Towards a Seat at the Table

How an Initiative of Cities Got Their Voices Heard during Germany's 2022 G7 Presidency

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Abstract

In the past, both researchers and policymakers have often underlined the important role cities have to play in reaching the objectives of the Paris Agreement and the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Meanwhile, city networks have become increasingly active in approaching international institutions and getting their voices heard. Among them are the Urban7 Group – a recently founded group of city associations from G7 countries advocating for a stronger involvement of cities in G7 policymaking. The discussion about who has a voice in the G7 and what role cities can potentially play in it is significant. The G7, despite being somewhat contentious, remains a highly relevant forum both in terms of the negative contribution of its members to global sustainability crises (such as climate change) and their collective economic capability to address the crises. In the past, references to the role of cities were largely absent from G7 official documents; this changed during Germany's G7 presidency in 2022. Based on a document analysis and semi-structured interviews with ministry officials and city network representatives, this paper investigates how, in 2022, the Urban7 Group was involved in the G7 process, and which actors and contextual factors had an impact on the width and depth of this involvement. While the German presidency opted not to directly involve the Urban7 Group as an official G7 engagement group, the group nevertheless gained access to ministerial negotiations, in particular those of the new G7 track on urban development. The paper finds that this engagement was facilitated by pre-existing contacts with ministerial officials as well as changes in the delineation of ministries following the German federal election in late 2021 that led to changes in political leadership and the formation of a new ministry to take responsibility for urban development. The paper closes with critical reflections on the 2022 process, recommendations and potential avenues for future research.

Contents

Abbreviations

AA	Federal Foreign Office (Auswärtiges Amt)
BMWSB	Federal Ministry for Housing, Urban Development and Building (Bundesministerium für Wohnen, Stadtentwicklung und Bauwesen)
BMZ	Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (Bundesministerium für wirtschaftliche Zusammenarbeit und Entwicklung)
DST	Association of German Cities (Deutscher Städtetag)
G7	Group of 7
GPM	Global Parliament of Mayors
ICLEI	International Council for Local Environmental Initiatives
SKEW	Service Agency Communities in One World (Servicestelle Kommunen in der Einen Welt)
UNFCCC	United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change
U7	Urban7 Group
U20	Urban20
WBGU	German Advisory Council on Global Change (Wissenschaftlicher Beirat Globale Umweltveränderungen)

1   The "century of the city"

In an increasingly urbanising world, cities are often framed both as the problem and as the solution to global challenges such as the fight against climate change or, more generally, achieving the transformation towards sustainable, just and inclusive societies (UN-Habitat, 2022; WBGU [Wissenschaftlicher Beirat Globale Umweltveränderungen], 2016; IPCC [Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change], 2022).[1] This indicates that cities have become recognised both as relevant fields of action and actors in international politics. The 21st century has even been proclaimed the "century of the city" ("Cities: The century of the city", 2010).

The role of cities in the global realm has also been underlined by research that finds how important sub-national actions are to the achievement of the goals of the Paris Agreement and the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (Kuramochi et al., 2020; UN-Habitat, 2022; Watts, 2017; WBGU, 2016). This conviction has been more strongly held among those who deem national governments' efforts to tackle sustainability issues insufficient or "failed" (Barber, 2013; Curtis, 2016; Hoff, Gausset, & Lex, 2020). To ensure that international policies take into account urban needs and perspectives, and to facilitate the effective implementation of international agreements, it is argued that local governments should gain more influence in the development of these policies. The German Advisory Council on Global Change (WBGU), for instance, recommends "giving city networks and cities the right to participate in, and speak at, international negotiations that affect them" (WBGU, 2016, p. 409).

In the past years, city networks have become increasingly active and self-confident in approaching international institutions and getting their voices heard (Acuto & Leffel, 2021; WBGU, 2016). Examples include ICLEI – Local Governments for Sustainability (a global network of local governments dedicated to sustainable urban development) and the Global Parliament of Mayors (GPM). Among the increasingly active transnational city networks is the Urban7 Group (U7) – a recently founded group of city associations from the Group of 7 (G7) countries, advocating for a stronger involvement of cities in G7 policymaking.

The discussion about who has a voice in the G7 and what role cities can potentially play in it is highly relevant. Meanwhile, the G7 is a crucial player when it comes to solving global challenges, as they still contribute to 40% of global GDP, and to 25% of global energy system CO_2 emissions (IEA [International Energy Agency], 2022). However, the expectation that the G7 embodies liberal and democratic values and should take on responsibility for increased action towards a more sustainable and just future are growing at a time when the international rules-based order is being questioned and international action for sustainable development is stagnating (Beisheim et al., 2022). The G7's success in addressing the challenges will likely be measured based not only on its results but also on how it gets there (see Dingwerth, Witt, Lehmann, Reichel, & Weise, 2019). Due to its exclusivity, opaque policymaking, and limited democratic legitimacy, the G7 has been much contested as a forum of global governance (Brandi, 2019).

The involvement of cities could increase both the G7's democratic legitimacy as well as contributing to reaching the goals of the Paris Agreement and the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). So far, however, the G7 has not yet implemented any official procedures for involving local governments. In fact, cities and urban issues in general have largely been disregarded by the G7 in the past, as a review of official G7 documents revealed (see also Buchoud, 2022, p. 5).

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1   Aust (2015, p. 277) critically remarks on the underlying conceptions of this dual description. According to him, it "invites an intellectual operation which puts some cities on the problem side and others on the solution side", pointing at the circumstance that problems tend to be identified in cities of the Global South and solution provision and "best practices" tend to be looked for among cities of the Global North.

While cities have not so far played much of a role in the G7, more recently a new dynamic has emerged. During 2022, cities and urban issues gained additional weight in the G7. In their summit communiqué, G7 leaders "acknowledge the significant role of cities (…) as actors in our transformation towards sustainable development" and commit to "foster exchange among and with cities" (G7 [Group of 7] 2022c, p. 17). Moreover, the G7 held a first ever ministerial meeting for sustainable urban development. In the concluding document, the ministers stress their support for "a stronger recognition of cities as dialogue partners within the framework of the G7, by continuing and intensifying dialogue with city associations, alliances and networks, e.g. the 'Urban Seven'" (G7, 2022d, p. 7).

This paper casts light on the actions behind these statements and investigates how cities, represented by U7, were involved in the G7 process during the German presidency in 2022. U7 itself claims that it gained a "seat at the table in the G7 process" in 2022 (U7 [Urban7 Group], 2022b). In the following, this claim will be more closely examined, with the intention of answering the question: "How – and facilitated by which actors and contextual factors – was the Urban7 Group involved in the G7 process during the German G7 presidency in 2022?"

The paper finds that, despite the decision of the German chancellery not to mandate U7 as an official engagement group, U7 was able to make its voice heard in parts of the G7 process, especially so in the new G7 Urban Development Track. This was facilitated by pre-existing contacts between U7 members and ministerial departments, as well as changes in the delineation of German ministries and their political leadership following the German federal election in late 2021.

The paper contributes to the literature on the rising role of cities in global governance, showcasing how city representatives made their voices heard in the field of sustainable urban development. In addition, the paper sheds light on G7 policymaking, more specifically on G7 processes under the German presidency in 2022, thereby examining club governance processes that deserve attention but take place out of the limelight of leaders' summits and other high-level meetings.

The paper is structured as follows: Section 2 reviews scholarly accounts of how cities gained global relevance and recognition as actors in international politics. It further examines the recent focus on the issue in official G7 documents and introduces the paper's leading question, as stated above. The qualitative research methods used in the analysis are discussed in Section 3. Subsequently, Section 4 provides the findings based on the analysis of the collected data. Subsection 4.1 outlines the role of local governments as actors in the G7 process prior to 2022. Subsection 4.2 describes the emergence of the U7 Group and sheds light on the reasons why their demand to become an official G7 engagement group remained unsuccessful. Then, subsection 4.3 identifies reasons why and how U7 nevertheless managed to get its voice heard at the new G7 ministers' track on sustainable urban development. Finally, the paper closes with concluding remarks and recommendations.

2   Cities as players on the global stage

> "[C]ities are now catalysts of almost every aspect of the global system" (Parnell, 2016, p. 538).

In recent years, cities and their role in global governance have increasingly gained the attention of scholars, politicians and practitioners. In order to set the stage for the following analysis, this chapter reviews, first, scholarly accounts on how cities and local governments gained global relevance and recognition (2.1) and, second, official documents exemplifying the advent of urban issues on the G7 agenda (2.2).

2.1 Literature on the role of cities in global governance

In 2013, Benjamin Barber published his provocative book *If Mayors Ruled the World*, in which he portrays mayors as an alternative to "dysfunctional nations" – the ones who can more effectively solve global challenges (Barber, 2013). While the book does not present a scientific analysis, it certainly sparked an ongoing debate about the role cities should have in global governance. One of the first scholarly accounts addressing the changing role of cities in the international sphere was Saskia Sassen's work on the economic role of metropolises or "global cities" as functional elements of our globalised markets (Sassen, 1991). This perspective on the role of individual cities has, however, since been criticised as too narrow and too focused on the Global North (Ghadge, 2019; Robinson, 2006). By now, Sassen's account has been complimented by contributions on the broadening nature and role of the growing ecosystem of city networks (Acuto, 2013; Acuto & Leffel, 2021; Bouteligier, 2012). In addition, cities received substantial attention in the literature on environmental and climate governance for their potential to contribute to tackling the climate crisis and solving other sustainability issues (Kuramochi et al., 2020; Watts, 2017); (IPCC, 2022, p. 910), especially so at a time when national governments have proved unable to do so quickly and effectively enough (Bulkeley, 2010; Curtis, 2016; Hoff, Gausset, & Lex, 2020).

The claim that cities are important actors for the implementation of sustainability frameworks is not new. In 1992, at the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro, the international community acknowledged the importance of local government in the implementation of sustainability conventions such as Agenda 21 (Parnell, 2016, p. 532). Researchers and experts repeated this conviction for other key conventions, such as the Paris Agreement and the 2030 Agenda (Brandi, 2018; UN-Habitat, 2022; WBGU, 2016). Parnell observes that "under the egis of the 2030 Agenda, the developmental role of sub-national government is elevated on the global stage, suggesting that the hegemony of the nation state as the primary development conduit is being diluted" (Parnell, 2018, p. 171). It is argued that cities should have more influence in the development of international policies to ensure they take into account urban needs and perspectives and to facilitate their effective implementation (WBGU, 2016, p. 409).

Interestingly enough, as will be shown below, representatives of multinational city networks are well aware of this situation and therefore demand their seat at the table of international fora. However, researchers like Acuto and Leffel find that the vertical integration of cities and city networks into multilateral contexts is still weak: "At present, [city] networks tend to more formally link 'across' (connecting cities) than they do 'upwards' to multilateral actors and frameworks" (Acuto & Leffel, 2021, p. 1770). In a recently published article, Keith et al. (2022) find, more generally, that "current modes of engagement [local and regional government in international dialogues] (for example, via the Major Groups to the UN) are insufficient".

One form of multilateral fora are informal groups or club governance structures (Berger, Cooper, & Grimm, 2019; Brandi, 2019) such as the G7 and the G20. Membership to these groups is limited and there is no automatic entry. Consequently, clubs like the G7 offer their members an informal forum for the competition of ideas, "protected" from the outside: "Members place a limit to the range of actors […] and define what type of actor is relevant, with high entry rules based on prestige and position" (Tsingou, 2015, p. 231). While informal groups are often seen as occupying influential positions in global governance, the form of government exercised by them is not without controversy. For instance, White is critical that formats such as the G20 create a setting in which leaders "make policy without the procedural constraints of domestic politics" (White, 2022, p.194). Likewise, though from a democratic theory perspective, Hilbrich concludes that club governance institutions show, due to their exclusionary nature and a lack of parliamentary and public control, "a democratic deficit" (Hilbrich, 2021, p.249).

At the G20, cities voices have been represented by the Urban20 group, a forum that aims "to inform the discussions of national leaders at the G20" (Urban20, 2022). However, since it only

brings together mayors from 20 major G20 cities (i.e. capital cities and economic hubs), it runs the risk of over-representing the voices of these few, often more resourced, cities.

When it comes to the G7, no official procedure is in place to make urban voices heard (see subsection 4.1 for a more detailed analysis). In 2022, however, G7 official documents included several references acknowledging cities as important stakeholders and collaboration partners for solving global challenges, as will be shown in the following section.

2.2   Cities in official G7 documents

During the German G7 presidency in 2022, cities gained attention in G7 official documents to an unprecedented extent, with references in the concluding documents of several ministerial meetings and even the leaders' summit.[2]

Until recently, cities and local governments had rarely been acknowledged as important stakeholders or collaboration partners. The G7 Environment Ministers' Communiqué published under the Japanese G7 presidency in 2016 was one of the few accounts in which G7 ministers acknowledged the role of cities and subnational actors for – in this case – environmental protection, climate action and sustainable urban development in particular (G7, 2016, para. 59f).

This changed in 2022. The German presidency's programme, published at the very start of its tenure, recognised the importance of good governance at the local level as a prerequisite for the successful solution of many global challenges (G7, 2022e, pp. 6, 9). The Leader's Communiqué published in June at the G7 summit in Elmau (i.e. the key outcome document of the G7 in 2022), went further, with the G7 leaders committing to increased exchange with cities, and tasking their ministers for sustainable urban development to meet and develop initiatives to strengthen cities in their capacity to support sustainable development:

> We acknowledge the significant role of cities, their associations, and networks as actors in our transformation towards sustainable development. We commit to foster exchange among and with cities. We task our relevant Ministers to develop a joint understanding of good urban development policy to be adopted at the first ever G7 Ministerial Meeting for Sustainable Urban Development, and to decide on joint initiatives for unlocking the full potential of cities to promote social, cultural, technological, climate-neutral, economic, and democratic innovation for the common good (G7, 2022c, p. 17).

The first-ever G7 ministerial meeting on sustainable urban development took place in Potsdam in September 2022. In their communiqué, the ministers recognised cities as "major global players", who, among other things, were "key to implementing landmark international policy frameworks, particularly the 2030 Agenda, the Paris Agreement, the New Urban Agenda and other relevant multilateral agreements (…)" (G7, 2022d, p. 3). While the communiqué did not yet include any specific initiatives, it expressed the ministers' intention to focus on "increasing the involvement of cities in the development and implementation of urban development policies; [and] strengthening dialogue between local and national levels". To this end, they express their willingness to "continuing and intensifying dialogue with city associations, alliances and

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2   The leaders' summit is the most important G7 meeting of the year. In addition, there are several ministerial meetings, which usually take place in the days and weeks before the summit. The number of ministerial meetings is determined by the presidency. Besides more established "tracks", such as finance and foreign policy, there have been meetings of G7 ministers for environment, development, health, employment and education, to name some examples. Ministerial meetings are prepared by senior officials in the line ministries, as well as numerous G7 working groups and task forces. Each ministerial track usually produces its own concluding document, all of which feed into the main G7 policy document, the "leaders' communiqué" or "leaders' declaration".

networks, e.g. the 'Urban Seven'" (G7, 2022d, p. 6f). Also, the "U7 Mayors' Declaration" received a special mention (G7, 2022d, p. 4). Further references to cities can be found in the communiqués of the G7 ministers for climate, energy and environment (G7, 2022b, para. 60, 62, 79, 83) and for development (G7, 2022a, para. 31, 53), in which the ministers mainly address the role of cities in climate and energy action, and in the provision of sustainable infrastructure.

The aim of this paper is to investigate the actions behind these official statements and investigate how cities represented by the U7 group were involved in the G7 process during the German presidency in 2022. More specifically, the paper aims to examine how – and facilitated by which actors and contextual factors – the U7 group was involved in the G7 process during the German G7 presidency in 2022. Before diving into the analysis (Section 4), Section 3 gives an overview of the methodological approach.

3   Methodology

This paper is based on two main sources, first, the analysis of publicly accessible official G7 documents and, second, semi-structured expert interviews. The former includes an analysis of both leaders' and ministerial communiqués as well as official statements and press releases by the U7 Group and its member networks. Access to official G7 documents was considerably facilitated by the new G7/G20 Document Database, which enables "an accessible way to search quickly, efficiently and target-oriented [sic] for and through documents officially released by the G7 and G20" (G7G20 Documents Database).

The G7, like other informal intergovernmental organisations, follow certain rules and procedures, although they are often implicit and unwritten (Vabulas & Snidal, 2013) and may thus be more difficult to uncover for outsiders. Thus, insider knowledge is particularly valuable for gaining a better understanding of how the G7 work. Interviewing is one suitable qualitative approach to data acquisition in informal settings. In this, gatekeepers play a pivotal role as "individuals in an organisation that have the power to grant or withhold access to people […] for the purpose of research" (Burgess, 1984, p. 48 as cited in Valentine, 1997).

Fourteen semi-structured expert interviews conducted with ministry officials and city network representatives between September and December 2022, both online and in person, represent the second main source of data. Selection of those to be interviewed was not based on strict statistical representativeness; it was, rather, based on a sample of respondents "who are likely to have the desired knowledge, experience or positionings, and who may be willing to divulge that knowledge to the interviewer" (Cloke et al. 2004, p. 156). A first set of interviewees – persons and institutions involved in the G7 process and the implementation of the Urban Development Track with the potential to act as gatekeepers – were identified by an intense internet search. Snowball sampling served to further identify interviewees who share potentially relevant knowledge. However, as respondents tend to channel the researcher to likeminded individuals (Cloke et al., 2004, p. 156), the sampling is based on different points of entry to reduce the risk of biased results (see also below).

All interviews have been digitally recorded and – in order to prepare these materials for analysis – fully transcribed. After this "change of medium" (Gibbs, 2007, p. 11) from "oral speech to written text" (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2009, p. 102), the transcripts were uploaded into Atlas.ti, the QDA software used for coding and further analysis, together with pertinent official documents (see above). Coding helps to manage huge amounts of qualitative data, and has been defined as "[b]reaking a text [or other data items] down into manageable segments and attaching one or more keywords" (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2009, p. 32). The first rounds of coding were inspired by grounded theory initial coding "through which concepts are identified and their properties and dimensions […] discovered in data" (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 102). However, other than in

grounded theory, coding was not strictly line by line or sentence by sentence but rather paragraph-wise.

To increase validity, statements made by individual interviewees were checked against those of other respondents, preferably from other institutions. Where applicable, this screening also included information from official documents (see above). Respondents are considered as representatives of the respective institution and the institutionalised practical knowledge, not as individuals. In the following, use of any information that would allow direct identification of the interviewees was avoided – going beyond the usual anonymising of persons. Without the willingness of persons who themselves operate in hierarchical administrative structures, institutional research in this form would not be possible. We are therefore not only indebted to our interviewees, but also regard it as a principle of research ethics to guarantee their personal anonymity. The resulting loss of information must be accepted.

4   Analysis and findings

4.1   Cities and local governments as stakeholders in the G7

The following section investigates the role of cities and local governments as stakeholders in the G7 process. To this end, it examines the functional set-up of the G7 and draws upon expert interviews with (former) government officials.

The G7 is an informal forum of global governance. This means that it does not have a secretariat nor a charter steering its work. Instead, the forum is chaired by a presidency, which rotates annually among its members and is in charge of preparing the annual meetings (or "summits"). While any G7 decisions and communiqués are based on consensus, the presiding country – and, more specifically, the leader's personal representative, known as the "Sherpa", and his or her office – are in charge of drafting the agenda, deciding on the number and kinds of ministerial meetings to be held, and organising the stakeholder involvement process (Boehm, 2019; Hajnal, 2022). An interviewee from the German Chancellor's Office pointed out that despite manifold ministerial inputs feeding into these decisions, the G7 process is still "a leaders' process", meaning that they have the final say regarding many aspects as they are the "political faces" of the process.

Stakeholder involvement at the G7 mainly happens via so-called "engagement groups". Under the lead of an organisation that is mandated by the respective presidency, these engagement groups develop policy recommendations for the G7 based on their particular perspectives and expertise – often in the form of a written declaration or statement (Luckhurst, 2019). However, G7 leaders are not bound to take up these recommendations, and the level of exchange with the engagement groups varies, depending on the presidency and topic. While it is the presidency's decision whether and which engagement groups it wants to mandate, there is a certain tradition of engaging groups such as Civil7 (civil society), Business7, Labour7 (trade unions), and Women7, to name a few examples. Next to these four groups, the German presidency in 2022 mandated Science7 (science bodies), Think7 (think tanks), and Youth7.[3]

As a primarily national government-led process, cities and local governments have played less of a role in the past. According to an interviewee and former G7 Sherpa, the G7 policy formation process does not include any common or standardised procedures for consultations with lower

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3   For more information on the official engagement groups during the German G7 presidency in 2022, see G7 Germany (2022).

levels of government. If and how such an involvement takes place, depends on each G7 member itself.

In Germany, local governments enjoy a comparatively high status, which is manifested by article 28 of the constitution on "local self-government" (*kommunale Selbstverwaltung*). Although there are several associations, such as the German Association of Cities (Deutscher Städtetag, DST) and the German Association of Cities and Municipalities (Deutscher Städte- und Gemeindebund), who represent cities' and municipalities' interests in state, national and European policymaking processes, there is no formal procedure for local government involvement in the German G7 process. According to an interviewee working for the Chancellor's Office, the option of installing such a process for the German G7 presidency was not considered by the Chancellery in summer 2021, when the decision was made as to which stakeholder groups should be mandated for the official engagement process.

4.2 The Urban7 Group – a cities' initiative aiming to engage in the G7 process

> It was not about creating another network but about the recognition that the G7 – an informal association of states – are dealing with topics and coming to decisions that are also relevant to the municipal level. (Translated from Interview with U7 representative)

This section scrutinises the emergence of U7 and its main demand to increase local government participation in G7 policymaking.

The Urban7 Group (U7) is an advocacy group representing the interests of local governments and, more specifically, of cities. It consists of eight national city associations, one from each G7 member state and the EU.[4] In 2022, the group was headed by the Association of German Cities (DST), with the support of the international city networks Global Parliament of Mayors (GPM) and ICLEI – Local Governments for Sustainability. The city network United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG) was a so-called "network partner". Also, the publicly funded Service Agency Communities in One World (Servicestelle Kommunen in der Einen Welt, SKEW) supported the process – as will be explained in more detail below.

A special feature of U7, which several participants pointed out (not without pride), is its composition. In contrast to Urban20 (U20) (the official G20 engagement group dealing with urban issues), which is dominated by capital cities and economic hub cities, U7 deliberately established a platform for dialogue with and among national city associations from G7 countries and their networks (interviews with U7 representatives from both the UK and Germany). It thereby intended to capture a much broader range of cities, including the "second tier" cities, as a representative of Core Cities UK described the scope of U7. U7's aspiration is thus to be more inclusive and to give ordinary cities – in the sense defined by Robinson (2006) – a forum in which their voices can be heard. To further increase this inclusiveness, U7 invited local government representatives from the Global South to be involved in the network's agenda setting.

Individuals involved in the U7 process emphasised different points of departure for the advent of U7. A representative of ICLEI saw the starting point at the G7 meeting of environment

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4   Canada: Federation of Canadian Municipalities (FCM); France: France Urbaine (Urban France); Germany: Deutscher Städtetag (Association of German Cities); Italy: Associazione Nazionale Comuni Italiani (ANCI, National Association of Italian Municipalities); Japan: Japan Designated City Mayors' Association (JDCMA). The European Union: Eurocities; UK: Core Cities UK; USA: The United States Conference of Mayors (USCOM).

ministers in Toyama in 2016, where, for the first time, mayors and representatives of city networks (including ICLEI) were invited to the G7 negotiation table. For others, however, the U7 process started in 2021. Core Cities UK, an association of intermediary cities, approached the British G7 presidency to inquire how they intended to involve local governments in the G7 process.

A driving factor behind Core Cities UK's initiative towards the G7 has been the 26th meeting of the UNFCCC COP in Glasgow. The city of Glasgow, which is also a member of Core Cities UK, put much effort into "making COP about cities" (Interview with Core Cities UK representative; U7, 2021).

Soon, however, it became clear that the British presidency would not make "the urban voice (…) part of that [G7] dialogue" (Interview with Core Cities UK representative). Therefore, Core Cities UK decided to approach other city associations with the idea of establishing a dialogue of municipal representatives from G7 countries that aimed to identify ways to "link it very positively to the G7" (Interview with Core Cities UK representative; U7, 2021). In June 2021, ahead of the G7 Leaders' Summit in Carbis Bay, representatives of the national city networks from G7 member states and international city networks[5] came together to hold U7's inaugural meeting. The initiators of U7 were somewhat surprised by the positive responses of their fellow city administrations:

> We weren't really sure what other cities would think about this. They might think it was kind of a wild idea to try and influence the G7 Heads of State meeting. But far from it. They all responded instantly and said: We love the idea, we want to get involved. (Interview with Core Cities representative).

At this first meeting, U7 passed a first joint statement (U7, 2021) in which the U7 cities "urge the G7 nations to work with [them]" and to "draw on the experience of cities in decision making as well as policy making". Also at this meeting, U7 established a rotating system of chairpersonship. Core Cities UK thus passed on the position of chair to the German U7 member, DST (the Association of German Cities). The main policy demands that U7 carried forward with respect to the German G7 presidency specified the demands that had been voiced at their first meeting: that local governments should have a seat at the table of (all) G7 negotiations. One interviewee lamented that the G7 process discusses a whole range of issues with a direct impact on cities, but without actively including them in the discussions.

> So, [we said]: It would be good, if one not only talked about cities as actors who implement it all, but to talk with cities. We founded the U7 to provide a group that can be involved for such purposes. Our goal, of course, is to one day be part of the leaders' summit. (Translated from interview with U7 representative)

This demand was also repeated in the closing document of the U7's 2022 meeting held in May 2022, the "2022 U7 Mayors Declaration" (U7, 2022a). In this document, the group calls for more awareness on the part of their national governments for the potential of municipalities and cities in addressing sustainable urban development as well as in fostering liberal democracy through direct citizen involvement. They urge their national governments to engage with the local level on regulatory and fiscal issues affecting urban and social transformation, and to develop a mutual understanding of pressing items on the G7 agenda that affect the urban realm.

Long before this document was published, as early as summer 2021, the U7 chair had started preparing for the organisation's campaign to get G7 recognition in 2022. At this point in time, it was already clear that Germany would soon find itself in an exceptional situation. The federal elections of September 2021 were to put an end to Angela Merkel's 16-year rule and an

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5   For a list of participants of the first U7 summit, see Core Cities UK (2021).

unknown new government would come into office, only a few weeks before taking over Germany's G7 presidency.

Thus, in the summer of 2021 U7 approached the German Chancellery – still under the Merkel administration – with a request to be mandated as an official G7 engagement group (Interviews with U7 representative and German public officials). According to a representative of U7, they opted for this format, since it would have meant an official and structural involvement in the G7 process. As an official engagement group, there would have been funds for the organisation to meet and draft statements and recommendations. In addition, the status of an engagement group would have guaranteed the participation of high-ranking public officials and politicians to attend their meetings and listen to their proposals and concerns. Without this official status, the interviewee continued, getting one's messages across was going to be much more difficult.

Although a U7 member remembered the initial response from the Chancellor's Office having been quite open and positive, the group was not among the seven engagement groups that were officially mandated by Chancellor Merkel in summer 2021. Of course, the newly appointed Chancellor Olaf Scholz would have had the opportunity to change this decision after his inauguration on 8 December 2021. However, an interviewee working for the Chancellor's Office explained that there was a reluctance to reopen the mandating process at this late point in time, as this would likely have caused further interest groups to voice their demand to be mandated as well. In addition, it was pointed out that meaningful exchange with engagement groups requires time and human resources, which limits the number of engagement groups a presidency can and wants to mandate. Another interviewee and former G7 Sherpa of another G7 country, also brought up this argument and added that it can be difficult to bring in new engagement groups. According to him, G7 presidencies often "inherit" quite a large number of engagament groups from previous years,[6] which are difficult to abandon (e.g. to make room for others) without risking losing face or triggering discussions. In the end, as the interviewee from the German Chancellor's office explained, the selection of engagement groups was a question of priority. Apparently, the Chancellor's office did not consider the involvement of local governements to rank higher than that of the other groups that were ultimately selected.

This subsection analysed U7's evolution, its composition as well as its commitment to local government involvement in the G7 process. The paper will now cast light on how U7 nevertheless managed to get its voice heard, even without recognition as an official engagement group.

4.3 A window of opportunity for urban issues and involvement at the G7 summit

> We said from the beginning: urban development policy in the G7 can only happen with cities, not on cities, but placing cities as partners at the negotiation table. (Translated from Interview with BMWSB representative)

When it became clear to U7 in December 2021 that Chancellor Scholz would not mandate them as an official engagement group at this late point in time, U7 had to find other ways to engage in the process. An interviewee shared that, to this end, they opted for the pragmatic approach – meaning that they only approached those ministries whom they considered especially important and/or with whom their German members had been in contact before. According to the interviewee, this reduction was also necessary due to the limited time and resources at hand.

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6   Engagement groups under the UK G7 presidency in 2021: Women7, Youth 7, Business 7, Civil Society 7, Labour 7 and Science 7.

U7 members thus reached out to the ministries for urban development (BMWSB), economic cooperation and development (BMZ) and foreign affairs (AA) – in each case via persons in these ministries with whom they had been in contact before. Outreach to BMZ and AA happened at the end of 2021, whereas communication between U7 and the BMWSB had started much earlier – as will be explained in the following.

U7's attempts to become involve in the G7 Foreign Policy track were not successful. A U7 representative shared that while communication with the AA had been open in the beginning, such involvement did not eventually take place. Attempts to get background information on this issue from the AA were not successful. It was, however, communicated that the position of responsibility for urban diplomacy was vacant at the time of inquiry (November 2022).

The Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) was more receptive towards the U7 proposal for more local government involvement in the G7 process. U7, according to its own account, was able to comment on the development ministers' communiqué and welcomed the presence of the State Secretary at the Mayors' Summit. Most importantly, BMZ provided U7 with substantial financial and organisational support, which was channelled through the aforementioned Service Agency Communities in One World (SKEW).

According to a U7 representative, this financial support was crucial to them being able to realise the Mayors' Summit and also for getting ICLEI, including their networks and experiences, on board. In addition, interviewees agreed that SKEW support significantly boosted U7's visibility (as it enabled them to finance personnel and hold meetings etc.) and, in the end, was also crucial for their strong engagement in the Urban Development Track. A respondent entrusted with the matter at the ministry confirmed this notion, stressing that organising a meaningful engagement of local government representatives from all G7 countries alone and from scratch would have been a difficult task for the newly established ministry, especially given the limited resources it had at its disposal for setting up the new track.

The fact that BMZ supported the BMWSB's process was enabled by two factors. On a departmental level, civil servants working on the strengthening of local government actors in sustainable development were very receptive to U7's proposal to strengthen local government involvement at the G7 and thus advocated for their support within the ministry. For this to be put into practice, leadership approval was also key. Again, the federal elections led to a change in leadership in the BMZ, which was beneficial to the involvement of cities. Prior to the 2021 election, both the minister and her State Secretary had worked for the Federal Ministry for Environment, where they had also worked with cities and city networks on issues of urban sustainability. Several interviewees underlined that due to this professional experience, they shared the conviction that local governments should be more involved in the process of international policymaking. This gave the department the leeway to become active and support the U7 Group.

Despite this general openness of BMZ and the support it provided to U7, the group was not directly involved in discussions of the Development Track itself (as was the case with the Urban Development Track). A respondent shared that, in fact, plans for a side-event with U7 representatives at the development ministers' meeting had been discussed at the beginning of the year. However, these discussions were suspended when, after 24 February 2022, the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine started to draw attention and resources to more pressing topics. In general, interviews with officials working in the ministry pointed to two main reasons hindering a stronger involvement of U7 in the Development track, the first being that the Chancellery had decided against official engagement of U7. In addition, the U7 proposal reached BMZ very late in their G7 preparatory process, when the selection of topics had long been determined, none of which foresaw the direct involvement of local government representatives.

U7 was most noticeably involved in the Urban Development Track, which was organised and hosted by BMWSB. The main reason for this was that German U7 members and the responsible ministerial department had long-standing working relationships. Although BMWSB was only established in late 2021, as an outcome of the German federal elections in September, a department working on urban development had already existed. Founded in 2007, it had been under the roof of three different ministries, most recently under the roof of the Ministry of the Interior[7], although the department had been headed by the same person the whole time.

Since its inception, the department concerned with urban development engaged with German U7 members such as DST in their policy development. A respondent working for DST shared that they had already been engaged in the development of the Leipzig Charter, Germany's national urban development policy, which was developed in 2008 (see also the preamble to the Leipzig Charter).[8] This charter formed the starting point for a longer, strategic process of increasing first European and then further international dialogue and exchange on urban development policy, which continues to the present day. In the beginning, this dialogue mainly took the form of conferences, networks and bilateral partnerships. In advance of the German EU presidency in 2020, the department developed a strategy to intensify international engagement and connectedness, in which the adoption of the New Leipzig Charter represented a first milestone.[9] Following on from this, the department started a strategic process to advance international cooperation on urban development issues beyond the European scale, and the German G7 presidency in 2022 represented a good opportunity for doing so (interview with ministry official).

As a continuance of their collaboration, DST was involved from early on in deliberations on how to bring urban development to the G7 agenda – even before it was clear that a new ministry for this would be created:

> In our network, we had formulated this goal [of bringing international urban development policy to the G7 agenda] between half a year and a year in advance [of the G7 presidency]. (Interview with DST representative)

Prior to the elections, however, uncertainties remained as to what form exactly this input to the G7 agenda would take. Urban development was still subordinated to the Federal Ministry of the Interior, which, according to an interviewee working for the department for urban development, would not have organised a meeting of G7 ministers of the interior about sustainable urban development. An independent G7 track on urban development, thus only came into sight when, in December 2021, the new governing coalition established a ministry for urban development (BMWSB). Interviewees observed that the new minister was very interested in discussing the topic at the G7 and decided to propose a dedicated meeting of G7 sustainable urban development ministers.

According to an interviewee in the Chancellery, Olaf Scholz and his Sherpa team wanted to give every interested ministry the opportunity to engage in the G7 process (not necessarily a common practice in the G7) and thus welcomed the BMWSB's initiative. In addition, G7 partners were generally receptive of the proposal. Respondents pointed out that some G7 members were more open than others, but that there was no opposition to having a meeting of ministers on sustainable urban development. Interviewees observed that countries with a higher degree of

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7   Prior to 2022, these were: Federal Ministry for Traffic, Construction and Urban Development (2005–2009), Federal Ministry for the Environment, Conservation, Construction and Nuclear Safety (2009–2018), and Federal Ministry of the Interior (2018–2021).

8   For more information on Germany's National Urban Development Policy, see National Urban Development Policy (n.d.).

9   For more information on the New Leipzig Charter, see European Commission (2020).

decentralisation, such as the US, found it easier to connect to the proposal. Another factor was the COVID-19 pandemic, which brought to the attention of international politics the importance of local governments in dealing with such crises.

The decision to have an independent track on urban development was communicated to the public at the end of February (dpa [Deutsche Presseagentur], 2022), although interviewees hint that, internally, the decision had been made in January. Once the track was established, the way for local government involvement in a G7 forum was paved. According to ministerial officials involved in setting up the new G7 track, it was clear from the beginning that collaboration with cities (local governments) should be part and parcel of the process. Interviewees shared that such an involvement was considered as important mainly for two reasons: first, to gain and include a concerted perspective from local governments in G7 countries, and, second, to create ownership at the local level for G7 commitments that were likely going to require local implementation. In addition, this involvement was also presented as a "unique selling point" that differentiated the new track from others in the German G7 presidency.

During the course of 2022, U7 was closely involved in the preparations of the ministerial meeting and its communiqué. On the one hand, it was part of the stakeholder involvement process, which also targeted engagement groups such as Women7 and Youth7. This process was facilitated by the German development agency GIZ (Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammen-arbeit) on behalf of BMWSB, and included workshops and exchanges, the outcomes of which fed into the development of the communiqué. According to an interviewee working in BMWSB, however, the involvement of U7 went much further: representatives of the group were part of every meeting of the track, including all meetings on the working level as well as all meetings of the so-called Sustainable Urban Development Officials – SUDOs, for short (the G7 senior policy advisors on sustainable urban development). The SUDO meetings were attended by representatives of DST and ICLEI (U7, 2022c). In addition, U7 was able to comment on drafts of the urban development ministers' communiqué. The interviewee working in BMWSB pointed out that, in fact, the sections in which the communiqué underlines the role of cities and municipalities for sustainable development were "language of the U7". Finally, a U7 representative was also present at the ministerial meeting in Potsdam on 13 and 14 September 2022 (U7, 2022d).

Although recognition as an official engagement group was declined, U7 takes a rather positive view, on balance, of its involvement in 2022. In a recent publication, U7 spoke positively of having "achieve[d] remarkable progress toward multi-level governance" (U7, 2022b). Among other things, the group highlighted that "mayors had a seat at the table in the G7 Process" and that "several G7 ministries made written commitments to engage with cities and include cities as partners". U7's involvement in the new Urban Development Track received particular praise: "Cities now have a groundbreaking model that they can refer to when pushing for multi-level governance and co-decision in future multilateral processes" (U7, 2022b).

The above examples illustrate how U7, even without a mandate as an official engagement group, was able to actively co-design the Urban Development Track through a pragmatic approach, i.e. using already existing contacts in relevant ministries. It remains to be seen, however, to what extent the involvement of urban actors, begun by U7 under the German G7 presidency, can be continued under subsequent G7 presidencies.

5   Conclusion

Based on the frequent mentions in recent G7 documents of cities and their important role in addressing global sustainability challenges, this paper investigated how – during Germany's 2022 G7 presidency – the Urban7 Group (U7), an initiative of city networks from all G7 member states, got involved in the G7 negotiations on sustainable urban development.

By examining the functional set-up of the G7 and its inherited traditions, the paper found that although cities were not officially involved in the G7 process, Germany, holding the presidency in 2022, had the option of doing so. Despite the comparatively strong role of local governments in the German constitution, the Chancellor's Office did not decide to directly involve local government representatives in the G7 process. Interviews with public officials showed that the G7 process (still) tends to be seen as a leaders' process only (i.e. a process exclusively shaped by the heads of states).

The paper then scrutinised the emergence of U7, an association of G7 cities and global city networks, which was founded with the aim of being mandated as an official engagement group, as a way of being formally involved in the G7 process. The fact that U7 was not officially mandated was certainly the biggest obstacle to a stronger involvement of city representatives. As an engagement group, U7 would have had more visibility and access to decision-makers, as well as more resources for organising the process. Under Chancellor Merkel, the proposal was welcomed but not taken up – be it because she didn't want to make such a decision on behalf of her successor or because local government involvement was perceived less of a priority than that of the other engagement groups. However, by the time Chancellor Scholz took office, his team considered it too late to mandate U7 as an official engagement group for the G7.

In the course of Germany's presidency, U7 was nevertheless involved in the G7 process in several ways. They most noticeably got involved in the G7 Urban Development Track, which came into being due to a rearrangement of ministerial delineations following the 2021 federal elections in Germany. Once a ministry with responsibility for urban development (BMWSB) was created in December 2021 and the decision was made to have a meeting of G7 sustainable urban development ministers, the way for U7 involvement was paved. Interviews with both public officials from the ministry and German U7 members revealed that close working relationships had existed long before the advent of the G7 presidency. Thus, a close collaboration in the G7 process could build on existing networks and was an integral part of the G7 track on Urban Development from the beginning.

While the emergence of the Urban Development Track and of the U7 advocacy group were parallel processes without a causal relationship, they influenced each other with benefits for both sides: for BMWSB, the involvement of U7 provided them with a concerted local government perspective, helped to create ownership for G7 decisions at the local level, and contributed to further profiling of a newly established ministry. For U7, the involvement led to an increase in their influence and visibility, which included the adoption of specific communiqué language on the pivotal role of cities in G7 policymaking, as well as gaining a proverbial "seat at the table" of the ministerial meeting.

Overall, the different ways in which U7 was recognised, supported and involved by the ministries, underline the relevance of both institutional and personal contacts to relevant departments and public officials, and of an openness by political decision-makers as long as there is no structural involvement of local governments in place. For example, the outcomes of the 2021 federal elections brought political decision-makers, who were receptive towards the strengthening of U7, into leading positions at BMZ. Ministerial support for U7 enabled them to organise a much broader participation process and was also crucial for their strong engagement in the Urban Development track.

Looking ahead, whether U7 will ever be successful in becoming an engagement group in the future remains to be seen. In the years to come, this decision will be up to other G7 presidencies and will thus depend on their willingness and receptivity. To strengthen democratic decision-making, and advance the implementation of measures towards achieving the SDGs and climate goals, the G7 should consider establishing dedicated participation formats to increase multi-level cooperation in international policymaking. The involvement of local government actors in the Urban Development Track could serve as an example of how this could work.

Until then, a pragmatic way forward for U7 could be to increase their influence via network building and forming strategic alliances with officials within the (inter-)national ministerial bureaucracies. Of course, relying too much on personal networks goes along with a risk that influence fades as soon as certain individuals are no longer in charge. As such, the rotating G7 presidencies represent both a chance and a risk. In any case, U7 should probably adopt a more long-term strategy, starting to build networks with national government representatives long before the start of their G7 presidency.

Meanwhile, the format of an official engagement group might not even be the best fit for bringing forward local government voices and concerns. As local governments are elected representatives and part of the government system, one could argue that their involvement should differ from that of NGOs. Also, while engagement groups might receive more attention from political decision-makers than other interest groups, there is also no guarantee that the national government leaders will take up the points raised by these groups.

The accounts of both the implementation of the G7 Urban Development track and the creation of U7 are snapshots of the role of local governments during Germany's G7 presidency in 2022. Therefore, a promising topic for future inquiry is how the role of local government actors is evolving in the G7 over time. It will be interesting to assess whether U7 can maintain its influence in the Urban Development Track gained in 2022 and whether it will be able to further increase its influence on the G7 in future.

Additionally, future studies could critically reflect on the G7 Urban Development Track, especially on the question of who is speaking for whom in this track. To what extent are local governments from within the G7 entitled to speak for local governments from elsewhere and the Global South in particular? While U7 might arguably represent more perspectives by bringing together city associations instead of major cities only, it is still a voluntary association of city representatives, which might run the risk of over-representing the voices of a few, often more resourced, cities and city networks.

Last, but not least, the comparison with the G20 and its handling of urban issues seems to be a fruitful field for further scholarly inquiry, as differences between the two G-formats (i.e. in membership, shared values, etc.) might also have an impact on how city networks like U7 act towards the respective forums in future.

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