

MUNICIPAL *times.*

LOCAL DEMOCRACY REBUILDS TRUST



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On the third day of the UCLG Annual Retreat, the municipal movement turned to a strategic question shaping its international engagement: how to operate politically in a global order where universal multilateralism is increasingly complemented — and in some cases bypassed — by plurilateral, multi-actor coalitions. Sessions on New Multilateralism and Trust and Leadership in the DNA of the Movement explored how cities and regions can engage in these shifting formats without diluting shared democratic values.

Joseph Foti, Principal Advisor for Emerging Issues at the Open Government Partnership, opened the discussion

with a blunt diagnosis of the international landscape. “Even the pretense is gone,” he said, referring to the idea that global cooperation still rests primarily on universal forums. In practice, influence is increasingly exercised through coalitions organised around specific issues. For local governments, this creates both opportunity and risk. “If you are not at the table, you are on the menu.”

For Foti, plurilateralism is not the problem. Design is. “Coalitions that go beyond talk must have concrete commitments, timelines and accountability,” he said, arguing that independent monitoring and consequences for non-performance are what distinguish operational

alliances from declarative platforms. He pointed to city-led initiatives such as the C40 Cities Climate Leadership Group and OGP Local as examples of plurilateral formats that combine political ambition with reporting and peer review. The political test, he argued, is whether these coalitions are “big enough and designed well enough to solve big global challenges and anti-democracy efforts.”

Emilia Saiz, Secretary General of United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG), placed the debate within the organisation’s own positioning. UCLG, she noted, has long combined universal multilateral engagement with more focused alliances and thematic coalitions. The challenge today is coherence. “We want to change the multilateralism that we have with new actors,” she said, “but we need to overcome fragmentation by defining our objectives.” As agendas become more dispersed, she warned, there is a risk that collective priorities are sidelined by more transactional arrangements. Initiatives such as the Global Taskforce’s 100 Days of Multilateralism, she added, are intended to help the movement “focus on this agenda together,” even when positions differ.

Several speakers underlined that plurilateral engagement must remain explicitly grounded in democratic values. **Carola Gunnarsson**, Vice-President of the Council of European Municipalities and Regions (CEMR), argued that international cooperation among local and regional governments must be value-based to retain legitimacy. Democracy and the rule of law, she said, must remain the foundation of cooperation, alongside human rights,

solidarity, social cohesion, sustainable development and gender equality. Without this normative anchor, rust in international action erodes, she warned.

Concerns about democratic erosion and authoritarian pressure also shaped the discussion. **Alfonso Gómez**, Mayor of Geneva, pointed to the growing influence of autocratic and exclusionary political forces in many contexts. Cities, he argued, are frontline spaces where democracy is practiced daily, and where local leaders and civil society organisations increasingly face pressure. He stressed the importance of protecting independent media and citizen associations, and of ensuring that plurilateral engagement does not become a space where illiberal agendas are normalised.

From Latin America, **Rodrigo Neves**, Mayor of Niterói and President of Mercociudades, cautioned against reducing plurilateral engagement to voluntary alignment. “Coalitions of the willing are not enough,” he argued. In a fragmented international order, he said, the movement needs “coalitions of the responsible,” grounded in transparency and shared standards of accountability. For Neves, the political challenge is to ensure that plurilateral cooperation produces obligations, not only affiliations.

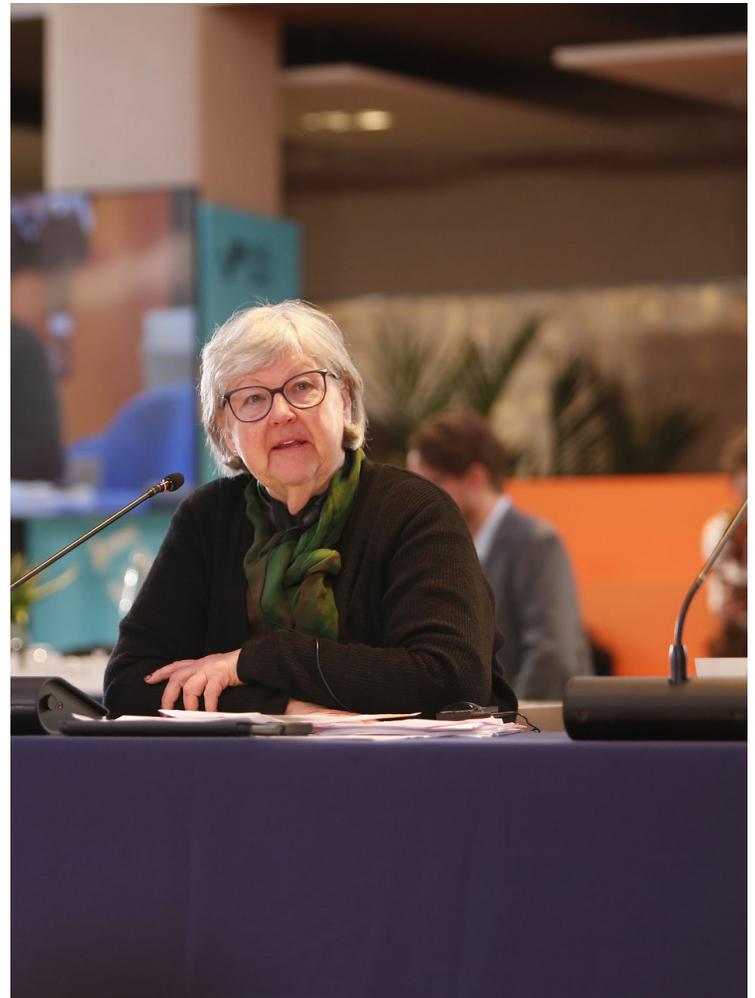
The session also addressed the institutional implications of a more networked global order. **Dario Soto**, representing the Global Governance Forum, argued that cities and regions are increasingly implementing global agendas on the ground while remaining structurally underrepresented in formal



decision-making spaces. He called on municipalities to engage in debates on United Nations Charter reform and to support initiatives such as Cities for UN Reform, positioning cities as emerging protagonists in reshaping global governance.

Throughout the exchange, speakers returned to a shared concern: the risk that fragmentation in the international system is mirrored within the municipal movement itself. **Jan van Zanen**, Mayor of The Hague and member of UCLG's Executive Presidency, argued that in a divided world, the movement must model cooperation across political and regional differences. "Our diversity is our strength," he said, "but only if we hold it together." Disagreement, he added, is manageable; disengagement from shared spaces is not.

As UCLG looks toward its upcoming Congress, the debate clarified the strategic terrain ahead. Plurilateral coalitions and networked governance are likely to multiply as universal multilateralism continues to fragment. The political task for cities and regions is not to choose between formats, but to shape them — ensuring that new coalitions extend democratic agency, uphold shared values, and reinforce collective coherence rather than weakening the foundations of the municipal movement.



A COALITION OF THE RESPONSIBLE



In the context of growing democratic erosion, social fragmentation and global uncertainty, trust has become both a foundational value for local governments and one of the defining challenges of political leadership. The session on Trust and Leadership in the DNA of the Movement examined how the municipal movement can renew democratic legitimacy through leadership models grounded in participatory democracy, inclusive governance and a strong human rights-based approach to local public action, as part of the strategic runway towards the 2026 UCLG Congress.

Lorena Zárate, representing the Global Platform for the Right to the City, argued that the political context has shifted fundamentally. “We are not in the neoliberal era anymore,” she said. “We are in a post-liberal moment that is openly autocratic and anti-democratic.” Trust, she warned, is not simply eroding but being actively undermined. “Corporate power and algorithmic control are attacking trust. Women, Indigenous peoples, trade unions and local governments are under attack.” For Zárate, the response must be structural. “We have to recover trust and defend trust. Let’s respond at the same scale — through a plurilateralism that comes from and is for regions, communities and cities. We need to reverse power centralisation trends.”

Practical experiences from Sweden illustrated how trust is built through participation. **Anders Henriksson**, President of the Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions (SALAR), described how municipalities in southern Sweden are creating structured dialogues between social workers

and residents to rebuild confidence in public services. In Lund and other cities, youth councils are formally linked to decision-making rather than operating in parallel. “Trust is not just a nice idea,” he said. “It is essential to leadership. What we need now is political courage — leaders who speak openly about problems, who ensure processes are transparent and respectful, and who show citizens that their voices matter.”

UCLG Secretary General **Emilia Saiz** reflected on what she described as the paradox of trust. “If you ask people whether they trust politicians, many will say no,” she said. “But if you ask whether they trust their water supply, emergency services or public spaces, the answers are very different.” She argued that trust is often built through the everyday delivery of public services rather than through abstract political discourse. The challenge for leadership is to connect values to tangible outcomes, and to restore accountability when institutions fail to meet their commitments.

Berry Vrbanovic, Mayor of Kitchener and UCLG Co-President, framed trust as a practical outcome of everyday governance. “Local governments are judged less by abstract commitments than by how people experience public services: Trust is built through transparency, meaningful participation and honest information,” he said. Reliable access to water, care for older adults and children, and the protection of basic rights are not technical issues, but foundations of democratic legitimacy.



Dignity and human rights were repeatedly highlighted as the normative anchor of trust. **Rocío Lombera**, representing Mexico City, recalled the opening words of the United Nations Charter: “We, the peoples.” For her, trust is not only proximity but identity and shared purpose. “It is memory and hope. It is the essence of government.” She added that rebuilding trust also means practising “door-to-door government” — restoring proximity by meeting people where they live, not only where institutions convene.

María Eugènia Gay, Deputy Mayor of Barcelona, stressed that citizens’ perceptions are shaped by whether public policies are applied fairly and in line with rights. “When principles are applied with dignity and due process, people trust,” she said. “When this breaks down, the space is quickly filled by polarising narratives. Dignity is the boundary for power. The law must affirm that.”

The Vienna Commissioner for Human Rights, **Shams Asadi**, underlined that trust depends on competence, responsiveness and dignity in public action. When institutions fail to explain decisions or deliver fairly, she noted, legitimacy erodes. “Trust is built when institutions are capable, transparent and respectful of fundamental rights,” she said.

Rodrigo Neves, Mayor of Niterói and President of Mercociudades, linked trust to renewed interregional cooperation. Referring to recent steps to strengthen ties between Latin America and Europe, he argued that commercial and political agreements must be accompanied by local responsibility. “This is about collaboration and shared responsibility,” he said. “Local leadership is what will guarantee sustainability in the long term.”

Jan van Zanen, Mayor of The Hague and member of UCLG’s Executive Presidency, warned that disengagement poses a greater threat to democracy than disagreement. “We cannot allow polarisation to become paralysis,” he said. UCLG, he added, is strongest when it acts as “a community of shared responsibility,” capable of modelling cooperation across political and regional divides.

Looking ahead, **Mateusz Płoskonka**, representing the City of Kraków, invited members to engage with the 25th Conference of the International Observatory on Participatory Democracy (OIDP), to be held in Kraków in September 2026. Marking 25 years of collective learning on participatory governance, the conference will focus on how care, proximity, democracy and peace can be translated into renewed legitimacy. “Trust is not rebuilt through one single model,” Płoskonka said. “It grows through many local solutions and shared learning.”

Bheki Stofile, President of the South African Local Government Association (SALGA), emphasised coordination as a condition for trust in a context of overlapping crises. “New forms of conflict and climate change do not recognise borders,” he said. “As first responders and long-term rebuilders, municipalities need authority — and we build trust by working well together.”

Closing the exchange, **María Fernanda Espinosa**’s circled back to the vision of a “coalition of the responsible” that she cited as a political horizon for the UCLG Congress in Tangier. Global challenges such as climate change, artificial intelligence, outer space and the deep sea, participants noted, require shared rules and shared accountability. Trust, in this framing, is not a sentiment but a political practice — built through rights-based governance, participatory leadership and collective responsibility for the commons.

Pedro Bravo, writer and long-time observer of the municipal movement, closed the exchange with a note of political realism. The current moment, he suggested, is not defined by a single rupture but by overlapping crises — alongside which processes of renewal are also taking shape. For local leaders, the task is to hold both at once: to name democratic erosion clearly while committing to rebuild through cooperation, delivery and shared responsibility.



WHEN DECENTRALISATION SHRINKS

Across regions, democratic erosion is being felt first at the territorial level. Local and regional leaders described how centralisation, fiscal constraints and political interference are narrowing the capacity of municipalities and regions to govern, deliver services and protect civic space — with direct consequences for democratic legitimacy.

Paola Pabón, Prefect of Pichincha, offered a stark account of the pressures facing subnational governments in her country. Recent political developments, she argued, have weakened territorial autonomy and undermined democratic practice. Referring to the arrest of Quito's elected mayor, she said such actions go beyond established legal norms and contribute to what she described as the "politicisation of the law." For Pabón, decentralisation is not a technical matter but a democratic condition. When resources and authority are recentralised, she warned, local governments lose the capacity to deliver on care policies and rural support — and citizens lose trust in institutions meant to represent them.

From North Africa, **Mohamed Sefiani**, Mayor of Chefchaouen, stressed that no city can face democratic pressure alone. Territories, he argued, are essential political actors, but local multilateralism only works when it is grounded in practical cooperation with civil society and other local governments. Protecting essential services as public goods, and giving residents an active role in shaping them, is part of how cities can defend democratic space in everyday governance.

From Africa, **Fatimetou Abdel Malick**, President of the Nouakchott Region and UCLG Co-President, linked democratic pressure to demographic and territorial realities. Rapid urbanisation across African regions, she said, is intensifying demand for housing, water, employment and basic services. Trust in institutions, in her view, depends on whether regional governments are given the authority and resources to respond at scale. Women, she added, play a critical role in sustaining social cohesion and service provision, yet remain underrepresented in conflict resolution and decision-making spaces.

Bheki Stofile, President of the South African Local Government Association (SALGA), situated territorial pressure within a wider landscape of overlapping crises. Armed conflicts, economic coercion, climate impacts and geopolitical shifts, he argued, are reshaping municipal realities: "We are the first responders," pointing to the destruction of local infrastructure in conflict zones and the strain placed on basic services by displacement and economic disruption. In such contexts, he argued, local governments are asked to rebuild livelihoods without commensurate authority or resources. Unity within UCLG and financial sustainability are not organisational concerns but political preconditions for defending local democracy, he added.

Territorial vulnerability was also linked to civic space and political participation. A representative of the Observatory for the Defence of Local Democracy, based in Bilbao (Spain), described how the initiative works with municipalities to identify risks to local democratic practice and provide



technical support and training. By monitoring early signs of democratic erosion and supporting institutional resilience, the Observatory aims to equip local governments to respond before restrictions on participation and autonomy become entrenched.

Other interventions pointed to the geopolitical consequences of shrinking territorial authority. Speakers referred to conflicts in Ukraine and Gaza, economic pressure through trade measures and tariffs, and climate shocks that do not recognise borders. For municipalities, these dynamics translate into concrete pressures on housing, infrastructure and public services — often without a corresponding increase in fiscal space or political voice in international forums.

Across regions, a common concern emerged: when decentralisation is weakened, democratic erosion accelerates. Local and regional governments lose room to manoeuvre, citizens experience service gaps more acutely, and the space for participation narrows. In this context, defending territorial autonomy was framed not as an institutional privilege but as a democratic necessity.

As the municipal movement prepares for the next phase of its collective positioning, the message is clear. Territorial governance is not a peripheral layer of democracy. It is where democratic erosion becomes visible — and where democratic renewal must begin.



PRESIDENCY MEETING

As is customary during the Annual Retreat, UCLG's Enlarged Presidency met in closed session to take stock of the organisation's priorities and internal processes, with a view to the upcoming World Congress in Tangier. The meeting brought together members of the Presidency and Vice-Presidency, with Secretaries General of the UCLG Sections attending as observers, creating a space for political leadership to exchange views on the organisation's strategic direction in a rapidly changing global context. Discussions focused on aligning institutional positioning, strengthening internal coordination across regions and sections, and clarifying the next steps on the road to the 2026 Congress, as the municipal movement prepares to enter a new phase of its collective mandate.



HOW TO ACTIVATE THE LOCAL SOCIAL COVENANT

After two days of strategic debate, the afternoon workshop shifted the focus from political framing to implementation. Participants worked on how to advance the Local Social Covenant as a shared political pact, exploring what it takes to translate principles into coordinated local action across diverse territorial contexts.

The workshop was structured around the Covenant's eight pillars — housing, conflict prevention, climate justice, finance, food systems, public health, culture and the “new essentials” — with participants examining how these commitments can be operationalised through public service provision, community participation, public–community partnerships and collaborative governance. The emphasis was on moving from alignment around values to concrete pathways for delivery.

Across working groups, participants identified recurring constraints. Sustaining participatory processes over time remains difficult, particularly in contexts of limited technical and financial resources. Administrative fragmentation and rigid procedures were flagged as barriers to coordinated action. In several contexts, distrust between institutions and communities continues to undermine implementation, even where political commitments exist on paper.

At the same time, the workshop highlighted enabling conditions. Public–community partnerships were identified as a way to design more responsive and effective policies, particularly in areas such as care, housing and food systems. Participants stressed the importance of creating permanent spaces for dialogue, rather than one-off consultations, and of establishing clear rules of shared responsibility to avoid shifting burdens onto communities without corresponding support.

The discussion returned repeatedly to the idea of the Covenant as connective infrastructure. Its added value, participants argued, lies in linking capacities, leadership and resources around a shared vision of social transformation, rather than adding another layer of commitments. Where the Covenant is treated as a coordination framework, rather than a standalone programme, it is more likely to shape decisions that affect everyday life.

The message from the workshop was clear. Activating the Local Social Covenant is less about launching new declarations than about building the conditions for coordinated delivery. Turning political agreements into practice requires sustained collaboration across institutions and communities, with commitments reflected in decisions that directly impact people's lives.

The workshop positioned the Local Social Covenant as a practical building block of the political roadmap towards the 2026 UCLG Congress in Tangier, where delivery and shared responsibility are expected to take centre stage.



PLURILATERALISM – WORD OF THE YEAR?



Some words escape specialist circles and suddenly enter everyday political language. This week, “plurilateralism” did exactly that. Repeated across the Democracy and Plurilateralism session of the UCLG Annual Retreat, the term surfaced not as jargon, but as a shared reference point for how international cooperation is changing.

At its simplest, plurilateralism describes cooperation among several actors who choose to work together around a specific issue. Unlike multilateralism, built on universal or near-universal membership and shared rules, plurilateral arrangements are selective by design: they bring together those willing and able to move on a given agenda — climate, transparency, procurement, digital governance — without waiting for consensus from everyone.

The linguistic contrast matters. “Multi” suggests many, even all; “pluri” suggests several. It is a small semantic shift, but a revealing one. Multilateralism evokes the image of a shared table where everyone is invited, even if agreement is slow and uneven. Plurilateralism reflects

a world of smaller tables, narrower agendas and faster conversations. The term has moved beyond academic circles: major dictionaries now recognise it, and in French, Spanish and Portuguese (plurilatéralisme, plurilateralismo) it has become standard policy vocabulary. The ease with which the word travels reflects how widely the underlying practice has spread.

Plurilateralism also sits within a growing family of “lateralisms.” Bilateralism remains the most familiar format of cooperation, especially in diplomacy and trade. Regionalism organises collaboration among neighbours. “Minilateralism,” a term gaining traction in geopolitical analysis, refers to small groups of powerful actors coordinating on strategic interests. Each format reflects a different trade-off between inclusiveness, speed and political leverage. Plurilateralism occupies the middle ground: broader than bilateral deals, narrower than universal multilateral agreements.

For cities and local governments, this shift has opened new spaces for action. Climate networks, transparency partnerships and thematic alliances allow municipalities to cooperate directly, share standards and accelerate implementation without waiting for national-level agreements. Yet the word carries an implicit tension. Plurilateralism can enable progress, but it can also normalise fragmentation. Selective coalitions risk sidelining voices, diluting shared values or turning cooperation into a series of transactional deals. As several speakers noted, the political challenge is not whether plurilateralism exists, but what kind of plurilateralism is being built — and under which standards of accountability and democratic coherence.

If multilateralism is the grammar of universal cooperation, plurilateralism is the grammar of a more fragmented world — one of networks rather than fixed tables. Will “plurilateralism” become the word of the year in 2026? Probably not. But it might quietly deserve the title. Not because it is new, but because it names a reality that has already arrived.

BARCELONA

DISTRICT 11:

Solidarity in the Municipal DNA

Ahmed Abulaban, City Director of Ramallah, cut through the policy language of the session. Speaking of life under siege in Gaza and daily attacks in the West Bank, they thanked cities for maintaining ties. “Your solidarity matters,” they said. “Your voice gives us strength.”

The exchange drew attention to Barcelona District 11, cited during the discussions as a concrete example of city-to-city cooperation with Palestinian municipalities. Barcelona has ten administrative districts; “District 11” is the name given to a newly announced international cooperation platform, framing the city’s global action as an extension of its territorial governance beyond municipal borders.

Barcelona District 11 channels the city’s international engagement towards cities and territories facing conflict or crisis, prioritising long-term partnerships over ad hoc support. It operates through technical cooperation between municipal departments, institutional partnerships with local authorities and support for local public services under strain, aiming to strengthen administrative capacity and continuity of local governance.

In the Palestinian context, this has meant sustained institutional links with municipalities operating under severe constraints, keeping channels of cooperation open when national and multilateral frameworks are stalled or contested. More broadly, District 11 formalises Barcelona’s practice of city diplomacy: using municipal competences — planning, public services and technical expertise — as tools of international solidarity.

The political relevance of such cooperation was underscored in the room. In contexts of violence and isolation, maintaining city-to-city ties preserves institutional visibility and continuity for local governments under pressure.

As global multilateralism becomes more fragmented, initiatives like District 11 show how the municipal movement is practising networked governance in concrete terms. The moment in the room was a reminder that behind every framework of cooperation are real municipalities facing real constraints — and that for cities, solidarity is part of how they govern.





What's on Today?

26 FEBRUARY 2026

A NEW GENERATION OF UNIVERSAL LOCAL PUBLIC SERVICES

Day 4 of the UCLG Annual Retreat turns the focus to Tangier 2026, positioned as a milestone for showcasing local multilateralism and placing public service delivery at the heart of a renewed global social contract. The morning session (10:00–13:30) frames Tangier as the new frontier of the municipal and territorial movement, bringing together local governments, civil society and communities around shared priorities anchored in the Local Social Covenant. In the afternoon, The Workers behind Service Provision (15:00–16:30) highlights the role of local and regional government workers in delivering inclusive, quality services through social dialogue and decent work, before Connecting the Dots (16:30–17:30) links the week's debates to UCLG's mandate and international positioning ahead of the 2026 Congress.

CREDITS

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TRENDING NOW!

WHEN DEMOCRACY HITS THE FEED

The third day of the @uclg_org 2026 Retreat has wrapped up, but the posts on social media are still there, capturing what was a day focused on democracy and multilateralism. Local and regional governments are addressing trust and leadership, as well as the collaborative delivery of the Local Social Covenant, with the aim of turning rights and care into real impact.

Although it often feels increasingly difficult, networks can still be used to connect people. Over these days, the Retreat has shown its potential to transform traditional multilateralism into networked governance that connects diverse actors without losing the internal cohesion of the movement. As @UCLG_Saiz points out: “From health to water, equality, care, housing or public services, building a shared vision based on trust and collective goals is key. Multilateralism must refocus on the agenda to overcome fragmentation. This is the way of our Local Social Covenant.”

The conversation online continues with @berryonline, Mayor of @CityKitchener, highlighting how trust is built through quality universal public services, transparency and accountability. However, the path is not without obstacles. @PaolaPabonC warns: “Pressure and judicialisation against subnational governments weaken decentralisation, local investment and democracy. Defending local autonomy is key to multilateralism.”

For her part, @Lorena_Zarate_ reminds us that, in an era of attacks on the public sphere, our agenda must be to resist and defend democracy from the territories. As @jan_vanzanen points out, the greatest risk to trust is disengagement, and the crucial role of local leadership is to model co-creation by bringing different voices together around the same table.

Everything being built these days — the debates, political dialogues and workshops — serves as a foundation on the road to our next big milestones. The political roadmap for the 2026 multilateral cycle is already underway, steering the movement towards the World Congress and the Summit of Local and Regional Leaders in #Tangier2026. As Mayor @u_ibrahim_altay notes, the movement is moving towards a renewed multilateralism based on trust and local leadership.

Since we are all part of this process, we invite you to join the conversation. And because social media speaks through images as much as words, here is a link to photos from the Retreat so you can illustrate your posts and add them to the discussion: [flickr.com/photos/uclg/albums](https://www.flickr.com/photos/uclg/albums)

We look forward to reading your thoughts!

#UCLGMeets



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