



OPINION

VIEWPOINT

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Partnerships as an Urban Response to the Global Polycrisis



Domestic and international partnerships operating on multiple levels are what's needed for solving today's complex crises argues Dr Philipp Rode, Executive Director of LSE Cities at the London School of Economics and Political Science, and LSE Lead of the Emergency Governance Initiative for Cities and Regions.



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Around the world, people are exposed to and worry about concrete, multiple and often overlapping crisis points. While the pandemic may have been the dominant concern until recently, it is now surpassed by a combination of crises linked to geopolitical conflict and a fragile international order, global energy and food supply, and the early effects of the climate emergency. While statements about an ever acuter crisis and the proliferation of emergency declarations can easily lead to resignation and even oblivion rather than mobilising collective action, a systematic analysis of the current state of crisis and an acknowledgement of its governance implications is no matter of choice.

Partnering for Complex Realities

The evidence that systemic risks such as global heating, increasing inequalities, biodiversity loss or social unrest are increasingly higher and overlapping is becoming stronger by the day. But rather than intersecting coincidentally, observers increasingly worry about the connection between them. This has led to a new recognition of a global polycrisis defined by the Cascade Institute as “a single, macro-crisis of interconnected, runaway failures of Earth’s vital natural and social systems”. When any of the risks above turn individually into a real crisis, the resulting complex emergencies are already beyond social memory, highly political, lacking trigger moments

and difficult to define. When they materialise as part of a polycrisis, they create an entire system of such complex emergencies.

The governance implications of a global polycrisis are profound. Governing singular complex emergencies has already entirely overwhelmed existing institutional structures. Hoping for a return to normal mode governance anytime soon, while convenient at present, will not only be seen increasingly as naive but ultimately as dangerous. Governance renewal for the coming decades will require adjusting our institutional structures to emergency mode, activating strategic partnership across and within territories, while dealing with live crises. Crucially, the complex emergencies we are facing today demand governance well beyond established disaster response, relief and recovery. Systemic risks, complex emergencies and the polycrisis share dynamic networks, unknown feedback loops, non-linear relationships, and deep uncertainties that cut across policy domains, professional disciplines, administrative boundaries and timescales.

The type of emergency governance required to tackle these complex realities will have to be built around a capacity for deep prioritisation, managing trade-offs and productively engaging with diverging political sentiments. Crucially, emergency governance will have to activate new strategic partnerships to overcome



Cities have been experimenting with citizen assemblies that bring together diverse voices from the community to inform planning and governance. Image: Rawpixel.com / Shutterstock

sector-specific governance silos, territorial fragmentation and political division. Cities and their governments are well-positioned to lead these partnerships which will have to operate across various dimensions—vertically, by seeking new collaborative approaches to engage with their respective national governments, and horizontally, by establishing partnerships with other cities, nationally and internationally, as well as with committed private and third sector actors. Most importantly, new city-led strategic partnerships will have to focus on building “coalitions of the willing”, formed through open invitations to local citizens and residents to join in experimental efforts for responding to complex emergencies.

Retooling Urban Governance

An urban response to the polycrisis and governing complex emergencies will have to be built on local governments’ strengths, such as their agility, proximity to people, capacity for partnerships and in-depth understanding of interrelated systems. The Emergency Governance Initiative for Cities and Regions (EGI) led by United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG), Metropolis, and LSE Cities at the London School of Economics and Political Science investigates this urban response. Financing and budgeting will have to adapt to and acknowledge the role of fiscal autonomy and new capacities to generate own-source revenues. Local public services will have to adjust to exceptional times, acknowledge structural changes in demand, adopt flexible staff re-deployment mechanisms and encourage strong cooperation across service operators. Ultimately, municipal and local government will

have to lead more effective territorial responses to complex global emergencies and re-embrace two fundamental logics of urban governance.

First, the recognition that urban governance is fundamentally multilevel. In normal mode policy making and service delivery, most tiers of government and many non-state actors are already involved in urban affairs. Under emergency mode, multilevel co-operation, co-production and co-delivery move beyond a value-driven distribution of state power and becomes a precondition for effective emergency response. Above all, the required strategic partnerships need to rely on advanced coordination mechanisms. To enhance multilevel emergency governance, cities and regions must also take on a strategic decision-making role and not just bear operational responsibilities. Furthermore, redundancy and diversity rather than efficiency and hierarchical control may have to be prioritised. Success relies on close feedback loops between executive decisions and their impacts on the ground; it needs to employ mechanisms that can quickly aggregate inputs from different local governments, and should be built around a platform for continuous information and experience sharing between multiple agencies, city governments, as well as national and international urban governance networks (Figure 1).

Second, urban governance needs to be considered as a political rather than a technocratic approach. Possibly the greatest challenge of governance renewal for and under crisis modes will be to increase the democratic legitimacy of emergency action. Radical and rapid policy intervention inevitably lead to tensions

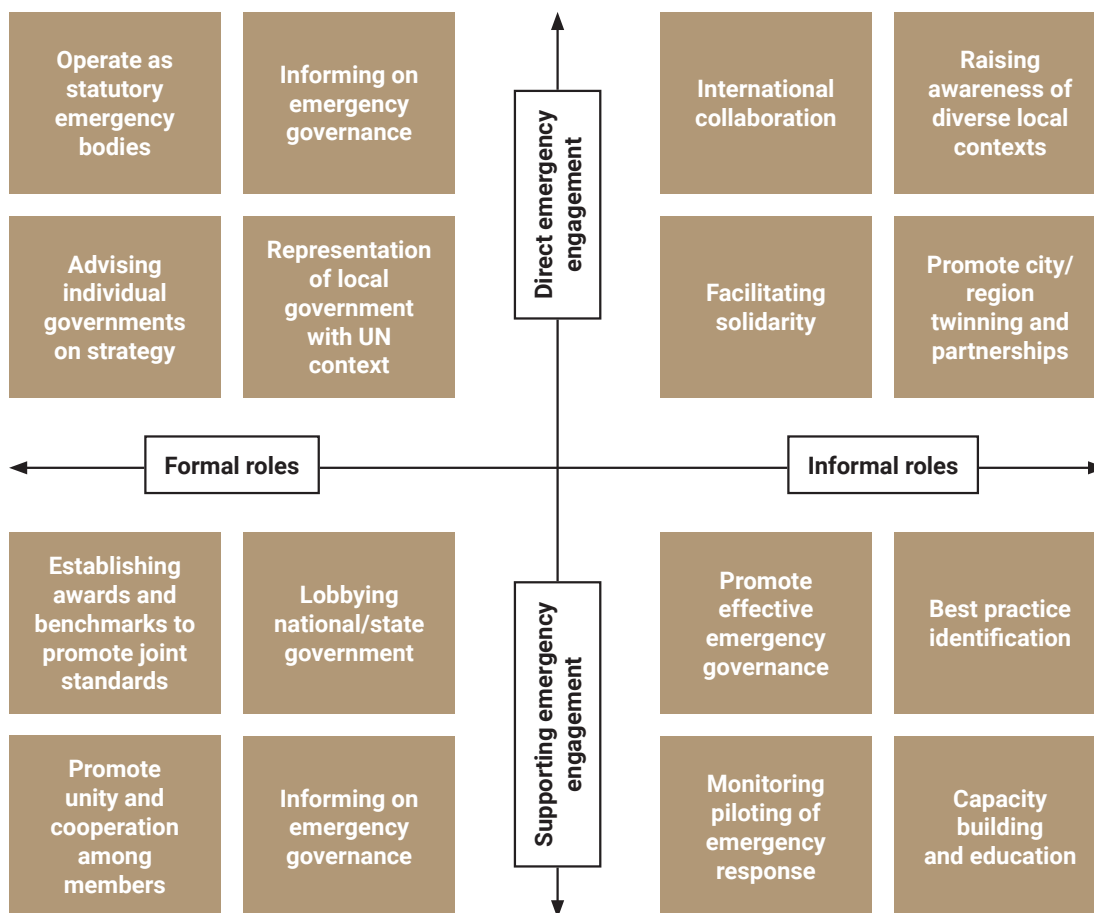


Figure 1. City networks as strategic partnerships responding to complex emergencies.
Image: Rode et al (2021). *Multilevel Emergency Governance*. EGI Policy Brief 4

between long-established frameworks for ambitious participation, good governance and representation. Instantaneous and technocratic decisions, limited political debate and absent political mandates for emergency action manifest such tensions. But emergency governance also establishes synergies and opportunities for democratic renewal with clear triggers for wide engagement—citizens as agents for change, a new confidence in the collective and increased motivation of the general public to contribute. These practices are increasingly informed by feminist thought, care ethics and advances in governance by empathy.

Scaling Strategic Partnerships

Over the last few years and at the intersecting crisis points of the pandemic—the climate emergency, political confrontation and social unrest, city-led strategic partnerships have already established many practices that can be

learnt from. Emergency assemblies, digital citizen wallets, youth councils, expanded voting rights, decentralised emergency responses and far-reaching emergency response consultations are just a few examples. Progressive cities also help to overcome the reactionary tendency of dealing with permanent crisis by leading reforms of existing institutions and governance approaches that counterbalance the short termism of emergency responses. But they will also have to be able to better detect and enable social tipping points that lead to transformative change. The joining-up of concrete, territorially embedded intervention and broader normative frameworks is what partnership-oriented urban governance can clearly offer the new emergency governance. It is an offer that must be deeply embedded in a future response to the global polycrisis. 📍