



THE FUTURE OF DECENTRALIZATION AND MULTILEVEL GOVERNANCE IN A RAPIDLY CHANGING CONTEXT: **A GLOBAL ROUNDTABLE**



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THE FUTURE OF DECENTRALIZATION AND MULTILEVEL GOVERNANCE IN A RAPIDLY CHANGING CONTEXT: A GLOBAL ROUNDTABLE

February 26-27, 2026

New York University's Wagner Graduate School of Public Service
New York, NY



The Local Public Sector Alliance (LPSA), together with the Forum of Federations, NYU's Wagner Graduate School of Public Service, the Center on International Cooperation (CIC) at New York University (NYU), Commonwealth Local Government Forum, OECD, United Cities and Local Governments, UNDP, the World Bank, along with a number of other partners, is convening a global roundtable on the future of decentralization and multilevel governance in a rapidly changing context. The global roundtable is scheduled to take place on February 26-27, 2026, at New York University's Wagner Graduate School of Public Service in New York City.

Background

The seismic shift that is underway in the global development funding landscape should be a wake-up call to leaders in the Global North and South alike. As support from the international community is waning or changing, sustainable development will increasingly have to be achieved by Global South countries themselves and potentially other partners, redoubling their efforts to improve the responsiveness, results-orientation, and efficiency of the public sector.

The changing global context has obvious and important implications for those who study, work on, and advocate for inclusive and efficient decentralization, localization, and multilevel governance. Inclusive and efficient multilevel governance systems can—and should—be leveraged to contribute to global stability, economic prosperity, sustainable development, and efficient public service delivery in countries around the world.

The evolving role of the decentralization and multilevel governance community of practice

The need for global development actors to renew their focus on (local) public sector effectiveness comes after close to 25 years of declining attention to decentralization and local public sector governance. Given the expectation of a further reduction in official development assistance, the global Community of Practice that is focused on decentralization, localization and multilevel governance will be pushed to “do even more with less” and to innovate.

With the view that “public finance is development finance”, a larger share of development assistance will have to be set aside for public sector reforms that allow countries to be self-reliant, not only by strengthening domestic revenue mobilization, but equally importantly, making sure that public sector resources reach the grassroots with inclusive and efficient public services. The role of

multilevel governance systems and the local public sector in this process cannot be ignored, especially in places where continued urbanization causes decentralization to emerge as an obvious and compelling strategy to boost public sector responsiveness and performance.

Regardless of the structure of a country's public sector, ensuring responsive public services will typically require dedicating a larger share of public resources to frontline services; public sector resources will need to be allocated efficiently, equitably, and transparently across the national territory; and public sector resources will need to be efficiently transformed from public sector inputs (e.g., public finances and human resources) into public sector outcomes (e.g., public services and infrastructure) at the local level.

In practice, however, public sector resources flow to where they are directed by national and local decision-makers. As such, champions of inclusive multilevel governance and efficient public sector management will likely need to influence public decision-makers to allocate resources in ways that go against the political economy forces that—in many countries—have created challenges for effective local government finance, governance and performance.

Public sector responsiveness and efficiency will improve—and the value-for-money received by citizens will increase—when governments at all levels are more transparent, accountable and results-oriented, and when PFM systems track and improve the decentralized, spatial allocation of public resources. Public service delivery outcomes are hindered when resources get stuck at central government level (or on their way down the chain), rather than being spent and managed as part of an effective and transparent multilevel governance system.

The evolving view of development—and the role played by effective and responsive multilevel governance systems—also requires sectoral interventions. Recent events have highlighted the unsustainability of externally-funded, stove-piped sectoral interventions that fail to address the underlying capacity and governance issues that cause public sector institutions and frontline service providers to be unresponsive and ineffective. If the global development community is serious about a path to self-reliance for Global South countries, the balance in global development efforts between “laying pipes” and “fixing the country (multilevel governance) systems that lay the pipes” needs to shift towards greater emphasis on developing, empowering and capacitating the relevant systems.

Finally, the conversation on the future role of multilevel governance system is important for colleagues in adjacent practice communities working on issues related to conflict and fragility, inclusive economic growth, cities, climate change, gender equity, and other global challenges. Each of these policy challenges require collective action across different government levels, whereas their respective practice communities may not yet realize that ineffective multilevel governance forms a binding constraint to achieving their ambitions in a sustainable manner.

Roundtable objectives

The collective vision of the roundtable organizers is a world where people are informed and empowered; governments are open and responsive; and the public good is enhanced through civic engagement and collective action. Achieving this vision requires countries to pursue inclusive, efficient, and responsive multilevel governance systems.

Implementing the necessary reforms to achieve inclusive and responsive multilevel governance systems requires building country-level consensus and political will that results in public sector reforms (including in governance, administrative, fiscal, and sectoral systems), informed by evidence and an in-depth understanding of decentralization and localization as complex, cross-cutting and multistakeholder reforms. Global advocates of inclusive governance and sustainable development have an important role to play in knowledge development; knowledge sharing; and convening, outreach, and field-building. The issue of how to strategically sequence and implement reforms also requires dedicated attention.

The focus of the roundtable is not to reflect on the importance of different thematic or technical issues—there are other venues to dive deeper into specific topics. Instead, the focus is on identifying what we (think we) know, where we need to be more self-critical or work harder to better understand how multilevel governance can be leveraged in the real-world (or not), what to prioritize, and how to overcome the increasingly restrictive operating environment being faced by global champions, development actors, and other stakeholders that recognize the importance of multilevel governance and the local public sector in achieving inclusive governance and sustainable development.

Hosting, participation, and funding

The **2026 Global Roundtable on Decentralization and Multilevel Governance** is organized and co-hosted by the Local Public Sector Alliance (LPSA), the Forum of Federations, NYU's Wagner Graduate School of Public Service, and the Center on International Cooperation (CIC) at New York University (NYU), together with the Commonwealth Local Government Forum, the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG), UNDP, the SDSN Global Commission for Urban SDG Finance, and the World Bank.



The roundtable convenes a broad and diverse group of approximately 60 leaders, practitioners, scholars, and policy experts engaged in multilevel governance and public sector reform across the globe. This rich mix of participants reflects the roundtable's commitment to bring together different global and institutional perspectives, fostering multi-disciplinary and cross-sectoral dialogue, and collaborative learning on the major challenges and opportunities in decentralization and multilevel governance. The QR code gives access to the complete list of registered participants and their bios.

Participants include representatives from international organizations and multilateral institutions such as the World Bank, the Inter-American Development Bank (IADB), Asian Development Bank (ADB), the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), UNDP, UN-Habitat, the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, as well as other UN agencies and bilateral development partners (including the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation); global and national intergovernmental bodies including national and subnational government officials, local government associations, and intergovernmental commissions, including Forum of

Federations, Commonwealth Local Government Forum, United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG), the East Africa County and Local Government Association, NALAS, and Kenya's Intergovernmental Relations Technical Committee; academic and research institutions such as New York University, the University of Pennsylvania, University of Toronto, University of Colorado Denver, University of Lausanne, and other leading universities and policy research centres; civil society partners including Center of International Development at NYU, The Asia Foundation, and the UN Sustainable Development Solutions Network Global Commission for Urban SDG Finance; as well as global think tanks (such as ODI Global) and expert practitioners working on fiscal decentralization, urban governance, public finance, and inclusive governance.

Given the collaborative nature of the roundtable, all co-conveners, partner organizations, and participants in principle bear the cost of their own attendance. Travel support for a limited number of unaffiliated participants has been provided by LPSA and other partners. A limited number of colleagues are participating in a hybrid format.

Session / panel structure

Given the high level of expertise assembled for this roundtable, the roundtable sessions are structured to maximize participation and interaction, so we can all learn from the perspectives and insights of others within the community of practice. Roundtable panel sessions are expected to last 1h:30m each. Different roundtable sessions are coordinated and moderated by one or more partner organizations.

While session structure should be driven by the content to be discussed, generally, short presentations and panelist remarks by 3-4 panelists are expected to take up to 45 minutes, followed by inputs, contributions, and discussion in plenary.

While short PowerPoint presentations may be included in different sessions (as guided by the panel organizers), the roundtable intends to provide as a space for shared learning and collective reflection rather than an opportunity for formal academic-style presentations.

Given the incredible expertise and various perspectives in the room, it is critical that half of the time for each session is left for plenary discussions, so that the discussions can benefit from the collective insights of all participants.

To foster an environment of trust and open discussion, the Roundtable will be conducted under the Chatham House Rule. Participants may generally reference the ideas and perspectives shared, but they may not identify or quote any participant or their organization without explicit permission.

Roundtable: Program details

Time	Thursday, February 26, 2026 Multilevel governance as an enabler of development: elevating the decentralization debate to more effectively catalyze action Master of Ceremonies: Enid Slack, Institute on Municipal Finance and Governance, University of Toronto
8:30-9:00	Registration / coffee
9:00-9:30	Opening remarks Chair/Moderator: Paul Smoke, New York University (NYU) <i>Jamie Boex, Local Public Sector Alliance (LPSA)</i> <i>Polly Trottenberg, Dean, NYU Wagner Graduate School of Public Service</i> <i>Emilia Saiz, Secretary General, United Cities and Local Governments (video)</i> Keynote: <i>Amb. Lamin B. Dibba, Permanent Representative of The Gambia to the United Nations</i>
9:30-11:00	Panel 1: Multilevel governance as an enabler of global stability Chair/Moderator: Rupak Chattopadhyay, Forum of Federations <i>Jamie Thomas, Forum of Federations</i> <i>Monika Le Roy, Montreal Institute for Global Security</i> <i>Soeren Keil, University of Passau (virtual)</i> <i>Shahla Al Kli, Counterpart International</i> <i>Dorothee Allain-Dupré, OECD</i>
11:00-11:15	<i>Health Break</i>
11:15-12:45	Panel 2: Multilevel governance as an enabler of effective public sector management and service delivery Chair/Moderator: Serdar Yilmaz, World Bank <i>Kelmend Zajazi, Network of Associations of Local Authorities of South-East Europe (NALAS)</i> <i>Rachana Shrestha, Asian Development Bank</i> <i>Daniel Platz, UN DESA</i> <i>Tim Williamson, World Bank</i>
12:45-13:45	Lunch
13:45-15:15	Panel 3: Multilevel governance and cities: enabling climate resilience in practice Chair/Moderator: Lucy Slack, Commonwealth Local Government Forum <i>Richard Vernon, Mayor of Montego Bay, Jamaica</i> <i>Eugenie "Genie" Birch, University of Pennsylvania</i> <i>Andrew Boraine, Founder, South African Centre for Cities</i> <i>Sohaib Athar, World Bank</i>
15:15-15:30	<i>Health Break</i>
15:30-17:00	Panel 4: Multilevel governance as an enabler of subnational finance for sustainable development Chair/Moderator: Paul Smoke, New York University (NYU) <i>Deborah Wetzel, Independent Consultant (Former World Bank)</i> <i>Gundula Löffler, ODI Global</i>
17:00-17:15	Closing, Day 1 Enid Slack, University of Toronto

Time	Friday, February 27, 2026 Decentralization and Multilevel governance: Doing more with less through greater collaboration and coordination among decentralization and MLG actors Master of Ceremonies: Enid Slack, Institute on Municipal Finance and Governance, University of Toronto
8:30-9:00	Networking / coffee
9:00-9:15	Recap of Day 1 <i>Kimberly Noronha, Penn Institute for Urban Research, University of Pennsylvania</i> <i>David Jackson, NYU Center on International Development</i>
9:15-10:45	Panel 5: Multilevel governance reforms —adapting to new realities? Chair/Moderator: Chas Cadwell, Local Public Sector Alliance (LPSA) <i>Kithinji Kiragu, Kenya Inter-Governmental Relations Technical Committee (IGRTC)</i> <i>Jaap de Visser, University of Western Cape, South Africa</i> <i>Madhavi Rajadhyaksha, Consultant / Local Public Sector Alliance (LPSA)</i> <i>Dario Runtic, Association of Cities in Croatia</i>
10:45-11:00	<i>Health Break</i>
11:00-12:30	Panel 6: The role of global institutions—priorities for multi-level governance going forward Chair/Moderator: Deborah Wetzel, Independent Consultant (Former World Bank) <i>Amy Gill, UNDP</i> <i>Isabelle Chatry, OECD</i> <i>Axel Radics, Inter-American Development Bank (IADB)</i> <i>Dubravko Bilic, Mayor of Ludbreg, Croatia, and President, Network of Associations of Local Authorities of South-East Europe (NALAS)</i>
12:30-12:45	Closing remarks <i>Paul Smoke, New York University (NYU)</i> <i>Betty Wainaina, NYU Center on International Cooperation</i> <i>Enid Slack, University of Toronto</i>
12:45-14:00	Lunch

* Some modifications to the final program may be required depending on circumstances.

Session Framing

Panel 1: Multilevel governance as an enabler of global stability

Inclusive and responsive MLG systems form an important precondition for inclusive governance and meaningful citizen engagement; offer a potential off-ramp from conflict, violence and fragility; and can act as a force multiplier in the fight against global climate change. Effective multilevel governance system may offer a mechanism for governments to maintain their end of the social contract, although doing so may require leaders to place long-term national interests ahead of the immediate political gains associated with centralized power. At this juncture, the global pendulum seems to be swinging in the direction of greater centralization of political and economic power. Are proponents of decentralization and multilevel governance fighting insurmountable forces? What can be learned from the current state of MLG about the potential of decentralization and multilevel governance as an enabler of global stability going forward?

Panel 2: Multilevel governance as an enabler of effective public sector management and service delivery

Decentralization and multilevel governance systems have the potential to serve as a prime enabler of inclusive, sustainable human development by strengthening public sector accountability, responsiveness and effectiveness; by strengthening the effectiveness of the public sector as a providers of key social services (including education and health), and by facilitating local actors to pursue inclusive development and social transformation. Numerous conditions need to be met, however, for multilevel governance systems to be able to be a catalyst for inclusive human development and efficient public service delivery. What is the current state of knowledge or the state of practice, to ensure that practitioners don't pursue or apply one-size-fits-all policy solutions that may not be suitable for specific country contexts?

Panel 3: Multilevel governance and cities: enabling climate resilience in practice

Cities are increasingly at the frontline of both opportunity and pressure. Rapid urbanization, demographic change, and growing demands for infrastructure, housing, services, and jobs are reshaping development trajectories across countries at all income levels. At the same time, climate change is intensifying these pressures, exposing underlying weaknesses in planning, financing, coordination, and institutional capacity. Whether cities are able to manage these challenges effectively depends fundamentally on how multilevel governance (MLG) systems function in practice. This session examines how multilevel governance systems shape urbanization outcomes, and how these same governance dynamics condition cities' ability to respond to climate-related risks and shocks. While cities are widely recognized as essential actors in both sustainable urban development and climate resilience, experience across the Commonwealth suggests that formal decentralization frameworks, national urban and climate strategies, and local implementation arrangements often diverge in important ways. Responsibilities, resources, and incentives are frequently misaligned across levels of government, and in many contexts' recentralization trends, weak vertical coordination, and constrained access to finance limit effective local action.

Panel 4: Multilevel governance as an enabler of subnational finance for sustainable development

Decentralization and multilevel governance systems play a key role in promoting development and shared economic prosperity by balancing legitimate national priorities with specific public service needs of local populations. A robust system provides space for subnational government mobilization and use of public funds and development finance. Given the economic importance and potential of cities and metropolitan areas, they may play a stronger role in public sector action and free up limited national government resources and development assistance to support smaller and economically weaker jurisdictions. Yet economic and fiscal systems do not operate in isolation: cities and regions are unlikely to thrive economically or respond to constituent needs without adequate political and administrative empowerment. How can a multilevel public sector help to unlock the benefits of sustainable development? What factors must be considered to identify desirable and feasible action to improve performance?

Panel 5: Multilevel governance reforms —adapting to new realities

The second day of the roundtable will address the reality that global institutions supporting decentralization and multilevel governance are going to have to do more with less as actors adapt to a new global reality where central governments trend authoritarian; where international aid and even global philanthropy are retreating; and where AI and social media hold increasing sway over institutions at all levels. In this context, Panel 5 will explore different perspectives on how policy makers shaping multilevel governance arrangements at the country level (and the organizations in the decentralization and MLG community supporting them) are re-orienting themselves in the evolving global context. In this session we want to understand what is happening on the ground. What about the political and economic context has changed at the country level, and how is it affecting your work and that of others trying to improve services, voice and accountability? Are the obstacles or opportunities for multilevel governance solutions expanding or retreating? Why and who has more sway in this emerging context? How does it change what you think outsiders can best provide, if anything?

Panel 6: The role of global institutions—priorities for multilevel governance going forward

Global institutions supporting decentralization and multilevel governance will likely have to confront new issues and do more with less. This may place pressure on the availability of key public goods within our community of practice. Drawing on our discussions throughout the roundtable, what knowledge development and knowledge sharing inputs are required for the global community of practice? How can collaboration and coordination between organizations improve the effectiveness and impact of efforts? Panel 6 will explore these questions with a focus on the role of international (financial) institutions, development partners, and partners in global philanthropy as we go forward.

Global Roundtable location

The Global Roundtable will take place at New York University’s Robert F. Wagner Graduate School of Public Service. NYU’s Wagner School is located at 105 East 17th Street in New York City near Union Square (105 E 17th St New York, NY 10003 – Building 1 on the map below). Since access to NYU campus buildings is restricted to students, faculty, staff, and registered visitors, roundtable attendees must bring valid identification to enter the NYU’s Wagner School Building.



Additional logistical details and weather

The dress code for the roundtable is business casual. Coffee and light refreshments will be available throughout the day, and a simple lunch (including a vegetarian option) will be provided on both days of the meeting. Please communicate any dietary restrictions in advance.

Note that at the end of February, New York City is still firmly in winter, with chilly temperatures and the possibility of snow. Average daytime temperatures range from the upper 30s to mid-40s °F (3–7 °C), while evenings are colder, often dipping into the 20s °F (-3 to -6 °C). Colder weather is possible as well. Attendees should plan to dress warmly, with coats, scarves, and gloves recommended, and appropriate footwear in case of rain or snow.

On Wednesday, February 25, 2026 (from 16:00- 17:30), there will be an optional pre-registration and “meet and greet” at the NYU Wagner School.

Contact information

Overall program coordination / emergencies:

General contact: roundtable@decentralization.net

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Jamie Boex, LPSA: jamie@decentralization.net , (+1) 301-606-5920

Mirna Dave: LPSA: mirna@decentralization.net , (+1) 910-689-8740

In New York (on the ground logistics):

Christopher Harris, NYU: ch135@nyu.edu , (+1) 310-927-2003

Hotel recommendations, area amenities, and cultural activities

Unless specific arrangements have been made with LPSA or other organizing partners, participants are responsible for their own travel and accommodation arrangements.

Local transportation. Most international flights to New York will arrive at JFK airport. The cost for transportation from JFK to Manhattan varies widely, from about \$11.40 for AirTrain + Subway, to \$35-\$40+ for shared shuttles, to a \$70 taxi flat fare plus tolls/tip (around \$85-\$100 total), with car services (Uber, Lyft, etc.) ranging from \$80-\$150+, depending on speed, convenience, and luxury level.

Lodging options. There are many hotels near Union Square, where the NYU Wagner School is located and where the Global Roundtable will be held (105 E 17th St, New York, NY 10003). Hotels closer to Union Square tend to be more expensive (e.g., Hyatt Union Square New York; 134 4th Ave, New York, NY 10003; 7 min. walk; \$300+ per night). Some of the cheaper hotels that are nearby may have a mix of private (*en suite*) and shared bathrooms (e.g., Chelsea Inn Hotel, 9 min walk, <https://chelseainn.com>).

If the higher cost of nearby hotels is a concern, we suggest you consider Hyatt Place New York / Chelsea (140 West 24th Street, New York, NY 10011). This hotel is about an 18-minute walk to NYU Wagner, or a short Uber/Lift/Taxi ride away. LPSA has a room block here at a rate of \$149 per night (plus tax). The Hyatt Place New York / Chelsea has free Wi-Fi and a basic complimentary breakfast.

Alternatively, you could consider Hampton Inn Manhattan–Chelsea (108 West 24th Street, New York, NY 10011). This hotel is also about a 17-18 minute walk to NYU Wagner. Online rates fluctuate around \$130-150 per night (plus tax). The Hampton Inn Manhattan–Chelsea also has free Wi-Fi and a basic complimentary breakfast.

The U.S. Government lodging reimbursement rate (excluding taxes) for New York City for February 2026 is \$179 per night. In New York City, hotel stays are subject to several mandatory taxes and a unit fee that total a maximum of approximately 14.75% plus a flat fee of \$3.50 per room, per night. Some hotels also charge optional "destination" or "resort" fees. For information, the U.S. Government rate for meals and incidental expenses for New York City is \$92 per day (75% on first and last day of travel).

Manhattan's Chelsea neighborhood. Both hotels are located in Manhattan's Chelsea neighborhood, offering convenient access to various amenities, including:

Dining: Diverse options on 7th & 8th Avenue (Italian, Mediterranean, fast-casual, vegan) as well as several delis within 2–5 minutes

Cafés: Joe, Ole and Steen, Blue Bottle, Starbucks, La Colombe within short walking distance

Transit: Immediate access to 1, C/E, F/M subway lines

Landmarks: Madison Square Park, The High Line, Flatiron District

Everyday Needs: CVS, Walgreens, Trader Joe's, Target, Whole Foods

Union Square. The NYU Wagner School is located in Union Square, a bustling, historic Manhattan neighborhood and landmark park located at the intersection of Broadway and 14th Street. Known as a hub for activism, it features the renowned year-round Greenmarket, diverse street performers, shopping, and iconic statues, serving as a vibrant, central meeting place for New Yorkers.

Food options near NYU Wagner / Union Square include:

- **Rosa Mexicano.** A fresh take on authentic Mexican cuisine, serving beloved classic dishes in a stylish and sophisticated atmosphere.
- **Union Square Café.** Seasonal New American cuisine with Italian influences in a casual and refined setting.
- **Tarallucci e Vino.** Italian cuisine in a rustic setting serving three meals a day.
- **Laut.** Malaysian restaurant serving a wide range of local favorites and street foods with regionally authentic spices and fresh ingredients.
- **Le Basque.** Upscale vegan restaurant that masterfully blends the rich culinary traditions of France and Spain into a unique, plant-based dining experience.
- **Ilili NoMad.** Ilili NoMad serves modern Lebanese and Mediterranean cuisine with vibrant mezze, grilled specialties, and craft cocktails in Manhattan's NoMad neighborhood.
- **Novità.** Novità is a much-loved Gramercy neighborhood trattoria serving authentic regional Italian dishes according to the seasons.
- **Vallata.** Vallata is Tom Colicchio's celebrated Italian restaurant located steps from Union Square Park, showcasing fresh ingredients, handmade pastas, and Neapolitan-style pizzas from a lively open kitchen.
- **Casa Carmen.** Casual spot dishing up traditional Mexican recipes, plus vegetarian options.
- **Elini's.** Flavorsome Greek specialties served in an elegant eatery with both indoor and outdoor settings.
- **Mission Ceviche.** Stylish restaurant featuring classic Peruvian fare and seafood dishes, plus a relaxed bar.
- **Friend of a Farmer.** Farm-style American restaurant with seasonal ingredients.
- **Chito Gvrito.** Casual eatery with a locally sourced menu of seasonal Georgian dishes, plus wine & craft cocktails.

Before and after conference sessions, New York City has a wide array of museums and cultural activities. For instance, one might consider attending a performance of Hamilton on Broadway (Richard Rodgers Theatre, 226 West 46th Street, New York, NY 10036), for instance, on Friday evening, February 27, at 7:00 pm.