

City diplomacy and Australian LGAs: The Potential for Global Urban Leadership in Pluralised Systems of Local Government

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In April 2020, C40 Cities, a prominent transnational network of almost 100 of the world's largest cities that have committed to mitigating the impacts of climate change launched a Global Mayor's COVID-19 Recovery Taskforce. This group of 11 city leaders aimed to drive a sustainable and fair recovery from the crisis in cities. The membership of the group includes the mayors of Freetown, Milan, Lisbon, Rotterdam, Medellín, Montréal, New Orleans, Seattle, Seoul, the Secretary for the Environment of Hong Kong and Melbourne.

This list is not surprising in that it includes a number of leaders of cities that have been proactive members of emerging forms of transnational city leadership and networked global urban governance (Pejic and Acuto, 2021) that has seen the proliferation of city networking, other forms of bi-lateral relations between cities, as well as the inclusion of local authorities in many multilateral forums and agenda.

There is, however, significant variation in the jurisdiction of the local authorities included in this leadership group and as figure 1 shows, the City of Melbourne stands out as a notably smaller municipality in terms of population when compared with its greater metropolitan area.

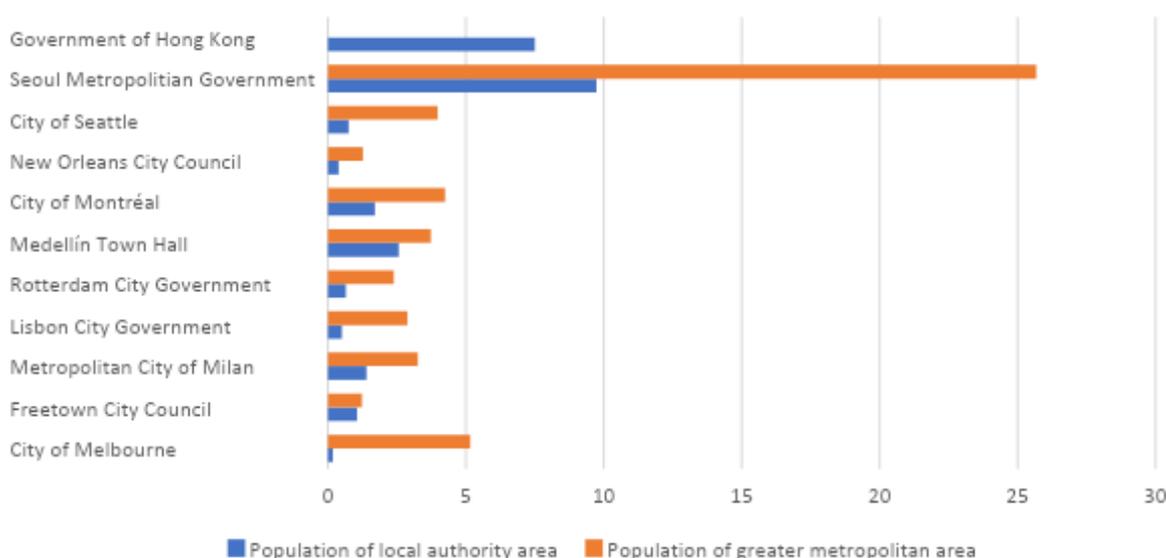


Figure 1: Population of local authorities included in C40 Global Mayor's COVID-19 Recovery Taskforce and greater metropolitan population

The Australian Way

The mostly pluralised form of local government in Australia's largest cities, such as Melbourne and Sydney, contrasts with many centralised models of metropolitan

governance we see in peer cities abroad where unitary local authorities often boast the capacity to directly influence the lives of millions of residents through their policy and planning. Does the comparatively limited jurisdiction of local governments in cities such as Melbourne and Sydney hinder their capacity to lead meaningful change within their countries when compared with their peers in these groups? Or can the leadership of these authorities in connecting with global urban agendas bring tangible benefits to the greater metropolitan city-regions in which they reside?

Is Bigger Better?

Of course, size is not everything and Australian local government authorities (LGAs), particularly Melbourne and Sydney, have become central actors in globally networked urban initiatives, including some of the most prominent such as the Urban20 group of major cities from G20 countries or ICLEI Local Governments for Sustainability, where the City of Melbourne hosts the Oceania regional secretariat. This is part of an expansion of 'city diplomacy' in Australian cities, purposeful networking abroad through forms such as transnational city networks, twinning arrangements, collective advocacy and engagement with multilateral fora (Acuto, 2016).

The City of Melbourne is for example the most active Australian LGA in transnational city networking activities with fifteen formal transnational city network memberships. This is the same number as the cities of London and Berlin, while Sydney has eight such memberships. Since at least the 1980s there has been a progressive expansion of outward looking modes of urban governance in Australia and concerted efforts in major capitals to aspire to be recognised internationally as 'global' cities (Freestone, Davison and Hu, 2019).

Many have highlighted the need for more coordinated and strategic governance of Australia's vast metropolitan regions, which is currently multi-level and fragmented (Steele, 2020). While this analysis usually concerns the capacity to address domestic urban challenges, it is clear that city leaders are needing to increasingly work internationally to meet globalised modern challenges, such as climate change, sustainability and mass migration, and there is limited discussion of how Australia's lack of metropolitan governance may hinder the capacity of our cities to maximise the benefits of international engagements in advancing local goals.

100 Resilient Cities – A Lesson in Metropolitan Cooperation

One of the most prominent examples of both the potential and challenges of engaging with global urban agendas in Australian metropolitan contexts was the involvement of Melbourne in the Rockefeller Foundation's 100 Resilient Cities (100RC) program. 100RC was a global initiative which provided funding for cities to hire a Chief Resilience Officer to develop a resilience strategy, build multi-sectorial partnerships within cities and participate in a global network of cities sharing knowledge and best practice (Fastenrath, Coenen and Davidson, 2019).

Melbourne was one of the first 32 cities selected to take part in the program, with their application promising coordination between the 32 local councils comprising metropolitan Melbourne. More than 1000 individuals from 230 public and private organisations, Melbourne's 32 local councils and state government departments were consulted in the development of the Resilient Melbourne Strategy. Research indicates that many stakeholders found Resilient Melbourne offered a valuable platform for metropolitan-level knowledge exchange and urban innovation (Fastenrath, Bush and Coenen, 2020).

However, as the State Government is ultimately responsible for metropolitan Melbourne there was no direct democratic link between the 32 councils who signed up to the strategy and the broader metropolitan population. With time-limited funding from 100RC (which has now concluded operations), researchers have suggested the ongoing success of the program would likely be contingent on significant State Government involvement (Moloney and Doyon, 2021).

Does System of Local Government Matter?

The experience of 100 Resilient Cities is just one example of an increasingly apparent reality of Australian local authorities engaging internationally with peers and exploring opportunities for policy mobility and bringing shared commitments to addressing global challenges 'back home'. Evidence on the effectiveness of city diplomatic efforts is limited and dedicated comparative empirical study is needed to learn whether system of local government is a factor that hinders these efforts.

What is clear however is compared with many international peers who are deeply engaged in global urban agendas, cities such as Melbourne and Sydney face additional complexity in adapting and implementing policy responses generated from transnational collaboration. With knowledge sharing and policy mobility major benefits of these forums, it raises questions as to need for additional metropolitan governance mechanisms to maximise the benefits of these engagements.

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