

Concept note

Feasibility study on a “Geneva Cities Forum”

Geneva, January 2018

Summary

The feasibility study has the overall objectives to inform the decision making about a Geneva Cities Forum and provide recommendations about practical options to advance such deeper partnership on city-level expertise, networks and activities between different Geneva-based institutions. It builds on the existing collaboration of several Geneva-based institutions over the last three years. A Geneva Cities Forum also stands to support the implementation of the new international consensus to prioritize safe and inclusive cities as endorsed by the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the New Urban Agenda. This proposal sets out the background and existing state of reflection on a Geneva Cities Forum before developing the terms of reference for a feasibility study to be conducted by an international consultant. The feasibility study is co-funded by the Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs and the City of Geneva.

1. Background

Over the last three years, the Geneva Peacebuilding Platform (hereafter ‘the Platform’) has advanced several collective networking initiatives that focused to connect city-level actors more closely to Geneva-based institutions working on peace, development, security and humanitarian issues. It co-convened a Technical Working Group on urban safety and peacebuilding practice since January 2015, and co-organized two international conferences in Geneva on *Reviewing the State of Safety in World Cities* in June 2016 and June 2017. These initiatives build on the fact that crime, violence, and social exclusion are three of the most important problems for contemporary cities, given the trends of rapid urbanization and continuous increase of global inequalities and marginalization. This strategic landscape requires new solutions for city leaders that combine and cut across knowledge and best practices from different sectors and institutions. The initiatives also occurred in the context of a new international consensus to prioritize safe and inclusive cities and associated efforts to implement the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the New Urban Agenda (NUA).

The Platform has advanced the existing city-focused networking and activities through a collective impact organizational model. Such an approach entails the facilitation of partnerships to leverage existing institutional resources and generate an outcome that no institutions could achieve on its own. Due to this approach, it was possible to build a partnership on city-level networking between the United Nations Office at Geneva (UNOG), UN-Habitat, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE), the Geneva International Centre for the Democratic Control of Armed Forces (DCAF); the Centre on Conflict, Development and Peacebuilding (CCDP) of the Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies, and the Small Arms Survey. The

international conferences also received support from the City of Geneva and from a reference group of representatives from over 26 organisations contributing to the planning process.

The above mentioned collaboration fostered an interest to develop a deeper partnership on city-level expertise, networks and activities. This interest was confirmed through the conference in June 2017 that also led to preliminary observations about the strategic elements for a “Geneva Cities Forum” – a name that has been suggested for this deeper partnership. Given the existing state of interest and preparations, the Platform proposes to facilitate a feasibility study to analyse in greater depth the potential of a Geneva Cities Forum. For the Platform this role occurs within the framework of its functions to incubating new ideas and practice within the broader peacebuilding field.

2. Current state of reflections

This section summarizes the current state of reflections about a Geneva Cities Forum. These reflections have been distilled by the Geneva Peacebuilding Platform based on four preparatory meetings for the international conference in 2017 and informal consultation in Geneva and Nairobi in spring 2017.

- a) Comparative advantage of Geneva:** The Geneva Cities Forum builds on Geneva’s comparative advantage as a global hub. Geneva hosts 35 international organizations, 174 diplomatic missions and 400 NGOs, as well as many research organizations, major companies and private foundations. These organizations collectively work to achieving peace, rights and well-being. Given the diversity and connectedness of Geneva, there are few better places to access expertise and practice that are relevant for city leaders to achieve safe and inclusive cities; and there are few better places to nurture partnership across institutions and sectors to address the challenges of urban conflict, insecurity and development.
- b) The value added of Geneva:** For over 150 years, Geneva stands for the human dimension in international affairs as embodied in humanitarian diplomacy, human rights, and people-centred security. This legacy has nurtured the know-how and expertise in many different fields embedded in Geneva’s community of professionals on issues such as humanitarian action, peace mediation, human rights, security sector governance, health diplomacy, development assistance, or disaster risk reduction. This density of expertise and know-how as well as its global connectedness make Geneva a unique access point – or docking station – for city-level actors and experts seeking practical solutions for the challenges they face. In an era where discourses about urban safety and security tend to be dominated by ‘hard’ security or ‘counter-terror’ policies, Geneva can add value by emphasizing the practical value of people-centred approaches that build on the use of dialogue, negotiation, and partnership to resolve conflict and to build more inclusive societies.
- c) Match-making to implement the 2030 Agenda and NUA:** The constant quest of urban leaders to find solutions is now paralleled by a new international consensus to prioritize safe and inclusive cities. The international community has endorsed the 2030 Agenda and the NUA. The 2030 Agenda includes specific goals on inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable cities and human settlements (Goal 11) and on peaceful and inclusive

societies (Goal 16); in addition city-level issues cut also across a whole range of other goals. The NUA calls for inclusive measures for urban safety and the prevention of crime and violence building on the engagement of local communities, non-governmental actors and local authorities. The implementation of these global agendas will depend on “localization”, implying that solutions should be implemented as close as possible to the specific settings they are intended to affect. United Cities and Local Government (UCLG) has also called for leadership at the city-level to implement the 2030 Agenda and the NUA. Within this context, there is opportunity to strengthen systematic linkages to match the needs for safe and inclusive cities with the practical expertise and experiences available in the institutional ecosystem of Geneva.

- d) Network approach:** In Geneva, work on ‘cities’ is not dominated by any single institution or actor. In other words, the city-level expertise, networks, and activities are not institutionalized. It is therefore appropriate to work via a networking approach, in which various actors combine their respective strengths for collective impact. Such approaches form part of the Strategy for International Geneva (*La Genève Internationale et son Avenir*, June 2013) under rubric ‘Axe 2a’. Such a network approach is also important to incubate new initiatives and partnerships to help craft solutions to the rapidly increasing risk of conflict and insecurity in urban settings.
- e) Focus on small and medium cities:** There are many existing networks for major cities, yet small and medium sized cities seem left behind. The World Cities Report 2016 (p.8) states: *The fastest growing urban centres are the small and medium cities with less than one million inhabitants, which account for 59 per cent of the world’s urban population and 62 per cent of the urban population in Africa. Despite the demographic importance and potential role of such cities, urban planning efforts in developing countries have focused disproportionately on the problems of large metropolitan areas, thereby contributing to urban primacy. If small and medium cities are to fulfil their potential, then they should form part of the new urban agenda for developing countries.* The Geneva Cities Forum could focus on the network building and exchange with small and medium cities and assist these cities to reach the goals set out NUA and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, especially with regards to fostering safe, inclusive and peaceful societies.
- f) Technical and expert level:** Discussions in the Geneva Cities Forum could take place at the senior technical and expert level; i.e. the professional level just under the mayor, leaders of community organizations, or thought leaders from academia, think tanks, governments or international organizations. The target group is a group of professionals that can deliver the ambitions expressed in the new Urban Agenda and SDGs at the local level.
- g) Complementarity:** With its focus on Geneva’s institutional ecosystem, on small and medium cities, and on the technical or expert level, the Geneva Cities Forum seeks to complement existing forums by infusing solution-oriented knowledge and practice relevant for political discussion on the 2030 Agenda and the NUA, Mayors Forums, UCLG or other city-level networks. The Geneva Cities Forum will make it easier for other networks to benefit from the expertise and know-how available in Geneva.
- h) Light footprint:** The Geneva Cities Forum responds to the comments received from city officials that they have a preference to interact with more formalised entities. Given the number of city-level networks on a whole variety of issues, city officials are weary of

smallish initiatives with little institutional back-bone. Hence the focus on a networking approach backed-up by existing institutions.

- i) **Strengthening connections between UN and other policy hubs:** The Geneva Cities Forum does not act as a political forum (hence, the focus on the senior expert level) or replace any political processes associated to the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals or the New Urban Agenda. Through a networked approach and by focusing on the technical level and on small medium cities, the Geneva Cities Forum seeks to stimulate exchange on cities issues between different UN and other policy hubs.

3. Terms of reference for the feasibility study

Objectives

The feasibility study has the overall objectives to inform the decision making about a Geneva Cities Forum and to provide recommendations about practical options to advance such deeper partnership on city-level expertise, networks and activities between Geneva-based institutions. The feasibility study has the specific objectives to

1. Assess the current state of knowledge about the international relations of cities and associated networking activities, and identify what gaps exist;
2. Study past efforts to strengthen city-level networking in Geneva, and discuss the reasons why these did not bear fruit in the long term;
3. Develop and analyse the 'demand side' for a Geneva Cities Forum from the perspective of city-level actors and experts (from outside Geneva), especially with respect to what topics, activities, and organizational structure would constitute a comparative advantage viz-a-viz other networks and institutions in this field.
4. Develop and analyse the 'supply side' for a Geneva Cities Forum and how the resources, expertise and skills available in Geneva represent a value added for city-level actors and experts.
5. Discuss the key strategic elements that could constitute the rationale and comparative advantage for a Geneva Cities Forum building on, but going beyond, the current state of reflections noted above.
6. Discuss how a Geneva Cities Forum could enhance existing efforts to strengthen Geneva as an international hub.
7. Develop a spectrum of options – and their respective strengths and weaknesses, and an order of magnitude of the resources needed to implement different options – that would enable the establishment of a Geneva Cities Forum or other such type of efforts to strengthen city-level expertise, networks, and activities in Geneva.

The feasibility study is accompanied by a reference group composed of several actors that have previously demonstrated interest of deeper partnership on city-level expertise, networks, and activities.

Further information

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