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Redefining metropolitan governance in the 21st century

metropolis

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About Metropolis

Metropolitan governance allows governments to deliver common goods at the most appropriate scale

Metropolis supports cities and large metropolitan areas to find innovative and sustainable answers to current and future urban challenges. Bringing together over 150 member cities and 700 million inhabitants worldwide, Metropolis serves as a global hub where metropolises can connect, share experiences and mobilise on issues related to economic development, social cohesion, sustainability, gender equality and quality of life.

For almost four decades, Metropolis has been at the forefront of understanding and navigating the evolving landscape of metropolitan areas. This paper is a result of Metropolis' collaboration with its members and aims to raise awareness around the opportunities of metropolisation. By empowering governments to take bold steps, Metropolis envisions collectively pioneering the future of urban development aligned with the Sustainable Development Goals, fostering resilient and sustainable communities in a world marked by inequality, uncertainty and digital transformation.

This paper, the first in a series, serves to contextualise the importance of thinking, planning and managing at the metropolitan scale. It outlines the metropolisation context, clarifies key definitions, explores various governance models and their advantages and disadvantages, and addresses the challenges and opportunities of governing at scale. Most importantly, this paper does not advocate for a specific model of metropolitan governance or the creation of another bureaucratic layer. It underscores that **metropolitan governance is a strategic realignment of governance structures to match the dynamic and interconnected nature of metropolitan life, allowing governments to deliver common goods at the most appropriate scale.**

In collaboration with UN-Habitat, Metropolis champions World Metropolitan Day, encouraging cities to think beyond their administrative boundaries. Moreover, Metropolis continues to build knowledge and resources for its members and metropolitan areas around the world through research and projects such as The Metropolis Observatory and the development of a toolkit for metropolitan governance.

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Executive summary

The 21st century is an era of profound urban transformation. The number of metropolitan areas with more than one million inhabitants has been increasing steadily from only 76 in 1950 to more than 500 such metropolitan areas today (UN-Habitat, 2022a). 60% of the world population live in metropolitan areas and this is projected to rise exponentially. This unprecedented growth presents a critical challenge: establishing effective and inclusive governance frameworks for these metropolises.

Historically, metropolitan governance focused on cooperation between individual municipalities. However, the evolving urban landscape demands a more holistic approach, one that aligns local needs with broader regional, national and global contexts. **Outdated paradigms separating rural from urban, centre from periphery, and nature from city must be reevaluated to ensure effective and inclusive metropolitan governance.** The integration of biodiversity, sustainability and inclusive distribution of opportunities is imperative in addressing contemporary challenges and achieving the Sustainable Development Goals by the 2030 deadline.

With a quarter of the global population living in cities of more than 1 million*

With a quarter of the global population living in cities of more than 1 million, discussions on metropolitan governance need to transcend traditional notions of economies of scale, agglomeration economies and knowledge spillovers. **Today, daily life involves navigating municipal boundaries and administrative jurisdictions, presenting both unprecedented opportunities and challenges.** Comprehensive governance solutions are required to address issues such as mobility and housing, crucial in shaping the evolving notions of city, place and belonging.

Metropolitan areas play a pivotal role in the global context, experiencing the impacts of globalisation, economic and digital transformations, and complex emergencies such as the climate and care crises. From experiencing first-hand the consequences of the gig economy, inflation, backlashes against gender-based rights, and increasing informality to negatively contributing to the Earth's already over-stretched planetary boundaries, metropolitan areas are at the forefront of numerous challenges. Metropolitan areas need approaches that balance the urgent need for action with inclusive, participatory processes. Only by addressing the growing inequalities exposed by these emergencies can governments build truly sustainable and equitable societies.

* Multiple sources compiled by World Bank (2024) – processed by Our World in Data

The interconnectedness of the modern world is exemplified by how megatrends manifest in metropolitan areas. This interconnectedness defines not just our present, but also the challenges and opportunities of the 21st century. Collaboration within and beyond borders has never been as important to tackling these challenges. **Various models of metropolitan governance exist, each offering distinct advantages and challenges:**

- **Metropolitan governments,** whether single-tier or two-tier structures, have the potential to reshape urban areas by pooling resources and making operations more efficient across a larger area. However, success hinges on robust accountability mechanisms and genuine community engagement. This ensures that the needs of all residents, particularly historically marginalised populations, are effectively addressed.
- **Sector-based metropolitan agencies** focus on managing specific services within metropolitan areas, such as public transportation or water management. While these agencies offer expertise and efficiency, disparities in service coverage and accountability challenges may arise without central oversight.
- **Vertical coordination** leverages existing governmental structures to implement metropolitan policies and services, often through regional or central authorities. While this model can facilitate policy implementation, fragmented governance and fiscal disparities may hinder metropolitan-wide cohesion.
- **Voluntary cooperation among municipalities** provides a flexible framework for addressing shared challenges, fostering collaborative solutions tailored to local needs. However, its effectiveness depends heavily on the political will and sustained commitment of all stakeholders involved.

As metropolitan areas grapple with evolving challenges, adaptive governance structures are critical. **While aligning administrative boundaries with functional metropolitan areas can enhance coordination, effective governance demands more.** It necessitates inclusive, participatory approaches that prioritise equitable resource distribution and sustainable development. By embracing diverse governance models, fostering stakeholder collaboration and prioritising inclusive decision-making, metropolises can unlock their full potential as global engines of prosperity and innovation.

This paper calls for a shift in how we conceptualise and implement metropolitan governance. By embracing adaptable and innovative approaches, aligning with global goals and recognising the dynamic nature of metropolitan life, governments can pave the way for resilient and sustainable communities. Metropolitan governance is not just about addressing current issues; it is also about laying the groundwork for generations to come.

The metropolis as a compass for a world in transition

Global challenges, local impacts

The world is facing a multitude of interconnected crises, ranging from biodiversity loss and environmental degradation to economic downturn and social unrest. The climate crisis is intensifying, leading to a surge in both the frequency and severity of disasters. This, coupled with rising inequalities, creates a dangerous cycle of vulnerability and instability (UNDP, 2024).

Cities play a key role in addressing global issues, from ending poverty, to women's rights and climate adaptation

Simultaneously, the traditional world order, characterised by robust political blocs, is undergoing a transformation, making international cooperation more challenging (UNDP, 2024). Amidst this shift, there is a growing disillusionment with governmental institutions, fostering scepticism and social polarisation, thereby weakening the social contract (UNDP, 2024). The proliferation of misinformation and disinformation further exacerbates societal divisions. With nearly three billion people anticipated to participate in elections globally within the next two years, the dissemination of misinformation poses a threat to the legitimacy of newly elected administrations (WEF, 2024).

In this landscape of eroding institutional trust and a growing desire for change, it becomes imperative to address social disparities and promote meaningful engagement, ensuring that historically marginalised communities are enabled to participate in decision-making and shaping equitable futures. The urgency of this task is underscored by the confluence of pressing global challenges: climate change, pandemics, economic instability, widening inequalities and resource insecurity. **These challenges do not unfold uniformly across the globe, highlighting how past decisions have shaped present inequities. Addressing these disparities is fundamental to building a future that is both just and resilient.**

The coming years represent a critical turning point for our collective future. How societies navigate these complex, transboundary challenges will either escalate tensions or catalyse a new era of equitable, resilient multilateral cooperation. Within this context of global polarisation, cities, particularly major cities, emerge as pivotal agents for collaboration and problem-solving.

Amidst unprecedented urbanisation, metropolitan governance has emerged as a crucial tool for integrating people, places and the environment. Highlighted by the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the latest Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) report, cities play a key role in addressing diverse global issues, from ending poverty, to women's rights, to climate adaptation.

Defining the metropolis in a world in transition

The 21st-century city is a metropolis – a city that transcends traditional boundaries, interconnected with its surrounding ecosystems and the global landscape. Home to over 1.8 billion people (UN-Habitat, 2020), metropolitan areas are engines of innovation, diversity and prosperity. They significantly contribute to economic advancement, offering significant benefits and spillover effects to their national economies (OECD, 2015a). In 2012, metropolises made up 33% of the world's global population, but they produced more than 55% of all global economic output (LSE, 2014). Furthermore, almost 60% of metropolitan areas consistently outperformed their national averages in job creation (Parrilla et al., 2014).

Urbanisation has been key to the economic development of many countries. However, poorly managed metropolitan areas can exacerbate territorial disparities and social divides, increasing tensions, and limiting communities' equitable access to basic services and infrastructure, from sanitation to green spaces (UCLG, 2016). This is particularly the case when the city centre attracts economic activities, while other parts of the metropolitan area lack investment and connectivity with employment opportunities (OECD, 2016). This polarisation represents one of the potential negative effects of increasing agglomeration. Hence, effective metropolitan governance is essential to ensure a good quality of life in an increasingly unequal world.

The process of metropolisation, rather than solely population growth or migratory flows, is reshaping the distinctions between cities, suburbs and rural areas. Metropolisation describes the merging of fragmented urban and peri-urban regions into interconnected systems, challenging traditional notions of the city, place and belonging (Cardoso and Meijers, 2021). This interconnected system necessitates integrated management strategies, embracing the diverse fabric of the metropolis.

Following a holistic approach, Metropolis adopts the term 'metropolis' or 'metropolitan area' to underscore the interconnectedness of cities with their surrounding ecosystems and the global context.

Metropolisation in numbers

Metropolises are home to 1.8 billion people

The number of metropolitan areas with more than one million inhabitants has been increasing steadily over the years. **Almost 1 billion people will join the metropolitan population in the next decade.**

Africa and parts of Asia-Pacific will have the largest increase in size and the number of metropolises, while the rest of the world forecasts lower growth rates; even, in the Northern Hemisphere, we find more and more aging and shrinking metropolises. Density trends are also uneven: sprawl is still growing in some parts, while densification is the future in others (UN-Habitat, 2022a).

Metropolises are resposible for 60% of greenhouse gas emissions

While occupying only 3% of Earth's surface, **metropolises are responsible for a staggering 70% of global energy consumption and over 60% of greenhouse gas emissions.** This disproportionate impact can be attributed to the high concentration of population relying heavily on fossil fuels.

The IPCC report emphasises the urgency of a collective effort for drastic transformations across various sectors. This includes shifting to renewable energy sources, implementing sustainable land management practices, and reimagining urban planning with a focus on public transport and buildings (IPCC, 2022).

Capital city regions show the highest income inequality in 13 of 26 OECD countries

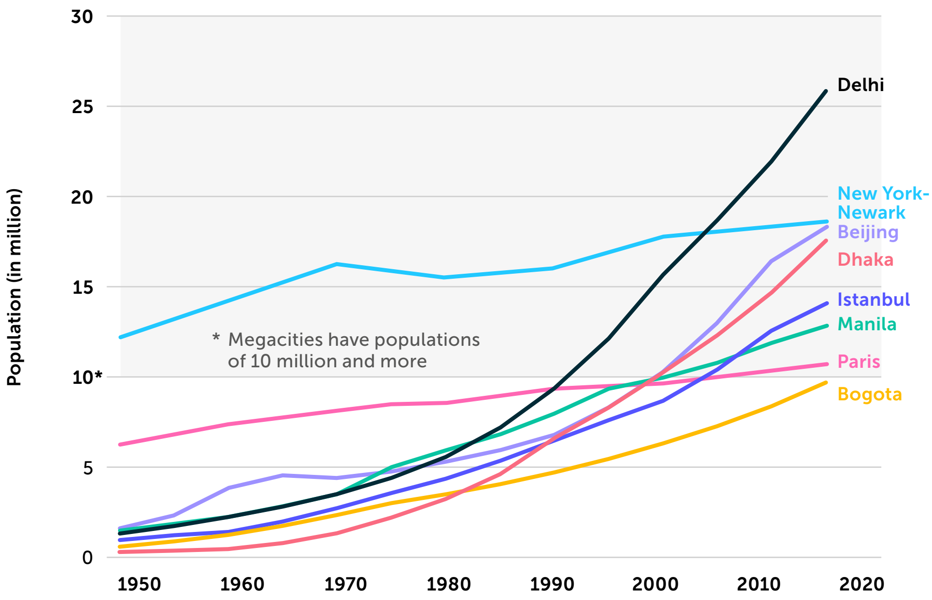
Capital city regions have the highest income inequality in half of the 26 OECD countries. This highlights the need to address both the disparity between regions and the issue of rising inequality within metropolitan areas (OECD, 2023).

While major cities typically experience stronger economic growth, this is not necessarily reflected in increased quality of life. Challenges include housing unaffordability, rising informality and increasing inequality within the city itself. Tackling these disparities through targeted policies is crucial to fostering prosperous livelihoods in these large urban centres (OECD, 2023).

To effectively govern these expansive urban spaces, **governments must embrace a multifaceted approach that considers the metropolitan area on three levels:**

1. **The metropolis as an urban system:** A metropolis is not just the downtown area. It includes the suburbs, towns and everything in between. It is a complex and interconnected system, with strong economic, social, cultural and environmental linkages. Each metropolitan area follows a unique developmental path, with diverse land-use patterns necessitating seamless connectivity across its industrial zones, business districts and neighbourhoods.
2. **The metropolis as part of an ecosystem:** Cities are part of an ecosystem, meaning that they both impact and rely on their surroundings. Metropolises are not self-sustaining, they rely on their surrounding natural systems for food, water, energy, flows of talent and innovation, and well-being. The metropolitan perspective recognises this fundamental connection between cities and their ecosystems. **Despite occupying just 3% of Earth's surface, metropolises consume immense resources and generate 70% of carbon emissions**, leaving a great ecological footprint (IPCC, 2022). Given their profound impact on the environment, metropolitan governments need to rethink their relationship with the planet so that they can respect Earth's planetary boundaries (Rockström, 2009).
3. **The metropolis as a global player:** Metropolises are key actors on the global stage because of their influence, economic and cultural significance. These urban centres have a responsibility to address global challenges like the climate crisis, gender-based violence, and public health. While profoundly influential, metropolises are more than local electoral and administrative politics, they are also an arena of struggles and conflicts that transcend borders, mirroring those occurring on the global stage (Martinez, Bunnell and Acuto, 2020).

Population levels in the world's largest cities over time



Source: UNDESA (2018)

Cities are expanding beyond their traditional boundaries, giving rise to new and complex urban entities. Delhi (India) has undergone a remarkable population increase, rising from approximately 1.3 million inhabitants in 1950 to 30 million by 2020 (UNDESA, 2018). Metropolitan areas are challenging conventional notions of urban planning and governance. **Today, there are more than 40 megacities –cities with more than 10 million inhabitants– in the world, encompassing influential centres such as Paris, Istanbul, New York and Rio de Janeiro** (UN-Habitat Database, 2020). Projections indicate that this trend will continue, further emphasising the need to redefine existing governance frameworks.

The challenge extends beyond individual megacities. The emergence of macro-regions, geographically concentrated clusters of interconnected metropolises, adds another layer of complexity. For example, the Pearl River Delta macro-region in China is home to over 86 million people and encompasses two Special Administrative Regions (Hong Kong and Macau) and nine municipalities, of which four approach or exceed ten million inhabitants (Guangzhou, Shenzhen, Dongguan and Foshan). The unprecedented growth and interconnection of these urban spaces call for a shift towards metropolitan-level governance.

There are currently over 40 megacities in the world with populations exceeding 10 million, and that number is steadily rising

Integrating a metropolitan vision: Governance models

Effectively managing metropolitan areas requires overcoming administrative and political barriers that hinder the daily lives of local communities. Inclusive, participatory governance ensures that the full diversity of members of the metropolitan area benefit from agglomeration, rather than leaving some to cope with pollution, the impacts of informality, and waste while others enjoy cultural and natural assets and economic opportunities.

Adopting a metropolitan perspective allows governments to address differences between rural and urban areas, embrace interconnectivity and shared opportunity, and thus promote a balanced and sustainable relationship between cities and their surroundings. This involves encouraging partnerships between urban and rural areas and establishing flexible and adaptive cooperation mechanisms between municipalities to provide public services and promote local and regional development. Such governance reflects a collective responsibility, moving beyond the idea of winners and losers, and aims to create a more equitable and prosperous metropolitan environment for all.

In practice, the governance of metropolitan areas is increasingly intricate and fragmented, often involving a network of local governments, agencies and interests not initially designed for metropolitan-scale issues (See Annex 1). Moreover, the administrative culture and political history of each country influences the preferred model of metropolitan governance for projects and policy-making (Haveri and Tolkki, 2019). Approximately 70% of metropolitan areas in OECD countries have dedicated governance bodies overseeing regional development, transportation and planning (OECD, 2015b). Despite this advancement, significant variations persist in legal frameworks, competencies and budgets (OECD, 2015b).

Four main models of metropolitan governance have emerged: metropolitan governments, sector-based metropolitan agencies, vertical coordination, and voluntary cooperation among municipalities. These models range from formal structures designed to implement metropolitan-scale policies to informal arrangements where local authorities collaborate to address shared challenges and goals. While each governance model carries its own set of advantages and drawbacks, they all strive to effectively manage the realities of metropolitan areas.

However, existing metropolitan governance models and structures were developed without considering the challenges of digitalisation, informal settlements, climate change and other contemporary issues. With the recent disruptive changes in metropolitan areas, simply establishing a structure at the metropolitan level may not be sufficient anymore.

Four main governance models

Formal arrangements			Informal arrangements
Metropolitan government Elected or non-elected metropolitan entity that represents municipalities	**Sector-based metropolitan agency** Entity that plans and manages one or several public services	**Vertical coordination** Metropolitan policies implemented by the national or regional level	**Voluntary cooperation** Local authorities organise at their own initiative

Metropolitan government

Metropolitan governments are a dedicated structure specifically designed to address metropolitan scale challenges with a holistic perspective. Two types of structure are the most prevalent, with a third one presenting particular characteristics:

1 Single-tier metropolitan government

A government body that oversees the metropolitan area. It can be formed through a merger of local governments or the creation of a metropolitan city.

- **Metropolitan cities are city governments** that cover the functions of the whole metropolitan area, as exemplified by the City of Guangzhou (China) and the Greater Amman Municipality (Jordan).
- **Metropolitan governments** formed by a merger of local governments. This is the case of the City of Toronto[1] (Canada) and Abidjan (Côte d'Ivoire).

2 Two-tier government

Government structure formed by a metropolitan authority alongside existing municipal authorities. This type of government usually has competencies in service delivery and spatial planning, while housing and welfare remain the competence of individual municipalities.

- **Directly elected metropolitan authorities** have their own mayor or council, as well as specific competencies that are distinct from the municipalities or councils in their territory. This arrangement is exemplified by the Istanbul Metropolitan Municipality (Türkiye) or the Seoul Metropolitan Government (Republic of Korea).
- **Indirectly elected metropolitan authorities** feature indirectly elected governance structures, deriving their legitimacy and accountability from a broader pool of directly elected officials, including governors, mayors, regional parliamentarians, and city councillors. Notable examples of this model include the Metropolitan Area of Barcelona (Spain), the Metropolitan City of Turin (Italy) and the Metropolitan Region of Bogotá–Cundinamarca (Colombia).

3 Special-status metropolises

Special-status metropolises stand apart within the territorial landscape of their respective nations, often due to their immense size, historical significance or role as national capitals. This distinct status elevates them beyond the conventional administrative framework and establishes a unique, direct relationship with the central government, akin to that of states, provinces or other regional entities. Consequently, these metropolises have broader competencies and responsibilities compared to other urban authorities within their countries, which sometimes translates into having additional revenue sources. They may adopt either a two-tier structure, exemplified by Mexico City in Mexico and Brussels Capital Region in Belgium, or a one-tier structure, as observed in the four directly administered cities of China (Beijing, Chongqing, Shanghai, and Tianjin) and the three city-states of Germany (Berlin, Hamburg and Bremen).

1. The Municipality of Metropolitan Toronto was dissolved in 1998. The boundaries of present-day Toronto are the same as those of Metropolitan Toronto upon its dissolution.

Metropolitan governments have the potential to reshape urban areas by pooling resources and making operations more efficient across a larger area. For instance, when it comes to planning transportation or managing waste, having one central authority can make things run more smoothly and avoid unnecessary duplication. **Moreover, the presence of a single, coordinated entity can enhance accountability, providing residents with a clear point of reference for addressing metropolitan-wide issues.**

Metropolitan governments also present their own set of challenges. One major concern is accountability. When residents lack direct access to the governing body, doubts may arise regarding its responsiveness to local needs. This scenario underscores the importance of fostering a sense of connection and inclusive participatory processes within the larger metropolitan structure. **While metropolitan governments have the power to make positive changes, it is crucial for them to keep communication open and involve communities to truly meet everyone's needs, particularly historically marginalised communities.**

Metropolitan governments have the potential to reshape urban areas by pooling resources and making operations more efficient across a larger area

Example of metropolitan government

Metropolitan Area of Barcelona (Spain)

36
municipalities

3.2
million inhabitants (2021)

Established in 2010, the Metropolitan Area of Barcelona is a two-tier metropolitan government composed of 36 municipalities. The Metropolitan Council is the decision-making body of the metropolitan area. It is composed of 90 metropolitan councillors, representing each municipality in proportion to their population. Notably, all mayors and city councillors automatically assume positions as metropolitan councillors, forging a direct link between local and metropolitan governance.

Source: Metropolis for the Council of Europe (2022) Governance of European metropolitan areas.

Sector-based metropolitan agency

Sector-based metropolitan agencies are specialised governance structures that plan and manage specific service provisions. These technical agencies specialise in providing one service, such as water management, public transport or waste management (single-sector authority). They can also plan and deliver services for multiple sectors (multi-sector authority) The objective of these agencies is to optimise service delivery across municipalities.

Sector-based agencies have a focused approach toward specific services, which can lead to enhanced expertise and effectiveness. This concentration often results in high-quality service delivery due to dedicated funding sources such as user fees or municipal contributions. However, this specialised approach also presents challenges. One concern is the potential for service disparities to emerge. For example, certain areas within a metropolitan area may have varying levels of service coverage. This can lead to situations where a well-functioning transit system in one district fails to connect adequately with another, leaving residents without sufficient access to transportation.

Moreover, the absence of a centralised, elected body overseeing these agencies can raise accountability issues. Residents may struggle to identify the responsible party for addressing service gaps or inconsistencies. **By leveraging the expertise of sector-based agencies while promoting improved coordination across the territory, the metropolis can unlock its full potential, ensuring that all residents benefit from efficient and equitable service delivery.**

Example of a sector-based agency

Metropolitan Mobility Network in Santiago de Chile (Chile)

750

million passengers in 2022

The Metropolitan Mobility Network, established in 2002 with the creation of Transantiago, is a cornerstone of public transport in Santiago de Chile. This comprehensive system oversees the planning and management of the city's entire bus network.

The Metropolitan Mobility Network integrates all public transportation options within Santiago, including buses operated by six concessionaires; Santiago Metro (a rapid transit system) and MetroTren Nos (a suburban rail network serving the greater metropolitan area). In 2022, the system facilitated over 750 million passenger trips across its diverse modes of transport.

Source: Red Metropolitana de Movilidad (2022) Informe de Gestión 2022.

Vertical coordination

Vertical coordination relies on the existing governmental structures to implement metropolitan policies and services. This model can facilitate the implementation of metropolitan plans when there is adequate funding and authority, but it can also weaken the coherence of the metropolitan vision across the different policy domains that the government oversees. In many countries, in particular those with federal systems, metropolitan governance is often vertically coordinated by regional, state or provincial authorities, sometimes within the framework of a national law, as in Brazil or Bolivia. In other countries, especially where one or two metropolitan areas account for a significant part of the country's population, it is the central government that plays that role, as is the case in the Philippines.

Vertical coordination presents a distinct method for governing metropolitan regions. However, its fragmented nature can pose challenges when addressing issues that extend beyond municipal borders. Additionally, fiscal disparities may emerge, as municipalities with limited resources may face difficulties in delivering services at the same standard as more affluent areas. This disparity can result in unequal service provision and infrastructure development throughout the metropolis. It is essential to empower local governments while promoting collaboration on a metropolitan level to address these challenges effectively.

Example of vertical coordination

Metropolitan Manila (Philippines)

17
municipalities

13.3
million inhabitants (2020)

The Metropolitan Manila Development Authority is a government agency that coordinates service delivery across Metropolitan Manila. This region is the capital of the Philippines, with over 13.3 million inhabitants.

The Metropolitan Manila Development Authority and Metropolitan Manila are under the direct supervision of the Office of the President of the Philippines. The Metropolitan Manila Council is composed of the 17 mayors of the local governments and a chairperson, who is appointed by the President.

Source: GIZ (2015) Unpacking Metropolitan Governance for Sustainable Development: Discussion Paper

Voluntary cooperation

Voluntary cooperation among municipalities provides a versatile approach that empowers local governments to address shared challenges. This model, characterised by the self-organisation of local authorities, offers a flexible framework that can be tailored to specific needs. Moreover, the ease of forming and dissolving voluntary arrangements makes it a straightforward solution for collaboration. Since accountability and decision-making stays clearly with each municipality, this model avoids some of the fears about losing formal control, but it can also be easily blocked or slowed down.

The spectrum of voluntary cooperation encompasses a range of arrangements, from informal partnerships to formal agreements:

- **Informal cooperation** involves coordinating activities and sharing information without a legal agreement.
- **Formal cooperation** entails formalising the agreement through a joint agency, joint service provision or a shared funding arrangement.

Example of voluntary cooperation

Los Angeles (United States)

5
counties

18.5
million inhabitants

Los Angeles is a metropolis with almost 18.5 million people, which is divided into more than 200 cities and five county governments with no metropolitan government.

Los Angeles uses an inter-municipal agreement to contract service provision. In this case, Los Angeles County delivers essential services like public works management, business license collection and even sheltering services, all under contract agreements with the individual municipalities.

Source: Slack, E. (2007) Managing The Coordination Of Service Delivery In Metropolitan Cities: The Role Of Metropolitan Governance. The World Bank. Policy Research Working Papers.

Voluntary cooperation among cities opens up the potential of a network where each city, with its unique strengths and challenges, collaborates for mutual benefit. By pooling resources and expertise, municipalities can achieve cost savings and enhance service delivery across the board. This collaborative approach also builds capacity by combining knowledge and skills, enabling cities to address complex challenges and explore innovative solutions.

The advantages of voluntary cooperation go beyond efficiency, fostering a sense of shared responsibility and risk management among participating cities. However, effective collaboration requires a solid foundation. It is crucial to establish accountability and transparency mechanisms for services spanning multiple jurisdictions. Clear oversight ensures that residents know who to hold accountable. Additionally, fair distribution of resources and benefits is essential for sustained success. Ultimately, the success of voluntary cooperation relies on the political will and commitment of all stakeholders involved.

Voluntary cooperation can also extend beyond national borders. Some arrangements are set up through the initiative of local governments and others are top-down. National governments often spearhead cross-border cooperation projects, as exemplified by the Eurotunnel and the Asia Highway Network. These ventures promote regional connectivity and infrastructure development through collaborative efforts. Initiatives like Greater Geneva demonstrate the power of cooperation at the municipal and provincial levels. This case exemplifies how communities across countries can work together to collaborate on shared issues.

Example of international cooperation

Greater Geneva

1.0
million inhabitants (2019)

2
countries

209
municipalities

Greater Geneva is a cross-border metropolis of over one million inhabitants, located between France and Switzerland. It is a public entity, under Swiss law, organised as a Local Grouping for Cross-Border Cooperation.

Greater Geneva brings together the Canton of Geneva, the municipalities in the zone of Genevois and the Nyon District to collaborate on mobility, sustainability and land use planning. Cross-border cooperation in this area started in 1973 and was formalised in 2013 with the creation of Greater Geneva.

Source: Grand Genève (2022) Grand Genève : Mode d'emploi.

There is no one-size-fits-all solution

Metropolitan governance embraces a nuanced approach that recognises the varying scales at which different services and issues are most effectively managed. **This approach, anchored by the scales of districts, urban agglomerations and metropolitan regions, ensures that common goods are delivered at the most appropriate level,** fostering a more efficient, equitable and sustainable metropolitan landscape. It also considers the dynamic dimension of urban evolution, allowing some room to extend governance structures and geographic limits to embrace new territorial, social, and environmental realities.

At the scale of the district, the focus lies on providing proximity to essential services that underpin safe and healthy living, such as parks, community centres, preschools, nursing homes and public transportation. These services, deeply rooted in the fabric of local communities, demand a governance structure that reflects a deep understanding of neighbourhood needs and allows all residents to take care of themselves and others.

Moving beyond immediate neighbourhood concerns, **the urban agglomeration scale encompasses the broader metropolitan area, home to a diverse range of opportunities and services.** This scale is well-suited for managing issues that transcend individual municipalities, such as housing, economic development, higher education and cultural institutions. A governance structure that effectively coordinates these interconnected elements is crucial for nurturing a vibrant and thriving metropolitan economy, as well as creating accessible, gender equitable, affordable and caring metropolitan areas.

The metropolitan region, encompassing a region with one or more densely populated urban cores in commuting-conjunction with the suburban zone, emerges as the appropriate scale for addressing environmental concerns. Water, waste management, biodiversity and ecological corridors, all essential components of a sustainable metropolitan ecosystem, transcend municipal boundaries and demand a metropolitan regional approach. Similarly, broader issues of sustainability, such as food security, energy supply, logistics and global connectivity, can be effectively addressed at the metropolitan region level, ensuring that metropolitan areas contribute to a more sustainable future.

In essence, metropolitan governance should not be viewed as the creation of another layer of bureaucracy, but rather as a realignment of governance structures to match the dynamic and interconnected nature of metropolitan life. This is recognised in the New Urban Agenda, which emphasises the need for effective and inclusive metropolitan governance that transcends administrative boundaries and respects functional territories. It also encourages urban-rural partnerships and inter-municipal cooperation mechanisms as useful tools for providing public services and advancing local and regional development. This is because by delivering common goods at the most appropriate scale, metropolitan governance can pave the way for a more resilient, prosperous and sustainable metropolitan future.

Adjusting city administrative boundaries can foster more effective governance, but it's not the whole equation

In the same way, effective metropolitan governance only sometimes depends on fully aligning city administrative boundaries with the wider functional metropolitan area (LSE, 2014). While a closer alignment can facilitate coordinated planning and resource allocation, there are significant variations. Adjusting city administrative boundaries to encompass the entire metropolitan population can foster more effective governance, but it is not the whole equation.

Governing the metropolis of the 21st century

Metropolitan governance, the process of governing metropolitan areas, is a response to the interconnected and complex nature of these urban ecosystems. However, metropolitan governance is not without its challenges. Fragmented governance structures, institutional and financial gaps and overlaps, legitimacy concerns, and the local impact of global crises have hindered progress in this area. These challenges can be overcome by adopting appropriate strategies and frameworks for metropolitan governance.

Building trust and legitimacy

Today, there is a worldwide trend of declining social cohesion, leading to increased vulnerability to polarization, which is recognised as a top global risk (WEF, 2024). This decline, coupled with economic uncertainty and distrust in societal institutions, and backsliding on human rights including gender-based rights, is creating a divide between people and institutions, particularly weakening trust in governments (UNDP, 2024). This lack of trust undermines the social contracts between governments and their citizens, leading to various reactions ranging from apathy to activism across different political systems and demographics, especially among younger generations.

In this context, effective metropolitan governance must be grounded in trust, legitimacy, participation, and representation. However, some of these elements are lacking in current models of metropolitan governance. In some cases, national governments hold significant influence over metropolitan and city-level matters, making collaboration with the national government crucial for addressing complex metropolitan challenges such as transportation, infrastructure development, environmental protection and economic development.

Key questions for subnational governments to enhance engagement

1. What are the main barriers that prevent metropolitan communities, in all their diversity, from actively and meaningfully engaging in the decision-making process?

2. How can metropolitan governance frameworks effectively promote transparency, accountability and inclusive participation in decision-making, particularly ensuring that historically marginalised communities have a voice?

3. What innovative methods and platforms can local, regional and metropolitan governments use to increase public awareness of engagement opportunities and foster dialogue, co-creation, trust, and a deeper sense of community?

4. Can civil society organisations and citizens easily navigate metropolitan governance and hold authorities accountable?

In terms of legitimacy, many metropolitan governments rely on indirect elections, resulting in decision-making bodies such as Metropolitan Councils, Assemblies, or Boards composed of political city representatives appointed by their municipal councils (Tomàs in Metropolis, 2020). Furthermore, community engagement, essential for successful metropolitan governance, faces numerous challenges at the metropolitan level, as metropolitan issues are often unfamiliar to residents and mechanisms for meaningful participation are sometimes inadequate, inaccessible or even exclusionary (Tomàs in Metropolis, 2020). Therefore, community engagement at the metropolitan level should adopt innovative and inclusive approaches tailored to the metropolitan scale and diversity and the demands of communities.

Moreover, **the lack of social and gender diversity in subnational governments weakens the possibility for responsive, representative and effective governance,** as these bodies fail to reflect the diversity - and thus the needs and aspirations - of the communities they represent (Tomàs in Metropolis, 2020). Women, particularly those from ethnic minority backgrounds, are underrepresented in both local and metropolitan governments, hindering the promotion of gender equality and the integration of women's perspectives and needs into governance (Tomàs in Metropolis, 2020). This gender gap perpetuates stereotypes and prevents the potential for building inclusive, innovative and effective governance. This is especially significant given that not a single indicator for SDG5, gender equality, has been met or even almost met, and only 14 countries grant women equal legal rights to men (UNDP, 2023).

Simply offering avenues for public participation is not enough. To build trust, legitimacy and representation, metropolitan governance must evolve into a facilitator for social innovation and active, accessible engagement. This means creating meaningful opportunities for all individuals to participate in information sharing, consultation, collaboration, and ultimately, decision-making. By encouraging a culture of co-creation, metropolitan governance can tap into the collective intelligence, diversity and creativity of its inhabitants. This fosters a sense of ownership and empowers communities to develop innovative solutions to pressing challenges. This shift from provider to co-facilitator strengthens the social fabric of the metropolis and unlocks its full potential for progress.

Addressing fragmented governance

One of the main challenges in metropolitan governance lies in the fragmented nature of urban landscapes. Often, metropolitan areas comprise a patchwork of cities, each with its own government, agenda and diverse communities. **Fragmented governance arrangements coupled with political partisanship and competition can create obstacles to effective**

Key questions for subnational governments to overcome fragmented governance

1. Are existing metropolitan arrangements creating more problems or delivering the services and policies that the communities, territories of the metropolitan areas need?

2. What strategies can metropolitan areas employ to effectively coordinate policies and services across different municipalities?

3. How can metropolitan governance structures facilitate data and information sharing across municipalities to support informed decision-making and coordinated action?

4. How can metropolitan governance effectively address issues that transcend municipal boundaries, such as transportation, social inequalities and economic development, to promote social and territorial cohesion?

policy-making and service delivery, especially for issues that transcend municipal borders. Even when the geographical boundaries encompass the initial economic region, economically vibrant regions naturally outgrow their established political borders, and informal economies do not neatly map along municipal lines. Nonetheless, the adaptation of governmental boundaries is an infrequent and intricate phenomenon. Consequently, achieving crucial alignment between institutions, investment and infrastructure with the dynamic functional geography of the metropolitan area proves to be a formidable task (Slack, 2014). This necessitates continued coordination between consolidated core cities and neighbouring municipalities on matters like transportation, social inclusion and economic development.

In this context, multilevel governance emerges as the cornerstone of effective metropolitan governance. Collaboration between different levels of government, alongside robust and inclusive participatory processes, and clear competencies foster coordinated decision-making, resource allocation and policy implementation, ensuring that metropolitan development aligns with broader regional and national strategies, as well as community aspirations. For instance, sometimes local governments face limitations in enacting significant changes due to their limited competencies in certain areas of policy-making. Despite the efforts of local authorities like the City of Toronto, their ability to implement substantial shifts in energy production and reduce emissions is restricted without support from higher levels of government. Toronto aspires to achieve its ambitious 2030 climate targets by reducing reliance on natural gas and embracing renewable energy. However, energy production is regulated by the province. To address this challenge, TransformTO, a short-term implementation plan, proposes a collaborative approach. It envisions a unified effort among municipal, provincial and federal authorities to facilitate a transition towards a sustainable energy model (IMFG, 2022).

To overcome fragmentation, a shared vision for the metropolitan area's future is essential. This vision should articulate a clear understanding of the region's strengths, challenges and opportunities, providing a common framework for decision-making and collaboration. Additionally, national governments play a key role in enabling metropolitan collaboration by supporting the political and fiscal empowerment of subnational governments. They can also encourage coordinated strategies across different levels of government, fostering a sense of shared responsibility (Nuno et al., 2019). For example, the federal transportation grants in the United States fund Metropolitan Planning Organisations to encourage cooperation across metropolitan areas. This is especially important as tensions between different levels of governance can arise when the central government directly invests in cities under specific conditions without involving regional or provincial governments.

Metropolitan governance goes beyond the transfer of responsibilities and resources. It entails managing "mutual dependence" (Devas and Delay, 2006) and promoting a significant cultural shift towards cooperation and collective accountability.

Establishing robust institutional and financial resources

Metropolitan areas face a critical challenge – managing complex urban issues with limited resources and authority (UN-Habitat, 2022a). Financial transfers from national governments often lag behind the escalating demands of metropolises, hindering their ability to fully leverage their economic potential (OECD/UCLG, 2022). This global metropolitan management gap not only hinders metropolitan development but also exacerbates the issues arising from fragmented governance.

Decentralisation must be coupled with a certain degree of fiscal autonomy. This implies aligning financial resources with the services provided by subnational governments. However, many countries fail to devolve revenue-raising tools alongside new responsibilities, resulting in a fiscal imbalance. This is evident in London, which possesses limited revenue-raising options compared to other major cities globally (Slack, 2014).

Metropolitan areas require a clear delineation of functions combined with corresponding revenue streams. A diverse mix of user fees, taxes, intergovernmental transfers, and the ability to borrow for capital investments is crucial (Slack in Metropolis, 2018). Sustainable borrowing necessitates adequate own-source revenue, stable intergovernmental transfers and a robust institutional framework to manage potential challenges (UN-Habitat, 2022a).

Key questions for subnational governments to address authority and funding gaps

1. What are the benefits and challenges of fiscal decentralisation for metropolitan authorities, and how can they be addressed through effective metropolitan governance?

2. How can metropolitan governance systems foster coordination and collaboration among different levels of government and stakeholders, enhancing the quality and efficiency of service delivery?

3. How can the allocation of policy competencies and resources at the metropolitan level be aligned with their needs, ensuring subsidiarity and accountability?

4. Are institutional arrangements robust enough to navigate dissent, social unrest and political disagreements without compromising the quality of governance?

Creating resilience to the local impact of global crises

Over the past five decades, the frequency and severity of disasters have notably increased. This concerning trend is driven by greater exposure to environmental hazards, compounded by the effects of rising inequalities and the climate emergency (WEF, 2024). Metropolises are particularly vulnerable due to their dense populations and economic activities. To address these challenges, new leadership roles are emerging in cities, such as Heads of Uncertainty or Chief Heat Officers (UNDP, 2024).

Recent global crises, from pandemics to political turmoil and backsliding on human rights, have exposed the limitations of siloed governance structures. Developing a coordinated response and effectively handling complex emergencies requires the adoption of governance approaches where various levels of government and sectors, each with its own specialisation and resources, engage in continuous collaboration (Metropolis, UCLG and LSE, 2020). **This new approach must strike a delicate balance: prioritising swift action in the face of immediate threats, while upholding governance principles for long-term resilience and social inclusion.** Furthermore, it must address the inherent inequalities that emergencies often exacerbate, ensuring all inhabitants are protected during these challenging times, and that those disproportionately impacted, such as women, and persons with disabilities, are specifically considered and included in recovery processes.

The future of our metropolises depends on their ability to adapt to these complex emergencies and current megatrends. Traditionally, city planning focuses on a 10-20-year horizon for economic development, transportation and environmental strategies. However, forward-thinking urban planning, as exemplified by major cities like Singapore and Lyon (France), leverages foresight to anticipate future trends and chart new courses (Kuosa, 2011). This proactive approach is key for effective risk management and the development of more integrated strategies for policy-making and service delivery.

Strategic planning, guided by thorough scenario building, must become central to metropolitan governance. Metropolises, with their unique capacity to drive collaboration across diverse sectors and levels of government (vertical and horizontal coordination), can lead the way. By cultivating a culture of cooperation, prioritising inclusivity and embracing innovative governance models, metropolitan areas can ensure that communities and individuals not only survive but thrive in the face of adversity.

Achieving successful metropolitan governance requires a collective effort from all stakeholders, working together towards a shared vision for the metropolitan area's future. By fostering a culture of trust, participation and coordination, developing a common vision with all stakeholders including residents, maintaining flexibility, fostering adequate resource allocation and implementing effective, inclusive and gender-sensitive strategic plans supported by strong governance, metropolitan areas can address complex challenges, inspire just sustainability and create thriving, equitable and resilient urban spaces for future generations.

Key questions for subnational governments to tackle global crises

1. What are the opportunities for metropolitan areas to become more resilient from global crises through effective investment, participatory processes and resource allocation?

2. How can metropolitan areas harness the power of foresight to enhance crisis preparedness, response and recovery efforts? Are the metropolitan structures gathering data to measure and track the metropolitan impact of global crises?

3. How can metropolitan areas promote the exchange of knowledge and expertise with cities around the world to learn from each other's experiences and develop innovative solutions to global crises?

4. Are the structures of metropolitan governance ready to respond to address environmental stress and emergencies in a way that ensures diverse communities are protected and supported?

Conclusion

The 21st century presents unprecedented challenges to the traditional paradigm of urban governance. Cities stand at a critical crossroads, facing a confluence of environmental degradation, economic precarity, growing social inequalities, large-scale human mobility and social unrest. These interconnected issues necessitate a fundamental transformation in the way governments conceptualise, plan and manage metropolitan areas. The existing system, characterised by compartmentalisation within arbitrary boundaries, operates under the outdated assumption of self-sufficiency. This fragmented approach falls short in effectively addressing the complex challenges that transcend city boundaries.

Traditional municipal boundaries often fail to capture the dynamic and interconnected nature of contemporary metropolitan life. The lived experiences of communities and the movement of people and resources, be they economic, environmental, cultural or social, often go beyond these pre-defined lines. Hence, the need for a governance framework that reflects this dynamism.

Metropolitan governance emerges as a critical response to the limitations of traditional urban governance. It is a collaborative effort to dismantle artificial barriers and foster a shared approach to addressing the challenges confronting metropolitan areas. This framework transcends the confines of individual municipalities, instead emphasising collective responsibility. It represents a commitment to pushing our cities beyond the narrative of isolation and encouraging collaboration between different government levels – national, regional and local to ensure coordinated decision-making, resource allocation, and policy implementation.

Metropolitan governance is a collaborative effort to dismantle artificial barriers and foster a shared approach to addressing the challenges confronting metropolitan areas

The core principle of metropolitan governance lies in its holistic perspective. It inspires a paradigm shift, moving away from the narrow, urban-centric viewpoint that has dominated urban planning in the past. By acknowledging the interconnectedness of metropolitan life, this approach paves the way for a more comprehensive understanding of the issues at hand. Economic actors, natural systems and social issues all operate within a broader metropolitan context, and effective solutions demand a governance structure that reflects this interconnected reality.

Metropolitan governance is not merely an exercise in adding another layer of bureaucracy. Instead, it represents a strategic realignment of existing governance structures. This realignment aims to ensure that the framework responds to the dynamic and interconnected nature of metropolitan life by delivering services and resources at the most effective geographical scale. Hence, effective metropolitan governance rests on several crucial pillars: seamless collaboration across government levels, robust institutional and financial frameworks that eliminate redundancy, fostering trust and legitimacy, and maintaining adaptability.

There is no singular, universally applicable model for metropolitan governance. Effective implementation calls for a tailored approach that considers the unique needs, aspirations and contextual realities of each individual metropolitan area. A cornerstone of this approach is the commitment to continuous evaluation and adaptation, and a sensitivity towards the needs, contentions and aspirations of the residents within (and beyond) the territories. Regular assessments, including through engagements with diverse stakeholders, coupled with the potential for reform are key in ensuring the continued effectiveness and inclusiveness of the governance framework in the face of an ever-evolving urban landscape. Strategic planning, informed by robust scenario building, empowers metropolitan areas to navigate the intricate challenges and opportunities presented by a rapidly changing world.

A critical challenge for effective metropolitan governance lies in establishing and nurturing trust amongst diverse stakeholders. Current models often lack this crucial element. To address this gap, fostering collaboration amongst a broad spectrum of actors – including local governments, regional authorities, the private sector, civil society actors and the population at large – is essential. Civic engagement must transcend mere token participation. Meaningful avenues for information sharing, open dialogue and collaborative decision-making are fundamental to building trust and ensuring a sense of ownership within the community. What is more, promoting social and gender equity within governing bodies is equally important. **A lack of diverse representation not only undermines the efficacy of governance but also perpetuates existing social inequalities.** Ensuring a representative decision-making process that incorporates a wide range of voices leverages the collective intelligence of the metropolis.

Metropolitan governance, with its emphasis on collaboration, adaptability and knowledge-sharing, offers a promising framework to address the complex challenges confronting contemporary metropolises. By embracing a holistic approach that transcends traditional boundaries and fosters a culture of trust and equity, governments can pave the way for a more sustainable and prosperous future for all.

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Annex 1. Comparative analysis of metropolitan governance models

This table summarizes the different governance models proposed by various organizations. The table offers a high-level comparison to help readers understand the complexity of metropolitan governance, but the nuances of each model are not fully captured here.

	Formal arrangements						Informal arrangements
Metropolis	**Metropolitan government** Elected or non-elected metropolitan entity that represents municipalities				**Sector-based metropolitan agency** that plans and manages one or several services	**Vertical coordination** Metropolitan policies implemented by the national or regional level	**Voluntary cooperation** Local authorities organise at their own initiative
World Bank	**A consolidated local government** by amalgamation of municipalities or land annexation			**A Metropolitan government** including a separate metropolitan-level government or a two-tier	**Metropolitan authority** including single-sector authorities and multi-sector authorities	**Regional government** responsible for metropolitan area coordination and managing some services at scale	**Inter-municipal forum** or council
IADB	**City-state**	**One-tier consolidated** government	**One-tier fragmented** government	**Two-tier government**			**Voluntary cooperation** and special purpose districts
OECD	**Metropolitan city** with a special status and broader competencies			**Supra-municipal authority** a metropolitan entity	**Inter-municipal authority**		**Soft/informal coordination** in a polycentric urban system

Please note: It is important to recognize that metropolitan governance structures can be multifaceted. Some metropolitan areas may employ a combination of models, such as a metropolitan government functioning alongside sector-specific metropolitan agencies.

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