



## ■ In Profile – Edgardo Bilsky, Director of research in the World Secretariat of United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG) in Barcelona (Spain)



Born in Buenos Aires (Argentina), Edgardo Bilsky completed his studies in Paris (France), with a Master's degree in Contemporary History at the *Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales* in Paris (1984). He began his career as a professor of History and Social Sciences at the University of Buenos Aires and the University of Paris III and Paris V. He published various books and articles. In early 1990, he integrated the cooperation agency of the World Federation of United Cities – CUD – in charge of programmes with Central America and later with Latin

America. In May 2004, he participated in the creation of UCLG. In 2006, he assumed the coordination of the Global Report on Decentralization and Local Democracy (GOLD).

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**DeLoG: *Dear Edgardo, let us first of all thank you for taking your time for this interview! Recently UCLG and DeLoG have joined efforts to offer sessions on localising the SDGs and the principle LNOB at the Africities Summit. Referring to the thematical input, what enabling institutional factors for leaving no one behind could you name?***

We are very satisfied with the outcomes of DeLoG and UCLG's joint effort at Africities. It was very important for us to give this event the visibility and centrality it deserves. It was a representation of an otherwise underrated reality – local and multilevel governance in the African continent – and untapped potential in one of the regions of the world which will experience impressive rates of urbanisation in the next few decades. The back-to-back sessions we organised during the summit allowed us to address LNOB as an actual goal for local governments across the continent: it was good to see how strong the demand is for larger bottom-up participation in the decision-making process, the mobilisation of all local stakeholders, the need to strengthen local ownership, knowledge exchange and international cooperation between peers. As you know, 51 countries, and specifically 19 from Africa, will be reporting to the 2019 HLPF: it is important to have such moments of awareness-raising, summing up progress and obstacles, designing solutions together. This is why more initiatives like these sessions on the localisation of the SDGs, with LNOB as the founding principle, are more and more necessary.

**DeLoG: *Having analysed institutional structures for the most recent GOLD report, what can you say are the most promising and hindering issues one can identify on the local governance level? Do these structures leave enough room for innovation?***

UCLG has worked on the Global Reports on Decentralization and Local Democracy – known as GOLD Reports – for over ten years. It is interesting to explore this analysis across time. There are today worrying trends all around the world when it comes to decentralisation



policies and the capacity of local governments to ‘localise’ the global agendas, and particularly the SDGs. As showed in our preliminary findings for the report that will be published in 2019, in many regions subnational governments are experiencing contradictory trends – greater expectations for their role in the implementation of the SDGs on one hand, and stagnating decentralisation process (or even new re-centralising ones) on the other hand. Inadequate ‘enabling environments’ can hinder the capacity of local and regional governments to contribute more actively to the global agendas. UCLG is monitoring the national reporting processes for the SDGs to see how local governments can participate more and better. We are doing our best to raise awareness on this essential global debate. These have been key outcomes of the reports that UCLG presented to the High-Level Political Forum in 2017 and 2018. We need to reach a critical mass and engage our constituency even more in this process.

**DeLoG: *What and who are the main sources of innovative approaches towards sustainability on the local and regional level? Can you name some enabling factors and important stakeholders?***

In a system, which is yet not taking full advantage of the contribution of local and regional governments, it is often necessary for front-running cities and territories to drive change in policy. Pioneering municipalities, provinces and regions have been proactive in aligning their strategic planning with the SDGs and the other agendas, often making that first step that not even their national governments had committed to (on local climate change actions, for instance). These local governments have been litmus tests for innovative practices and localised initiatives and have sparked the interest of many others: Durban, Madrid, Mannheim, New York, Buenos Aires and Seoul are just a few among them.

Similarly, while often underrated, national local government associations have been quite active in organising awareness-raising initiatives and pilot projects to involve their members (for example, the Deutscher Städtetag, the association of German cities, CNM in Brazil, ANCB in Benin, ASPAC/Apeksi in Indonesia) and create snowball effects across territories and communities. So much of this effort is tailored to the specific challenges that the Goals address. SDG 11, for instance, perhaps the one closest to the reality of municipalities and local governments in general, has triggered a number of initiatives across affordable housing, integrated multimodal and sustainable transport, waste management, resilience and risk-management via the Sendai Framework, and the role of culture as one of the intangible pillars of true territorial development and inclusion. At a global scale, more than 9,000 cities and local governments are participating in the Global Covenant of Mayors for Climate and Energy to take action on climate change mitigation, adaptation, as well as access to sustainable energy. All this shows that horizontal collaboration and knowledge sharing are being those enabling factors that are making awareness grow and mobilisation improve across all regions.

Different local governments have been proactive in building multi-stakeholder alliances to mainstream rights-based approaches in their territorial development strategies (Gwangju in Korea, Venice and Vienna in Europe). These include the ‘Right to the City’ principles acknowledged by Habitat III (in Mexico City, for instance), and support the right to housing (e.g. the ‘Cities for adequate housing’ initiative promoted by Barcelona, Amsterdam, Berlin,



Durban, Lisbon, London, Mexico City, Montreal, Montevideo, New York, Paris and Seoul). Sanctuary Cities and Refuge Cities address the urgent needs of specific vulnerable groups, while strengthening social cohesion and solidarity but also guaranteeing the protection of human rights. Participatory and rights-based approaches are developing a new framework for the 'co-creation' of cities and territories, based on a stronger involvement of local actors, and this is a path-breaking approach that has stemmed directly from the bottom up.

***DeLoG: How has the contribution of local and regional governments been changing over the recent years regarding 'localising the SDGs'? Is there enough willingness to align local policies with the SDGs and continue adapting to them? In how far is support for local and regional governments by organisations like UCLG essential to make progress?***

We did our best to make the reports an instrument to study progress but also not lose sight of outstanding issues and weaknesses of the localisation process. After three years of analysis, we know today that localisation is an expanding movement across all regions. While strategic alignment and adaptation of local plans have been a first step for many local governments, in our reports we were already able to collect about 150 cases of actual localisation, that is, the concrete application of the goals to the local reality. Many trends have emerged. We have seen that Northern and Western European local governments have done much for awareness-raising. We know that in Latin America several larger cities are making strong alignment efforts. In Africa, local governments in countries such as Benin, Togo, South Africa have advanced the most, but countries as diverse as Botswana, Cape Verde, Morocco, Sierra Leone or Uganda are also developing pilot projects. On the other hand, the process of localisation has been lagging behind in regions such as Eurasia and the Middle East. National associations of local governments and global networks such as UCLG, C40, ICLEI, specialised networks such as DeLoG and many other global actors have a strong responsibility to advocate for more vertical cooperation, new and effective institutional mechanisms and the 'enabling environments' thanks to which local governments and stakeholders can be engaged at all stages of the localisation process.

***DeLoG: DeLoG is happy to be joining the World Observatory on Subnational Finance and Investment as an active partner. Can you tell our readers a little more about the Observatory and what potential role you see for DeLoG and its members?***

Side by side with the OECD, UCLG has been working on the development of the Observatory since 2015. We are very glad to have DeLoG now on board in the Steering Committee. The Observatory has so far been the strongest attempt to systematically provide reliable data and indicators on subnational government structures and finance, and has the ambition to analytically compare their performance in terms of local budgets and fiscal and investment management. Currently, the Observatory manages data for about 100 countries. The next report will be published in 2019, with the aim to cover at least 130 countries. DeLoG and its members could play a critical role in data collection, peer-review of the country profiles and the comparative analysis for the global report. Collected data are being used to contribute to the follow-up of the Addis-Ababa Action Agenda on Financing for Development (AAAA), and especially its paragraph 34, the one that most empowers local and regional governments to demand adequate resources, powers, and instruments to fund local development.



**DeLoG: Which emerging topics do you see for the work of UCLG in 2019 and which major goals does UCLG set for the next year? Where do you see possible joint activities of UCLG and DeLoG in 2019?**

2019 is going to be an important year. The UN will perform several quadrennial reviews of the whole SDGs and global agendas' framework within its system, and it is extremely important that local governments – as well as all local stakeholders – are duly represented in a process, which will certainly define both where we stand right now as a constituency and what we need to do more and better for the years to come. A partnership such as the one with DeLoG will have several appointments to thrive and grow. The High-Level Political Forum will meet again in July for the fourth cycle of assessment of SDG implementation, but also for the presentation of the UN's first Global Quadrennial Report on Sustainable Development. In September, under the aegis of the UN Secretary General, many heads of state will meet for the SDG Summit. UCLG itself will have a busy year, with our World Congress in November in Durban and the presentation of the GOLD V report. Our main hope for this busy 2019 is to keep on fostering the political will and mobilisation of the subnational level, making it commit to the global agendas; to join our efforts and pool our knowledge to build real capacity for local and regional governments to implement the 2030 Agenda successfully; to strengthen the integration of local governments in the VNR processes and ensure that more and more reports study and showcase local actions and initiatives; to promote the New Urban Agenda as a localisation catalyst and an essential contribution to the achievement of the SDGs. We aim to work seamlessly on the realisation of the agendas and their underpinning commitment: partnerships, cooperation and solidarity among all actors and stakeholders at the local level will be essential, and the collaboration with DeLoG will be a priority to move in this direction.