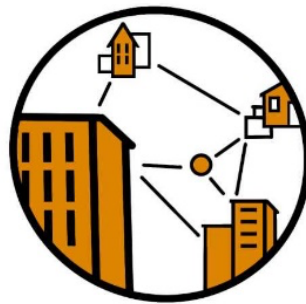


URBANORMS

Exploring International City Networks in
Global Norm Dynamics



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Urban Networking and Global Norms: Towards a Better
Understanding of International City Networks

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About URBANORMS:

URBANORMS is a research project that studies the activities and structures of international city networks in global politics. Its mission is to understand how network structures influence the activities of international city networks in global norm dynamics and to explore the variance of these activities in reference to different institutional and political backgrounds.

URBANORMS was launched in Spring of 2022 at the Institute of International Relations of the TU Braunschweig. The research team comprises Prof. Dr. Anja P. Jakobi as Principal Investigator, Ronja Haenschen, M.A., and Dr. Bastian Loges.

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Abstract

Bridging across the strands of urban studies, norm research and network research, this article examines how International Relations (IR) research can contribute to a comprehensive and comparative analysis of international city networks (ICNs). ICNs have regularly been examined in urban studies, showing a growing degree of networking among cities, global representation of urban actors, but also a growing implementation of global norms on the local level. Yet, we know little on the variety of ICNs' activities and explanations for them. To facilitate further research on ICNs and explain this variance, the paper proceeds in four main steps: We first present research in urban studies, highlighting the manifold empirical insights linked to ICNs and global norms, yet also showing that generalizable explanations on what causes specific activities of these networks deserve more attention. In a second step, with a view to classify ICNs' activities, we show how norm research can enrich the study of ICNs. In particular, we show the existent variety of activities in norm dynamics, ranging from norm initiation and adoption to norm contestation. In a third step, emphasizing that ICNs are global networks, we review IR network research with a view to examine the structural characteristics of ICNs and their influence on ICNs' activities. In a final step, we show that combining these research strands leads to a more comprehensive understanding of specific ICNs, and using them as complementary approaches enables the systematic development of novel hypotheses on ICNs. All in all, the article paves a way not only to more systematic research on ICNs, but also for cross-fertilization of usually separated research strands in IR.

1. Introduction

A growing research strand in International Relations (IR) shows that global politics is increasingly populated not only by states, international organizations, and private actors but also by sub-national entities like cities and their networks (Kosovac et al. 2021; Szpak et al. 2022; Acuto et al. 2023): Local cities use their networks to contribute to international political goals like, for example, the Sustainable Development Goals (Hartley 2019; Croese and Parnell 2022) or the Paris Agreement (Van der Heijden, Patterson et al. 2019; Gordon 2020). As one result, international city networks (ICNs) and their members commit to global norms, sometimes independently of national governmental preferences and occasionally even overpassing national governments in their compliance with international commitments (Curtis 2014b, 29; Smith 2019, 140). These networks exist in almost every issue area of global politics, have a multilateral membership base of cities and other actors, and come in different forms or sizes, from rather loose initiatives to highly formal organizations with different governing bodies (Jakobi et al., forthcoming; Acuto and Rayner 2016; Lecavalier and Gordon 2020). In addition to a bottom-up understanding of cities' international engagement, top-down effects from international organizations and their programs exist, too: UN, WHO, or regional organizations provide various programs and partnerships for cities and ICNs (Tavares 2016; Kosovac et al. 2020), making them significant partners of international actors for the diffusion of global norms. Thus, ICNs provide an important nexus between the local and international levels and are considered to play a vital role in combatting climate change (Bulkeley and Betsill 2013; Bouteligier 2012; Gordon 2020), migration politics (Oomen 2020; Durmus and Oomen 2022), human rights (Och 2022; Nijman et al. 2022; Zwingel 2023) or global health (Acuto et al. 2017; Jakobi and Loges 2022) by implementing global norms or agreements. Yet, although these networks clearly engage in global norm dynamics, they have rarely been analyzed in IR norm research nor in research on global networks. In this article, we examine how - different strands of literature – namely urban studies, norm research, and network research – could be linked in a fruitful way, generating important research avenues for different communities in IR.

Existing research in urban studies – a multidisciplinary research community interested in processes linked to the urban level – have analyzed ICNs under different labels like city networks or transnational municipal networks linked to city diplomacy (Kern and Bulkeley 2009; Heikkinen et al. 2020; Lee and Jung 2018; Acuto and Leffel 2021). In this research strand, different activities and network structures of ICNs are examined. They are often explained with reference to a growing interdependence between cities and other actors, or linked to national institutional change that impacts the city level: Economic and political globalization, urbanization, and the decentralization of political decision-making have supported a development in which cities regularly engage in international diplomacy with different counterparts (Acuto 2013; Nijman 2016; Tavares 2016). At the

same time, research has repeatedly stated the need to assess what exactly ICNs contribute to global politics and why (Acuto et al. 2023, 4; Curtis 2014a, 16; Ljungkvist 2014, 38; Herrschel and Newman 2017, 16). In turn, political science or IR approaches put forward functional explanations on the international level, as cities and their networks are seen to become more important due to intergovernmental stalemates (Barber 2013; Szpak 2022) or due to the local impact of global problems like climate change (Gordon 2020; Hickmann 2021). Also, IR concepts like 'orchestration' or questions of identity formation have been applied to examining ICNs (Gordon and Johnson 2017; Gordon and Ljungkvist 2022). At the same time, existing research on ICNs' growing international relevance rarely considers the variation in how they position themselves to global norms. Therefore, IR lacks a comprehensive assessment of ICNs with a view to potential explanations of their varying activities. Regardless of whether explanations refer to the subnational, national, or international level, a common finding is that ICNs represent a "form of networked urban governance that holds some potential for global governance but also raises key questions as to the place of cities in multilateral affairs" (Acuto and Leffel 2021, 13). Thus, research on ICNs underlines variation in ICNs' different profiles and organizational structures, and suggests that a high degree of institutionalization facilitates cooperation among cities and with other actors (Bouteligier 2012; Acuto et al. 2023). This refers to network research that can be applied to explain how structures and relations translate into network activities. At the same time, IR network research has rarely analyzed ICNs as a specific form of networks by assessing their structures, relations, and internal processes and is also not widely common in norm research (but see Bansard et al. 2017; Acuto and Leffel 2021; Carpenter 2007). In sum, existing research on ICNs shows the variety of ICNs' activities and their growing importance for global politics. However, comprehensively mapping, as well as explaining the causes and variation of ICNs' activities, remains a challenge.

Bringing together research on ICNs, global norm dynamics, and political networks aims at a more comprehensive understanding of ICNs through systematizing their activities in relation to global norms and explaining the variance of activities through network structures and relations inside and beyond ICNs. While urban studies have important findings for IR on the variety of ICNs' activities, norm research offers an opportunity to analyze them as different practices to support current norms, criticize them, or start normative change. At the same time, network research enables the explanation of these activities by highlighting internal and external network relations. By combining these three research strands, we provide a more comprehensive understanding of specific ICNs and offer a basis for the systematic development of novel hypotheses on ICNs. In particular, our main aim is to propose a research perspective that broadens the existing research by systematizing varying activities of ICNs (as dependent variables derived from norm research) and linking them to possible explanations (as

independent variables derived from network research). In sum, we combine these different strands of literature to contribute to an ongoing debate on questions of analyzing ICN's activities (Oosterlynck et al. 2019; van der Heijden, Bulkeley et al. 2019) and to facilitate the systematic allocation and integration of knowledge on ICNs in IR. At the same time, the combination of existing research on ICNs in urban studies with norm research and network research shows that ICNs provoke new questions not only concerning empirical developments in global governance but also in relation to several research strands in IR. Thus, research on ICNs is not only beneficial in generating more knowledge on the growing influence of subnational governmental entities on global politics, but also in providing an opportunity for cross-fertilization of different, compartmentalized research strands in IR.

The remainder of this article proceeds in four main steps: In the following section, we present the existing findings of urban studies on ICN concerning ICN activities related to world politics. This forms a state-of-the-art on the empirical phenomenon of ICNs and the explanations for their growing relevance. In the subsequent section, we present norm research as a way to theorize and conceptualize the variance of ICNs' activities. We show that these activities can be systematized as different contributions to norm dynamics, yet additional explanatory analyses remain necessary. In a further step, we then present network research in IR as an important tool to analyze ICNs and their activities. In the final step, we use urban studies, norm research, and network research as complementary approaches to a more detailed study of ICNs, showing how this combination enhances the understanding of ICNs and delivers potential explanations for their varying activities, including the development of tentative hypotheses.

2. Urban Studies, Global Politics, and the Activities of International City Networks

While IR often refers to cities as part of global politics in the past – for instance Greek city states in the Peloponnesian War or the Hanseatic League as examples of early globalization – a global, contemporary perspective on cities emerged in the 1990s through influential work by Sassen (1991) and Castells (1996) who established the idea of 'World Cities' at the intersection of IR, sociology, and urban studies (Derudder et al. 2011). Focusing on the city's function for the global economy, namely for global companies and markets (Bassens et al. 2019, 3), this intellectual tradition conceptualizes cities as strategic sites or nodes in a global network of economic interactions which created international hierarchies between different cities in their importance for the global economy (Bouteligier 2014, 60; Acuto and Leffel 2021, 9-10). Over time, scholars in urban studies enlarged this economic and spatial understanding of cities' global relevance into a broader perspective on cities as

actors in international affairs (Bouteligier 2012; Ljungkvist 2016; Curtis 2016). Today, urban studies analyze both global activities of specific cities as well as ICNs as different forms of so-called 'city diplomacy' or 'paradiplomacy' (Acuto and Rayner 2016; Tavares 2016). These networks are often supported by administrative entities, as many cities and local governments established specific offices and strategies for their international affairs (Ljungkvist 2014, 42; Acuto et al. 2018, 1). Thus, international activities have become "an everyday practice for mayor, local government officials, and city bureaucrats" (Smith 2019, 143). Yet, at the same time, existing research on the international activities of cities does not always distinguish between the activities of specific cities and the activities of their networks or offer distinct explanations for their respective agency (Gordon and Ljungkvist 2022), while we would argue that theoretical explanations of these activities are likely to vary. Moreover, the existing literature also uses different terms like 'transnational municipal networks', 'city networks' and others (Kern and Bulkeley 2009; Acuto and Leffel 2021), which include networks that are not necessarily multilateral in their membership. In this article, we stick to the term ICN as 'international city network' (ICNs in plural respectively) to signify the fact that the membership base is multilateral as their members must represent at least three countries, but it also includes, however, networks that in fact consist of transnational relations with foundations, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), businesses, or international organizations (Jakobi et al., forthcoming). It is this variance in membership that raises important questions about the specific role of cities and their networks in global politics.

International City Networks as International Actors

Empirical assessments show that ICNs proliferated significantly over the last decades and can be found worldwide (Acuto and Rayner 2016, 1156; Acuto and Leffel 2021, 2; Acuto et al. 2023, 533). At the same time, findings on ICNs' activities often relate to network activities in environmental politics, mainly their implementation and leadership activities in sustainability and climate policies (Acuto and Rayner 2016, 1153; Davidson et al. 2019a, 3541; Smith 2019, 720). In particular, the city network 'C40' in climate change politics is frequently used to illustrate the comprehensive international activities of ICNs (Bouteligier 2014, 58; Curtis 2014b, 4; Ljungkvist 2016, 4). Yet, studies also include cities and ICNs in migration politics (Oomen and Baumgärtel 2018; Oomen 2020), human rights (Shawki 2011; Och 2018; Runyan and Sanders 2021), nuclear proliferation and counterterrorism (Graham 2010; Ljungkvist 2021). These networks represent elaborate forms of cooperation that exceed traditional twin-city models, which are mainly bilateral contacts among cities and their inhabitants (Ljungkvist 2014, 41). ICNs develop dynamically in number and structures, and scholars assess a growing formalization and institutionalization that transforms initial coordination among cities into complex governance

arrangements (Acuto and Leffel 2021, 5; Davidson et al. 2019b, 697). At the same time, a great diversity of ICNs exists concerning their age, their membership size and base, whether they represent larger or smaller cities or whether they focus on single issues or are a 'multi-issue network' (Bouteligier 2012, 21; Acuto and Rayner 2016, 1152-1155).

Cities typically use these networks to channel their collective ambitions and to formulate urban demands at the global level (Curtis 2014a, 27; Acuto 2019, 137). Within networks, cities exchange information, knowledge, and best practices and thus create processes that facilitate local capacity-building for urban responses to common policy problems (Acuto and Rayner 2016, 1162; Pinault 2019, 719). They hold conferences and summits, issue regular reports, establish pilot programs and communicate via social media, blogs, and newsletters, thus strengthening network structures and reaching out to other actors (Acuto and Leffel 2021, 5; Nijman 2016, 229). Formal relations within ICNs can include different communities from within the city administration, partners from public organizations or research institutions (Acuto and Leffel 2021, 8), and private actors with specific economic interests in urban innovations (Davidson et al. 2019a, 698; Gordon and Johnson 2019, 716). Urban studies also assess particular, not necessarily formal, relations between city networks and international organizations like the UN, World Bank or WHO (Bouteligier 2012, 21; Kosovac et al. 2020, 1). These networked relations result from different push and pull effects between the local and the global levels. On the one hand, findings show a bottom-up process in which ICNs reach out to international organizations or attend international negotiations to bring in urban ideas and concerns (Bouteligier 2012, 21; Nijman 2016, 231-232). On the other, in a top-down manner, international organizations increasingly consider cities and their networks as addressees of frameworks, programs, and policies (Davidson et al. 2019b, 697; Acuto and Leffel 2021, 12-13). As analyses show, ICNs are increasingly recognized as actors by states, civil society organizations, and international organizations (Gordon and Ljungkvist 2022, 65-67; Kosovac et al. 2020, 9-10; Acuto et al. 2023, 530), not least for their implementing activities in support of global programs and norms. As some results suggest, these networks already shape international affairs (Herrschel and Newman 2017, 81-84; Acuto et al. 2023, 521). Yet, cities do not have "a seat at the table" (Acuto 2016) and even if they are central to some UN programs, their status in global politics is rarely formalized.

In sum, existing studies document an international agency of cities and ICNs, underlining that cities increasingly aim to promote urban interests at the international level, and ICNs are an important means of achieving political visibility and leverage. Through their networking efforts, cities are increasingly embedded in a multi-level system that includes formal as well as informal relations with other public, private, and international actors.

Explanations for the Activities of International City Networks

Existing studies present different rationales to account for cities' international networking efforts. These often focus on the city-level and its dynamic, and are less focused on comparisons and explaining variance across cases. These rationales usually emphasize learning among cities, shared international interests on the local level, or a functional urban reaction to global governance problems: With a view to policy learning, studies on international activities of cities highlight that international networking is frequently motivated by the desire to exchange and to learn from other cities' experiences (Bouteligier 2014, 67). With a view to shared interest, cities' networking activities are also a tool to present topics relevant for cities on the global level and to represent local stakeholders and their concerns in international policies (Smith 2019, 134; Bassens et al. 2019, 10). By using the architecture and dynamics of global governance, city networks aim to further their interests and participate in international fora (Ljungkvist 2014, 32; Acuto 2019, 136). Finally, a rationale often labelled as 'leadership' refers to policy problems by conceiving city networks as an instrument for more effective global governance, especially by handling collective action problems of states. This is particularly visible in city networks' global activities on climate change that contrast the international situation where nation-states are in a multilateral gridlock (Curtis 2014b, 4; Acuto and Rayner 2016, 1155). Cities and ICNs consider themselves leaders and publicly commit to pioneering new solutions or increasing policy implementation (Ljungkvist 2014, 48; Rapoport et al. 2019; Acuto and Leffel 2021, 11). Signalling such leadership qualities also furthers a progressive image and international reputation (Ljungkvist 2016, 8; Acuto and Leffel 2021, 11).

Scholars emphasize that "cities are 'out there' in world politics, lobbying, linking, planning and cooperating; and they are doing all this, often, in formalized groups—city networks" (Acuto and Rayner 2016, 1147). These network structures are seen as central enablers of cities' international agency: Cities typically have an agency as local government derived from their formal status as municipal government of a given local territory (Acuto and Rayner 2016, 1151; Bassens et al. 2019, 4). In contrast, their international agency is relational because it is based on networking with other actors. Thus, it is influenced by internal structures and processes (Gordon and Johnson 2019, 716; Smeds 2019, 720) but also by the response of external actors to the network, namely whether they recognize it as an important actor (Davidson et al. 2019b, 702). Urban studies assess that "wielding network power means in practice that the city's influence is never really stabilized and is always shared with other actors, peers and flows" (Acuto 2019, 137, see also: Bassens et al. 2019, 5; Acuto et al. 2023, 525). At the same time, these network structures receive only scarce attention as an explanatory variable, and

only limited findings exist on how the internal structures and processes of city networks impact their activities (Acuto and Ghojeh 2019, 709-710; Acuto and Leffel 2021, 6). In particular, research on C40 has been used to elucidate internal network structures and their consequences: The C40 has a two-tiered structure with a secretariat and other organizational units that positively affects ways of communication within and beyond the network (Acuto and Rayner 2016, 1160, Davidson et al. 2019b, 705-707). Yet, power structures and asymmetries exist (Smeds 2019, 720), for example, in the relations between network members from the Global North and the Global South (Davidson et al. 2019b, 702; Acuto and Leffel 2021, 7). Assessments show that the network structure of C40 has internal and external effects: It supports communication and coordination between members, as well as the diffusion of global climate norms among them. Additionally, it influences its ability regarding agenda-setting and the collective addressing of urban issues at the global level (Gordon and Johnson 2018, 38; Gordon and Johnson 2019, 715; Davidson et al. 2019b, 699).

All in all, existing studies on ICNs provide important insights into cities' activities through these networks: Sub- and transnational change, the rise of city diplomacy, a growing demand for learning and cooperation as well as support from international actors all contributed to the rise of ICNs and their importance in world politics. At the same time, ICNs are often depicted as implementing networks of global policies and norms, less so as actors in their own right. From our perspective, research could benefit from assessing the activities of ICNs systematically and comparatively and also considering the network level as the explanatory factor for different activities of ICNs. The following sections show how existent approaches in IR can contribute to such an enlarged understanding of ICNs, starting with norm research as an important perspective for assessing ICNs' activities.

3. Norm Research and the Activities of International City Networks

Norm research developed from early constructivist research (Finnemore 1993) to a broad research field focusing on all aspects of norms, including their meaning, effects, and change. Norms refer to standards of appropriate behavior for actors with a given identity, and they have a regulative as well as constitutive dimension for normative orders (Jepperson et al. 1996; Finnemore and Sikkink 1998; Deitelhoff 2006). Norms are based on a logic of appropriateness, a perspective in which actors do not act as utility-maximizers (March and Olsen 1998) but acknowledge the perceived oughtness of moral-normative standards (Florini 1996; Jurkovich 2020). Normative dynamics are processes that create order through the emergence, diffusion, contestation, or rejection of normative principles in global society. Analyses particularly focus on different instruments and strategies in this process used by

actors like states, international organizations, or NGOs. It also considers the interlinkage of the global, national, and local levels (for an overview: Lantis 2017; Sandholtz 2017). Processes of normative change have been assessed in a range of global policy fields and include studies of apartheid and slavery (Klotz 1995; Crawford 2002), humanitarian intervention and a responsibility to protect (Finnemore 1996; Welsh 2014), weapons of mass destruction (Price 1997; Tannenwald 2007) and torture (McKeown 2009; Schmidt and Sikkink 2019) but also whaling (Bailey 2008; Epstein 2008) or global crime (Nadelmann 1990; Jakobi 2013). Existing research on norms, however, rarely considers the activities and roles of ICNs (but see Jakobi and Loges 2022).

Processes and Outcomes of Global Norm Dynamics

Norm dynamics are interactive processes in which different actors contribute to creating and changing norms. Earlier research developed rather linear models of change, specifying a set of actors, activities, and delineable phases of change (Finnemore and Sikkink 1998; critically Bucher 2014; Wiener 2007). Following this approach, norm dynamics consist of three consecutive stages from norm emergence to diffusion and internalization. Norm emergence is a phase in which norm entrepreneurs introduce a normative claim and interact with external audiences to convince these actors of a new normative frame (Finnemore and Sikkink 1998, 897; Wunderlich 2013, 32). In doing so, they use a variety of strategies depending on the actors and levels addressed, including rhetorical framing (Keck and Sikkink 1998; Payne 2001), creating new normative meanings and aiming to persuade other actors of these claims (Deitelhoff 2006; Deitelhoff 2009). To foster norm dynamics, norm entrepreneurs use 'organizational platforms' like networks, conferences, or bureaus that can serve as an institutional base for the promotion of new norms and the forging of strategic coalitions among like-minded actors (Finnemore and Sikkink 1998, 899; Wunderlich 2020, 33, 90). Therefore, they also strategically select international fora to address reluctant actors and to pressure for change (Coleman 2013). In the second phase, a norm cascade evolves when such norm supporters target other actors through socializing or, if openly resisting the norm, through naming and shaming (Risse et al. 1999; Liese 2006). In the final internalization phase, the norm is fully recognized as such and implemented cross-nationally. In this phase, activities focus on institutionalizing the norm at the national and global level to further norm implementation (Betts and Orchard 2014).

While variations exist (Risse et al. 1999), this linear model of a norm life cycle was central to understanding norm dynamics and normative change in global politics (Finnemore and Sikkink 1998). Yet, subsequent norm research emphasized the possible variance in how actors respond to global norms and act in norm dynamics – thus underlining the agency of those expected to internalize

the norm. Particularly, the local adoption of norms depends on specific contexts and conditions that substantially affect norm dynamics. Practices of 'localization' and 'translation' exist through which actors link global norms to meanings on the ground and actively reframe a norm in order to adjust it to local contexts (Acharya 2004; Cloward 2016). Such processes often result in significant changes in a norm's actual meaning, sometimes producing an amalgam of global-local standards with rather ambiguous meanings (Zwingel 2016; Zimmermann 2017; Berger 2017). In practices of 'norm subsidiarity,' localization can also mean outright resistance and opposition in response to global norms (Acharya 2011; Capie 2008). Such an understanding of norm dynamics is less deterministic and emphasizes that beyond legal validation and social recognition, internalization of norms requires cultural validation (Wiener 2008; Wiener 2014) or includes regular contestation of a norm's application or even its validity (Deitelhoff and Zimmermann 2020). Norm dynamics are contingent, and research increasingly considered feedback loops, complexities, and reflexive perspectives that reintroduced a stronger focus on agency (Sandholtz and Stiles 2008; Krook and True 2010; Zimmermann 2017). Thus, norm dynamics also include norm contestation (Wiener 2018) that affects norm robustness (Deitelhoff and Zimmermann 2019) and may lead to outcomes of norm impasse (Stimmer 2019), norm polarization (Symons and Altman 2015), norm erosion (Rosert and Schirmbeck 2007), norm regress (McKeown 2009), norm decay and norm death (Panke and Petersohn 2012).

In sum, norm research presents a multifaceted and dynamic picture of how actors engage with global norms at different levels. By systemizing how ICNs contribute to norm dynamics, norm research benefits the study of ICNs and vice versa, as cities and their networks provide important and innovative case studies of local actors and their activities on global norm dynamics.

Activities and Actors in Global Norm Dynamics

Norm research integrates different levels of analysis, from the local to the global, but it also links some activities in norm dynamics to specific types of actors. While norm diffusion was initially conceived as a process from 'norm makers' to 'norm takers', norm dynamics, in fact, represent a complex interaction in which actors engage with norms on all levels (Krook and True 2010; Sandholtz and Stiles 2008). Agency is not only linked to norm entrepreneurship, to selecting and using organizational platforms or processes like naming and shaming, but also assigned to actors typically considered to be passive norm takers (Epstein 2012; Draude 2017). Research underlines that these do not merely adopt, internalize, and implement global norms. Instead, they criticize or change norms by adapting them to their specific context. Alternatively, norm addressees can oppose them more fundamentally, sabotage their implementation, or even establish an alternative norm to maintain the status quo (e.g., Bloomfield

2016; Campbell-Verduyn 2017; Bob 2017; Schneiker 2021). A comprehensive understanding of norm dynamics can thus not be reduced to processes that disseminate norms from a global to a local context but includes possible variations and reactions of those addressed and affected by norms. Norm research conceives world politics and global governance as a dynamic process in which different groups of actors engage for or against norms on different levels, and it developed a large number of concepts and proposals of how these normative dynamics unfold and what types of actors they involve.

Despite its breadth, norm research has rarely analyzed ICNs (but see Jakobi and Loges 2022), but from this perspective, ICNs are another type of actors in norm dynamics, which can be expected to engage in activities comparable to others. In general, the local level – albeit not clearly defined (Anderl 2016) – has a particular role in norm dynamics, as it is often conceived as the 'other' to global norms. There is, thus, an assumed mismatch between global norms and local implementation (Zimmermann 2017; Acharya 2004; Acharya 2011). In particular, local actors are expected to show significant differences from global norms, a finding that does not match existing studies on ICNs. Instead, urban studies emphasize that ICNs predominantly engage in the local diffusion and implementation of global norms, e.g., those on climate change or human rights (Acuto 2016; Johnson et al. 2015; da Silva 2018; Acuto et al. 2023). Possible explanations for the differing findings could be that research on ICNs may be biased by an extensive focus on climate policy and prominent examples like C40, a network dedicated to implementing climate policies locally and worldwide. Still, evidence exists that ICNs cannot be reduced to implementation activities alone, as examples from international migration policy highlight (Durmus and Oomen 2022; Baumgärtel and Oomen 2019).

In sum, norm research developed a breadth of concepts to analyze and categorize activities in norm dynamics. This breadth contrasts sharply with research on ICNs, which often reduces these networks to implementers of global norms. Considering the existing research on norms, one could expect a more complex relation of ICNs to global norms. Thus, norm research can be used to categorize the character and extent of potential ICNs' activities, differentiating between norm initiation, the adoption of global norms, or their contestation.

4. Network Research, Network Analysis, and Activities of International City Networks

Network research has become a more prominent part of IR scholarship since the mid-2000s (for an overview see Hafner-Burton et al. 2009), yet this common term assembles different research strands and traditions. A very basic distinction is between network analysis as a specific method of empirical

analysis (hereafter: the method of social network analysis, SNA) and a more conceptual perspective on the relation of actors (hereafter: network analysis). While being somewhat intertwined, SNA as a method mainly progresses with a sophistication of quantitative methods, while conceptual network analysis progresses with substantive or generalizable knowledge of networks, their internal characteristics, and their political effects (e.g., Avant and Westerwinter 2016; Victor et al. 2016, 3). A focus on specific types of networks is also common in scholarship on governance and public policy. In that context, 'policy networks' elucidate how a specific policy is made in an existent formal system, while 'governance networks' embody a new approach to policy-making with a different, usually enlarged set of actors and in a pluralist tradition (Blanco et al. 2011, 298-302). This distinction of 'analyzing policy networks that influence the existing political process' versus 'analyzing governance networks as novel part of politics' also corresponds to different research strands in IR: For instance, Van Apeldoorn and de Graaf (2014) analyze national policy networks in the formal making of the US grand strategy while Hamilton et al. (2022) show how a global policy network centered around the Global North predominantly contributed to the Women, Peace and Security Agenda, despite the relevance this topic has for the South. In contrast, governance networks have been distinguished in IR depending on specific functions like harmonization and expert networks (Slaughter 2004), by its characteristics as multi-stakeholder participation in global public policy networks (Reinecke 1998), global governance networks (Eilstrup-Sangiovanni 2016) or advocacy networks in norm dynamics (Keck and Sikkink 1998; Carpenter 2007). Membership and composition, but also the identity of actors, their ties, and their network, thus influence activities, the expected mode of cooperation, and the policy outcomes we can expect (e.g., Van Apeldoorn and de Graaff 2014; Beyers and Braun 2013; Zech and Gabbay 2016; Thurner et al. 2019)

As a method, SNA has contributed to a better understanding of interdependency in the international system: Being part of a network can positively affect cooperation across policy fields, particularly through information growth and trust building among potential partners, also via indirect ties (e.g., Kinne 2013; Kinne 2018). Yet, the relationship between conceptual and methodological progress in the analysis of networks also shows tensions that result from different research aims: For instance, Ramia et al. (2018) argue that network research on governance networks in public policy could benefit from more conceptual questions, instead of only technical and statistical refinements. In contrast, Ward et al. (2011) review network research in political science with a clear emphasis on methods while focusing little on conceptual questions and the different substantive concepts of networks in political science. Reviewing traditions of network analysis, Selg (2016) identifies two perspectives: The first mainly conceives networks as inter-actions or linkages of autonomous actors that 'have' some kind of relation that might affect individual and collective behavior. The second

perspective has a more constitutive understanding of networks, actors and agency involved, emphasizing questions of trans-actional relations and their impact. This distinction is helpful in delineating empirical research on the structures of networks 'as a given' from research that implicitly or explicitly assumes that the creation of a network will have specific social consequences, particularly through the internal and external interactions accompanying its existence. Both perspectives are common in IR and can be applied to ICNs, yet we mainly consider the consequences of network formation here, as it comes with a more substantial understanding of these networks as a new type of actors in global politics. Such perspective also enables analyses of the effects of varying network compositions, including questions of network membership, resources, organization, or identity.

Assessing Network Structures

Social networks are relations among actors (usually the 'nodes') and ties between them (Ward et al. 2011, 246). The relations of all actors in a given network result in specific structural network characteristics, which, in turn, also influence the relations and activities of actors. This understanding introduces different possible units of network analysis – nodes, ties, the network itself, or its social effects among members or on others. For instance, actors that communicate innovation and cause change within a network are typically referred to as 'entrepreneurs', while actors that constitute a single node between two otherwise separated groups in the networks are 'brokers', and actors channeling communication and relations are 'gatekeepers' (e.g., Goddard 2009; Carpenter 2007; Christopoulos and Ingold 2015). Ties between actors can be differentiated regarding whether they are unidirectional or whether they actually represent a bilateral contact between two actors, for instance, by distinguishing between in-degree and out-degree (Patty and Penn 2016, 155). Networks as units differ regarding their structures: Whether a network has few or many central nodes, is rather tightly integrated or loose, can typically be assessed by SNA through calculating measures of centrality, density, or others. Also, questions of cohesion within a network can be addressed (Patty and Penn 2016, 148), including assessments of 'homophily', groups, and cliques inside the network. Measures linked to connectivity trace the positions of actors within the network, showing the differences in how well-connected specific actors are to others (Patty and Penn 2016, 150), including effects of this difference, like the strength of weak ties (Granovetter 1973). Statistical measurements used in SNA can thus be linked to concepts that are central in IR to explain actors' activities: For instance, 'power' can be based on a central position in a network but is also dependent on whether communication, resources, or other links are analyzed as relevant ties between nodes (see Kim 2019 on different aspects of power). Measurements also allow us to distinguish different forms of centrality, each with a specific understanding of the overall position of a central, powerful actor (Patty and Penn 2016, 155-156;

Larson and Lewis 2020, 129). At the same time, network research can also analyze qualitative information, such as how specific networks are shaped by powerful actors, bureaucracies, or their identities. In sum, these aspects underline how network formation, its members, and organization affect network activities, a linkage that is highly relevant to research on ICNs. Quantitative network analysis could enable a better understanding of the internal structures of ICNs. At the same time, qualitative studies of ICNs could also be used to isolate central characteristics like resources and capacities of specific networks and questions of identity, given the importance of entrepreneurship, expertise, and other causes for change in networks.

Assessing the Effects of Networking on the Activities of ICNs

The creation of a network regularly has effects on network members (internal effects) as well as on their relation to the environment (external effects). While internal and external effects of networks are linked, they still require a separate analysis. Internal effects concern the members themselves, how they relate to each other, and which activities are caused by these relations: For instance, states that share specific attributes in a given network – like close trade relations or similar security interests – are more likely to adopt similar political positions on trade policy, war or intervention in conflict (Dorussen and Ward 2008; Corbetta 2013; Cao 2012). The social structures of the network thus influence the behavior of the actors embedded in these structures (see e.g., Corbetta 2013, 370-372 for a review of other cases). ICNs can thus affect the activities of specific city members – from organizational innovation to changing policies and the implementation of global norms. In addition, networking facilitates collective action towards common goals and thus causes network-external effects. From that perspective, networking enables member cities to pursue collective activities in the global political environment.

Network research has repeatedly shown that networking has a positive effect on collective political action: For instance, civil society's ability to shape agenda and influence policy outcomes is enhanced through networking as a form of political organization (e.g., Murdie 2014, 3-6, Carpenter 2011). With a view to sub-state actors, De Oliveira Paes (2023, 61-81) shows that the emergence of the 'Amazon region' not only implied the creation of a network among actors within the region but their cooperation also made the diverse stakeholders a unified voice towards external actors and a gatekeeper to external interests in the region. Yet, research is rare with regard to how *specific* internal structures have a *specific* effect on the external activities of a network. What kind of network organization is more or less effective in creating political outcomes – including contributions to norm dynamics – therefore deserves more attention. A clear linkage between network creation and network

effects on a central actor's ability to pursue its objective is shown by Farrell and Newmann (2019): The United States used the growth of communication and financial networks among states worldwide to gain more influence on other states in these sectors. While network growth was caused by political interdependence, its technical backbone and infrastructure effectively rested on a few hubs that could be effectively controlled through the US. An evolving network structure with specific hubs thus created new opportunities for one actor combined with heightened asymmetry among network members, resulting in 'new structural conditions of power' (Farrell and Newmann 2019:74) accompanying technological change. Also, in other cases, the creation of networks as a byproduct of other political processes ultimately influences the latter: As research on EU negotiations shows, countries can use their network position and ties to gain influence in bargaining (Lovato and Maurer 2022). Yet, whether a specific form of networks is more effective in translating actors' input to collective political output remains an open question. Some results of organizational networks nonetheless show that structures impact effectiveness with regard to collective responses. Kim (2019) proposes a network approach to analyze global governance, aiming to categorize existing structures that are labeled as fragmented, polycentric, or complex with network terms that can better be compared against each other, but also with regard to the impact these structures have on effective policy-making (Kim 2019, 917-920). Network effects were also linked to specific diffusion patterns: The polycentric diffusion of carbon emissions emerged due to different networks and different relations within them (Paterson et al. 2014, 424-443).

All in all, network research has frequently emphasized that network composition and membership, resources and capacities, organization and identity influence social outcomes, but it is less frequently analyzed how these translate into a given, specific activity of the network. Analyzing ICNs with tools from network research could enhance knowledge on what kind of network characteristics enable which kind of global activity of ICNs, while, in turn, such studies of ICNs could also deliver important case studies for network research.

5. Examining the Activities of ICNS: Complementary Perspectives and Avenues

Taken together, each of the three research strands – urban studies, norm research, and network research – has a specific perspective on ICNs, yet they all bring in specific, complementary dimensions for analyzing ICNs' activities. As summarized in Table 1, existing findings in urban studies on ICNs show their increasing involvement in global politics. Studies typically explain the rise of city diplomacy with

cities' search for solutions to political problems and refer to the local level of analysis as the main driver of this development, as well as the growing relevance of cities for other international actors. From this perspective, networking between cities is an international activity to further exchange, cooperation, and learning. In contrast, norm research contextualizes ICNs' activities as a part of norm dynamics in global governance, a process that involves multiple levels of analysis from the local to the global. At the same time, norm research would presuppose a variance of activities in norm dynamics, not reducing actors' agency to merely implement norms or to only engage in one of these activities. While concepts in norm research are numerous and detailed, we here subsume these under three overarching categories – norm adoption, norm initiation, and norm contestation – to systemize different types of ICNs' activities. Network research, finally, benefits the study of ICNs' activities by closely analyzing their networking structures in methodological and theoretical ways. Quantitative and qualitative methods can examine how network composition and membership, resources and capabilities, organization and identity translate into social outcomes. With a view to ICNs, this approach would support a detailed, comparative, and explanatory analysis of how ICNs' structural characteristics affect their global activities.

Table 1: Complementary Research Perspectives on ICNs

	<i>Urban Studies</i>	<i>Norm Research</i>	<i>Network Research</i>
<i>Focus</i>	Analyzes the importance of cities and their international activities in global politics	Analyzes the variance of contributions to global norm dynamics on multiple levels	Analyzes the effects of network structures, including effects on activities in global politics
<i>Perspective and Existing Findings on ICNs</i>	Comprehensive knowledge of specific ICNs, their structures, activities, and contextual factors, but limited comparative or generalizable assessments	Comprehensive knowledge of international activities in global norm dynamics, but limited number of studies on ICNs	Comprehensive knowledge of network structures, relations, and their effects, but limited number of studies on ICN

Source: own account

While each of the three perspectives provides a unique approach to the study of ICN, they are complementary in several ways: First, each perspective can be used to supplement the other, resulting in a more comprehensive perspective on ICNs. Second, each perspective provides a specific assessment of ICNs, enabling better comparisons of what their external conditions of ICNs are, what contributions to global norm dynamics they make, and how their network structures differ. Third, these complementary perspectives can also be used to develop hypotheses on how exactly internal

structures of ICNs determine specific activities of ICNs with regard to norms, against the background of external factors of change that urban studies usually emphasize. In the following, we illustrate these three avenues, from a more conceptual, systematizing analysis of specific ICNs and their activities that enables comparisons across different ICNs to explanations for their activities. Methodologically, each of these research avenues is – to a varying extent – open to different methods, but we restrict ourselves to outlining conceptual gains, less so debates on methodological possibilities.

Systematizing and Comparing ICNs' Activities

Systematizing ICNs from a complementary perspective of urban studies, norm research, and network research allows a multifaceted picture of ICNs, as we illustrate by relying on the Fast-Track Cities Initiative (FTCI): This ICN was founded in 2014 and is dedicated to global health, particularly to developing better responses to HIV/AIDS (Jakobi and Loges 2022). As of 2024, more than 280 cities from all continents align with the networks' commitments to focus on activities to end HIV/AIDS. Although HIV represents a global problem, it has different consequences not only on the regional, national, or sub-national level but also more pressing implications in urban areas, particularly in comparison to rural environments (UNAIDS 2023). Faced with comparable HIV epidemics, cities started to network with each other to facilitate learning and exchange comparable to other ICNs. FTCI also emphasizes the importance of networking with local communities and stakeholders, including people living with HIV/AIDS and providers of medical services (FTCI 2023a), reflecting subnational developments in health governance. At the same time, international actors reached out to cities as an addressee of related programs: The Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS) included them as central actors in its global campaigns, given their importance in ensuring an effective response to HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS 2014). Consequently, UNAIDS, the United Nations Human Settlements Programme (UN-Habitat), the International Association of Providers of AIDS Care (IAPAC), and the City of Paris founded the FTCI in 2014. Over time, the network became a forum for cooperation among cities and a platform to develop local strategies for leadership in HIV/AIDS responses and for urban advocacy at the global level (Jakobi and Loges, 2022).

From a perspective of norm research, the network was explicitly committed to normative goals around HIV/AIDS from early on. Its founding document, the so-called 'Paris Declaration' (FTCI 2023a), defines a common goal of "90-90-90", which indicates that 90% of all people with HIV/AIDS should know about their infection, of which 90% should receive therapy and of which 90% should show viral load suppression due to therapy so that they cannot pass on the virus. A recent update raised these goals to 95-95-95 by 2030 (FTCI 2023a). By referring to "zero stigma", the declaration also contains the

normative commitment that people living with HIV/AIDS or who are exposed to a high risk of infection should not be marginalized. Given that HIV/AIDS policies often address minorities, FTCI advocates partially controversial policies at the intersection of global norms on health and human rights, particularly a right to health as well as rights related to sexual orientation and gender identity. The members of FTCI aim to increase therapeutic progress for people living with HIV/AIDS and reject the discrimination of key populations particularly affected by the disease, including men who have sex with men, drug users, or transgender persons (FTCI 2023b). By exceeding pure norm implementation in the HIV/AIDS response, member cities accelerated the promotion of medical innovations and more inclusive programs. Effectively, many FTCI members surpassed the 90-90-90 and zero stigma goals earlier than the respective countries at the national level. At the same time, member cities developed programs that explicitly address specific populations – even in situations where these minority groups are stigmatized or criminalized in the national context (Jakobi and Loges, 2022). Thus, in exceeding mere adoption, FTCI shows that ICNs can develop political agency – and even leadership – by amplifying global norms.

A network perspective on ICNs advances knowledge on FTCI regarding network composition and membership, network resources and capacities, network organization and identity. While FTCI's members include cities from around the world, its operational composition incorporates representatives from mayors' offices, local health professionals, or stakeholders from key populations. As seen above, the FTCI's resources and capacities mainly rest on information and knowledge, not so much on material resources, as the network provides specific instruments, including documentation on best practices, interactive public dashboards, and technical support (FTCI 2023a). Due to its rather loose network organization – FTCI has no official secretariat, formal governing bodies, or different committees – the annual conferences represent the central platforms to coordinate activities, manage information, and shape collective positions by bringing member cities and their communities together. This also highlights the effects of internal network organization for implementing global indicators and standards by questioning whether developing leadership in HIV/AIDS governance is foremost grounded on FTCI's internal structures or its high connectivity to other important global hubs within a broader network structure, like UNAIDS, IAPAC, and UN-Habitat. At the same time, network research enables the systematization of FTCI as a case within different established categories: By supporting existing policies on HIV/AIDS, FTCI resembles a harmonization network concerned with the diffusion and implementation of global norms. At the same time, FTCI could also be regarded as an expert or even an activist network, given its relevance to medical progress and global rights. Finally, FTCI may also be assessed as a governance network that establishes new processes of multi-level exchange and coordination in global HIV/AIDS policies.

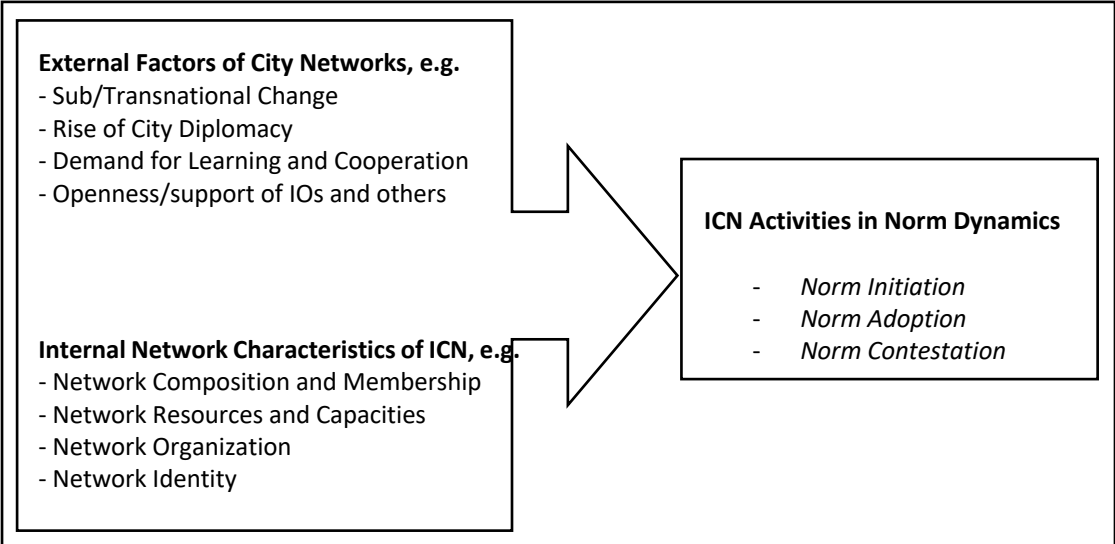
FTCI is not a single case of ICNs engaging in global norm dynamics. Prominent networks like C40 or Climate Alliance contest current normative principles by advocating for the inclusion of equity norms and demanding "climate justice" (C40 2023; Climate Alliance 2023). Mayors for Peace, an ICN engaged in nuclear disarmament, opposes the current nuclear order for decades. By advocating a "culture of peace," the network lobbies for the abolition and prohibition of nuclear weapons, thus engaging even in norm initiation (Mayors for Peace 2021). ICNs thus differ regarding what they contribute to global norm dynamics and how comprehensive these contributions are. Norm research opens the way to comparatively assess the different activities and external effects of ICNs, which contribute to case studies and comparisons of ICNs, but ultimately, it also enables explanations of ICNs' activities – in particular when being linked to network research and its focus on the relevance of internal network structures.

Explaining ICNs' Activities through their Structural Characteristics

Norm research and network research deliver crucial elements for explaining ICNs' activities: Norm research develops a fine-grained perspective on ICNs' different activities, here differentiated as norm adoption, initiation, and contestation. At the same time, ICNs' activities are an explanandum (dependent variable) that requires further analysis, and network structures are an explanans (independent variable). Empirical research has repeatedly shown that ICN structures vary significantly (Acuto and Rayner 2016; Acuto and Leffel 2021; Jakobi et al. forthcoming): Network membership varies geographically from national to regional or even global, and ranges from rather small networks to ICNs that assemble thousands of members ICNs also differ in requirements for admission, which affects the strategic choices of cities for joining a network and membership composition: While some ICNs include a specific class of actors, such as mayors or experts, others set precise benchmarks for cities before joining like meeting specific benchmarks or having establishing specific offices linked to the network theme. Also, networks broadly vary in resources and capacities, particularly in providing finances, communication, or information. Significant variance exists in network organization, for instance, whether ICNs have secretariats and representative bodies. Finally, ICNs vary with regard to the identity of a network, e.g., whether it is mainly linked to independent experts, company representatives, activists, public administrators, or diplomats. The existing research on ICNs usually treats these different structural characteristics as empirical given and outcomes of cities' global networking efforts, yet they should also be conceived as causal factors to explain variance in ICN activities as social outcomes. From a perspective of network research, thus, the internal structural variance of ICNs can be a source for differences in what ICNs do – including an explanation of what ICNs contribute to global norm dynamics. In sum, norm research and network analysis are thus complementary approaches that

not only enlarge existing analyses in urban studies but can also be used to explain ICNs' activities by delivering a multifaceted understanding of dependent and independent variables as well as their potential causal relations.

Figure 1: Examining Cities' Networking through Urban Studies, Norm Research and Network Research



Source: own account

Figure 1 summarizes the complementary approaches to explaining ICNs' activities, outlining central arguments for a systemized understanding of ICNs and the causal relations between their structural characteristics and their varying activities.

With a view to the existence of ICNs and their activities in world politics, many existing studies on ICNs focus on conditions beyond networks as important explanations for what ICNs do and why. From that perspective, decisive elements are changes on the urban level or functional ideas, ranging from changed local governance structures to the rise of urban diplomacy, the growing need for cooperation and exchange among cities, and the changing consideration of cities by international organizations or other actors. While such findings produce knowledge on the context of establishing networks, they emphasize the city level as a source of networking and focus less often on ICNs as specific institutions or on the network level as a decisive explanatory factor.

To show the difference to existing studies on ICN and to provide the first steps for a more comprehensive research agenda, we complement the existing research by outlining some tentative hypotheses of how specific network structures could influence ICN's activities, clustering these along the four dimensions of the independent variable 'structural characteristics of the network.' The aim of

this article is not to thoroughly test these causal relations, but to provide a way forward, and we show the plausibility of our arguments by referring to cases of existing ICNs.

Network composition and membership are likely to impact the extent of activities in global norm dynamics. In particular network-size and linkages among and beyond members are crucial factors for pursuing a political agenda in global politics. One could thus expect that the larger the ICN, the more likely comprehensive activities in norm dynamics are – implying that large networks are more likely to show more than one type of activity (hypothesis 1a). For example, Mayors for Peace or United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG) are large networks with several thousand members. They do not only engage in norm adoption but also in norm initiation, like the prohibition of nuclear weapons in the UN (Mayors for Peace 2021) or a people-centered understanding of citizenship within the UN Network on Migration (UCLG 2024a). Moreover, the membership base and its connection to other global actors are also likely to determine what exactly an ICN can do so that ICNs that are closely related to international organizations, or networks that have a global member base could be more active with regard to initiating, contesting or adopting global norms than networks that do not have such linkage, are small or whose members only come from specific regions. Mayors for Peace – a highly active network engaging on different levels from local communities to national governments and UN meetings, and in different organizational contexts from schools to campaigns and international treaty negotiations, has a broad member base of almost 170 countries and is closely linked to the UN with a consultative status at the UN's ECOSOC (Mayors for Peace 2021). Vice-versa, smaller networks with no formal linkage to international organizations like Leading Cities seem to be focused on adopting shared, city-related norms, like urban sustainability and resilience, less so on debating normative problems at a global level (Leading Cities 2024).

Resources and capacities influence any actors' ability to act politically, and ICNs require different resources for different contributions to norm dynamics: Norm adoption, being the implementation of norms, mainly requires resources on the city level, less so on the network level. Norm initiation and contestation, in contrast, require ICN to apply political mobilization strategies, including resources like expertise and knowledge, public relations, or lobbying, with the aim of convincing actors other than cities. Following that, one could assume that ICNs with many resources – material or immaterial – are also more likely to show resource-intensive activities like norm initiation or norm contestation in global norm dynamics (hypothesis 2a). Examples of such resource-intense activities are highly active networks like FTCI or C40 that incorporate expert knowledge on HIV or climate politics and disseminate this knowledge internally through workshops and best practices as well as to external actors by attending and lobbying at international forums (FTCI 2023b; C40 2023). In

contrast, ICNs with limited material or immaterial resources show fewer activities in global norm dynamics, and if so, mainly focus on norm adoption (hypothesis 2b). For instance, the small Réseau Art Nouveau Network is dedicated to protecting and promoting the cultural heritage of Art Nouveau. It pursues a highly specific purpose unrelated to global norm dynamics (other than protecting heritage) and is limited to a small number of cities and experts linked to this art movement (Réseau Art Nouveau Network 2024).

With regard to the network organization, the effectiveness of ICN is likely to benefit from centralized and institutionalized forms of decision-making comparable to other international institutions. Following this, the organization of an ICN through formalized sub-groups, secretariats, or formal delegation – is likely to increase the scope of different activities in global norm dynamics (hypothesis 3a). Prominent networks like UCLG illustrate this complexity of internal workflows and external relationship management: UCLG has partners from the governmental, intergovernmental, and private realms, creating but also supporting a complex network structure with many parallel activities linked to different global norms (UCLG 2024b). In contrast, ICNs with few or no internal structures can hardly engage in activities that require political coordination towards other actors and are thus less likely to engage in these (hypothesis 3b). For instance, FCTI is a highly active network that aims to provide leadership in implementing relevant policies linked to HIV/AIDS worldwide. Yet, its weakly institutionalized structures would be hardly suitable to contest or initiate global norms collectively, nor would norms unrelated to HIV/AIDS resonate in these organizational structures.

Finally, the network identity is likely to be relevant to ICNs because a dominant identity impacts not only how these networks function but also what kind of activities are deemed central and how relevant dissent with existing norms is. Empirically, ICNs can consist of public servants as delegates from local administrations, depending on the issue, however, networks may develop an understanding of their identity based on their expertise or with regard to activism. Hence, it can be expected that a dominant identity as a network of local administrators makes it likely that an ICN mainly adopts existing global norms and does neither initiate nor politically contest global norms (hypothesis 4a). This resonates with ideas on 'harmonization networks.' In contrast, ICNs with an identity based on expertise or even activism are less bound to hierarchies, and whether they adopt, initiate, or contest existing global norms depends on the knowledge or the political preferences of these actors (hypothesis 4b). These differences are visible in existing networks: The Rainbow Cities Network consists of local administrations, and its main focus is on implementing global norms on minority rights (RCN 2024). The FTCL, with its strong ties to experts, adopts norms but also sets itself more ambitious normative

goals (FTCI 2023b). The politicians assembled in Mayors for Peace do contest and initiate global norms on nuclear proliferation, resembling an activist network (Mayors for Peace 2021).

Taken together, these hypotheses represent a first effort in systematizing how structural features of ICNs could prompt particular activities. In future research, rigorous testing of these causal factors – and, ultimately, their interactions - is necessary. This would result in a better understanding of ICNs, but it would also examine which of these hypotheses delivers the best added value to existing studies of ICNs and how they complement existing approaches in urban studies. The article thus demonstrated that bringing together three very different – but ultimately complementary – research strands can contribute to a better understanding of ICNs as networks of local actors in global politics. A further beneficial side-effect is the potential integration of different scholarly debates in a common framework, a task that also enables productive exchange among otherwise separated scholarly communities.

6. Conclusions: ICNs as a Research Opportunity in IR

In order to facilitate possible explanations for the variance of ICN activities, this article brought three usually unrelated strands of literature into a conversation, thereby identifying gaps and finding fruitful avenues to fill them. Starting with urban studies, our review documented ICN activities and multifaceted structures. While existing research regularly shows ICNs' implementation efforts of global norms worldwide, limitations exist with regard to generalizable findings on the variety of ICN activities with regard to norm initiation and contestation and on ICNs as networks in their own right. The different analytical approaches used in urban studies and the dominance of single case studies, often linked to environmental politics, are frequently conceived as an obstacle to a more comprehensive and comparative analysis of ICNs (Smith 2019, 720; Acuto and Leffel 2021, 3; Acuto et al. 2023, 530). IR norm research and network research provide complementary approaches to the study of ICNs: Norm research frequently underlines the fact that global norms are not disseminated in a linear process from global norm-making to national implementation but that dynamics emerge in which actors relate differently to norms, including the aim to initiate new norms or contest current ones. Consequently, norm research gives us a multifaceted idea of what actors contribute to global norm dynamics. Such a systematization should also apply to ICNs, going beyond the dominant understanding of ICNs as local implementers of global norms. We then reviewed existing IR scholarship on networks, which frequently analyses international institutions and processes, an approach rarely used in urban studies to examine ICNs (but see Bouteligier 2012; Bansard et al. 2017; Acuto and Leffel 2021). Networked agency is a key

characteristic of ICNs, and much research in urban studies has emphasized the connectivity of cities among themselves or to important international or private actors. Yet, the structural characteristics of these networks are usually not examined closely and are not conceived as a cause for the varying global activities of ICNs. In a final step, we illustrated the added value of linking these research fields in two ways: We first analyzed the FTCI as an important ICN in global health, showing how categories from norm research and network analysis advance our understanding of this network and its activities through a systemized assessment. We then used this broadened understanding of ICNs, their structures, and activities to develop causal hypotheses on how network characteristics affect the activities of ICNs.

Our primary aim has been to push the IR research agenda on ICNs to fill important gaps by pointing out that IR scholarship cannot yet explain why ICNs contribute to global politics with substantial variation. To systemize this variance of ICN's activities, norm research has analytical merits, while network research enables systematic explanations for these contributions to global norm dynamics. Apart from integrating and consolidating knowledge on ICNs through an exchange between three research strands, this undertaking also stimulates research questions for the respective communities: While ICNs have not been the subject of detailed analysis in either norm research or network analysis, urban studies regularly show that ICNs adopt global norms, strive for effective implementation, and even aim for leadership by amplifying them. So far, however, norm research often presents analyses of norm localization and translation that emphasize the conflict of global norms and local conditions, typically considering actors as contesting and rejecting global norms unconnected to local cultures and ideas (Acharya 2004; Zimmermann 2017). For network research, studying ICNs could help clarify what kind of network is more relevant in global politics than others. For instance, ICNs can be 'governance networks,' but their most important characteristic is not obvious. Depending on their membership composition and purpose, ICNs could be similar to harmonization and expert networks but also to global public policy networks and multi-stakeholder forums. In established IR research, these labels signify considerable differences in how we understand the contribution of networks to global politics, and the large number of ICNs could enable a closer inspection of these different types and their effects.

This article highlights that ICNs deserve further analytical attention, and IR scholarship should contribute to more systematic knowledge of their activities because ICNs refer to broader debates in IR. ICNs and their activities not only signal the emergence of a new actor in global politics but also confront IR with a form of cooperation across subnational and international levels, as well as among public and private actors at different scales. However, this development does not necessarily signal a

disaggregation of global politics away from state-centered forums or a fragmentation of global normative frameworks. Instead, ICNs often support global norm dynamics on the national and international levels in cooperation with state and non-state actors or international organizations. At the same time, this role of international and private actors also deserves attention, in particular when it comes to democratic decision-making or funding: While existing research has critically examined the influence of foundations or earmarked funding on global decision-making and international actors (e.g., Baumann 2021; Acuto and Leffel 2021, 1765), there is a limited acknowledgment that ICNs' decisions – and those of their city members – can also be influenced by funding decisions elsewhere. Not just for reasons of legitimacy, it is important to examine how far ICNs actually follow their promise of representing 'local voices' and whose. For reasons of effectiveness, it is useful to know what kind of ICNs' structures further or hinder their global activities. Since a variance is visible in existing empirical research on ICNs, it will likely translate into varying grades of political impact and success. Linking the activities of ICNs to their structures also has important policy implications because ICNs correspond to the perceived need to represent urban perspectives on collective problems in global politics. While we focused on norm research and network analysis, IR could improve knowledge and systematic research from different perspectives with social movement approaches, with multi-level frameworks, with a view to foreign policy, or as part of critical development studies. All these approaches have merit, either because they could critically assess ICNs' claims to represent 'the local' or elaborate on the consequences – including the strategic consequences – of sub-national representation and exchange on the international level.

Future studies could also tackle structural questions that are relevant for global governance in general, for instance, which structures of ICNs particularly foster network activities for collective policy outcomes and which are less effective in doing so. Yet, to better conceptualize the impact of networking efforts, measurements on membership in ICNs are needed – including a better distinction of whether only cities are members or other entities, and if so, which ones. Measurements are also required with regard to the intensity of cooperation among members and structural properties like power, centrality, or homophily of these networks. Yet, also contextual factors like the domestic level are important facilitators or obstacles to global engagement, as ICNs show: Some countries have substantially limited cities' international engagement, given their emergence as additional governmental – yet subnational – actors on the international level (Leffel 2021, Pejic and Acuto 2021). Our discussion and tentative hypotheses can guide future research, but a systematic assessment of how and why ICNs effectively contribute to global norms is not limited to our approach. Ultimately, the linkage of urban studies to other IR approaches is beneficial not only for IR as a discipline but also for understanding contemporary contributions to global governance by actors other than nation-states.

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