How City-networks are Shaping and Failing Innovations in Urban Institutions for Sustainability and Resilience

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A response to 'A Decade of C40: Research Insights and Agendas for City Networks', Kathryn Davidson, Lars Coenen, Brendan Gleeson*

Abstract

The seminal piece of Davidson, Coenen and Gleeson gives a good overview of the role of C40 as a global intermediary for establishing networked governance and knowledge brokerage of cities. The identified benefits for cities participating and even driving city networks are well presented, however require a closer conceptual and empirical development that also considers evidence and reflection from the institutional work of other transnational networks such as ICLEI, Climate Alliance, Asian Climate Change Cities Resilience Network, 100 Resilience Cities as well as the Covenant of Mayors and UCLG. In this response article we extend the conceptualization of the benefits and risks for the roles of city-networks as curators of institutional spaces for co-creation and knowledge co-production to respond to the third theme of Davidson, Coenen and Gleeson paper on the ways that city networks shape urban institutions.

Cities engage in policy-science dialogues and policy-community-business interfaces about climate change pressures and challenges as well as about thinking for solutions (Fuhr et al, 2019). The last decade has seen the rise of many policy-relevant concepts that entered the discourse and framed urban policy and planning agendas such as sustainability, urban resilience, and experimentation. All these concepts and associated frameworks and approaches require intense and continuous dialogue, curation and facilitation of an open process to ideas, interests and concerns for being embedded to city specific needs and urban institutions. In earlier work, we argued that there is a value in institutional spaces that allow such processes of co-creation of new urban imaginaries and of co-producing actionable knowledge to inform local action. These institutional spaces are conditions and outputs of innovative urban governance and are organized and/or initiated by city networks (Kemmerzell, 2018) and scientists at both local and global levels (Frantzeskaki and Rok, 2018). In this response article, we focus on the role of city networks in influencing urban institutions and in shaping and failing to innovate urban institutions through the curation, organization and facilitation of institutional spaces for co-creation and knowledge co-production to respond to the third theme of Davidson, Coenen and Bellinson paper on the ways that city networks shape urban institutions.

1. City networks shape innovations in urban institutions

City networks shape urban institutions and particular innovations in urban institutions by: (1) democratizing planning through the curation, facilitation and sustaining of co-creation processes in cities; (2) depolitization of (urgent and pressing) urban issues, and (3) institutionalization of evidence-based and knowledge-based solutions to strengthen urban agendas.

First, co-creation as an open process to ideation, solution co-design and agenda co-formulation is argued of having several advantages to traditional participatory planning approaches especially about democratizing planning further. What, however, receives attention is the way co-creation innovates urban governance by connecting different urban actors through the openness and inclusivity to ideas, mindsets and aspirations and moving away from identifying 'stakes' and 'interests' as entry and selection criteria to processes of planning. In this advancing of urban governance, city networks play a catalytic role.

City networks allowed for capacity to be built in cities that bridged participatory planning to co-creation. In recent research in the policy-science interface, the ability of city officers and decision makers to engage in co-creation has been showcased and examined especially in their ability to produce evidence-based urban actions (Frantzeskaki, 2019). City networks educate city officers to engage and co-create with citizens, and with scientists by facilitating the dialogues and creating the institutional space for it through projects and city-forums (Frantzeskaki and Rok, 2018).

Additionally, city networks initiated and maintained the dialogue about the value in changing urban practices. They achieved this by framing and introducing new topics, practices and approaches as learning processes rather than de-institutionalisation of existing practices. As Bellinson and Chu (2019, p. 78) argue city networks 'can be drivers of innovation by uncoupling cities from their traditional planning models and experimenting with alternative learning pathways'. This allows for a trial period through city-to-city interactions, engagement in epistemic communities and establishment of communities of practice as well as by setting topic-focused projects, and recently through the proliferation of experiments (as action- and learning-oriented projects) in cities. As such city networks contribute actively in shaping institutional spaces for innovating in governance and for governing urban innovations (Bellinson and Chu, 2019). Cities that embarked in setting up experiments as means to govern new urban topics and risk-averse areas of policy and planning allowed through a learning-focused process to better embed new knowledge and evidence to urban agendas (Bulkeley et al., 2018; Frantzeskaki, 2019).

Learning through participating in a community of cities is also argued as a way of building transformative capacity of cities. Wolfram (2018, p. 12) notes that 'learning should be experiential and occur in the wider social context of communities, organizations and institutions, thereby also changing actor preferences and practices (. . .). This highlights the particular importance of the intermediaries involved in enabling and facilitating the required communication, interactions and transfers'. Kemmerzell (2018, p. 45) also points to the pivotal role that engagement with others as a means to policy learning about 'best practices' and 'policy models on certain issues'. Next to this, Kemmerzell (2018, p. 45) argues that cities engaging in the Covenant of Mayors 'commit (. . .) to pursue some shared goals and to meet common standards of action and monitoring. Such commitment can strengthen the professional position of the administration *vis-à-vis* the local council and the political leaders'. That may create salience of newly introduced topics, practices or approaches in urban governance and shape new urban institutions.

Second, city networks innovate urban institutions by institutionalizing evidence-based and knowledge-based inputs to urban agendas and to further 'normalise' processes that consider evidence in monitoring and assessment of urban issues. Hughes et al, (2018, p. 5) also point that 'transnational networks provide necessary capacity and resource support for urban climate change actions'. One way that city networks achieve this is by introducing theme-specific issues

and approaches and educating city officers and urban planners specifically on the topic. Another way is action-oriented projects in which city networks connect best practices and approaches across cities. Specifically, Van der Heijden (2016) noted that action-oriented projects enabled the transfer of knowledge and the building of new evidence for low-carbon building and housing policies in cities.

Third, facilitating institutional spaces for co-creation and co-production of knowledge between science-policy-society are important for depoliticizing urban topics and equivaling tacit with expert knowledge. City networks catalyzed these outputs by bringing in applications, practices or approaches across the globe to a city-to-city learning dialogue and debate that transcended political interests since are seen as scaled or transferred. Such depolitization of urban solutions and approaches aids cities that operate in ever changing political priorities to learn from other cities and to advocate for salience of urban solutions to their pressing problems.

2. City networks shake urban institutions and can accelerate institutional failures

City networks can also shake urban institutions and create conditions for institutional failures in cities due to (1) temporality of their agency, (2) establishing obsolete institutions, and (3) responding to an institutional void and operating as shadow institutions.

First, it is important to understand and keep in mind that institution building and shaping from city networks may suffer from temporality of agency. City networks establish their agency collectively as a result of the active engagement of cities entering the network and partnership. As such, their agency and power to shape and transform urban institutions is temporary and prone to be destabilized if the network shifts or devolves. This may result in a backlash of learning processes for urban institutions and institution building that require continuous facilitation and curation.

Second, city networks that are thematically driven such as 100 Resilient Cities network run the risk of investing in obsolete institutions. By becoming too specialized on knowledge inputs and approaches on narrow themes, they may become outdated or obsolete when cities move on to new topics and approaches or change policy priorities. A way for cities to navigate the temporality of institution building is by establishing policy and practice feedback loops that embed policy learning gained in the process of engagement regardless of the thematic focus or topical focus of the city networks.

Third, city networks may operate in dealing with an institutional void of non-supportive state-level climate or sustainability agendas and as such shaping institutions at city level that need to be 'on the shadows'. This may create a delegitimization precedent for topics that are otherwise important but not supported by state-level or regional-level governments. Homsy's (2018) research on the institutional context conditions that favor climate agendas in cities points to the importance of state level support for climate policy. When this state level support is lacking, cities engaging and operating through city networks to address this

institutional void create fragile institutions that may be vulnerable to change and resource deficient.

Conclusions

A critical investigation of the policy and governance impacts of city networks can progress not only our understanding of their role and importance for urban institutions and urban governance but will also inform the city networks on how to become salient and impactful in the future considering aspects of political geography and political economy (Lee, 2019). The emergence of a multitude of city networks manifests the learning void of cities globally on new solutions, approaches and actionable knowledge for progressing urban agendas for sustainability and resilience. This becomes even more relevant in view of the target-focused pathways stemming from the Sustainable Development Goals that a number of cities start to embark globally. City networks have a crucial role to play in aligning global and local agendas and in systematizing evidence while ensuring co-production of urban solutions takes place across geographies and across knowledge actors.

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