number of words for previously analysed UN documents. Each section was also coded by the predominant theme it referred to, allowing for a deeper understanding of the context within which cities are mentioned. Having constructed a database of 880 sections across all the documents, we undertook an assessment based on coded discourse analysis. The use of repetition to determine themes is an established qualitative research technique (Ryan and Bernard, 2003) that is not without criticism (Bryman, 2016). Although word-counting techniques can be helpful in distilling troves of data, especially in the case of United Nations documents, we have incorporated the use of systematic content analysis to understand the role that city citations play in the overall narrative. Not only do we consider these recurring elements, but we also note their linguistic connectors to understand their 'function' (whether this is referring to the city as an actor, place or issue topic). For example, 'by local government' and 'among cities' is coded to represent the city as an actor, while 'in cities' and 'urban centres' are examples of coding that relates to the city as seen as a site. This is analysed in conjunction with the coded themes. For example, the theme of environment is triggered when words such as 'desertification' or 'air quality' is noted. Similarly, the 'equality' theme is cited for expressions which include elements like 'discrimination' and 'intolerance'. We recognise that theme validation can incorporate personal judgement from the researcher and therefore to limit the error derived from this, inter-observer consistency was obtained through validating the coding through three different researchers (Ryan and Bernard, 2003). In this way, we argue for a more refined analytical approach than just 'counting' cities, as it also captures the contextual elements within which these references are made. This is particularly important in order to understand how cities themselves are comprehended within the United Nations generally, and we argue, the discourse within these documents provides a version of this.

This brings us to the first important tension in our dataset, and conversely in the acknowledgment of cities in UN frameworks. It is important to note the ongoing etymological tension within current scholarship between the use of 'urban' and 'cities' and its correlate synonyms and variants. Although it is perhaps beyond the scope of our analysis here to rehearse extensive debates in urban studies and geography on what a 'city' is or is not and what counts as urban (Angelo and Wachsmuth, 2014; Frey and Zimmer, 2001; Pacione, 2001; Pile, 1999), the quality of the mentions we gathered is perhaps as important as their amount and variety. Hence, we therefore decided to pay closer attention to the qualitative use of these terms as we believe it is imperative to appreciate not only the acknowledgement of cities in UN documents but also, as suggested by legal theorists before (Blank, 2006a; Schragger, 2016) the status of the local in global frameworks. United Nations frameworks and documents often reference 'city' and 'urban areas' interchangeably to describe equivalent spatial elements. Take Agenda 21 (United Nations Sustainable Development, 1992) which for instance states (para. 7.13) that 'by the turn of the

century, the majority of the world's population will be living in cities' and (7.13) that 'while urban settlements, particularly in developing countries, are showing many of the symptoms of the global environment and development crisis... if properly managed, can develop the capacity to ...improve the living conditions of their residents and manage natural resources in a sustainable way,.' Calling then (para. 7.16) to '(c) Adopting innovative city planning strategies to address environmental and social issues by [...] ii. Improving the level of infrastructure and service provision in poorer urban areas' This but one of many such examples. Yet 'cities' are not, as the literature tells us, the same of 'urban' issues, which in turn might hardly equate to 'local' (authorities or governments). How to solve this quandary then, and to capture more systematically, perhaps even of the overall UN parlance, the acknowledgments of cities?

Lending further to the confuted nature of the ontological debate, the institutionalised mechanisms of recognition are uncertainly placed, providing little consistency in providing legitimacy across institutions and international bodies. Local governments are included as a 'major group' as part of UN Sustainable Development Goals, conflating their position with other entities such as Academia, Non-Governmental Organizations and Trade Unions. Adding to the terminological confusion, we also recognise that that within the field of international politics, oftentimes all actors other than nation states may be referred to as 'non-state actors' including local governments and cities, once again highlighting this conflation. Cognisant of the conjecture that exists in the placement of 'cities' and 'local governments' in international parlance, we have nevertheless ensured a distinction is made between cities (and local governments) and other entities, such as non-Governmental Organisations in the analysis.

As previously mentioned, our solution here has been to code for three different dimensions, or 'functions', these acknowledgements might broadly represent. We further differentiate the mentions coded in our dataset for whether these speak of cities as places (a particular position in space), as an issue (a topic or theme of relevance), or as actors (an active participant in an action or process). As the literature suggests, this is to recognise that 'urban' is not always interchangeable with cities, and therefore to be treated differently from when cities are referred to as actors. This is, for instance, the difference between speaking of urban areas as a context affecting urban health or being a key area for implementation of climate action (as a place), or of urban resilience as an important element in global disaster risk reduction (as a topic), or lastly of cities as key partners in the implementation of set agreements (as actors). This last function captures references to, and more importantly acknowledgement of the active role of, 'local administration', 'local government', and the participation of a 'city level' to global governance. This more specific attention to what status is ascribed to cities surfaces, as we note in our conclusion, fundamental questions as to the construction of cities as an element of, if not active participant in, global agendas set by a UN system still fundamentally state-centric,

and thus on what kind of multilateralism is needed in an urban age (Aust, 2019; Blank, 2006a). Yet before diving into these actor-issue-place tensions we begin here by tackling the questions of the apparent 'rise' of cities and of the seemingly dominant role of environmental politics.

The 'rise' of cities?

Are cities increasingly recognized in formal UN frameworks? Our dataset urges caution even when unpacked in a few different ways to account for cities. The scatter plot in Figure 1 exhibits visually the negatively skewed nature of the mentions when graphed by year. Twenty-eight of the 32 data points are post-1990, with a further 80 per cent of the data points occurring from the year 2000 onwards. Two points (1996 and 2015) represent UN documents that are specifically geared towards cities. These are, respectively, 'The role of local government in the promotion and protection of human rights' and the 'New Urban Agenda' resulting from the Habitat III conference. Both documents mention cities in approximately 70 per cent of their sections, making up a fair portion of their text. Yet even aside from these two instances, Figure 1 highlights an important message: mention of cities in UN frameworks increased in the 1990s and 2000s.

Each UN framework carried differing numbers of sections rendering, to a degree, the measurement of each document mentioning cities problematic. Our solution was to ensure results are presented as the percentage of total sections in a UN document that mentions cities. This was undertaken in this way to avoid skewing the results due to inconsistency in number of sections between documents. As we highlight (see Table A1 in the appendix), there is a high positive skewness to the data, much due to the great difference between the median (2.63) and mean (8.47). Within the data set, this is due to a small number of frameworks that effectively 'skew' the data, such as the New Urban Agenda, as they hold an unusually high mention of cities. The high kurtosis value of 10.7 in our analysis effectively highlights this, indicating the existence of outliers in the dataset because of the small number of city-specific documents recording a large number of city mentions. Despite these outliers, it is important to include these documents in the analysis, as they represent key texts that have been charting the UN's engagement with cities in the past half-century.

So, are cities becoming more central to the operations of the United Nations? Are we witnessing a greater emphasis on them in UN frameworks? Perhaps in line with, but calling for a more tempered enthusiasm of, the scholarly and media emphasis on the newness and growing importance of cities in world affairs, our results show some evidence of this. If we group UN frameworks by year (Figure 2), our understanding of how cities might be faring over time provides a cautious response to the present-day emphasis on the 'urban age' (Brenner and Schmid, 2014). As can be seen, two jumps occur in 1995 and 2015, once again corresponding to one of the Habitat III and the 'Role of Local Governments' document. Despite there being several mentions predominantly throughout the 1990s and 2000s, our dataset does not show a clear increasing trend in percentages of mentions in UN documents by year. However, what can be seen is a larger amount of mentions of cities between 1990 and 2016, where 18 years out of 26 had a least one mention of cities. This is a high number when compared to the period between 1965 and 1990, of which only two years of the twenty had documents mentioning cities. Similarly, between 1990 and 2000, five years of the ten had at least one document that referenced cities. Between 2000 and 2010, this number increased to seven of the ten years. The six years between 2010 and 2016 had at least one UN document that mentioned cities in each year, bar 2013. This indicates an increasing number of UN documents mentioning cities over time which can signify a recognition of the importance of urban issues since the early 1990s.

This is also reflected in our linear regression analysis which, when undertaken with percentage of paragraphs per document as the dependent variable, and year as the independent, did not reach statistical significance at the $P = 0.05$ level, with the Pearson Correlation between the two variables relatively weak at only 0.29. However, if we compare the years within which cities are mentioned at

Figure 1. Percentage of paragraphs within UN documents that mention cities. Each marker represents one UN document
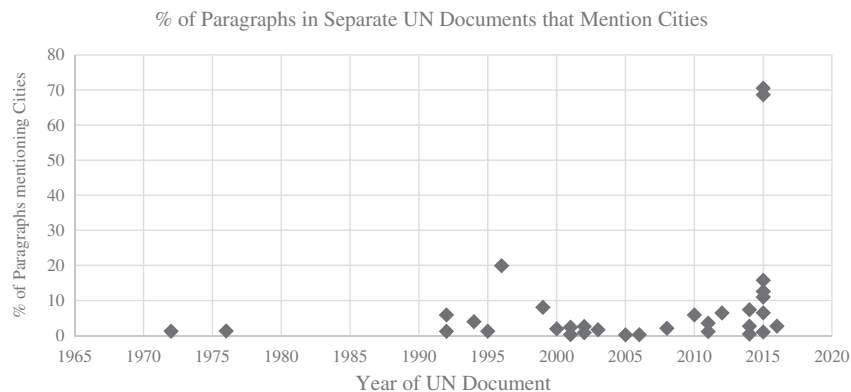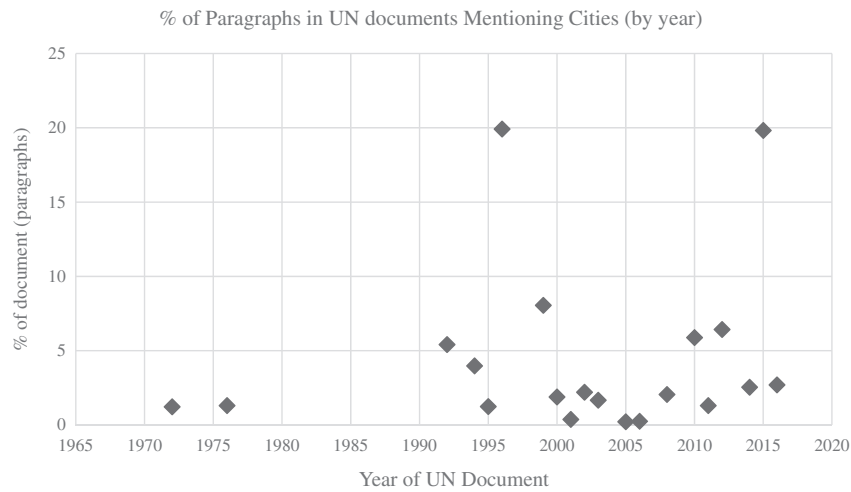

% of Paragraphs in Separate UN Documents that Mention Cities

Figure 2. Percentage of paragraphs within UN documents that mention cities (grouped by year)

% of Paragraphs in UN documents Mentioning Cities (by year)

least once, slightly more positive results might be registered (Figure 3). If we run a correlation analysis between year (from 1972 to 2018) and any mention of cities in documents in that year (either 'Yes' or 'No'), the Pearson coefficient between the two variables is 0.39 (significant at the 0.01 level), indicating that there is a linear positive relationship between the year and whether 'city' is mentioned. Once again, this correlation is relatively weak (below 0.5), flagging that potentially there might be *some* increasing trend in mentioning cities in UN documents but also highlighting

that this is far from being a predominant and very clear trend. Another way to demonstrate this is through taking the past half-century in five-year blocks to highlight overall trends of percentage of paragraphs mentioning cities in UN documents. Once again, here the overall picture shows a moderately increasing trend, despite the spikes during 1996 to 2000 and 2011 to 2015 periods. Nevertheless, the weak correlation should bode caution in proclaiming a steep, sudden or unprecedented 'rise' of cities in at least the formalised recognitions of official UN frameworks (Figure 3).

Figure 3. Percentage of paragraphs in UN documents that reference cities (5-year interval)

% of Paragraphs in UN Documents that Reference Cities
5 Year Intervals
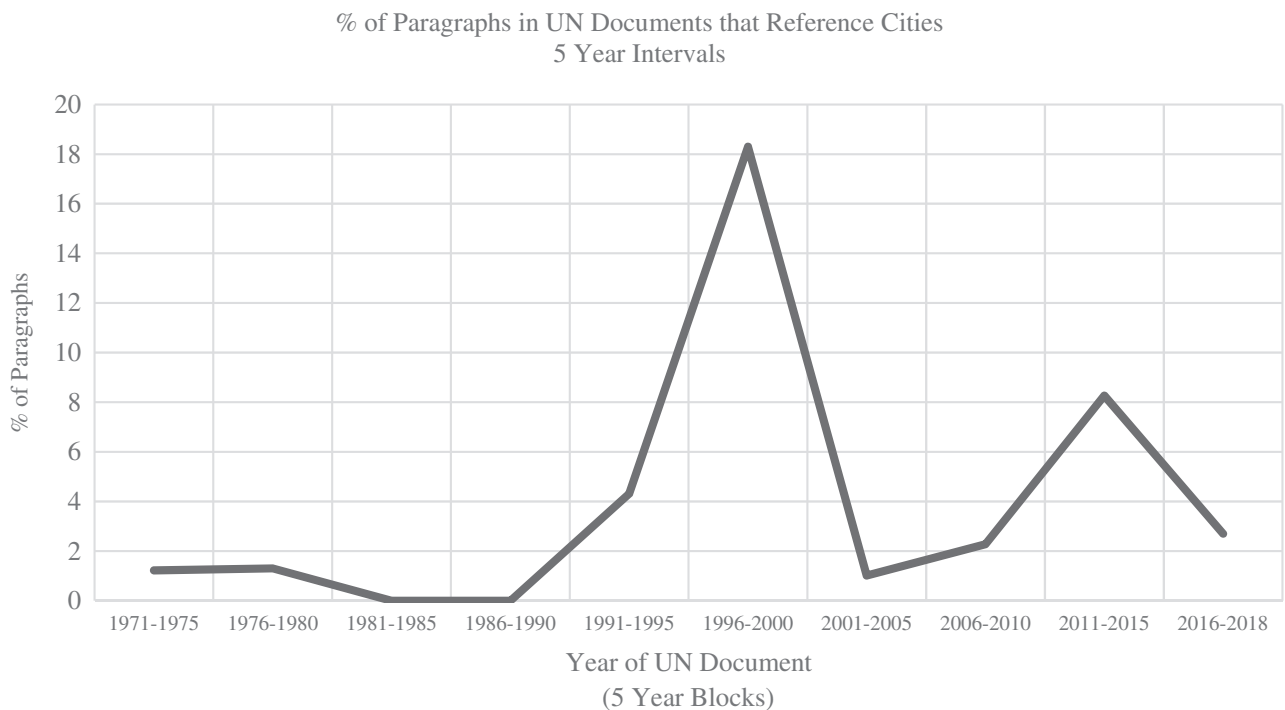
An environmental affair?

If some caution is required when proclaiming the vertiginous rise of cities in UN affairs, what can we say of the driver of this more moderate growth? Is the popularity of environmental actions and statements by mayors a sign of a specific trend? In previous research (Acuto, 2), we pointed out how over a third of formalized associations of municipal authorities, or 'city networks', are now focused on environmental issues. How does this assumption fare against the dataset we collected here? Diving deeper into the sections that had mentioned cities, we undertook thematic analysis to better understand the context within which cities are being cited and the issues these mentions relate to. Figure 4 shows the number of mentions as a percentage of overall mentions across all UN frameworks in our analysis. The most common theme aligned with city mentions, in this sense, is in fact not the environment. The acknowledgement of urban issues in UN frameworks seems more widely related to development matters. Some of this result might be likely due to the various Habitat documents, which have had a relatively strong emphasis on urban development, but this city-development association is also true for several other frameworks like 'The future we want' in 2009 and 'Agenda 21' in 1992.

These results do not necessarily reflect the themes of established city networks. Environment plays the largest theme addressed in city networks (29 per cent), while Poverty is the next key element (16 per cent) (Acuto, 2016a, 2018). The topic of poverty was addressed in the 'Other' category of our work, which was combined with several other

issue areas such as agriculture, peace and human rights. City networks, therefore, do not reflect the same proportion of themes across their groupings compared to those addressed in the official UN documents. It is difficult to ascertain whether this disparity is due to city networks representing the true key issues of concern, or whether the issue areas addressed by the UN more accurately depicts the real-world. This is of course not to dismiss the importance of environmental issues, which still takes a runner up spot in our overall ranking, ahead of a significant set of mentions that are associated to more specific and sectorial themes like education or gender. This also highlights the primary focus of a section (identified explicitly in the paragraph or indeed occupying the larger amount of it more informally), not dismissing that some sections might also acknowledge a secondary or tertiary theme.

To be precise 'development' refers here to elements such as economic growth, poverty alleviation and improving of living conditions. This theme is represented 37 per cent more often than the next prevailing theme: environment (which we took as centred on environmental areas ranging from climate change through to forests, air quality and desertification, etc.). This perhaps offers some degree of rebalancing to the 'global urban' discourse (Parnell, 2016). If cities have been widely popularised as actors key in climate change via extensive academic and local government advocacy since 1992, with finally some degrees of formalised recognition in the likes of the Paris Agreement or the workings of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (e.g. Bai et al., 2018; Romero-Lankao et al., 2018), their role in developmental challenge has perhaps received less

Figure 4. Thematic analysis of 'city' mentions in UN documents (as a percentage of overall mentions)

Thematic Analysis of "City" Mentions in UN Documents
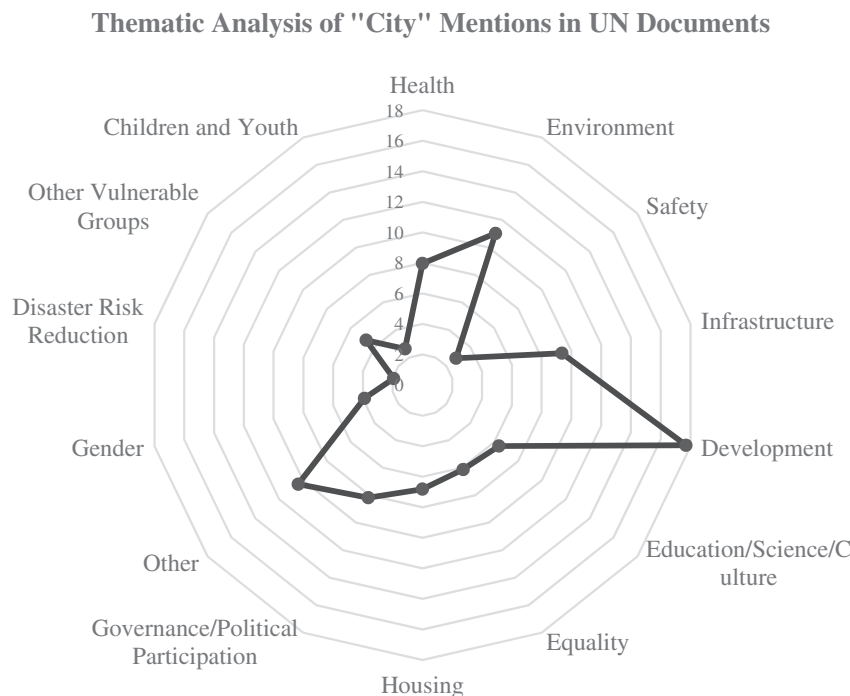
attention. However, in the official UN documentation assessed in this study, just over 10 per ecnt of city mentions were principally in the context of discussing environment issues. When compared to 16 per ecnt for development issues, it becomes clear to us that a more explicit media, academic and practitioner conversation on the role of cities in development should perhaps be taking place in current multilateral affairs beyond the popularity of environmental matters (e.g. Acuto and Ghojeh, 2019). This is not to say that environmental and developmental issues are dichotomous, and in fact we could perhaps qualitatively argue that the current SDGs focus has helped in coalescing the two towards some degree of common purpose. Yet this also raises questions as to the visibility of other themes such as health, which received lesser attention in our dataset of documents.

Figure 2 highlights the highly variable number of city mentions between UN documents. City-specific documents, unsurprisingly, have higher numbers of mentions than other UN documents, resulting in the peaks in the data. Whilst the Habitat agendas and conferences, established as once-in-twenty-year events, contribute clearly to periodically raising this visibility (1976, 1996, and 2016) we could also point to some more explicit formalization of the acknowledgement of the increasing influence that cities play in addressing key global challenges in the latest agendas (Revi, 2016). The Paris Agreement and SDGs both contain explicit acknowledgments of the role of cities, encouraging a degree of attention in follow-up programmes such as the CitiesIPCC project and the WHO Consensus on Healthy Cities (and streamlining of the SDGs in its regional urban frameworks). This is also reflected in the general (although weak) linear association between time and any mention of cities noted above. As our study demonstrates, it is clear that development represents a key leitmotif across the majority of mentions (Figure 4). However, cities role in development varies across the differing documents. During both HABITAT I in 1976 and HABITAT II in 1996, cities were seen as the target of development. In contrast, in the New Urban Agenda, cities are recognized as *drivers* for sustainable development (Acuto and Ghojeh, 2019; Birch, 2016). This brings in a more explicit focus on their, to use Paris Agreement and SDGs language, partners and implementers role vis-à-vis global agendas. So, does this mean that cities are now being recognised more formally within UN frameworks? Is this a shift from being an 'issue' to partaking in multilateral affairs as an 'actor'?

Recognising cities as . . .?

How are cities acknowledged in UN frameworks? Asking a question about the 'function' that cities are ascribed, not just the topics that appear next to or the frequency by which they appear, is in our view essential to tackle the agency question above. What sort of recognition have cities gathered in official UN 'speak' and what does this mean practically? Are there any key trends as to the role, active or passive at least, of cities in the frameworks that have paved the way to the current Agenda 2030? The UN discourse, from this viewpoint, remains fuzzy and often uncertain if we turn to our 'function' analysis of the dataset as described in the methods section above. None of the analysed pieces exclusively referred to cities as a single function throughout the whole document. There was consistently either one other section, or many different functions in the same section, that referred to cities in multiple ways; agency, site or issue. This fact already points at an important corollary of our study's categorization of city mentions by 'function': UN frameworks might be mixing different types of explicit acknowledgments of cities and urban issues, often potentially confusing the international discourse or opening up to challenging interpretations. The interchangeability of the use of cities in international documents is perhaps problematic in understanding how cities are being seen internationally, as places, actors or simply 'urban issues', and whether UN agencies and member states view cities as agents of change or simply matters to be dealt with by states. This, in our view, makes it even more crucial that we analyse the extent to which cities are mentioned in a particular capacity, which is our specific case, again for the purpose of a preliminary scrutiny, is undertaken here through analysing document sections separately, rather than by documents overall. Figure 5 shows sections analysed by the function of the city reference, incorporating either one, two, or all three functions within the one section. As shown, referring to cities as a site is used more interchangeably with the other two functions than it happens for actor or issue roles. The data also indicates that the 'site' function is the one that is least to be used on its own.

Yet it is perhaps the above question of agency and empowerment of cities by the multilateral sector (via UN frameworks adopted by states) that, for us, raises important challenges as to the place of cities in global agendas. In analysing documents (and their sections) that only referred to cities under the one function, the sheer majority of these afforded cities some degree of agency. This is over and above seeing cities as only a site, or only as an issue. Figure 6 exhibits how references to cities as actors have shown an increasing trend over time, an important observation in the way cities are viewed in the formal international sphere. Once again, this then paves the way for a conversation as to what it means to ascribe agency to cities, not just theoretically but very practically in UN and multilateral matters. 'Actor' acknowledgments often, if not almost always, do not come with instruction manuals as to how such 'actorness' functions within most of the frameworks that recognise it.

Interestingly, the most prevalent context within which cities are mentioned as actors is once again Development (26 per cent), followed by Housing (16 per cent) equally led by both Governance and the Environment (11 per cent). This is perhaps at some degree of odds with where the majority of the international (relations, and to a degree geography) theorizing lies, which have to date focused on the international agency of cities in environmental governance and climate change more specifically (e.g. Betsill and Bulkeley, 2006; Johnson, 2018). It also highlights that the

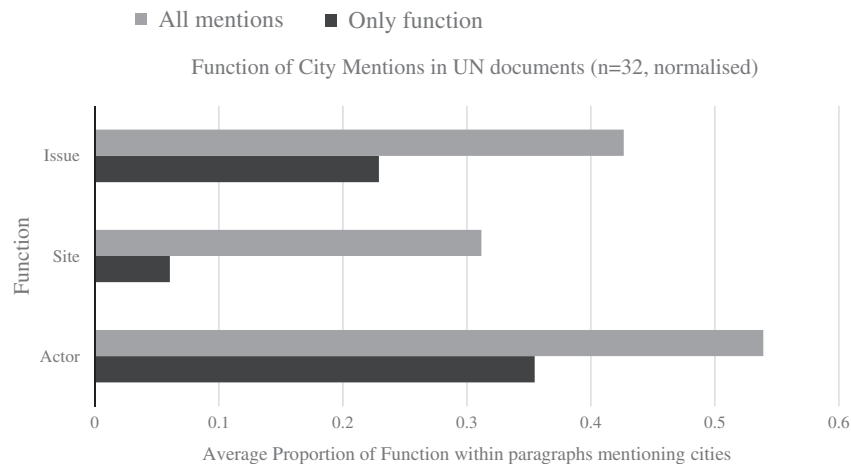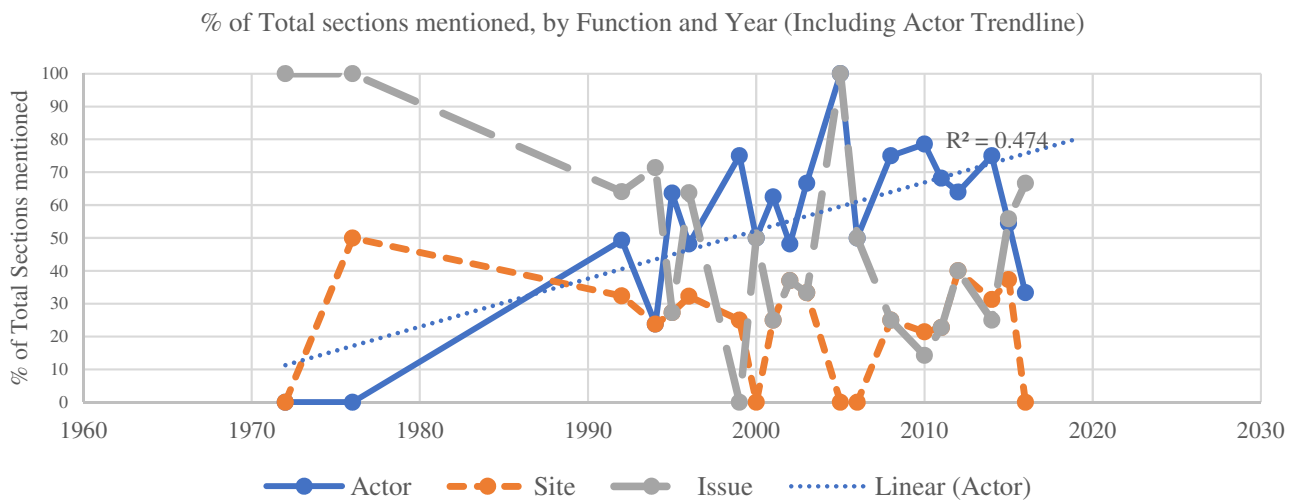**Figure 5.** City mentions by function (city as actor, site or issue topic)

■ All mentions   ■ Only function

Function of City Mentions in UN documents (n=32, normalised)

Average Proportion of Function within paragraphs mentioning cities

Figure 6. Longitudinal analysis by function

% of Total sections mentioned, by Function and Year (Including Actor Trendline)

$R^2 = 0.474$

Actor   Site   Issue   Linear (Actor)

well-developed but perhaps still siloed literature on the international potential of cities in health and culture (e.g. Kickbusch and Nutbeam, 2017; Pratt, 2008) has remained separated and (without any value judgment in the use of the term) still relative 'niches' in multilateral affairs. Yet, when taken collectively and across different themes, the historical trajectories within the dataset also indicate an interesting narrative: one of increasing references to cities as actors: the sheer majority (85 per cent) of UN documents sections post-2000 reference cities as actors over 50 per cent of the time, with an upward trend. This contrasts with references viewing the city as purely a site, or an issue topic. It also opens up a demand for students and practitioners of *global* governance to better engage with trends and shifts in *urban* governance: if the acknowledgment of 'actorness' is increasingly ascribed to cities, the types of institutional structures that underpin the role of cities as actors, and the shifts in these, are by far and large not a common matter

for international relations. The last two decades, on the other hand, have been witnessing fundamental restructuring of the 'city' level of politics, with for instance important shifts toward demands and reform for 'metropolitan' rather than local government (Gleeson and Spiller, 2012), an international movement toward central-to-local 'devolution' recasting spheres of political legitimacy (Rodríguez-Pose and Gill, 2003), 'scalar mismatches' in the way governing is organised in an age of complex urban systems (Bai et al., 2010), and shifts in the increasingly networked drivers of city leadership (Acuto and Ghojeh, 2019). Accounting for these processes in the way they underpin the forms of access and, as per our study here, formal recognition of cities in international relations is in our view essentially not to end our study and assumptions of global governance at the national level. So if above we have cautioned against perhaps too enthusiastic calls on the 'rise' of cities (e.g. Barber, 2013), we would on the other hand call for a much

more explicit discussion of what it means to invest cities with agency in the UN system in particular, or in international affairs more generally – an issue that to us seems to bring us to a key juncture in multilateral affairs.

A key juncture?

The Sustainable Development Goals explicit engagement with cities, along with several 2015–16 UN agendas, come at an apt moment for the acknowledgement of the centrality of cities, as actors, and of urbanization and urban settlements, as both issues and places for multilateral affairs, in the 21st century. This, as we have tried to demonstrate above, is not a sudden 'shift' of agendas nor a phenomenon limited to the environmental arena only. This also suggests that it might be misleading, as the variety of frameworks engaging with cities highlights above, to simply limit the reading of the role of cities in the UN system by focusing on UN-Habitat or the three 'Habitat' outcome documents like the New Urban Agenda. Just like there are varied and extensive mentions of cities across different frameworks in our dataset, there are today several UN agencies, programmes and funds that have been engaging with cities, an issue that deserves the same degree of systematic research engagement that we have attempted to provide here with our initial focus on frameworks. In short, then, we are confronted with plenty of evidence as to the presence of cities in UN affairs, frameworks and programmes. Overall, our data confirm this (albeit weak) increasing trend of mentioning cities in documents, highlighting the rising importance of cities. Yet the status of cities is still uncertain, under-economised in typical ceremonial roles ('partners' and 'observers'), despite this growing international recognition. Hence this is far from a comfortable scholarly or practitioner position. Although our preliminary study highlights cities as an important focus of some of the core agendas underpinning our current international system, we would argue that a more extensive analysis is necessary to determine the full extent of how UN entities, but ideally the international system more in general, engages with cities. Evidence-based, internationally oriented and up-to-date analysis is needed to spur conversations on the potential of cities in world affairs away from the anecdotal, experiential and case-specific.

This is an even more pressing issue if we think that, along with the documents and themes identified here, the last few years have seen the spillover of city acknowledgements to many agendas beyond the environmental, development or health ones. For instance, campaigners and mayors from the likes of UCLG and C40 are now convening an 'urban' track of the Group of 20 ('Urban20') calling for an even greater urban engagement in formalised multilateral politics. Likewise, an urban advocacy on the active role ('actor' function as we put it) of cities within the Intergovernmental Conference on the Global Compact for Migration has now led to the Mayors Migration Council (MMC): an initiative that seeks explicitly to 'realize the access, voice, and influence of cities around the world in international deliberations on migration and refugee issues'. The objective of these and many other initiatives is often seen as to 'empower' and 'enable' cities around the world to engage in diplomacy and global policy making. Urban20 and MMC are but a few of many of these efforts but testify to the importance of our final consideration of agency. Our finding on the growing acknowledgment of cities underscores even more directly the key juncture we are in when it comes to the role of cities in multilateral affairs. This brings about some important questions as to the place of cities in the UN. What does it mean to acknowledge formally local authorities as 'partners' of a UN framework? Who can steer and support a global urban development agenda in an uncertain UN system amid reforms? What level of participation should Mayors have in the multilateral fora? And consequently, what sort of space to voice concerns should urban constituencies, especially when represented by non-governmental actors like NGO campaigns, have in UN frameworks? Accounting for 'acknowledgments' of urban matters in official processes and documentation is, in our view, but a first step in recognizing the fundamental juncture the UN is facing when it comes to taking action on cities. Although this study provides a brief glimpse into the attention afforded cities, it does not presuppose that this increasing acknowledgement necessarily translates into changes in roles in practice or any further power-sharing arrangements between nations and cities. This presents fertile ground for further research into the practicalities of the roles cities already play and their future roles.

Combining the conspicuous track record and mounting wealth of evidence we have documented here, with the cross-cutting urban presence from development to environment, culture and education (to name but a few), it might be time for scholars and policy makers to accept that these questions need urgent answers. The next framework might well be one that begins unpacking the formal role of cities in the United Nations.

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Appendix 1

Table A1. List of UN frameworks assessed

Name of document	Year	Unique Symbol (if applicable)
2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development	2015	A/RES/70/1
A World Fit for Children	2002	A/RES/S-27/2
Addis Ababa Action Agenda	2015	A/RES/69/313
Agenda 2063	2015	NA
Agenda 21	1992	NA
Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action	1995	NA
Committing to Action: Achieving the Millennium Development Goals	2008	NA
Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage	1972	NA
Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women	2003	NA
Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities	2006	A/RES/61/106
Declaration and Programme of Action on a Culture of Peace	1999	A/RES/53/243
Doha Declaration on Integrating Crime Prevention and Criminal Justice	2016	A/RES/70/174
Fourth United Nations Conference on the Least Developed Countries	2011	A/CONF.219/7
Global Agenda for Dialogue among Civilizations	2001	A/RES/56/6
Global Conference on the Sustainable Development of Small Island Developing States	1994	A/CONF.167/9
Habitat I: Vancouver Declaration	1976	A/CONF.70/15
Habitat II: Istanbul Declaration	1996	A/CONF.165/14
Habitat III: New Urban Agenda	2015	A/RES/71/256
In a Larger Freedom	2005	A/59/2005
Keeping the Promise: Millennium Development Goals	2010	A/RES/65/1
Lima Declaration on Alternative Development	2014	A/RES/68/196
Paris Agreement	2015	FCCC/CP/2015/L.9/Rev.1
Political Declaration of the High-level Meeting of the General Assembly on the Prevention and Control of Non-communicable Diseases	2011	A/RES/66/2
Report of the World Conference against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia	2001	A/CONF.189/12
Rio Annex III	1992	A/CONF.151/26 (Vol. III)
Role of Local Government in the Promotion and Protection of Human Rights	2015	A/HRC/30/49
SAMOA Pathway	2014	A/RES/69/15
Second World Assembly on Ageing	2002	A/CONF.197/9
Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction	2015	A/RES/69/283
The Future We Want	2012	A/RES/66/288*
United Nations Millennium Declaration	2000	A/RES/55/2
Vienna Programme of Action for Landlocked Developing Countries for the Decade 2014-2024	2014	A/CONF.225/L.1

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