The United Nations System and the Process of Political Articulation of Local Authorities as a Global Actor[1]

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The recent creation of United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG), an organization of local authorities of universal scope, is the culmination of the emerging process of a new political actor on the international scene. The article describes and analyses some aspects of the interaction between this global political actor-in-the-making and the United Nations (UN) system. The theoretical question it addresses is how the new global actor has — even if partially — achieved its objectives, given its limited power resources and the opposition of other (apparently) more powerful actors: the central governments that run the UN system. Drawing on the literature on the foreign activities of subnational governments, as well as on the literature on transnational actors and the creation of global norms, the proposed explanation highlights the "mixed actor" (partially sovereignty-bound, partially sovereignty-free) character of subnational governments acting internationally.

Keywords: Transnational actors; Local authorities; United Nations; Habitat.

1. Introduction

In May 2004, the Founding Congress of United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG) was held in Paris, giving rise to a new international organization of global scope.[2] Product of the merger of two previously existing world associations of local authorities — the International Union of Local Authorities (IULA) and United Towns

Organization–Fedération Mondiale des Cités Unies (UTO–FMCU) —, UCLG's creation is the latest step in the process of political articulation of local governments on a world scale initiated in the early 1990s.

The United Nations (UN) system has been the main — although not the only — framework in which this process of political articulation has taken place. In a way which exhibits certain parallelisms with the constitutional logic of the Group of 77 a few decades ago, the UN has been the venue privileged by the international municipal movement, which has used the world organization both as a meeting point and a platform for political action. Insofar as some agencies of the UN (notably the Secretariat of the UN-Habitat Programme) actively supported the merger of the two global associations of local authorities, and considering that participation in the UN system clearly acted as one of its main incentives, it seems clear that the international organization (UN) has had constitutive effects on the global actor (UCLG) of the kind identified and described in the literature on transnational actors (Merle 1988; Boli and Thomas 1999; Willetts 1996; Risse 2002, among others).

If the UN have exerted their influence — both directly and indirectly — in the creation of this new actor representing local authorities from all over the world, local authorities themselves have also contributed (and continue to do so) to the transformation of the UN system. Although the claim that the UN system is undergoing a certain "destatalization" process would indeed be an exaggeration, there can be little doubt about it gradually opening up to greater participation of actors other than central governments, i.e., transnational actors. Indeed, transnational associations of local authorities have had a leading role in the struggle of international actors that do not belong to the central governments' club to obtain greater recognition within the UN system. Seemingly, their results have been better than those achieved by other, non-governmental transnational actors, notably regarding the institutional presence of the local authorities' association at intergovernmental conferences on social themes. One probable reason for this is the fact that, unlike the former — basically Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) —, local authorities are governments and, as such, have access to resources and possess a legitimacy that non-state actors lack.

The present article describes and analyses some aspects of the interaction between this global political actor-in-the-making and the UN system. The theoretical question it addresses is how the new global actor has — even if partially — achieved its normative and institutional objectives, given its limited power resources and the opposition of other (apparently) more powerful actors: the central governments that run the UN system. Drawing on the literature on the activities of subnational governments abroad, as well as on the literature on transnational actors and the creation of global norms, our hypothesis points at the "mixed actor" (partially sovereignty-bound, partially sovereignty-free) character

of subnational governments (by themselves or constituting transnational networks) as the main source of explanation.

The article is organized as follows. The next section (2) introduces the context in which local governments around the world have developed their common objectives vis-à-vis the UN system: to enhance local authorities' presence in the system (institutional objective) and to have an international normative framework on self-government and decentralization legitimised by the UN (normative objective). In section 3 we present our hypothesis on how these objectives were (partially) accomplished and its conceptual basis. Sections 4 and 5 describe, respectively, the advances towards the institutional and the normative objectives. Section 6 contains our concluding remarks.

2. Local Authorities Globally Articulated: Who They Are and What They Seek

The assembling of local authorities in transnational networks of varying nature, reach and aims is not a new phenomenon, nor is it one solely related to the present age of globalisation. For decades now, there has existed a rich institutional tapestry of transnational associations created by local authorities on different functional, regional and political grounds, as well as the two municipal associations with a world scope mentioned above: the IULA and UTO–FMCU.

The IULA was created in 1913 on the initiative of the Belgian association of municipalities, and by 2004 (when UCLG was created), most of the national and regional municipal organizations in the world had joined it. Its membership included individual local powers, associations of local authorities, and there was even a category of personal membership. IULA was a strongly regionalised organization, with six regional sections (Europe, Latin America, Africa, the Eastern Mediterranean and the Middle East, North America and Asia and the Pacific). Defence of local autonomy and promotion of citizen participation in community affairs were its main stated aims. For its part, the UTO–FMCU was an association of individual local authorities (cities, provinces, regions etc.) created in 1957 on the initiative of French local organizations. With members in 75 countries in 2004 and a progressive political orientation, UTO–FMCU devoted important efforts to enhancing technical cooperation between its partners, as well as to city twinning as a means of peace-building and social development in East-West and North-South relations. Especially during the Cold War, the main divide between the two organizations was ideological: while UTO was considered a "progressive" organization with social-democratic ideas that directed much of its effort at softening the East-West divide, IULA's activities were more anchored in the Western camp.

However, over the last twenty years, as local governments all over the world increase in power and autonomy, the number of these groupings or "networks" of local authorities has increased considerably, thanks to the new possibilities offered by information technologies and, to a larger extent, to a growing awareness of the benefits that multilateral cooperation between like-minded local partners can provide in their common struggles against the new economic, urban, social or political challenges posed by globalisation. Thus, countless multilateral cooperation arrangements have emerged: some are ephemeral and others more stable; some resemble classic international organizations (i.e., the Council of European Municipalities and Regions) and some are less institutionalised and with more focused objectives (like the various organizations concerned with environmental themes). Some have a political nature and focus on lobbying activities vis-à-vis national or international authorities, notably in regional integration processes (e.g., the European Union Committee of the Regions or Mercosur's Foro Consultivo de Municipios, Estados Federados, Provincias y Departamentos); others concentrate on the exchange of management practices and political or technical cooperation (e.g., Eurocities or Mercociudades).

It was in this rather chaotic, globalized context that, in the late 1980s, a new consensus began to take shape among politicians and officers in local governments and their respective associations. This consensus was based on the conviction that the interests and claims articulated by local authorities in the whole world vis-à-vis their national governments and international organizations had much in common, and that this commonality of interests called for some kind of political expression that could provide local actors with a single voice to be heard in world forums. From its inception, this objective of political articulation was linked to the aim of obtaining a greater institutional presence in the UN system,[3] which had, until then, given marginal treatment to the associations of local authorities, similar to that meted out to NGOs.[4] Here, the general objective of enhancing local authorities' institutional representation in the system took shape in two, more specific sub-objectives: the creation of a subsidiary consultative body, made up of local authorities, within the UN; and the binding of this body to the UN Centre for Human Settlements (UNCHS, also known as Habitat). Soon, a new, more substantial one was to be added to these institutional objectives: the passing by the General Assembly of the UN of a normative instrument that would respond to the demands for self-government made by local authorities to national central governments and international organizations.

In the early 1990s, conditions seemed to favour these objectives. On the one hand, the end of the Cold War meant that no ideological obstacles would hinder the unification of the two world associations of local authorities, IULA and UTO–FMCU. On the other, the UN system seemed more permeable to the influence of other actors. The UN was more involved in the search for new forms of global governance, which meant that the

world organization would be more willing to take on new functions or to use its leverage on others. Notably, the promotion of the "agenda for development" of Secretary General Butros-Butros Ghali (United Nations Secretary General 1994) called for an ever higher presence in the field, and therefore, for a need to have closer relations with local, non-state — or not central-governmental — actors, the support and commitment of which was essential for a successful implementation of development programmes. Hence the need both to conduct a permanent dialogue between the UN and these actors and to articulate, wherever possible, their different interests and points of view with a single voice that could address UN institutions coherently and effectively.

The main promoters of the parallel processes of institution-building, increased presence of local authorities in the UN and creation of international norms on decentralization and self-government were the leaders of the main global associations of local authorities (IULA, UTO–FMCU and also Metropolis),[5] as well as some individual local governments that led the process at different stages — like Barcelona and São Paulo —, and also a few *ad hoc* coordinating bodies of local authorities.

3. How did They Accomplish their Goals? Our Hypothesis

The objective of creating a single world organization of local authorities from the merger of IULA and UTO–FMCU (and the participation of numerous other existing associations) was achieved, as mentioned, in 2004. Since this objective did not depend on the will of actors other than those directly involved in the process, its achievement does not represent, in our view, any theoretical "puzzle". More intriguing is the partial — but far from insignificant — fulfilment of the two other main objectives: obtaining an institutional presence in the UN system and, notably, the normative one.

The main achievement, in terms of penetration in the UN system, took shape with the constitution of the United Nations Advisory Committee of Local Authorities (UNACLA) in 2000. Although UNACLA is not really the subsidiary consultative body of the Commission on Human Settlements that the local authorities had sought, but only a consultative body to its Executive Director, this does not diminish the importance of the creation of a formal body within the UN, made up of local authorities, to act as an advisor on local affairs. This is even clearer if we consider the important role played by UNACLA, since its creation, in the revitalisation of the UN-Habitat Programme.

On the other hand, advances towards the completion of the normative objective have also been remarkable. In April 2006, the UN-Habitat Governing Council (its intergovernmental, decision-making body) approved a document on Guidelines on Decentralization (United Nations Human Settlements Programmee (UNHSP), 2006) produced under the aegis of

UN-Habitat's Secretariat (its management body) after a lengthy process of discussions that involved, among others, a group of experts on decentralization summoned by UNACLA. The next step, for whose materialisation local authorities are now working, will be the adoption of the Guidelines by the UN General Assembly. With this, the first international legal framework promoting decentralization and local self-government will have come into existence, an achievement that seemed remote only a few years ago.

If one accepts that considerable advances have been made towards both objectives despite the initial opposition of much more powerful actors — the central governments represented in Habitat's Governing Council —, the question of how this happened clearly seems to be one worth considering.

Simply put, our hypothesis states that local governments, transnationally organized, were able to advance their objectives by simultaneously using resources drawn from their condition of governmental actors and other resources normally associated with the actions and resources of non-state actors. In other words, they reached their aims by taking advantage of their condition of "mixed actors", partially "sovereignty-bound", partially "sovereignty-free".

It was James Rosenau (1990), who originally established the distinction between "sovereignty-bound" and "sovereignty-free" actors. According to Rosenau, the actors included in the first category (basically central governments) are bound by their sovereign responsibilities to pay attention to the multiplicity of issues present on the global agenda and to distribute their limited energies and resources among them. For their part, sovereignty-free actors (a broad category including multinational companies, ethnic groups, bureaucratic agencies, political parties and also sub-national governments, with no formal constitutional obligations in the field of foreign policy-making), whose responsibilities are neither as important nor as dispersed, are freer to concentrate on more delimited and concrete objectives. The distinction, therefore, emphasises the limitations and responsibilities entailed by sovereignty in foreign policy-making.

Though, as indicated, subnational governments were placed in the "sovereignty-free" category by Rosenau, other scholars (Hocking 1997; Paquin 2004, 2005) posited a mixed category combining the other two and placing in it those subnational governments acting as foreign policy actors. This categorisation of subnational governments as mixed actors allows us to consider them, on the one hand, as full state actors (as opposed to non-state actors) who share their constituency's sovereignty (population and territory) with other governmental levels. On the other, their sovereignty-free characteristics would account for their "freedom" from most of the formal obligations entailed by foreign policy-making. In other words, their foreign policy actions are part of their governance responsibilities rather than of their governmental obligations (Rosenau 1997).

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As sovereignty-sharing — and therefore sovereignty-bound — foreign-policy actors, subnational (local and intermediate-level) governments enjoy a legitimacy that other actors (NGOs, social movements or interest groups) lack: a political legitimacy as representatives of their constituencies and a technical legitimacy as their public managers. Also, the fact that local authorities participate in the governmental structures of their national states (either as a formal or an informal participant of the foreign policy-making process) can help them obtain governmental support for their claims, and therefore can also be considered a resource.

On the other hand, their sovereignty-free dimension and the possibility of concentrating on a few selected issues accounts for a higher capacity (relative to central governments) to bring interests together and a considerable flexibility to establish all kinds of alliances with other subnational governments or other international actors. This, for its part, accounts for their assiduous presence in predominantly non-state forums (e.g., the World Social Forum), as well as the fact that, in common with non-state actors, subnational governments' demands are targeted towards central governments and international governmental organizations made up of central governments.[6]

As we shall see, globally articulated local governments exploited, with considerable success, their double condition of sovereignty-bound and sovereignty-free foreign policy actors to advance their common objectives regarding the UN system and, ultimately, central governments in general.

As governmental, sovereignty-bound actors, they had material as well as organizational resources that allowed them to advance slowly but steadily towards their aims, as well as a recognised legitimacy to have a say in programmes and decision-making bodies with a direct impact on the populations of which they are the legitimate representatives and public managers.

At the same time, and using methods frequently associated with more sovereignty-free actors, notably NGOs, local governments not only showed impressive effectiveness in their transnational articulation, but also in forming a strong coalition with the managing body of the UN-Habitat Programme. (This body, originally named Centre on Human Settlements, was to become the programme Secretariat in 2002.) Local representatives sided with Habitat officials to defend their common interests before the intergovernmental body of the programme. In our opinion, the cooperative stance of the Secretariat explains a good deal of the advances achieved in relation to the objectives of local authorities within the UN system, both in institutional and normative terms. Another ability which is typically associated with non-state actors — and the main power resource of the so-called "transnational advocacy networks" — (Keck and Sikkink 1998) is the use of the power of ideas and expert legitimisation as "soft power", a use which may sometimes modify power

relations that are initially unfavourable. In our case, as we shall see, local authorities, acting as transnational norms entrepreneurs (Finnemore and Sikkink 1998) used not only their own technical knowledge on urban issues as a leverage to support their claims, but also the knowledge of independent experts, summoned to grant supplementary legitimacy to these claims.[7]

4. The Institutional Objective: Obtaining Greater Presence in the United Nations System

As stated before, the process of local authorities' penetration in the UN system that led to the creation of UNACLA was intimately linked to the parallel process of convergence between the various transnational associations of local authorities. This is shown by constant references to the UN in documents and declarations regarding the unification process (including UCLG statutes). Also of significance is the fact that the intergovernmental conferences convened by the UN (mainly Habitat II in 1996 and Habitat + 5 in 2001) were used by local authorities to convene their two World Assemblies, which constituted real landmarks on the road to IULA-UTO unification.

We can thus affirm that the process was two-way: the degree of presence in the UN system could not have been achieved if the unification of the worldwide municipal associations had not taken place. At the same time, the objective of having a single voice before the UN was the main catalyst of the unification process. This already suggests an important role for the UN in the process of articulation of local authorities into a global actor. But the key to success in the objective of institutional presence was, as we shall see next, the solidarity and commonality of purposes that arose between local authorities and Habitat's management body, and which owed much to their complementary interests.

Next, we shall develop this argument, pointing out the parallel evolution of (a) the global political articulation of local authorities; (b) the gradual penetration of local authorities, through Habitat, into the UN system; and (c) the UN-Habitat Programme itself, whose main turning points were the intergovernmental conferences Habitat II (1996) and Habitat + 5 (2001). Special attention will be paid to the interaction and mutual reinforcement of local authorities and Habitat's management body.

4.1. The "City Summit" (Habitat II, 1996)

Habitat II, the Second Conference of the United Nations on Human Settlements, also known as the "City Summit", was held in Istanbul from June 3 to 14, 1996. It was one of the big intergovernmental conferences on social issues convened by the United Nations

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over the course of the decade, with the objective of advancing the processes of multilateral negotiations, and also the analysis, diagnosis and treatment of global problems. Habitat II, in particular, responded to the pressing problems of growing urbanisation in a context in which almost half the world's population already lived in cities.

The earlier Habitat I (Vancouver, 1976), had given rise to a modest institutional structure in charge of financing and coordinating small projects aimed at the improvement of the quality of life in cities of the Third World, mainly in Africa. The management body, the United Nations Center for Human Settlements (UNCHS), was known as Habitat and had its headquarters in Nairobi. It operated as a support unit to an intergovernmental body, the Commission on Human Settlements, subordinated to the General Assembly and Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC). Habitat did not actually work as an administrative unit, but as a United Nations Development Programme (UNDP-inspired programme), but with far fewer resources and a narrower scope.

In the months prior to the holding of Habitat II, the future survival of the Habitat institutional body was, in itself, uncertain. Within the framework of the process of reform and rationalisation of the UN system, the possibility of eliminating both the Centre and the Commission had been considered, with their functions transferred to other bodies and agencies in the system. African countries, with the support of the Group of 77, were able to prevent their disappearance. They were interested not only in retaining a UN headquarters in Africa, but in Habitat's activities for the human settlements in the region (Alves 2001).

In spite of its weakness and marginal importance within the system, the globally articulated local authorities chose Habitat (rather than other, more important programmes or agencies, like the UNDP or United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO)) as their "front door" and "focal point" in their strategy of penetration into the UN. The reasons are rather evident: in no other UN agency or programme is the participation of local authorities more justified, since Habitat's functions are directly connected with local governments' areas of responsibility and specialisation. The decision was taken in 1994, within the framework of a meeting of the G-4, a group formed in 1992 by the main local authority associations of global reach — IULA, UTO, Metropolis and Summit — to coordinate the participation of local authorities in the major UN social conferences, and to which other, less prominent organizations of local authorities were to be added later (Borja and Castells 1997). This shows that long before the unification of the associations, local authorities had already made joint progress towards their institutional objective. Also, during the same meeting of the G-4, it was decided to convene the First World Assembly of Local Authorities in Istanbul, as part of the programme of activities of the forum that ran parallel to the Conference.

The same arguments of legitimacy that justified the participation of local authorities in Habitat (the institution) were used to support their claim to participate in Habitat (the intergovernmental conference). The strength of the arguments, together with local governments' organizational capabilities, explain why at Habitat II, local authorities — and other transnational actors — were permitted a greater participation in the debates of the Conference in comparison with previous occasions. In fact, local authorities were treated as "full partners" of the conference and, if not the vote, they were granted a voice. Their demands — reinforced by the decisions taken in the First World Assembly of Cities — were conveyed to the intergovernmental conference, and made it to the final Conference documents. Another, more substantive accomplishment, was the explicit recognition of local authorities as the Centre's main partners in the implementation of the "Habitat Agenda", a set of commitments and recommendations in relation to the two main objectives of the Programme: "adequate shelter for all" and "sustainable human settlements development in an urbanizing world" (Istanbul Declaration on Human Settlements, 1996).

The results of Habitat II were therefore an important incentive for the unification of IULA and UTO, an objective ratified by the first World Assembly of Cities. To this end, the G-4 was replaced by a more institutionalised stance, the World Associations of Cities and Local Authorities Coordination (WACLAC), whose goals were advancing the unification process, formally binding local authorities into the UN system and promoting the World Charter of Local Self-Government, as well as enhancing cooperation between local authorities. Once again, therefore, the objective of the unification of the associations was tied in with those objectives related to the UN system: institutional participation and normative impact.

4.2. The alliance WACLAC-Habitat

The intense lobbying activities developed by WACLAC and its associates soon began to bear fruit: in December 1996, the General Assembly asked the Commission of Human Settlements to revise its working methods in order to open itself up to the representatives of local authorities and their associations (United Nations General Assembly 1996). One idea under consideration was to reproduce the tripartite model of the International Labour Organization, whose Executive Council is made up of representatives of governments, employers and workers. However, when the proposal was discussed during the 16th session of the Commission of Human Settlements (the first after Habitat II), it was rejected by the intergovernmental body due to the opposition of several delegations (India's and China's among them), which declared that to open the Commission to local authorities was legally unacceptable. Of course, differently from the case of the International Labour Organization

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(ILO), where the tripartite inclusion of governments, employers and workers makes a functional distinction, in the case of Human Settlements, inclusion of local authorities could be interpreted as a political statement about the inadequacy of national governments to represent localities.[8]

So, in the end, the Commission's recommendations were rather modest in character. Along with the classical solution of granting consultative status to the associations of local governments in the ECOSOC, the Commission suggested the possibility that government delegations to Habitat include representatives of local authorities. Both, needless to say, were far from satisfactory for local authorities.

Against the obstacle represented by Habitat's intergovernmental body, local authorities found a natural ally in Habitat's management body, from the outset sensitive to their demands. The first manifestation of the alliance between local authorities and Habitat (Centre) was the signing of a "Memorandum of Understanding" by means of which they committed to a series of common goals, among which the joint promotion of the World Charter on Local Autonomy, the joint development of the Programme of Best Practices and Local Leadership and the joint formulation of urban indicators.

Thus, the signature of the Habitat-WACLAC Memorandum marked the beginning of substantive influence of local authorities over Habitat's activities, an influence which has been steadily increasing to this day. The second significant step in this direction was the creation of the UNACLA, authorised by the Commission of Human Settlement in its 17th session (May 1999) after two years of negotiations and lobbying by WACLAC and its members (United Nations Commission for Human Settlements 1999).

As already mentioned, UNACLA's creation did not fulfil the expectations of local authorities. The latter demanded for the consultative body the status of a subsidiary body similar to the EU's Committee of Regions or the Council of Europe's Congress of Local and Regional Authorities. UNACLA was not created as a subsidiary body of the Commission of Human Settlements but as a consultative body under Habitat's Executive Director. Nevertheless, in spite of the considerable gap between local authorities' demands and the modest status accorded to UNACLA, the creation of the first formal consultative body made up of local authorities in the UN system was indeed a significant step forward, both on account of local authorities' institutional presence in Habitat and, more generally, as a manifestation of the gradual opening of the UN system to transnational actors.

After its effective constitution in January 2000, the influence of UNACLA on Habitat activities was soon noticeable. Right from the start, the Centre of Human Settlements gave UNACLA a privileged and differentiated role from the rest of the associates with which it cooperates. Habitat's Executive Director (initially Klaus Toepfer and, after 2002, Anna Tibaijuka), responsible for the designation of UNACLA's twenty members, chose

some prominent figures of the international municipal movement.[9] As a consequence, the collaboration with local authorities was increasingly enhanced.

4.3. Habitat + 5 and the revitalisation of the programme

In June 2001, the extraordinary session of UN General Assembly was held in New York to evaluate the progress achieved in the implementation of the Habitat Agenda (Istanbul + 5). As in Habitat II, the intergovernmental conference was preceded by the holding (this time in Rio de Janeiro) of the Second World Assembly of Cities and Local Authorities, which gave the last impulse to the merger of IULA and UTO.

As for the intergovernmental conference itself, a first remarkable element is the positive evaluation made of the implementation of the Habitat Agenda in the five previous years (contrary to the more negative evaluations generally made in other "+ 5" or "+ 10" revision conferences) and, especially, the positive evaluation of local authorities' role in the implementation of the Agenda, together with a recommendation to strengthen their already important role (United Nations General Assembly 2001).

A second remarkable element, due to its important symbolism, was the fact that, for the first time in the history of United Nations, a Mayor was permitted to address the General Assembly — a forum until then strictly reserved for central governments — as a representative of local powers. Joan Clos, Mayor of Barcelona, spoke before the General Assembly as UNACLA's Chairman and demanded (from the states) a bigger role for cities and local powers in the United Nations (Clos 2001).

Thirdly, the documents of Habitat + 5 reveal a striking resemblance between the discourse of the Executive Director of the Centre for Human Settlements and local authorities' traditional claims. In the report on the results of the implementation of the Habitat Agenda presented by the Executive Director to the conference, the main demands of local authorities appear in very clear formulation, from support for the subsidiarity principle to engagement in the formulation of a normative document on decentralization, together with the recognition of the role and contribution of local authorities in the United Nations. It can be safely stated, then, that by 2001, Habitat's management body was fully "localised".

The positive evaluation of the Habitat Programme of Istanbul + 5 was fundamental to the decision of proceeding to the revitalisation of Habitat and of giving it a stronger mandate. As a result, in January 2002, the UN-Habitat Programme was created, from the merger of the Centre of Human Settlements (which became the Secretariat of the Programme), the Commission of Human Settlements (from then on the Governing Council of the Programme) and the Habitat Foundation.[10] This organizational reform had positive effects on Habitat's

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relations with local authorities. Following a proposal from the Secretariat, the new working rules of the Governing Council, adopted in December 2003, opened up the main decision-making body of the Programme to the participation of representatives of local authorities, who, since the 20th session (2005), have been permitted to participate as observers, both in Council meetings and in those of subsidiary bodies, with every possibility of exerting direct and indirect influence over the final decisions that such a presence implies.[11]

In parallel with this process and, once again, partly driven by it, after Habitat + 5 the merger of the world municipal associations reached its last step. In May 2002, at the joint meeting of IULA and UTO in Guadalajara (Mexico), it was agreed that UCGL's headquarters would be located in Barcelona, whose local government had had a particularly active role in the municipal movement and in the initiatives of convergence and rapprochement to the United Nations.[12]

In 2004, then, the new organization — UCLG — began to operate. Significantly, UCLG's statutes make ample reference to the UN.[13] A UN-UCLG "Agreement of Cooperation" was signed the same year. It aimed at expanding the cooperation between the two partners on a series of issues.[14]

Today, even though UN-Habitat still declares itself the "focal point" for local authorities in the UN system, UCLG seems to view relations with the UN in broader perspective: in recent documents, no special references are made to Habitat as UCLG's main UN partner and UN-Habitat is not explicitly mentioned in UCLG's 2007 work programme, which includes, among others, the goal of working towards obtaining official observer status for UCLG at the General Assembly.

5. The Normative Objective: The World Charter of Local Self-Government

As pointed up by Finnemore and Sikkink (1998, 893), many international norms establishing standards for the appropriate behaviour of states had their origins in domestic norms that became internationalised, owing to the efforts of *norms entrepreneurs* of different kinds. In this case, the norms on decentralization that local authorities globally organized (acting as a *transnational norm entrepreneur*) promoted through WACLAC and UNACLA (with the help of Habitat's management body), are norms already applied in Council of Europe member states and appear in the European Charter of Local Self-Government, a convention adopted in 1985 (and amended in 1993) by the Council of Europe on the prompting of the Council of European Municipalities and Regions (CEMR), IULA's European section. UTO adopted the European Charter in 1994. Therefore, the decision made by the First World Assembly of Cities and Local Authorities (May 1996) of

promoting the adoption of a World Charter of Local Self-Government by the UN General Assembly was in reality the culmination of a process of diffusion of (basically European) norms initiated decades before.

As with the European Charter, the main principle that local authorities wanted to include in the World Charter was the subsidiarity principle, i.e., the idea that decisions must be taken and services must be offered at the lowest possible level, and as close to citizens as possible. Local authorities expected the Charter to incorporate some of their long-standing demands *vis-à-vis* central governments, such as better resources and autonomy for local finance, including taxation and transfers, as well as support for direct cooperation between local governments.[15]

As had occurred with the objective of institutional penetration, the support granted by Habitat's management body to the goals promoted by WACLAC and UNACLA was essential. In fact, the promotion of the World Charter was among the common goals of the agreement signed by Habitat (Centre) and WACLAC in 1997. It is then not surprising that the first draft of the Charter was written by a group of experts made up basically of local authorities, representatives of local authority associations, and Habitat's officers. The draft was discussed in eight regional international conferences over the following two years.

This process gave rise to a document, approved in April 2000, that met local expectations. Together with references to their demands of decentralization and access to financial resources, the text mentioned the constitutional and legal bases of local self-government (this, "where practicable", should be "guaranteed in the Constitution" of every country), the definition of local administrative structures, state monitoring, citizen participation and cooperation among local authorities at national, regional and international levels.

The Charter's draft was submitted to Habitat's intergovernmental body (the Commission on Human Settlements) at its 18th session (February 2001). Its approval and forwarding to the UN General Assembly were mandatory. There, governments belonging to the Council of Europe (and therefore already bound to those principles contained in the European Charter), as well as the members of the Group of 77 (who considered that the Charter was a useful instrument for development and a facilitator for international cooperation) were favourable to the text. But the open opposition of other governments, mainly the USA, China, and Canada — and, possibly, the less explicitly demonstrated opposition of other governments — prevented the Charter's adoption. The main obstacle was the binding character proposed for the Charter. Japan's representatives suggested that the General Assembly adopt the Charter as a mere declaration, an unacceptable solution for its promoters.

That opposition by central governments blocked the initiative of the transnational coalition of local governments-Habitat is not surprising. In fact, as has been repeatedly

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observed by those working on transnational actors and norms-building processes, although transnational actors and coalitions are sometimes quite successful in the phase of agenda-setting, a similar success is not to be expected in the later phase of actual rule-creation and international treaty-making, where state actors (central governments) run the business (Risse 2002, 264).

It is to a certain extent more surprising that, in spite of the initial opposition, the efforts to pass a set of international norms on decentralization was partially successful six years later with the agreement, by the same body that had previously rejected the Charter, to a document on Guidelines on Local Autonomy.

Along with the continuing support of Habitat's management body, success can largely be explained by the ability deployed by globally articulated local authorities to make use of a resource of *soft power* available to them in abundance: technical knowledge and information. By using technical arguments in support of their demands, and reinforcing these demands with the results of empirical studies conducted by renowned, independent experts, local authorities managed to persuade their interlocutors in the Habitat Governing Council of the convenience of adopting the norms on decentralization they advocated.

The first step taken in this direction was the opening of a discussion on decentralization that began at the First Urban World Forum (Nairobi, April-May 2002), involving the participation of local government representatives, experts in intergovernmental relations and experts in the application of decentralization measures at the national level.

Next, the Secretariat asked a group of international experts to prepare a comparative study on decentralization in order to document its present state in different legal system and institutions, as well as the relations between the local, intermediate and national levels of government. The study, made public in October 2002, was based on a sample of 28 different cases of decentralization processes taking place in different parts of the world, in developed and developing countries, including countries with economies in transition. On the whole, its conclusions supported local authorities' claims on decentralization.

The "Dialogue on Decentralization" continued in the following session of the UN-Habitat Governing Council (May 2003), with an important participation of local authority representatives. Although no significant advances in relation to the adoption of a normative framework were to be noted, the government delegations accepted the proposal of Habitat's Executive Director (made to Habitat's Committee of Permanent Representatives several months earlier) on the establishment of an expert group on decentralization, as a subcommittee of UNACLA.

Constituted in 2004, the Advisory Group of Experts on Decentralization (AGRED) prepared a first document, which was presented to the Governing Council during its 20th session (2005). This gave rise to a broad consultation process among the different

interested parties. In 2006, the Secretariat, in consultation with the UN-Habitat Committee of Permanent Representatives, finished the draft of the Guidelines on Decentralization. Finally, the Governing Council (at its 2st session in April 2007) endorsed the Guidelines, opening the way to their adoption by the UN General Assembly in September 2007.

The Guidelines contain the main demands of the globally articulated municipal movement: the subsidiarity principle, participation and non-discrimination. If adopted by the General Assembly, they would "support and guide legislative reform *where necessary and appropriate*", halfway between the binding instrument initially strived for and the "mere declaration" suggested by some governmental actors. The Guidelines are not the culmination of the lengthy process of norms-building and persuasion undertaken by local authorities at the global level. For the time being, however, they are not a minor achievement.

6. Conclusions

In the early 1990s, local authorities, transnationally organized, set themselves three common objectives. Firstly, to create a single world organization of local authorities by means of the merger of the two existing worldwide associations of local authorities (IULA-UTO), with the participation of many other bodies of a lesser scope. This objective was attained in 2004 with the inception of UCLG, the institutional expression of the new, emerging international actor. Secondly, to obtain a greater institutional presence in the UN system in general and in the UN-Habitat Programme in particular. So far, this objective has been partly achieved through the creation, in 2000, of UNACLA, a consultative body reporting to the Executive Director of the Programme, and the (partial) opening of the meetings of the intergovernmental body — the Governing Council — to local representatives. These are not minor achievements, and they have had important practical results, such as increasing the efficacy of the implementation of the Habitat Agenda and moving forward into another, more substantial goal of local authorities in the UN. This third goal, the passing by the UN General Assembly of a normative instrument on local autonomy and self-government, has also witnessed significant progress, with a set of Guidelines on Decentralization approved by Habitat's Governing Council and (seemingly) about to be endorsed by the General Assembly.

The theoretical question that this paper has intended to answer is how this emergent international actor has managed to advance considerably in its two objectives related to the UN system, in spite of the initial opposition of other governmental actors. The hypothesis we have tried to demonstrate is that transnationally organized local authorities advanced in the fulfilment of their objectives by using capacities arising from their character of mixed actor, partially sovereignty-bound, partially sovereignty-free.

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Firstly, as with other sovereignty-free actors, the power projected by transnationally articulated local authorities was not based on coercion but on persuasion. In order to persuade their (mainly governmental) interlocutors of the validity of their claims, local authorities repeatedly invoked two sets of considerations. On the one hand, they appealed to their own (and others') knowledge and expertise on urban development-related questions. On the other, they insisted upon their character of legitimate representatives of citizens living under their jurisdiction, i.e., upon the fact that they were governments, not non-state actors. The effectiveness of these arguments was soon to be demonstrated, when local governments were included as principal partners in the implementation of the Habitat Agenda. From then on, the fact of having been granted this special status was used, in turn, as a supplementary argument to move forward both in the institutional and normative objectives.

Secondly, the establishment of coalitions with other actors is a strategy frequently employed by sovereignty-free international actors. Here, the successful coalition formed between the articulated local authorities and the management body (now the Secretariat) of UN-Habitat was fundamental in advancing towards the two objectives. It was the management body that incorporated UNACLA as an advisory committee of Habitat's executive director; next, it put forward the new procedural rules enabling local authorities to participate in the deliberations of the Governing Council; and lastly, along with representatives of local authorities, it took the lead in the process of formulation and discussion of the Guidelines on Decentralization.

Lastly, it is also important to note that becoming a transnational norms entrepreneur is also, in itself, a kind of strategy frequently used by sovereignty-free actors to advance their objectives *vis-à-vis* States. In this case, local governments acted as transnational norms entrepreneurs in their attempt to change, to a certain extent, the power relations and the rules of the game that normally apply in their dealings with their national governments.

Even if they made extensive use of mainly non-state strategies, transnationally articulated local governments are nonetheless public, state actors. As such, they were able to resort to other mechanisms, and effectively did so in the pursuit of their goals. Besides the use of the legitimacy argument associated to their governmental status, local governments displayed a capacity of self-organization that other (non-state) transnational actors lack. This, of course, is related to the fact that, as governments, they are permanent, solid institutions. Furthermore, the access to their own central governments through direct, institutionalised channels, or even through informal ones, is a valuable resource indeed afforded by their governmental status.

Although our theoretical question was focused on how the emergent global actor advanced towards the achievement of its goals, this article has also shown how the UN system contributed to its political articulation. It is worth distinguishing, in this regard,

between two different kinds of influence. One is passive. The mere existence of the UN operated as an important stimulus for the constitution of the emergent actor. In fact, the creation of the first G-4, the initial coordinating forum of the main transnational associations of local authorities, was owed to the will to favour a common position in the UN intergovernmental social conferences of the 1990s.

Along with this passive influence, different agencies of the system also encouraged local authorities to speak with one voice. Here we have concentrated on the one chosen as the front door to the system, Habitat. Since the beginning, Habitat (Secretariat) stimulated the merger of the local associations, granted a special status to local authorities in the programme, valued highly their knowledge and expertise on urban questions and contributed to gradually opening up the intergovernmental Governing Council to local authorities.

Conversely, the increasingly important capacity of transnationally articulated local authorities to intervene in the formulation of the agenda and in the operative structures of the different spheres of UN-Habitat singles out local authorities and their associations as key players in the slow opening of the UN system to transnational actors.

Notes

1   An earlier version of this article was presented at the Sixth Pan-European International Relations Conference in Turin (Italy), September 2007. This article is a preliminary result of the Research Project Expansão, Renovação e Fragmentação das Agendas e Atores de Política Externa

(Expansion, Renewal and Fragmentation of Foreign Policy Agendas and Actors), supported by Ministério da Ciência e Tecnologia (MCT) / Conselho Nacional de Pesquisas e Desenvolvimento (CNPq) / CT Infra /CT Verde Amarelo nº 29/2006 – Programa Renato Archer de Apoio à Pesquisa em Relações Internacionais (Renato Archer Research Programme in International Relations).

2   As its members are not central governments, International Public Law does not recognize UCLG as an International Intergovernmental Organization (IGO). Officially, then, UCLG is an association regulated by Spanish private law.

3   The first time that these two parallel goals appeared on paper was in the "Rio-Barcelona Declaration", a document subscribed by the Mayors of the two cities, Cesar Maia and Pasqual Maragall, in May 1992.

4   Both IULA (since 1947) and UTO–FMCU (since 1963) enjoyed consultative status before the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) as "NGOs". They were therefore given the same treatment as self-considered NGOs with altruistic goals, chambers of commerce, parliamentary

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unions, trade unions or academic networks, among others. This conceptual confusion illustrates well the marginal status traditionally granted to actors other than central governments by the UN system.

5   Metropolis is an association of global reach whose members (90 cities from all over the world) are local and metropolitan governments of big cities (metropolises). With the creation of UCLG, Metropolis became part of the organization as its metropolitan section.

6   Although all subnational governments are mixed actors, the relative weight of the sovereignty-bound and sovereignty-free characteristics seems to vary according to governmental level. Thus, in local (municipal) governments, the sovereignty-free traits seem to be more developed than in intermediate-level governments, which exhibit a set of more "state-like" (therefore, sovereignty-bound) characteristics. See Salomón and Nunes (2007).

7   Similar considerations apply to other governmental actors. For a case study of a semi-governmental agency (Quasi Non-Governmental Organization (QUANGO)) using both state and non-state strategies, see Rodrigues de Macedo (2007).

8   We owe this remark to our anonymous reviewer, whom we thank.

9   Joan Clos (Mayor of Barcelona, President of Metropolis, President of WACLAC), as the first acting Chairman of UNACLA, Eva-Riitta Siitonen (Mayor of Helsinki and President of Eurocities), Cesar Maia (Mayor of Rio de Janeiro), Yves Ducharme (Mayor of Hull, Quebec) and Max Ng'andwe (President of IULA and of the Zambian Local Governments Association), among others.

10   The change implied, for Habitat, an upgrade in the UN system: from permanent committee of the ECOSOC, Habitat became a subsidiary body of the General Assembly (although it presents its reports to the Assembly through ECOSOC).

11   The 20th session (2005) and the 21st session (2007) were attended by 19 and 22 local authority representatives, respectively.

12   Thus, for instance, among its objectives are "to ensure the effective political representation of local government to the international community, in particular the United Nations and its agencies (art. 3c) and among its tasks, "collaborating actively with the United Nations and its agencies, and other relevant international organizations".

13   (i) The Global Campaign on Urban Governance, (ii) the Global Observatory of Local Democracy and Decentralization, (iii) the Urban Millennium Partnership – Localizing the Millennium Development Goals, (iv) the International Dialogue on Decentralization, and, lastly, (v) UNACLA itself.

14   First World Assembly of Cities and Local Authorities, Istanbul, 30-31 May 1996. Final Declaration.

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