City Diplomacy in a Fragmented World

Geopolitical Tensions, the Crisis of Multilateralism,
and the Rising Global South

Ricardo Martinez and Marta Galceran-Vercher (eds.)

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City diplomacy in a fragmented world: hybridity, informality, and power reconfiguration
Marta Galceran-Vercher and Ricardo Martinez

This introductory chapter to the monograph analyses how city diplomacy is evolving amid geopolitical fragmentation and a weakening multilateral order. It identifies four key trends that have shaped the trajectory of city networks over the past decade. First, the consolidation of hybrid and multistakeholder modes of governance. Second, the proliferation of informal and temporary inter-city alliances driven by pragmatism. Third, the emergence of a more assertive Global South, which has brought new leadership and regional initiatives into the global ecosystem of city networks, ultimately challenging longstanding Western dominance. Finally, the reconfiguration of agency within city networks alongside the growing influence of global secretariats. Together, these dynamics reflect a shift toward more flexible, pragmatic, and politically diverse forms of urban cooperation.

Funding models of city networks and their ecosystem of partners
Devon Cantwell-Chavez and Marielle Papin

This chapter focuses on the relationship between the financing and governance of transnational city networks. We argue that funding is not only about how an organization works on its own and what it can achieve with the resources it has; it is also about who gives money to and who exerts power over that organization. We introduce a new, tri-dimensional typology of transnational city network financing models and apply this typology to three case studies: UCLG, C40, and the Mayors Migration Council. From this, we generate five insights. First, networks have a wide variety of funders. Second, a lack of structural or core funding affects the capacity of networks to fulfill their missions. Third, many factors influence networks' financing models, including funders. Fourth, the increasing involvement of private actors in the ecosystem of transnational city networks still has unclear effects. Fifth, there remains information opaqueness in the financing of transnational city networks.

Diplomacy in crisis, subnational diplomacy evolves
Marissa Jordan and Ian Klaus

The practice of subnational diplomacy necessarily adapts to historical shifts. Such shifts are sometimes subtle and sometimes striking. They sometimes arrive slowly and sometimes suddenly. For practitioners of subnational diplomacy, 2025 has required quick adaptation and evolution to tectonic shifts. The decline of the increasingly

contested liberal international order accelerated. As a result, subnational jurisdictions are facing questions of how to continue engagement with international partners while existing diplomatic and development institutions are weakened. The past two decades of practice can illuminate current options, but experimentation and new approaches will also be needed. Already, some cities and states are showing that in the face of national volatility, they can serve as a steady hand in continuing the advancement of diplomatic relationships.

City networks in the UN system: the crisis of multilateralism as an opportunity?
Daniel Pejic

Cities are increasingly acknowledged within the UN system not merely as critical sites to address global governance challenges but as purposeful actors with a role to play in both shaping and implementing these agendas. Cities, networks and their supporters have invested significant resources in seeking recognition and influence within the UN system and have seen tangible impacts from these engagements. They have done so during a period of uncertainty, if not profound crisis, for the UN and multilateralism more generally (Guilbaud et al., 2023). Increasingly conflictual geopolitics, protectionism, and military and economic coercion are threatening the fabric of multilateralism in the 21st century. This paper considers the pathways to multilateral engagement that city networks have been influential in generating, and it questions the extent to which these hard-fought efforts toward recognition are a valuable pursuit for advancing global urban development in a context of fragmented global governance. While disruptive, the fracturing of the state-led international order may also be an opportunity for city networks to increase their importance within domains of global governance.

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Fritz Nganje

This chapter analyses the role of city diplomacy in localising the legacy of the Bandung Conference. Drawing on the examples of Porto Alegre in Brazil and Johannesburg in South Africa, I show how cities in the Global South have used their internationalisation to champion the social justice agenda embodied in the Bandung spirit. However, I argue that city diplomacy as a mechanism for localising the Global South's struggle for justice and equality faces significant challenges, which are reflected in the often ephemeral nature of this form of global activism and solidarity. The chapter reflects on some of these constraints, chief among which is the disciplining power of the dominant neoliberal paradigm, which as seen in the pervasive influence and world-making capacity of the global city concept, limits the imagination and pursuit of alternative forms of urbanisation and internationalisation.

Singapore's role in city diplomacy: lessons from its leadership in developing the ASEAN Smart Cities Network

Melinda Martinus

As a city-state, Singapore occupies a dual identity that enables it to engage in international diplomacy beyond the traditional state level. It has emerged as a prominent actor in city-to-city diplomacy, particularly through its leadership during its Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) chairmanship in 2018, when it launched the ASEAN Smart Cities Network (ASCN) to provide the regional organisation with an avenue to engage with its member states' localities. This paper explores how Singapore leverages city diplomacy as a strategic tool to project influence, secure economic benefits, and shape norms of urban governance in Southeast Asia. Using geographic, urban development, and international relations lenses, this article highlights how urban planning imaginaries, infrastructure-led regionalism, and technocratic planning cultures shape both the opportunities and limitations of Singapore's city diplomacy. The article concludes with reflections on the implications for Southeast Asia's alternative regional architecture and the future of subnational diplomacy amid the waxing and waning effectiveness of state-led responses to global challenges such as climate change, poverty alleviation, and digital infrastructure provision. A broader inquiry will be undertaken to explore how Singapore's influence through the ASCN model could potentially be further analysed to define diplomacy in a post-Western world order.

CITY DIPLOMACY IN A FRAGMENTED WORLD: HYBRIDITY, INFORMALITY, AND POWER RECONFIGURATION

Marta Galceran-Vercher
Global Cities Research Coordinator and Senior Research Fellow,
CIDOB (Barcelona Centre for International Affairs)

Ricardo Martinez
Senior Research Fellow,
CIDOB (Barcelona Centre for International Affairs)

Over the past three decades, cities have progressively asserted themselves as influential actors in international affairs, propelled by their demographic centrality and economic weight. This outward orientation has been facilitated by the proliferation of transnational municipal networks, which provide institutionalised platforms for resource pooling, knowledge exchange, and the pursuit of collective policy objectives. City diplomacy, once a marginal phenomenon, has thus become an increasingly salient dimension of global governance.

The contemporary landscape of city diplomacy, however, is markedly more complex than in the late 20th century. Its evolution must be understood in relation to both the internal dynamics of the networks themselves and the broader transformations of the international system. Internally, the institutionalisation of city networks has conferred growing authority upon their secretariats, while private sector actors have assumed a more prominent role in financing and shaping agendas. At the same time, intermunicipal relations are increasingly conditioned by the geopolitical interests of nation-states, exposing city diplomacy to the tensions generated by the erosion of multilateralism (see Pejic in this publication). Furthermore, the expanding international engagement of cities in the Global South signals a reconfiguration of power relations within global governance, challenging the historical predominance of Western actors.

This introductory chapter to the CIDOB Monograph *City Diplomacy in a Fragmented World: Geopolitical Tensions, the Crisis of Multilateralism, and the Rising Global South* does not seek to revisit definitional debates on the boundaries, classifications, or heterogeneity of city networks, questions that have traditionally occupied scholarly inquiry (e.g., Tortola, 2025) and which have been addressed in previous publications of the CIDOB Global Cities Programme (see, inter alia, Fernández de Losada and Abdullah, 2019). Instead, its objective is to identify and critically assess the key trends that are currently reshaping the city network ecosystem and city diplomacy more broadly.

Against this backdrop, the chapter delineates four key trends that have shaped the trajectory of city networks over the past decade, and that are further explored in each of the chapters of this publication. These are: (a) the consolidation of hybrid and multistakeholder modes of governance; (b) the proliferation of informal and temporary inter-city alliances driven by pragmatism; (c) the emergence of a more assertive Global South; and (d) the reconfiguration of agency within city networks alongside the growing influence of global secretariats.

Local multilateralism mirrors global multilateralism: hybridity and multistakeholderism

Reforming the multilateral system to make it more inclusive and responsive to urban interests has been a central concern of international municipalism since its inception (Galceran-Vercher, 2021). This ambition is often expressed in the demand to grant cities "a seat at the global table". Paradoxically, cities often demonstrate a stronger commitment to reinforcing and reshaping the international political order, rooted in the primacy of nation-states, than many countries whose geopolitical disputes erode multilateralism's collective capacity (Klaus, 2022). Yet global city networks are not only reinforcing existing multilateral norms and practices (Martinez, 2024a); they are also actively constructing a parallel urban multilateral order.

Indeed, the very existence of city networks can be seen as fostering multilateralism as the prevailing mode of transnational cooperation among municipalities. By building the infrastructures and mechanisms that allow local governments to confront shared challenges collectively, these organisations privilege multilateral approaches over bilateral ones (Galceran-Vercher, 2022). In a July 2022 op-ed, Emilia Saiz, Secretary General of UCLG, described this phenomenon as "local multilateralism" (Saiz, 2022), echoing UCLG's self-proclamation as "the home of local multilateralism".

Yet multilateralism today finds itself in a precarious position, increasingly perceived as a contested practice beset by overlapping crises. Strikingly, many of its evolving dynamics are mirrored in local multilateralism. These include a growing reliance on informality and minilateral arrangements, which will be examined in the following sections, as well as the consolidation of hybridity and multistakeholder approaches within the ecosystem of city networks, to be explored in the paragraphs below.

Multilateralism is no longer confined to treaty-based organisations but increasingly relies on informal and hybrid mechanisms at regional and global levels (Cooper et al., 2025, p. 1826). Intergovernmental governance has evolved into "governance with governments plus other actors", as hybrid arrangements proliferate across policy domains (Zürn and Koenig-Archibugi, 2006, p. 239). The notion of "hybrid governance" captures this intersection of public and private actors (Bäckstrand, 2008; Pattberg and Stripple, 2008). In a similar vein, Acharya's vision of a "multiplex world" (2017, p. 16) points to a system less dominated by large intergovernmental organisations and more open to private bodies, civil society, and regional initiatives.

In this context, the shift towards hybrid governance has also reshaped cities' diplomatic practices. City networking scholarship has long accounted for the growing importance of public-private partnerships and hybrid arrangements in urban governance (Acuto and Leffel, 2020). For instance, Abdullah and Garcia-Chueca (2020) characterise the city networking ecosystem as a "cacophony", underscoring the increasingly prominent role of private sector actors. In turn, such expansion of actors resonates with the notion of multistakeholderism, a governance practice distinct from traditional multilateralism, where governments, IGOs, civil society, the private sector, and research institutions collaborate on issues of public concern (Raymond and Denardis, 2015; Gleckman, 2018).

To be sure, most city networks operate now through such partnerships, which provide not only expertise and operational capacity but also critical funding (Acuto and Rayner, 2016; Gordon, 2020). Scholars and practitioners alike agree that this practice began to emerge in the early 2000s, with the establishment of C40 Cities Climate Leadership Group (Davidson et al., 2019). Yet its broader implications have transformed the ecosystem of city networks, such that even traditional public-based networks now receive significantly more private funding than before (see Cantwell-Chavez and Papin in this monograph). This makes research into the consequences of such practices, particularly regarding agenda-setting and legitimacy, more urgent than ever.

From another perspective, a central aim of city diplomacy initiatives is to mobilise cities around global challenges with local dimensions, such as climate change or migration, on the premise that these issues cannot be addressed by a single level of government or sector of society. This reflects the underlying logic of multistakeholder approaches, which helps explain their growing appeal within city organisations. In other words, by claiming a seat in global decision-making, the international municipalist movement embodies this logic, positioning cities as key stakeholders in global governance.

By way of illustration, the evolution of UCLG's advocacy slogan from "listen to cities" to "cities are listening" reflects a shift towards pluralism and coproduction in implementing global frameworks. This was further institutionalised in the UCLG Town Hall, conceived as a space for dialogue between civil society constituencies and local political leadership to jointly define global policies and localise global agendas. Yet UCLG is not alone in this endeavour: most global city networks today engage with a wide range of partners of different nature. Even so, while multistakeholderism is a practice driven by pragmatism and the willingness to collaborate on solutions, it is not without criticism (Fernández de Losada and Galceran-Vercher, 2021).

An evolving ecosystem of city networks: a turn towards informality?

The number of city networks has expanded to such an extent that scholars now commonly refer to a "global ecosystem of city networks" (Acuto and Leffel, 2020). This ecosystem has undergone a profound transformation. What was once a relatively simple configuration of public membership networks, primarily concentrated in Europe, has evolved into a diversified

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system in which longstanding city-only networks coexist with multi-actor platforms operating at the global level (Fernández de Losada, 2019).

Historically, diversification within city networks was largely actor-based. Networks diversified and expanded by incorporating a broader range of urban stakeholders, including local governments, civil society organisations, and occasionally private sector partners. Today, however, diversification extends beyond membership to encompass the very modes of operation. City networks now vary widely in their governance models, funding structures, thematic focus, and strategic ambitions. This operational heterogeneity enables them to be more agile, responsive, and tailored to the specific needs of their members.

One of the most notable developments in this evolving landscape is the proliferation of informal and temporary inter-city (hence, intergovernmental) alliances and organisations. This trend is reinforced by a broader process of deinstitutionalisation and fragmentation, which has become a defining feature of the current crisis of multilateralism. It mirrors shifts in global governance, where the "gridlock" of formal intergovernmental organisations has resulted in a proliferation of informal intergovernmental bodies (Abbott and Biersteker, 2024) and other forms of low-cost institutions (Abbott and Faude, 2021).

In their seminal work, Vabulas and Snidal (2013, p. 197) define informal intergovernmental organisations as those that: (1) share an explicitly articulated expectation – rather than a formalised agreement – about purpose; (2) have explicitly associated state members; and (3) convene regular meetings but lack an independent secretariat or other significant institutionalisation such as a headquarters and/or permanent staff. The three criteria can also be applied to distinguish formal city networks from temporary and informal city coalitions, often referred to as "pop-up networks" (Malé, 2019; Fernández de Losada and Zapata, 2022).

Such temporary coalitions typically emerge in response to urgent challenges (i.e., pandemics, housing, or migration crises) and, unlike traditional networks with permanent secretariats and long-term agendas, they are characterised by their flexibility, rapid mobilisation, and minimal bureaucratic overheads. Initiatives like Mayors for Housing or the Pact of Free Cities (which describes itself as an "open and progressive city alliance") illustrate this model. While some dissolve once their goals are met, others evolve into formalised networks with lasting structures.

A notable example of the latter is the Cities Coalition for Digital Rights (CCDR), founded in 2018 by Amsterdam, Barcelona and New York to promote and defend digital rights. For several years, this alliance operated without a secretariat or formal governance framework. Today, however, it is transitioning into a formal non-profit organisation under French law, establishing membership procedures and fees, and setting-up a permanent secretariat in Bordeaux.

All in all, the rise of informal alliances of cities reflects a broader logic of adaptive governance, whereby municipalities collaborate in targeted ways, without the constraints of formal institutionalisation. Often promoted by large cities that struggle to find established networks with homologous partners and aligned interests, these "pop-up" coalitions signal a shift in

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how urban actors conceive their role in global governance. Rather than relying exclusively on formal institutions, local governments are increasingly experimenting with formats that prioritise speed, innovation, and strategic impact (Fernández de Losada and Galceran-Vercher, 2021).

A more assertive Global South

International municipalism today closely resembles classical multilateralism around the UN, with its structures and agendas still largely shaped by Global North interests (Fernández de Losada and Galceran-Vercher, 2024). Most global city networks are headquartered in European cities including London, Brussels, Barcelona, Bonn, and Paris. This concentration of power is not only geographical: many of the professionals driving these networks are European or North American, or trained in their universities. Funding also reflects this imbalance, with resources coming largely from Western institutions: the EU, national cooperation agencies in Sweden, Germany, and Switzerland, development banks in Brussels and Washington, and major US philanthropies such as Bloomberg, Soros, Rockefeller, and the Ford Foundation.

Recent developments, however, suggest that this Western-centric dynamic is beginning to shift towards a decentred global political order. Cities in the Global South are adopting a more assertive role, challenging decades of political (though not numerical) underrepresentation within international municipalism (see Nganje in this publication). Mayors from Asia, Africa, and Latin America now hold prominent leadership positions: UCLG has been chaired by leaders from Istanbul, Johannesburg, Al Hoceima, and Montevideo; Metropolis is currently led by the mayor of Rabat (and was formerly chaired by the mayor of Dakar); and the influence of mayors from Guangzhou, Tehran, and Bogotá continues to grow. C40, meanwhile, was led between 2013 and 2017 by Rio de Janeiro and today operates under a co-presidency model shared between the mayors of Freetown and London. The increasing presence of mayors and subnational leaders from the Global South in leading positions of major transnational networks seems to suggest a stronger postcolonial viewpoint in the central institutional configurations of global urban governance (Acuto et al., 2024).

But it is not only a matter of leadership: the growing importance of city networks emerging from the Global South further illustrates this shift (see Martinus in this monograph). The Asian Mayors Forum (AMF), for instance, is a notable initiative connecting mayors and city managers across Asia (and some African cities) to promote regional integration through city diplomacy. It was established with the support of the government of Iran, under the auspices of the Asian Parliamentary Assembly, and it is currently headquartered in Tehran.

Similarly, the Russian city of Kazan launched the BRICS+ Association of Cities and Municipalities in 2024, building on the International Municipal BRICS Forum initiated in Saint Petersburg in 2019. Both initiatives, supported by the Russian government and UCLG's Eurasian section, aim to broaden local government participation in the BRICS agenda and coordinate positions of BRICS+ cities in global events such as COP30 in Brazil, giving municipalities of "friendly countries" a stronger voice on the international stage.

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Notably, the third meeting of the BRICS+ Cities (April 2025) was co-hosted by the AMF and the Municipality of Tehran. Given the strategic importance that both Iran and Russia attach to these municipalist initiatives, this collaboration can be interpreted as a manifestation of their ongoing strategic partnership (Azizi, 2025). It also underscores how major powers are increasingly recognising the role of subnational relationships in advancing geopolitical interests, making them an influential component of their foreign policy (see Jordan and Klaus in this publication).

Another clear example of this trend is the expanding transnational dynamism of Chinese city governments, which forms part of a broader diplomatic strategy on the part of China (Chen, 2021). Chinese cities are not only driving regional municipalist initiatives but also gaining increasing presence and political weight within global city networks. They hold leadership positions, finance and organise major events, provide technical expertise, and increasingly shape the priorities and political agendas of these organisations. In the coming years, close attention will need to be paid to the evolution of initiatives such as the Belt and Road Sustainable Cities Alliance, launched in 2019, and the Committee on the Belt and Road Local Cooperation, established in 2017 within UCLG ASPAC by Hangzhou Municipal Government and the Chinese People's Association for Friendship with Foreign Countries, with a permanent Secretariat in Hangzhou.

The growing assertiveness of Global South cities is also testing international municipalism's ability to present itself as a cohesive movement insulated from geopolitical tensions. This challenge is evident in the absence of globally unified municipalist responses to Russia's invasion of Ukraine and the war in Gaza (Fernández de Losada, 2022). In the case of Ukraine, Western cities largely echoed their national governments, condemning the invasion, supporting sanctions, extending solidarity to Ukrainian counterparts, and severing ties with Russian peers (Kasakove, 2022). By contrast, Chinese cities and many major urban centres in Iran, India, Africa, and Southeast Asia adopted a position of equidistance, unsettling their Western partners.

Similarly, divergent and often irreconcilable views on the Israel–Gaza conflict have fueled tensions not only within universalist city networks but also across regional networks that bring together cities from countries with sharply contrasting positions (for instance, within European municipalism). The silence maintained by some networks, contrasted with the explicit positioning of others (such as UCLG MEWA or the AMF), underscores the fractures running through international municipalism. These divisions reveal the growing weight of state-centric interests within city-led initiatives, fostering the emergence of geopolitical municipal blocs that increasingly mirror national alignments. This dynamic serves as a powerful reminder that the transnational activism of cities, while expanding, remains structurally embedded in and constrained by an international political system firmly in the hands and organised around the logic of nation-states (Martinez and Bunnell, 2024).

Agency reconfiguration within city networks: power to the global secretariats

The growing influence of city networks in global governance cannot be fully understood without examining the pivotal role that their

secretariats play in mediating between the local and the global. Once regarded simply as logistical facilitators or administrative bodies, city network secretariats have undergone a profound transformation. Today, they are no longer confined to supportive tasks; instead, they have evolved into strategic actors, exercising growing autonomy and shaping the networks' overall direction.

Despite the burgeoning development of the interdisciplinary body of literature on city diplomacy, the role and impact of city network secretariats remain undertheorised. Much scholarly literature has portrayed city networks as unitary actors, overlooking the complex power dynamics within these organisations. Lecavalier and Gordon (2020) have been pioneering in shedding analytical light on the power of secretariats as sources of authority and the conditions under which they exercise independent agency. In the increasingly crowded and shaky landscape of global governance, secretariats are key engines working tirelessly to ensure the organisational legitimacy of their city networks (Martinez, 2024b).

Engaging with the institutional dynamics underpinning city networks requires deeper investigation into internal governance structures and the political economy of these organisations (Bouteligier, 2013), as well as greater attention to the role of secretariats as brokers mediating competing member interests. Equally important is acknowledging that secretariats often pursue agendas and priorities of their own. This raises fundamental questions. Who holds the power and influence to shape strategic direction and coordination within these networks (Davidson et al., 2019)? Do city networks exercise independent agency, or do they act solely through the agency of their member cities (Busch, 2015, p.4)?

Most city networks delegate internal governance to a global secretariat, typically composed of a management team and technical staff. Secretariats vary widely in size and resources, often independently of network membership. For instance, UCLG, with a membership base of around 240,000 members, employs less than 50 people in its world secretariat. C40, with 97 member cities, has almost 400 staffers. Even though being formally a city network member does not equate to being actively engaged in it (Ward, 2019), staff-to-member ratios may indicate the level of support and technical assistance networks can provide, a critical function for achieving organisational goals (Haupt and Coppola, 2019). Against this backdrop, the striking difference in the staff-to-member ratios across the ecosystem of city networks illustrates how the organisational capacity of city network secretariats can redefine their influence over their members.

Acting as the "executive arm of the organisation" (UCLG, 2018, p. 23), these secretariats oversee global coordination and day-to-day operations. Their responsibilities extend beyond project implementation and membership management to include, among others: (a) technical support (research, capacity-building assistance, and pooling resources); (b) communication (disseminating messages, publications, and facilitating intermember contact); (c) advocacy and representation (lobbying on behalf of members and representing networks in international forums); and (d) partnership building (engaging with intergovernmental organisations such as the UN or the EU, peer networks, NGOs, civil society, and private actors).

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This evolution reflects a broader trend: city networks today are qualitatively different from their predecessors. As networks proliferate and professionalise, their bureaucracies expand, accumulating expertise and institutional capacity/knowledge. Consequently, secretariats emerge not only as administrators but as brokers mediating competing member interests and advancing their own agendas, particularly in networks founded with specific missions, such as climate action or urban resilience (e.g., C40 Cities or Resilient Cities Network). Traditionally, these networks have often been less concerned with representing the interests of their members in supranational bodies than with achieving the aims for which they were established (i.e., local action on climate change, developing urban resilience plans, etc.).

Secretariats are increasingly shaping organisational agendas through the drafting of strategic documents and framing discussions, which grants them significant influence over policy direction. Indeed, while members formally approve these agendas, the prerogative of drafting gives secretariats notable leverage. Technical secretariats, in connection with political leadership, are steering actors within city networks by mobilising political attention, allocating resources, and empowering partners towards specific policy agendas, to the detriment of other policy agendas (Martinez, 2023). Their institutional knowledge and continuity are, furthermore, essential to mitigate the inevitable political fluctuations of their membership and the fragmented and complex landscape that city networks need to navigate.

Across a wide range of variation within the city network ecosystem, the growing role of secretariats is at the same time shaped and constrained by external factors embedded in a broader context of forces at play. A far cry from the days of municipal voluntarism (Bulkeley and Betsill, 2013), several city networks now have greater difficulties than before to find cities eager to actively participate in these organisations by investing significant political resources and adopting leading positions. This problem is particularly salient for city networks that devote much of their daily work and legitimacy to political agendas rather than knowledge exchange, which, in contrast, builds on the increasing technical expertise that secretariats can offer to their members. This, in turn, correlates with two converging processes. First, the increasing expectations of members as a consequence of the consolidation of city networks offering highly efficient support thanks to their large private financing. Second, the growing trend across selected large cities to create the ad hoc, time-bound, pop-up mechanisms promoting specific agendas presented above, particularly in a time when reaching consensus across geopolitical and ideological divisions within intermunicipal structures is difficult.

About this monograph

This monograph, *City Diplomacy in a Fragmented World: Geopolitical Tensions, the Crisis of Multilateralism, and the Rising Global South*, explores how cities and city networks are reshaping global diplomacy amid geopolitical turbulence, institutional fragility, and shifting power balances. Across its chapters, the volume traces the key trends currently redefining the city networks ecosystem and the practice of city diplomacy more broadly.

In their chapter, Devon Cantwell-Chavez and Marielle Papin explore how the funding models of transnational city networks are deeply intertwined with governance and influence. They introduce a tri-dimensional typology of financing structures and apply it to UCLG, C40, and the Mayors Migration Council, revealing important dynamics. Their analysis highlights the diversity of funders across these networks, the vulnerabilities that emerge from the absence of stable structural funding, the increasing role of private actors in shaping agendas, and the persistent opacity surrounding financial flows.

Building on this, Marissa Jordan and Ian Klaus situate subnational diplomacy within the broader crisis of the liberal international order. They argue that as traditional institutions weaken, cities are compelled to adapt quickly, experimenting with new forms of engagement. In moments of national volatility, subnational actors can provide continuity and stability in international relations, demonstrating resilience while also testing innovative approaches to diplomacy.

Daniel Pejic then turns to the UN system, where cities and their networks have invested significant resources to gain recognition as purposeful actors in global governance. His chapter questions whether these hard-fought efforts are worthwhile in a context of fractured multilateralism, where conflictual geopolitics, protectionism, and coercion threaten the fabric of cooperation. Yet he also suggests that the weakening of state-led multilateralism may paradoxically create opportunities for cities to gain greater importance within global governance domains.

Next, the monograph revisits the legacy of the Bandung Conference through Fritz Nganje's analysis of city diplomacy in the Global South. Drawing on the examples of Porto Alegre and Johannesburg, he shows how cities have mobilised internationalisation to champion social justice and solidarity. At the same time, he highlights the constraints imposed by neoliberal paradigms and the global city concept, which discipline and limit alternative imaginaries of urbanisation and internationalisation. The chapter thus reflects both the promise and fragility of Global South activism in the municipal arena.

Finally, Melinda Martinus explores Singapore's unique role as a city-state, focusing on its leadership in launching the ASEAN Smart Cities Network during its ASEAN chairmanship in 2018. Singapore's dual identity enables it to leverage city diplomacy strategically, projecting influence, securing economic benefits, and shaping regional governance norms. Her analysis highlights how urban planning imaginaries, infrastructure-led regionalism, and technocratic cultures frame Singapore's approach, while raising broader questions about the future of subnational diplomacy in Southeast Asia and beyond, particularly in a post-Western world order.

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FUNDING MODELS OF CITY NETWORKS AND THEIR ECOSYSTEM OF PARTNERS

Devon Cantwell-Chavez
Postdoctoral Researcher, University of Copenhagen

Marielle Papin
Assistant Professor, Political Science,
Canada Research Chair in Urban Wellness
Director, Research Institute for Urban Wellness, MacEwan University

Introduction

Transnational city networks, understood as networks across two or more countries that cities create or join to enhance their urban policies, have become more prominent in global governance. Researchers have built important foundations for this area of research by answering questions regarding their functions in that space as well as their influence on local policies and global governance. Among the questions that remain unanswered is that of their funding. The few studies tackling this question have highlighted a public model as well as a private one. Yet what this means about how networks set up their goals and activities remains unclear. The rapid evolution of the city network ecosystem might also leave room for other emerging financial models. We need to understand these models and their substantive and procedural effects on city networks and members. More specifically, who holds the money and the power associated with it might push for some norms in networks, which might diffuse at the local level and influence the policy choices cities make.

In this chapter, we describe how city networks are funded and analyze the relationship between funding and city networks' goals, operations, and norms shared in cities. More specifically, we identify the various financing models of transnational city networks and observe their evolution through time; assess the implications of these models for city networks' goals, operations, and norms shared with city members; and classify and compare city networks using a new typology of financing models. Finally, we present three vignettes that model our typology: United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG), C40 Cities Climate Leadership Group, and the Mayors Migration Council (MMC).

We conclude that there is an increasing diversification of financial models in transnational city networks. Older networks tend to rely more on public funding, whereas newer networks resort to public, private or hybrid financial models. Networks are generally not concerned with the nature of funding. They are nevertheless worried about its continuity and to a lesser extent its restrictiveness. Several of them tend to shape their goals and activities in a way that might more easily attract funding, but this implies risks related to serving their members.

Background context

The last two decades of research on transnational city networks have taught us a lot about the subject, especially in the environmental field. Scholars have discovered that information-sharing and norm-setting are some of the most significant network activities (Andonova et al., 2009; Betsill and Bulkeley, 2004; Hickmann, 2016; Lee and Jung, 2018; Papin, 2020). They have also shown that networks impact both local and global climate governance (Bansard et al., 2017; Busch, 2015; Gordon, 2020; Hughes et al., 2018). In doing so, researchers have focused on city networks as networks made of and for cities.

The question of the financing of transnational city networks leads us to look at non-city actor participation in these networks. A number of scholars have started that line of research. At a systemic level, Acuto and Leffel (2021) note the significance of public-private partnerships in global urban governance. Haupt and Coppola (2019) offer a typology of climate transnational city networks in which they mention the involvement of private or other types of partners. Abdullah and Garcia-Chueca (2020) scrutinize the "cacophony" of the city network ecosystem and its numerous actors from diverse sectors. Fernández de Losada (2019) also notes the emergence of "privately led city platforms", in which private foundations and influential individuals play a prominent role.

Specific research on the funding and funders of transnational city networks is rather scarce. Leffel and Acuto (2018) briefly discuss membership fees as one way through which networks receive public funding. Van der Heiden (2010) highlights the importance of EU funding for European cities and transnational city networks. Martinez (2023) shows how some global networks implement legitimation strategies vis-a-vis the international institutions that support them. Jakobi et al. (2025), looking at 30 city networks involved in different issue areas, ask about the role of diverse stakeholders in city networks. Yet their documentary analysis does not allow them to fully elucidate their influence in those structures. On the private funding of transnational city networks, some researchers scrutinize the involvement of private philanthropies and billionaires in city networks and its correlation with the depoliticization of issues (Nielsen and Papin, 2021; Papin and Beauregard, 2024).

This brief review of the literature allows us to acknowledge all that researchers have uncovered on the functioning and impact of transnational city networks. It also leads us to see the financing of these networks as a crucial, yet so far unresolved question that requires more attention.

A new typology of transnational city network financing models

In this chapter, we introduce a typology of transnational city network financing models, consisting of three dimensions: the nature of funding, continuity of funding, and restrictiveness of funding (Table 1). This typology is based on document observation and 18 semi-structured interviews (see Appendix I)) conducted with city network, member city, and city network funder staff between June and

November 2024. Although we investigated to a greater extent five pre-selected city networks (of which we present three vignettes below), we also looked at other networks in our research to ensure the broad scope of our typology.

Table 1 - Typology of city network financing models		
Nature of funding	Public	
	Private	
	Hybrid	
Continuity of funding	Recurring/long-term	
	One-off	
Restrictiveness of funding	Restricted	
	Unrestricted	
	Political conditionality	
	Absence of political conditionality	

Source: Authors

Our research reveals an increasing involvement of private actors in the financing of city networks over the last 20 years.
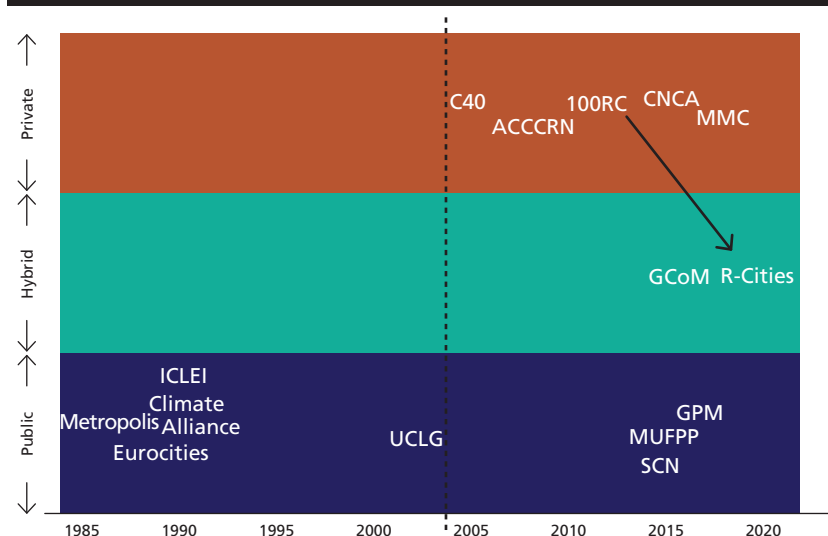
The nature of funding

The first dimension in our typology is the nature of funding. Financing models do not generally comprise exclusively public or private funding sources. We define them as public when they have 70% or more of public funding sources; private when they have 70% or more of private funding sources; and hybrid when they correspond to neither of the previous categories. Public financing models generally rely on city membership fees or grants from local or national governments or intergovernmental organizations (IGOs) such as the European Union (usually through the European Commission). Private financing models rely mostly on grants or endowments from private foundations, companies, or other private actors.

Our data suggest that public financing models are more frequent than hybrid or private models (Figure 1). More specifically, among the networks we studied for this project (see Appendix II), all the traditional networks (created before 2005) rely mainly on public funding. Newer networks (2005 onwards) have either public, private, or hybrid financing models. This confirms earlier studies, including Jakobi et al. (2024), which highlight that the only networks that report no type of private funding are networks created between 1980 and 2001.

Overall, our research reveals an increasing involvement of private actors in the financing of city networks over the last 20 years . Interviewees mention traditional networks receive more private funding than they used to (Interviews C4 and A2). Furthermore, several newer networks have private or hybrid financing models. The increasing share of private funding in city networks' financing models may be linked to the growing interest of corporate actors in urban governance (Interviews C4, A2, C2, B5) observed elsewhere (Fernández de Losada, 2019; Haupt and Coppola, 2019). Our research, using our recent database on the Transnational Governance of Urban Wellness in the Americas, shows that this phenomenon started to emerge about one decade earlier, with C40 (Cantwell-Chavez et al., 2025).

Figure 1 - The different financing models of transnational city networks based on the nature of funding across time

Source: Authors

The effects of the rise of private and corporate funding in urban climate governance are out of the scope of the present study but warrants further research.

The continuity of funding

Although the nature of funding matters when analyzing different financing models, we also need to consider the continuity of the funding. City networks, like other nonprofit organizations, seek durability. They want long-term funding to be able to hire permanent staff and implement their vision. Yet public or private, continuous or recurring funding is harder to attract that one-off funding, as studies on the projectification of urban governance have started to show (see, for instance, Torrens and Von Wirth, 2021). It is worth noting, however, that lack of diversity in continuous, long-term funding can leave networks more unstable. Several interviewees mention the case of 100 Resilient Cities (100RC), founded by the Rockefeller Foundation in 2013 to implement urban resilience and terminated in 2019 when the foundation abruptly withdrew funding after a change in the foundation's leadership (Interviews C2 and C4).[1] 100RC is often viewed as a case of a network's dependence on one sole source of (continuous, long-term) funding, which should be avoided (Interviews C4, C2, and B1).

The alternative to continuous, long-term funding is short-term or one-off funding opportunities. A challenging reality is that funders generally would rather commit to one-off, short- to medium-term funding than agree to recurring/continuing long-term funding (Interviews C2 and C3). Thus, the extent to which funding is continuous or recurring directly affects a network's capabilities. Indirectly, it might also affect its mission and activities. One innovation in navigating this challenge in networks is the pairing of specific funders with sub-initiatives. For instance, C40 partnered with the UK's Foreign, Commonwealth and Development

1. After 100RC's closure, the network was re-established independently from the Rockefeller Foundation as Resilient Cities (R-Cities)

Office (FCDO) to develop a program of support for cities developing Paris Agreement compatible climate action plans (CAPs). C40 is now formalizing this model of funding where public and private funders support a specific stream of initiatives in cities through their accelerator programs. One example of this is the C40 Water Safe Cities Accelerator, which seeks to improve water management in cities, sponsored by the Grundfos Foundation. Approaches like this can insulate networks against the ripple effect of a funder withdrawing.

The restrictiveness of funding

Finally, the third dimension that shapes different city network financing models is the restrictiveness of funding. Networks and organizations generally favour unrestricted funding, which allows them to use the money they get as they see fit. They can, in those instances, spend money on strengthening the structure of the network. Like continuous or recurring funding, unrestricted funding is difficult to obtain. Increasingly, funders, especially those from the public sector, reduce structural and administrative funding.

The restrictiveness of funding generally influences the activities a network might conduct, or how its mission might evolve over time. For instance, one interviewee explains that "there's a lot more money available for climate change than there is for, I don't know, libraries and museums" (Interview A2). That might progressively lead a network to focus on climate issues instead of or in addition to other issues.

One dimension of restrictiveness may be political conditionality. This can manifest as guidelines for language ("Taiwan" vs. "China Taipei"), use of funds (who can or cannot receive funds), or limitations on issue areas (avoid LGBT issues) (Interview A2). The absence of political conditionality is thus distinctive from unrestricted funding. While unrestricted funding refers more to doing technical tasks with more freedom, absence of political conditionality refers more to the freedom of networks to set their agendas.

Political conditionality – and more broadly the restrictiveness of funding – highlight that city networks are both political and technical in nature. The restrictiveness of funding in some cases impacts the content of a network's mission and the content and shape of its activities. It might result in some practices and norms being more emphasized than others for political motives. Occasionally, the selection of case studies among a set of good practices might be driven by funding prospects over technical assessment. To a lesser degree, funding restrictiveness also affects a network's capability to fulfill its mission. When a network is only funded through project-based donations, it might be unable to build a durable structure and therefore might struggle more to do what it set out to do.

To conclude on our typology of city network financing models, while city network staff have different preferences as to whether public, private or hybrid funding is the most appropriate to reach their goals, they all seem to favour recurring or continuing and unrestricted funding. Between the two, networks likely prefer recurring or continuing funding over unrestricted. In what follows, we present vignettes of three global networks which illustrate and complement this typology.

> The restrictiveness of funding in some cases impacts the content of a network's mission.

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Vignettes

In this section, we present networks including UCLG, C40, and the Mayors Migration Council. These networks have been selected because overall they provide a diverse picture of the ecosystem of transnational city networks in terms of areas of focus, date of creation, and sources of funding (Table 2).

Table 2 – The selected networks' year of creation, mission, and size.					
Network	Year of Creation	Mission[2]	Staff	Membership base	Budget
UCLG (World Secretariat)	2004	KS, A	~35	~240,000	Not disclosed/estimated
C40	2005	KS, A, I	396	97	Total income $37.9 m in 2021 (expenditures $33.5m in 2021)
Mayors Migration Council	2018	KS, A, I	12	~250	$5m (income $8.7m) in 2023

Source: Data were collected using networks' websites and recent annual reports, as well as interviews and interview follow-up emails. Some respondents did not have the information during the interview or did not answer our request for more detailed information.

United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG)

United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG) is a decentralized, global network of over 240,000 local governments and their associations founded in 2004. UCLG's membership consists of local governments either by proxy through regional associations or through individual membership. Because of its large membership base, UCLG sees itself as universal (Interview B5).

An important aspect of UCLG is its focus on being associative. UCLG sees itself as a public, world, membership-based organization, meaning it is focused on serving its members.[3] UCLG's leadership, including the presidency, is elected by the network's members, in a similar fashion to ICLEI. To be able to vote, members must be paying their fee. Unlike ICLEI, however, membership fees represent a higher share of UCLG's budget. Members might thus play a bigger role in the network. UCLG's leadership model also differs from networks like C40, in which membership rights are tied to complying with leadership standards, not fees.

UCLG is mainly a network for knowledge sharing and advocating for local governments before international institutions on a broad range of issues, including gender equality, social inclusion, participatory democracy, and development. Any topic that comes to the attention of local governments may be addressed by UCLG.

UCLG has a public financing model with three main components: membership fees, IGOs, and national governments. First, UCLG has intentionally designed its budget so that membership fees comprise up to a third of its funding. Second, UCLG also relies on funding from IGOs such as the World Bank or the European Union (through the European Commission). Third, UCLG receives funding from national governments, such as the governments of Norway and Sweden. Recently, UCLG has received funding from private actors as well, including a US$1.5m

2. We identify three broad missions: knowledge sharing (KS), advocacy (A), and implementation (I).
3. Technically, as an association UCLG is formally a private actor

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donation from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation in 2021 for activities related to water, sanitation, and hygiene, and money to finance the Youth Climate Action Fund in 2024 through Bloomberg Philanthropies.[4]

To a higher extent than ICLEI, UCLG's focus on membership fees ensures the continuity and non-restrictiveness of its funding. Through its members, UCLG decides on its priorities and presents strategies that have already been enacted by its members to potential funders. Overall, funding seems to impact the number or scope of UCLG's activities more than its agenda.

Although we could not access financial reports, UCLG likely has a smaller budget than other networks, relative to the size of its membership. Thus, it appears to have a small staff and number of projects. Respondents from UCLG member cities emphasize the lack of concrete results or actions taken through UCLG compared with other networks, such as C40 (Interviews B2, A3, and A4). Here, it is important to reiterate UCLG's mission, which focuses on advocacy and knowledge sharing, not implementation. This likely affects its financing strategy and required budget.

C40 Cities Climate Leadership Group (C40)

The C40 Cities Climate Leadership group (C40) was created in 2005 by a group of 18 cities in a meeting convened by then Mayor of London Ken Livingstone. At the time, it was called C20 as a reference to the G20, reflecting its focus on global leadership. As it grew to include 40 cities (97 at the time of writing), it was renamed C40. C40 strives to be a network of mayors where cities are the main stakeholders. Over time, though, it has given a voice in its leadership to its strategic funders, who sit on its Board of Directors. In addition to knowledge sharing and advocacy, it supports cities in adopting and implementing climate action plans.

In many ways, C40 represents a shift in the trajectory of city network financing. It is an exclusive, by-invitation-only network open to global cities and selected urban climate leaders. It is the first network – among those we investigated – that has used a private financing model. C40 does not have membership fees. The network relies heavily on various sources of funding, mostly private but also public.

C40 has a budget that is unmatched by peer networks, nearly all of it funded by private money. To put into perspective the scale of private financing, C40 spent US$56.4m in 2022 and Bloomberg contributed US$31 million that same year. In addition to the unmatched size of its budget, C40 also has an unparalleled size of staff, with almost 400 personnel for 97 cities. C40's budget partly explains why several respondents from city administrations praise the professionalism and effectiveness of the network (Interviews A3, A4, A5, and B2).

C40 has a highly complex financing model. Its funding overall is durable and continuous partly because it relies on a great number and variety of funders (Interview B2). C40 receives significant support from three

4. https://uclg.org/new/uclg-celebra-tes-the-new-youth-climate-action-fund-launched-by-bloomberg-philanthropies-to-activate-tens-of-thousands-of-young-people-in-dri-ving-local-climate-solutions-in-over-100-cities-across-the-gl/.

"strategic funders" (defined as funds that pay out to C40 on average US$3m or more annually): Bloomberg Philanthropies, the Children's Investment Fund Foundation (CIFF), and Realdania.[5] In addition, it receives funding exceeding US$1m from various private foundations. C40 also receives financial support (of less than US$1m) from diverse foundations and companies. Moreover, the network has long relied on significant funding from national governments such as the United Kingdom or the United States. Funding from the UK has, for instance, allowed the network to provide special financial support to cities from the Global South (Interviews A5, B2, and B3).

Although it is important to highlight the complexity of C40's financing model, we should not downplay the importance of its three strategic funders who provide continuous or recurring funding. Furthermore, the network can also benefit from their social capital. These three current strategic funders have valued links to many philanthropists who can also be tapped in order to increase the network's impact (Interview C6). Conversely, the status of strategic funders grants those actors a seat on the C40 Board of Directors, currently chaired by Michael Bloomberg, founder of Bloomberg Philanthropies and co-founder and majority owner of the multinational company Bloomberg L.P.

Assessing the degree of involvement of C40's strategic funders in the network's goals and activities is difficult yet crucial to the broader discussion on the impact of financing models on networks. Interviews with C40 staff for a previous research project highlight that "the mayors absolutely lead and guide the way that C40 moves forward" and that "donors have had a huge role in shaping how C40 works". They also emphasize Bloomberg's specific role and tremendous influence on the network through his data-driven decision-making approach. An interviewee working for a C40 strategic funder sees their organization's influence on C40 in having ensured that the network would work in collaboration with rather than against national governments (Interview C5). Interviewees from other networks question the influence strategic funders such as Bloomberg Philanthropies might have on C40. One of them highlights that the involvement of such an important actor, even if it comes with strings attached, would be hard to walk away from (Interview A2). C40 staff seem to highly value the partnership with strategic funders. A C40 staff member interviewed for this project agrees that all C40 funders are important because they allow C40 to have so much impact. Yet they also insist on the fact that, overall, the mayors are the ones who make the decisions and that C40 will only do what allows cities to have impact (Interview A6). Our data analysis leads us to conclude that there is a symbiotic relationship between cities, funders, and C40. Funders do seem to influence the network. So do cities. And C40 also influences its funders and members, the former by encouraging them to fund certain initiatives, the latter by sharing certain best practices that they hope cities will adopt. Simultaneously, C40, its members and its funders all need one another to strengthen their legitimacy in global urban governance.

This case study highlights the existence of stronger forms of partnerships between city networks and funders. It contrasts with the UCLG case, where funders appear to have little influence on the network's activities.

5. Though all three of these funders contribute above the US$3m mark, Bloomberg Philanthropies has contributed a much larger share. For instance, in 2022 Bloomberg Philanthropies contributed US$31m, compared to an estimated contribution of US$8.72m from CIFF and about US$5m from Realdania that year. (Sources: https://www.c40.org/news/danish-contribution-cities/; https://ciff.org/grant-portfolio/c40-phase-4/)

Mayors Migration Council (MMC)

The Mayors Migration Council (MMC) was established in 2018 by mayors with the support of Rockefeller Philanthropy Advisors, which acts as its fiscal sponsor. Today, it has more than 200 city members. The MMC appears to be mostly an advocacy and knowledge-sharing network with a small implementation component.

The MMC emerged through a US$500,000 grant from George Soros's Open Society Foundations. It now has a budget of over US$5m. The MMC has a private financing model largely based on the support of private foundations. As in the case of the Strong Cities Network (SCN), the MMC's financing model emerged organically, based on where they managed to attract funding rather than a well-structured strategy targeting specific private funders. Nevertheless, the network does not rule out attracting more public funding and changing financing models in the future. The MMC started with small, short-term grants and found ways to gradually increase commitments. Like the SCN and C40, it does not have membership fees. Among its public funders are national governments such as the Swiss Confederation or the German government through Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ).

The MMC's financing strategy has been to diversify funding. It has secured multi-annual restrictive grants and seems to favour the continuity of funding over its non-restrictiveness. It seems that, generally speaking, newer networks first seek to "stay afloat" (Interview C2), then look at strengthening their foundations and scope through less restricted funding that aligns with their vision.

While small networks struggle to survive, they cannot or do not seek to get just any funding. An interviewee from the MMC notes that some small grants might be very resource intensive, partly because they have a lot of requirements that do not always directly align with the network's mission (Interview C2). In those instances, a network might prefer to focus its efforts on other grants. This question speaks to the balance between the restrictiveness of funding and respect for a network's mission. It also indirectly relates to the question of the lack of structural or core funding which impedes networks from pursuing just any grant opportunity because of the costs associated with managing too many different grants that networks often cannot cover.

Conclusions

We identified three important dimensions in the analysis of networks' financing models: the nature of the funding; its continuity; and its restrictiveness. Although respondents have different opinions on the public or private nature of funding, most seem to agree that continuous or recurring and unrestricted funding, and funding with few political conditions, is best. Regarding the nature of the funding, we note that financing models are almost never just public or private. They rarely have only one source of funding. Rather, they are generally complex arrangements of distinct sources (often with a dominance of either public or private funding), with different timelines and restrictions.

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This complexity ensures networks' stability. If a funder stops their grants or donations to a network, that network will likely survive. Nevertheless, the complexity of networks' financing models has a downside: it involves costs associated with simultaneously navigating several grants with different requirements for eligibility, expenses, accountability mechanisms, and timelines. This might be an issue for networks with low structural or core funding.

Structural or core funding is hard to get, yet crucial to a network's durability. A lack of core funding might prevent the network from growing, but also, and more crucially, from carrying out its mission. Likewise, networks need a stable structure to ensure funding goes towards accomplishing their mission rather than distracting them from it. Transnational city networks have developed certain strategies to obtain more unrestricted funding that they can use for their structural needs. One of them is resorting to membership fees, which has diminishing returns for membership growth. This is particularly true in today's context, where many municipalities are members of several networks. Because membership fees must remain low, several newer networks prefer not to have any. Where they do exist, membership fees play a role that goes beyond financial gain, such as creating a social contract between the cities and the network. Another way in which networks have sought to obtain more unrestricted funding has been through service contracting. For instance, networks may be asked to prepare research on a specific area of expertise that they specialize in for a government agency or an international organization. This must be carefully balanced between the network's mission and desire for independence. Additionally, this is a more limited option for networks dealing with topics that are more politically sensitive or controversial. Overall, although the question of the lack of structural funding concerns any NGO, funders of global urban governance should consider how this might affect transnational city networks' capacity to fulfill their mission.

Many factors influence networks' financing models. This includes mission and favoured activities. A focus on advocacy and knowledge sharing might require less funding than a focus on implementation, for instance. Funders seem to prefer funding projects and activities that have a direct impact to activities that have a less visible impact, such as advocacy. Additionally, geopolitics might influence financing models. Our research indeed suggests that the geopolitical context dictates the topics of interest to public actors, who, as illustrated through the different case studies, are important transnational city network funders. Networks appear to consider all these variables when they approach funders and seek to maintain autonomy. In the C40 case, however, where three strategic funders are prominent within a complex financing model, we observe a symbiotic relationship between the network and its funders: funders might influence the network's activities or some of the norms shared with cities; in turn, the network seems to influence funders in the type of activities they should fund. Overall, both parties seem to gain more legitimacy in global urban governance.

The main evolution of financing models relates to the increasing involvement of the private sector in the ecosystem of transnational city networks. Although most networks still have public financing models, newer networks now sometimes use private

or hybrid-based models. The implications of this trend are still unclear. One consequence that seems to emerge is networks' increasing budget. With the emergence of C40 and its considerable support from Bloomberg Philanthropies and other foundations, cities' expectations of networks have increased. They now want more from networks, leading several networks to increase their budgets. Those that haven't are seen as being less effective by cities. More research on this question is crucial.

There must be more financial transparency from networks. City networks should consider improving transparency, since it makes them accountable and helps provide and strengthen their legitimacy (Interview A2). Finding information on their budgets, fundings, and spendings is difficult. Most city members appear to be unaware of how networks get the money they need to run their operations. Providing more transparency is important to city members but also to external stakeholders. Cities need more transparency from networks because they themselves are accountable and need to provide transparency on how they spend their money (Interview B2). They also want to make sure that the networks to which they dedicate resources work for them (Interview C1). Furthermore, transparency is important to external stakeholders who want to know the origins of network funding before they start interacting with them or becoming members.

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Appendix I: Interview descriptions

Appendix I: Interview descriptions				
Organization	**Date**	**Duration**	**Language**	**Code**
Former city network staff member	June 5, 2024	0:56	English	C4
City of Bogotá (Colombia) former staff member	July 4, 2024	1:00	English	B2
Government of Jalisco (Mexico) former staff member	July 10, 2024	1:22	Spanish	A5
City of Barcelona staff member	July 17, 2024	1:14	Spanish	C1
City of Guadalajara staff member	July 18, 2024	0:23	Spanish	B3
City network staff member	July 22, 2024	0:57	English	A2
Strong Cities Network staff member	July 26, 2024	0:41	English	C3
ICLEI América do Sur staff member	August 5, 2024	0:47	Spanish	A1
City network staff member	August 19, 2024	0:47	English	B1
Mayors Migration Council staff member	August 20, 2024	0:35	English	C2
City of Montreal (Canada) staff member	August 28, 2024	0:27	French	A3
ICLEI Europe staff member	September 11, 2024	0:43	English	B4
City of Paris (France) staff member	October 1, 2024	0:36	French	A4
UCLG staff member	October 4, 2024	0:33	English	B5
C40 strategic funder staff member	October 17, 2024	0:41	English	C5
C40 staff member	October 23, 2024	0:52	English	A6
ICLEI World Secretariat staff member	October 31, 2024	0:39	English	C6

Appendix II: City networks surveyed	
Network Name	**Acronym (if applicable)**
100 Resilient Cities Network	100RC
Asian Cities Climate Change Resilience Network	ACCCRN
C40 Climate Leadership Group	C40
Carbon Neutral Cities Alliance	CNCA
Climate Alliance	
Eurocities	
Global Covenant of Mayors	GCoM
Global Parliament of Mayors	GPM
ICLEI	
Mayors Migration Council	MMC
Metropolis	
Milan Urban Food Policy Project	MUFPP
Resilient Cities	R-Cities
Strong Cities Network	SCN
United Cities and Local Governments	UCLG

DIPLOMACY IN CRISIS, SUBNATIONAL DIPLOMACY EVOLVES

Marissa Jordan
*Program Manager, Carnegie California,
Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*

Ian Klaus
*Founding Director, Carnegie California,
Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*

A pivot to subnational diplomacy

The import of cities to foreign policy is historically rooted in their contributions to national power. For instance, the embassies they hosted served as gathering places for national representatives and allies to engage in discussion and negotiations. Cities were of global importance as being sites of populations and economic power, but not necessarily places for policymaking and influence on the global stage (Klaus, 2021).

In the 21st century, national governments, including the U.S. and China, have evolved their approach to subnational diplomacy in recognizing that, beyond just capital cities and urban centers, even secondary and tertiary cities have considerable policymaking influence and are fertile ground for diplomatic engagement (Klaus, 2021). This especially rang true when it came to addressing global challenges like climate change, where coordinated yet place-specific policymaking across varying locales is necessary to curb its progression. Over the last 20 years, cities have nurtured robust transnational municipal networks aimed at "horizontal collaboration" for tackling global problems. A simple logic of purpose and efficiency often informs such networks: mayors recognize the unique needs of their residents, and remaining active in global networks allows them to advocate for the interests of their residents on the international stage and discuss their concerns around topics like climate change, health, and migration (Curtis and Klaus, 2024c). National governments and international organizations have taken notice of their evolving role in world affairs and the unique coordination needed to create impact. Both have adapted their approach to global governance to include cities and foster relationships with nontraditional entities in addressing transnational challenges and developing further influence.

Cities became valuable to national governments not only for diplomatic engagement but also for geopolitical competitiveness. In the United States, the transition to viewing cities as geopolitical actors gained traction during the Obama administration, particularly

National governments, including the U.S. and China, have evolved their approach to subnational diplomacy.

through a growing emphasis on cities as nodes in global governance. As an example, on the sidelines of the 2015 Paris Agreement, the administration endorsed a pledge from 117 mayors in the United States to collaborate on tracking climate risks and coordinating mitigation and adaptation efforts (Office of the Press Secretary, 2015).

China recognized the strategic value of cities and began investing in them to gain influence. Most notably, President Xi Jinping's 2013 announcement of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) marked a formalized escalation of this approach. Through its investment in infrastructure and urbanism in over 140 countries, representing roughly two-thirds of the global population, China gained influence in these locales and projected its political and economic culture beyond its borders (Curtis and Klaus, 2024a). On the 10th anniversary of the BRI, Xi delivered a speech where he remarked:

> The BRI, drawing inspiration from the ancient Silk Road and focusing on enhancing connectivity, aims to enhance policy, infrastructure, trade, financial and people-to-people connectivity, inject new impetus into the global economy, create new opportunities for global development, and build a new platform for international economic cooperation… Belt and Road cooperation has expanded from physical connectivity to institutional connectivity. Important guiding principles for high-quality Belt and Road cooperation have been laid down, which include the principle of "planning together, building together, and benefiting together," the philosophy of open, green and clean cooperation, and the goal of pursuing high-standard, people-centered and sustainable cooperation (Xi, 2023).

China, through the BRI, exemplified to the world the geopolitical power that comes with cooperation and connection to the world's cities. As argued in *The Belt and Road City: Geopolitics, Urbanization, and China's Search for a New International Order*, "BRI puts urban corridors and infrastructure-building at the heart of its vision for a reshaped international order… and is the first modern example of an explicit linkage between transnational corridor-building and great power geopolitical strategy" (Curtis and Klaus, 2024b).

Cities offer impact locally but also at scale, and by forming relationships with them through infrastructure investments, national governments have attempted to foster a particular interdependence among communities across the globe. This level of interdependence is being re-examined now, and as geopolitical relationships shift, city officials are left to reconsider the relationship between national support and their existing global relationships.

Diplomacy and geography

This recognition of the diplomatic power of cities may well have reached an apex in the 2020s. The U.S. Department of State created a Subnational Diplomacy Unit (SDU) in October 2022. The SDU was created to "lead and coordinate the State Department's engagement with mayors, governors, and other local officials in the United States and around the world…by integrating local ideas into foreign policy and fostering connections among cities, municipalities, and communities in the United States and abroad" (U.S. Department of State, 2022).

Part of institutionalizing the priority of subnational diplomacy stemmed from then-President Joe Biden's own corridor-building approach. As Simon Curtis and Ian Klaus have argued, the U.S. borrowed a little from China's conception of geographical linkages, developing relationships and investment strategies in regions where the BRI had yet to gain significant influence (Curtis and Klaus, 2024a). This strategy aimed to advance U.S. leadership in the investment of foreign infrastructure. Biden's own post-COVID-19 domestic economic policy, "Bidenomics," emphasized the need for public investments in domestic infrastructure revitalization, global partnerships, and international cooperation. His National Security Advisor, Jake Sullivan, highlighted these efforts as linkages between foreign policy and diplomacy and domestic economic prosperity (Sullivan, 2023).

This all followed on the heels of the 2021 G7's Build Back Better World infrastructure plan with the Global South.[1] This strategic approach was further articulated by Biden himself, who stated:

> The United States is committed to using our resources and our international platform to support these voices, listen to them, and partner with them to find ways to respond that advance human dignity around the world. For example, there is an enormous need for infrastructure in developing countries… Done the right way, however, with transparent, sustainable investment in projects that respond to the country's needs and engage their local workers to maintain high labor and environmental standards, infrastructure can be a strong foundation that allows societies in low- and middle-income countries to grow and to prosper. That's the idea behind the Build Back Better World (Curtis and Klaus, 2024a, p. 5).

The West was now playing catch-up to the over ten-year corridor-building work that China has done through the BRI. Part of this catch-up included investment in the Trans-African Corridor by the U.S.-led Partnership for Global Investment and Infrastructure (PGII) and the EU's Global Gateway initiative, which sought to bolster the West's position in geopolitical competition with China (Curtis and Klaus, 2024b).

In addition to its participation in PGII, the United Kingdom also made moves to counter China's foreign investment within its own borders. The Chinese firm Huawei was set to develop 5G infrastructure across the UK before it pulled out of the deal, in part due to diplomatic pressure from the U.S. (Curtis and Klaus, 2024a). Also in Europe, Germany, under Chancellor Olaf Scholz, began integrating subnational approaches that curtail China's reach in its economy. In its China Strategy, Germany emphasized an overarching "de-risking" approach, given the country's reliance on China as its largest trading partner and the imbalanced nature of China's dependencies on Germany and Europe more broadly. China's reliance on Europe is in decline, whereas Germany, at the time, relied on China in important sectors, like the field of medical technology and medicinal products (Federal Foreign Office of Germany, 2023). Germany emphasized the important role city leadership has played in building partnerships with China and, therefore, expertise on China. Its approach highlights the need for coordination with its numerous *Länder*, towns, cities, and municipalities when it comes to how it proceeds with China (Federal Foreign Office of Germany, 2023).

1. G7 Summit "Build Back Better World," June 2021, https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/50361/carbis-bay-g7-summit-communique.pdf.

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As national and international actions threaten many diplomatic relationships as we know them, city diplomacy is offering channels for maintaining these relationships.

Beyond nations, urban networks, like C40 Cities and the United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG) organization, the Global Parliament of Mayors, and ICLEI - Local Governments for Sustainability, have played a contributive role in shaping the agendas of multilateral forums like the G20 and the aforementioned G7. Both forums have, in turn, emphasized the role of subnational diplomacy in global governance. The G20, for instance, created the Urban 20 (U20) and the G7 created the Urban 7 (U7) to strengthen urban alliances and better coordinate recommendations on global challenges with the G20 and G7 member countries (Urban 20, 2017). In 2023, the G7 summit in Japan explicitly recognized the importance of subnational governments in the climate agenda by establishing the G7 Roundtable on Subnational Climate Actions. The summary report of the roundtable noted the need for national support in promoting subnational climate actions and recognized:

Subnational climate actions reinforce the virtuous cycle by addressing multiple urban challenges. These are recognized not only for climate mitigation and adaptation but also for revitalizing local economies, enhancing people's well-being and health, and environmental conservation in both national and local contexts (Ministry of the Environment, Japan, 2023, p. 6).

However, the logic behind the formation of subnational networks is actually their greatest threat. In their 2025 paper "Transnational city networks and the climate agenda: a historical perspective and current trends," Marta Galceran-Vercher, Octavi de la Varga, and Ricardo Martinez argued that "growing geopolitical tensions, … the increasing influence of political discourse critical of climate action, and above all the intensification of climate change impacts seem to foreshadow a global governance context in which city networks will need to experiment and innovate in order to maintain – and especially expand – the reach of their environmental agenda" (Galceran-Vercher et al., 2025, p. 252). Two truths can exist when it comes to city diplomacy. Global challenges and national tensions threaten its effectiveness, but they also highlight the necessity of city diplomacy in responding to them. As national and international actions threaten many diplomatic relationships as we know them, city diplomacy is offering channels for maintaining these relationships.

Diplomacy upended

Donald Trump's victory in the 2024 U.S. presidential election accelerated the decline of what was already an increasingly contested liberal international order. The weakening of diplomatic and development institutions, both national and multilateral, like the International Monetary Fund, World Bank, G20, and G7, has implications for city diplomacy. City leaders are adapting their diplomatic strategies accordingly.

One of the Trump administration's defining messages is an "America First" approach to shoring up U.S. competition against China. However, unlike China's approach to gaining economic influence through investment in global infrastructure, the administration has upended the global order and pulled back from decades of alliances with democracies like Canada and France (Trofimov, 2025). The administration has disrupted not only those relationships with harsh tariffs, but also those and many

across the globe by disbanding "soft-power" institutions, like the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID). For over 60 years, the U.S. has engaged in forms of subnational diplomacy through these core institutions.[2] In their absence, the practice of subnational diplomacy is being tested. As city leaders established themselves as actors in their own right on the global stage, they have practiced diplomacy within the global order framework established by national and multilateral powers. However, the deconstruction of that global order by those same national and multilateral powers leaves city officials to grapple with how to maintain their international connections, which have now become vital to their cities' local economies and, in some cases, culture. Kyle A. Jaros and Sara A. Newland, in their 2025 Truman Center report on "Bridges or Battlegrounds? American Cities in a Changing US-China Relationship," found that in the face of national political tensions with China, city officials are strategically maintaining relations with the country. This includes, for some subnational entities, continuing climate and energy policy dialogue with China and maintaining established MOUs, like that of green shipping corridor agreements between Los Angeles and Shanghai and Guangzhou. The report found that, "when local actors feel that the political optics of China engagement are poor but the economic rationale for engagement is strong, some are engaging in quieter forms of paradiplomacy" (Jaros and Newland, 2025, p. 17). This includes—to boost foreign direct investment (FDI)—city leaders urging the federal government to issue U.S. tourist visas to Chinese nationals, and representatives advocating for soybean farmers to maintain that trade relationship, which slightly improved during the Trump Administration's October 2025 trip to Asia and the resulting US-China trade truce. At the same time, city leaders acknowledge that other areas of trade with China, such as reliance on technology, could be reduced (Jaros and Newland, 2025). Residents in places like Des Moines, Iowa, and Los Angeles, California, understand the relationship with China as vital to their local economies. Locals see the federal actions against China as potentially damaging to their prosperity, a reality that is at odds with the administration's perceptions of what decoupling with China could do for the U.S. economy (Jaros and Newland, 2025).

To be sure, cities remain powerful instruments of geopolitical influence. As the U.S. government complicates these subnational channels in its competition with China, it has also recognized cities as a strategic policy lever for gaining geopolitical influence in important sectors. The Trump administration acknowledges the importance of subnational relationships in advancing its interests. At the beginning of the second term, it announced an investment in a digital infrastructure strategy called Stargate. The administration is teaming up with major technology companies for a $500bn investment in computing infrastructure, like data centers, for artificial intelligence (AI) across the U.S. and abroad in places like the United Arab Emirates (OpenAI, 2025). However, success in this investment in digital infrastructure across the U.S. will require cooperation and collaboration with cities and their residents. The remote community of Abilene, Texas, in Taylor County—a county that President Trump solidly won in the 2024 U.S. presidential election—is the first city partner in the United States on this project. Weldon Hurt, the mayor of Abilene, and the locals have embraced what they regard as an investment in their city and county, despite wider worries about the strain that new data centers may put on Texas's already squeezed electric grid (Williams, 2025). Such collaboration and assistance help

City leaders have practiced diplomacy within the global order framework established by national and multilateral powers. However, the deconstruction of that global order by those same national and multilateral powers leaves city officials to grapple with how to maintain their international connections.

2. As an example, since 1997 USAID partnered with the International City/County Management Association (ICMA) to deliver technical assistance in urban management to cities around the globe. For USAID, locally led development projects were a top policy priority. For instance, USAID's Clean Cities, Blue Ocean (USAID CCBO) program, which was carried out in close collaboration with both national and municipal governments, was successfully completed in Indonesia in 2024.

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with the project's overall aesthetic appeal and the integration of construction activities.

For much of the 21st century, there has been a broad emphasis on the role that subnational jurisdictions play in both strengthening and pivoting relationships with foreign actors. While city diplomacy cannot replace the role of national diplomacy, it is now recognized as an influential part of foreign policy. As Jon Temin and Max Bouchet argued in their 2024 article, "The United States Needs Subnational Diplomacy More Than Ever," in the U.S. case, "subnational diplomacy is not a substitute for strong leadership from Washington. Given the necessarily centralized nature of the federal government's official relations, governors and mayors can't sign treaties or deploy the United States' military might. But what they can do is maintain some of the country's global engagement across political cycles, and they can do so across the political spectrum" (Temin and Bouchet, 2024). As national relationships restructure their reliance on one another, subnational jurisdictions are left to grapple with how they conduct business and diplomacy and deliver benefits from their international relationships to their residents. Nowhere is this challenge more apparent than in the largest subnational jurisdiction in the United States: California.

> Cities remain powerful instruments of geopolitical influence. As the U.S. government complicates these subnational channels in its competition with China, it has also recognized cities as a strategic policy lever for gaining geopolitical influence in important sectors.

## Case study: the view from California and other subnational jurisdictions

Subnational jurisdictions across the globe are weighing in as influential geopolitical actors because in this globalized world they see that what happens abroad affects how they operate at home. The largest subnational jurisdiction that shares this sentiment, and perhaps the most influential in terms of cultural and economic impact, is California. California has played host to high-level diplomatic events, marking its value in global affairs. For example, Woodside, California, was the chosen location of the November 2023 meeting between former U.S. President Joe Biden and Chinese President Xi Jinping, which aimed to repair U.S. and People's Republic of China ties (Baldassare et al., 2024**)**. This meeting occurred on the sidelines of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation Leaders' Meeting in San Francisco. The following year, leaders from the International Network of AI Safety Institutes gathered in San Francisco to address global coordination around the safety, regulation, and innovation of AI. The proximity to high-level and influential diplomatic events, as well as their role in the global economy, shape how residents connect with the world. The annual Carnegie California Global Affairs Survey captures how aware Californians are of living within a foreign policy actor, despite at times not recognizing the benefits.[3]

In the 2024 survey, Californians believed in the importance of U.S. global leadership in ending international conflicts, like Russia's invasion of Ukraine as well as the Israel-Hamas war in Gaza. They also had opinions on the relationship between the U.S. and China, with a plurality thinking the relationship is important but not especially strong, as seen in Figure 1, which captures responses from both 2023 and 2024 (Baldassare et al., 2024).

3. Carnegie California Global Affairs Survey, https://carnegieendowment.org/programs/carnegie-california?lang=en.

Californians also believe the United States should play a leading role in preventing nuclear proliferation (64%) and in addressing climate change (57%) (Baldassare et al., 2024). Overall, Californians want the U.S. to lead in global affairs, yet the survey also found that they do not necessarily want California itself to play this leading role, which highlights the complexities of subnational diplomacy.

Figure 1: Q: How would you rate the current state of relations between the United States and China

	Excellent	Good	Fair	Poor	Don't know
2023	4%	9%	31%	45%	11%
2024	2%	9%	39%	37%	14%
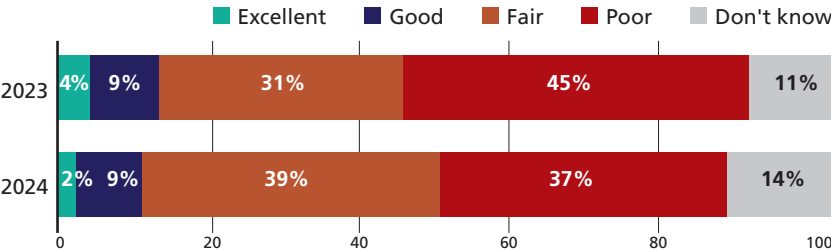
Source: 2023, 2024 Cargegie California Global Affairs Survey
2023 N= 1,500, 2024 N=1,499

In 2023, California's Governor Gavin Newsom went on a trip to China to have a bilateral meeting with President Xi Jinping and lead a delegation focused on climate action and economic cooperation. California city leaders like Fresno's Mayor Jerry Dyer led trips to places like Tokyo, Japan, to learn about downtown revitalization and high-speed rail, and San Diego's Mayor Todd Gloria led a trade mission to South Korea to strengthen economic ties and attract foreign investment (Frank and Jordan, 2024). All these trips were taken to strengthen California's economic opportunities and ties to the world. Of the Californians who support state and local international engagements like the ones above, they are supportive of California officials engaging with leaders from other nations on climate action (47%), trade (21%), and cultural exchange (10%). Despite Newsom's high-profile trip, their local leaders' fact-finding missions, and the overall alignment in priorities, in both the 2023 and 2024 surveys, when Californians were asked whether they support state and local engagement with leaders from other nations, about two-thirds of Californians responded "no" or "don't know." So, while there has been an increase in global engagements by subnational leaders, the benefits of these engagements are not as obvious to residents as global engagements from national leaders.

The findings from the Carnegie California Global Affairs Survey track with an international survey Carnegie California produced with the University of Melbourne in 2024. The 2024 Cities and International Engagement Survey captures an overall growth in cities' international activities and attention from national governments to cities' geopolitical influence. The growing attention and recognition of cities as important players on the international stage partly stems from the necessary coordination among cities in their response to the COVID-19 pandemic; the rise of international conflict as seen in Gaza and Israel, and Ukraine and Russia; migration, especially along the

U.S.-Mexico border; the rise of emerging technologies, like AI; and the push for national legislation around the creation of climate-resilient infrastructure (Pejic et al., 2025).

The survey, much like the California Global Affairs Surveys, found that climate change (82%) remains the top priority that most cities center their international engagements around, followed by economic development and trade (39%) and migration (33%).

The survey's affirmation of city officials being geopolitical actors is evident in the increased level of foreign policy engagement with cities and other subnational actors on the part of national governments. The survey found that 69% of cities were contacted at least once every three months by national governments regarding their international work, and more cities (84%) reached out to national governments at least once every three months about international issues (Pejic et al., 2025). Yet, much like the Carnegie California Global Affairs Surveys, the Cities and International Engagement Survey found that the communication of their cities' international engagements often fails to increase resident awareness about their international work (and its benefits). The survey found that "over three-quarters of participants (77 percent) said that their city actively communicates to their residents about their international work". Cities reported, however, that despite these communications efforts, their residents are often unaware of their international work, as captured in Figure 2 (Pejic et al., 2025, p. 14).

Figure 2: How cities rate the perception of their residents regarding their international work (n=49)
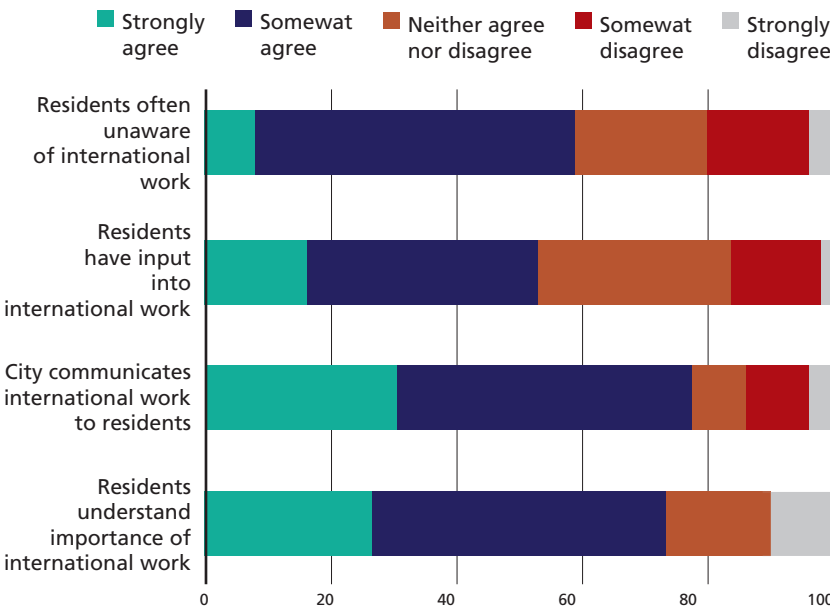
Source: 2023, 2024 Cargegie California Global Affairs Survey

Furthermore, the survey found that it is often argued that local governments can more effectively conduct international engagements that reflect their communities' needs over national governments, due

to their proximity to resident priorities. Yet "these findings suggest a growing relationship between national and local governments on international arrangements and potentially a disconnect in local community awareness of city diplomatic activities" (Pejic et al., 2025, p. 15). So, while national governments are more privy to cities' international engagements, local communities remain unaware.

Local officials may find greater support from their residents for their subnational engagements if they democratize their approach. Bringing residents in early on to develop their priorities and identify international partners could increase constituent buy-in. A number of democracies, both national and subnational, have utilized deliberative democratic approaches to policymaking. California is currently experimenting with a new digital and deliberative democracy program designed to foster dialogue between Californians and their government, informing policy decisions and building trust (Klaus and Weinberg, 2025). The approach recognizes the need for policymakers to better listen to and engage with citizens, avoiding capture by special interests and the pitfalls of referendum-based decision-making, which can lead to voter fatigue and polarized outcomes. Further, it opens a window for sharing the reasoning behind particular policy priorities. Integrating deliberative democracy strategies in how city leadership conducts international affairs could help expand education on its benefits and close the gap in local support.

Conclusion

Subnational jurisdictions and their diplomatic efforts have an increasing set of opportunities and challenges before them. In the United States, they are sites of contestation, with many facing threats to funding, either directly or indirectly through their institutions, if they do not align with the Trump administration's political agenda. Sanctuary cities, for instance, have been threatened with cuts to federal funding if they refuse to comply with the administration's immigrant deportation efforts. Universities across the country are at risk of losing federal funding if they do not restructure to fit the administration's anti-diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) agenda.

Cities in the United States and abroad are essential sites for national governments to learn about current global relationships and restructure them as needed. But cooperation from subnational jurisdictions is necessary to conduct this exercise. Cities' acts of policy independence demonstrate a distance from national agendas and, when empowered, can present an opportunity to maintain beneficial global relationships. This is a difficult time for diplomacy. And this includes city diplomacy. On the U.S. side, federal offices, like the former U.S. Department of State's Subnational Diplomacy Unit, which strengthened trade and alliances by supporting the capacity of subnational jurisdictions to lead those efforts, have been and are being dismantled. The U.S. is removing itself from international agreements like the Paris Climate Agreement, for the second time.

However, municipal diplomacy has several features that national diplomacy does not. It can pursue those advantages now, to the benefit of local residents, and share global agendas. Cities and states can serve as a steady hand in advancing diplomatic relationships in the face

> Cities' acts of policy independence demonstrate a distance from national agendas and, when empowered, can present an opportunity to maintain beneficial global relationships.

of national government volatility. While trade wars between nations threaten the livelihoods of individuals who rely on global trade, and national leaders withdraw from critical international agreements, city leaders, like those in California, are advocating for continued global engagement to boost their populations' economic prospects and tackle global challenges. Policymakers are learning what this tense geopolitical moment means for subnational diplomacy, but for the time being city leaders are continuing to engage with their foreign partners and thereby solidifying their global influence.

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CITY NETWORKS IN THE UN SYSTEM: THE CRISIS OF MULTILATERALISM AS AN OPPORTUNITY?

Daniel Pejic

Research Fellow, Melbourne Centre for Cities, University of Melbourne

Introduction

City networks – understood here as formalised organisations whose main membership is local governments, or who focus on cities – have been essential in forging institutional linkages with the United Nations system. These connections have allowed local leaders to elevate urban issues into the multilateral arena. There is now a complex network of relations between city networks and various organs of the UN which we see across a range of policy domains – for example, the Local Governments and Municipal Authorities Constituency (LGMA) providing input into multilateral climate processes with ICLEI as the focus point, or United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG) chairing the United Nations Advisory Committee of Local Authorities (UNACLA), a body which aims to strengthen the partnership between the UN system and local authorities. As city leaders have increased their focus on multilateral engagements, so too have major city networks, leading some to argue that the secretariats of these organisations should be considered international actors in their own right (Lecavalier and Gordon, 2020). Efforts to understand the multiscalar nature of city agency must unpack and contend with the complexity of the horizontal, vertical, cross-cutting and dynamic realities of global urban governance.

This reality means that not only do local leaders need to understand and navigate new partnerships with other levels of government and non-governmental actors working across multiple scales, but also that those working in multilateral organisations need to understand and engage with urban settlements and urban issues. It has been argued that global governance is more "hybridised" than ever (Strachová, 2021), with the inclusion of a broader array of international actors in multilateral processes, but in many ways it is also more "urbanised", as international actors recognise the need to attend to the urban scale to find solutions to global challenges. The mechanisms of city engagement in multilateralism have gone beyond just efforts to secure "a seat at the table" (Klaus, 2021), or the establishment of "new tables", in the form of transnational city network fora, but now have an emerging institutional architecture linking these domains.

The fracturing of the state-led international order may present an opportunity for city networks—institutions capable of facilitating transnational collaboration— to increase their importance within global governance.

These urban advocacy efforts have been occurring against the backdrop of an increasingly fragmented and fragile multilateral system. Conflictual geopolitics, protectionism, and military and economic coercion are threatening the fabric of multilateralism in the 21st century. This crisis, further fuelled by substantial budget cuts to UN agencies by the Trump administration and other nations (United Nations, 2025a), threatens the ability of the global community to collaborate toward addressing major urban and global challenges such as climate change, inequality, migration, disinformation and pandemics. However, the fracturing of the state-led international order may also present an opportunity for city networks – as institutions with a proven capacity to facilitate transnational collaboration on key issues – to increase their importance within domains of global governance.

This paper considers the reality of a more influential and central place for city networks within the UN and broader international system, and the strains that this system is under. It begins by providing a brief overview of the current role of city networks in global governance and the hard-fought recognition and linkages with multilateral processes that cities and their supporters have secured. It then analyses the multiple crises impacting the stability and effectiveness of the UN and other major multilateral structures, and the impacts that may have on international cooperation toward addressing global urban issues. Finally, the conclusion offers some optimism for the future role of cities and city networks in international processes by contending that these dynamic actors have the potential to demonstrate bold and pragmatic international leadership in an increasingly antagonistic geopolitical environment.

The role of city networks in global governance

For over 30 years, cities have undertaken concerted efforts to increase their interface and influence in multilateral processes. In some domains, such as climate change, migration and sustainable development, to name but a few examples, this has resulted in tangible linkages between local government organisations and these processes (Martinez, 2023). These connections have been most frequently facilitated through city networks, and we have seen a growing sophistication amongst network secretariats in their knowledge of the multilateral domain (Jakobi et al., 2025).

Looking at the UN system specifically, there is a complex tapestry of urban inputs into various agencies well beyond UN-Habitat, which is the agency with direct responsibility for human settlements. There is a now well-established literature that explores the influence of cities in global environmental governance (Gordon, 2020; Lin, 2021) and in particular the governance of climate change action (Acuto et al., 2024), which is the policy domain with the most mature and sophisticated institutional linkages between city networks and UN processes (Gordon, 2020). There is direct representation for cities within UNFCCC processes through the LGMA and a range of opportunities for major city networks globally to input into discussions related to sustainable urban development through the Global Taskforce of Local and Regional Governments. These connections have been influential in lifting the voices of urban actors within global climate change

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governance, including advancing the Coalition for High Ambition Multilevel Partnerships (CHAMP) for Climate Action agreement, which was created at COP28 and has been signed by 77 countries. This agreement, while voluntary, commits national governments to collaborating with subnational actors in their development of climate action strategies, including Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs).

Yet climate is just one example of the broad array of connections between the city network ecosystem and UN processes. In the case of migration, groups such as the Mayors Migration Council (MMC) and UCLG advocated strongly for urban inclusion in the process of developing the Global Compact on Migration and its implementation governance (Schweiger, 2023). Together with the International Organization for Migration (IOM), the MMC and UCLG have since 2021 steered the "Mayors Mechanism", which has formally linked local and regional governments with the state-led Global Forum on Migration and Development. This mechanism has evolved into a Local Coalition for Migrants and Refugees, a partnership between the city networks, the IOM and the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR).

In the area of biodiversity, many of the environmental city networks active on climate have also executed dedicated behind-the-scenes advocacy efforts with national governments to influence biodiversity COPs. This work culminated in the Edinburgh Declaration in 2022 (Edinburgh Process Partners, 2022), which recognised the essential role of subnational governments in addressing the biodiversity crisis. Across areas of health policy, there are long-standing initiatives to include cities in international collaborative platforms, for example the WHO European Healthy Cities Network, which celebrated its 30th anniversary in 2018. There has even been some recognition of the role of cities within more traditional "hard" power areas of international policy, such as the inclusion of urban perspectives through the UN framework of the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons, driven in part by Mayors for Peace and the advocacy of the former Mayors of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

These interfaces are far too numerous to catalogue here, but systematic research has also shown an increase in the acknowledgement of local governments within UN processes. For example, an analysis of UN frameworks underpinning the 2030 Agenda found 1,248 acknowledgements of cities within these agreements, with 43% designating them as "actors" with a role to play in meeting the goals of the agreement (Acuto et al., 2023). These acknowledgements were also increasing over time, with the majority occurring since the year 2000. In the case of migration, no major UN agreement primarily on migration directly acknowledged cities prior to 2016. Since this time, there have been 29 sections of UN migration agreements acknowledging the role of cities, with all but one of these designating cities as actors with a role to play in meeting global migration objectives (Pejic, 2024).

While the gains for collective city advocacy have been significant, it is of course essential to recognise that all these domains of global governance remain state-led and urban influence may range from significant to more symbolic. Despite this reality, it has been well documented across policy domains that cities are now far from just implementors of these global agreements, but are increasingly seeking upstream influence in their

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development to ensure urban issues are appropriately represented and their recommendations are suitable for implementation in urban areas (Szpak et al., 2025). This is all the more critical as cities are often the sites where the impacts of global challenges are most acutely felt.

Beyond the UN system, there is naturally a range of other areas where cities and their networks are seeking greater influence and interconnectivity. For example, since 2018 the G20 has had a dedicated urban track in the Urban 20, which brings together major cities of the G20 countries in advance of the multilateral forum to prepare a statement of input into the high-level process. This is convened by major city networks, C40 Cities and UCLG. While this is one of the 13 formalised engagement groups of the G20, conversely the Urban 7 group to the G7 is a non-formalised meeting coordinated by the major domestic city networks of G7 countries. This group has been advocating for formal recognition as an official G7 engagement group.

The European Union (EU) has perhaps the most mature governance infrastructure for including local and regional perspectives in policymaking. Across the EU, there are formal multilevel processes through which the EU engages with local and regional governments, such as the European Committee of the Regions or the Urban Agenda for the EU program. In Europe, and more broadly, there is a critical two-way connection between the multilateral system and city networking initiatives. An analysis of 200 major city networks found that multilateral organisations were key funders of international city networking initiatives and vital to the sustainability of these efforts (Acuto and Leffel, 2021).

Navigating complex and often opaque multilateral processes requires a significant investment of resources from cities, who require the time, expertise and funds to earnestly engage with networks and to participate in the opportunities that this engagement creates, such as access to multilateral fora. Evidence indicates that many cities see direct impacts from these engagements in terms of their urban policymaking (Pejic et al., 2025). In a recent survey of 49 local governments globally,[1] 42% said localising international agreements was an impactful part of their work, while 76% said they had some engagement with UN agencies, with 29% categorising this as a close working partnership (Pejic et al., 2025). The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development was the global framework the largest number of cities had formally endorsed (73%), while more than half had committed to the Paris Agreement and 29% to the New Urban Agenda.

In total, 61% said their city was represented on the board or leadership committee of a city network, indicating strong interconnectivity between this sample and the ecosystem of transnational city networking. While it is often larger and more well-resourced cities driving the engagement at multilateral level, city networks are making efforts to increase the geographic representation of their memberships, and the opportunities they provide, more equitably across the Global North and South and to include more voices from secondary and intermediary cities (Acuto and Leffel, 2021). This has, for instance, been a considered focus in migration, with dedicated programs to enhance the capacity of intermediary cities in migration policymaking and provide pathways for their input into global discussions (Stürner-Siovitz, 2023).

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It is clear that cities have invested significant efforts, largely through networks, to achieve recognition and some degree of influence in UN and broader multilateral processes, across a wide array of policy domains. Cities believe there are benefits from these engagements both in terms of understanding and influencing agreements and for accessing knowledge, expertise and resources through multilateral engagements. Access to these domains of activity and the benefits are not, however, equitably shared across geographies, despite efforts to improve opportunities for the input of cities from the Global South.

Multilateral crisis

Compared to the early 1990s, when cities accelerated efforts to be recognised within UN processes, the multilateral system appears today to be on decidedly shakier ground. While cities have long advocated for a "seat at the table", Klaus wrote in 2020 that this table appears to be "wobbling" (Klaus, 2021). In 2025, some might argue one of the legs has fallen off. The UN is in the midst of its most profound financial crisis since the organisation's founding in 1945, with Secretary General Guterres launching a wide-ranging reform initiative earlier this year, UN80. Challenges at the UN are part of a broader crisis of multilateralism, shadowed by an erratic US president. Since taking office in January, the Trump administration has cut US$5bn in foreign aid and funding to international organisations, including $521m in cuts to its Contribution to International Organizations (CIO) and $393m in cuts to its Contribution to International Peacekeeping Activities (CIPA). The US has also withdrawn from a number of UN agencies such as the WHO and UNESCO, and rescinded support for key international frameworks such as the Paris Agreement and the 2030 Agenda. It is clear that the current US administration has limited desire to sustain the existing multilateral system or to utilise these structures in order to advance its vision of the world.

Budget cuts by the US have impacted an array of UN agencies, as the US previously funded 22% of the UN's total general budget (Blanchfield, 2024). A number of European governments, such as France and the United Kingdom, have also scaled back their funding for development aid and UN programs, while increasing defence spending (United Nations, 2025b). This has led to widespread job losses and protests in Geneva from UN staff (Blackburn, 2025). UNICEF and the OCHA have indicated they will need to cut 20% of their overall budget, while the figure for the World Food Programme and UNHCR may be closer to 30%. The UN80 initiative aims to decrease the regular UN budget by 15–20% overall, with a likely 20% cut in total secretariat jobs (estimated at around 6,900 positions) (Shiffman, 2025).

Potentially profound shifts in the position and function of the UN as the central apparatus of the multilateral system reflect a broader geopolitical reality where the liberal international order is perhaps no longer the dominant logic of international affairs. The rise of authoritarianism, protectionism and an increasingly influential China are seismically and rapidly changing the nature of interstate cooperation. China specifically has long supported elements of the UN and broader multilateral system which align with its interests while also creating alternative avenues

of international cooperation through, for example, the Belt and Road Initiative, the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank or the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (Brugier, 2023). China at times has not only advanced its own vision for regionalism or multilateralism, but also, some have argued, an alternative model for global urban development (Curtis and Klaus, 2024). The radical dismantling of the international trade system thrust upon the world by the US's unilateral tariffs has the potential to restructure international partnerships and potentially bring a range of nations into closer economic partnership with China as they seek stability amidst policy uncertainly and economic volatility. The UN, and the multilateral system broadly, are contending with the fact that its power structures no longer reflect modern geopolitical realities and the current system has often failed to deliver for countries in the Global South (Abdessalam, 2023).

An opportunity for urban-led international cooperation?

With the global weakening of multilateral cooperation, it could be argued that the decades of effort that cities have invested in influencing the multilateral system were misdirected. It is possible, however, that this crisis may present an opportunity for a reimagining of multilateral institutions that provide greater opportunities for cities to play a key role as stabilisers of geopolitical tumult. In the same way that cities burst onto the global scene due to their perceived pragmatism and agility on environmental issues, when compared to the relative ineffectiveness of interstate cooperation, this crisis may too generate the need for new actors in global governance to drive purposeful and strategic international cooperation that leads to tangible local benefit.

While the challenge is great, two recent trends in city diplomatic practice indicate the potential for local governments to position themselves to become more influential actors in an era of further fragmented global governance. Firstly, city diplomacy appears to be becoming more professionalised. This is evident not only from the sophistication through which local governments actors are engaging with the multilateral system, as detailed above, but also recent survey research, which indicates that more city diplomats appear to be accessing relevant training for their professional roles (Pejic et al., 2025).

A second notable trend is an increased level of communication between local and national governments regarding international work. Almost 70% of cities from a global sample surveyed recently on this theme indicated that their national government contacted them at least once every three months regarding their international engagements (Pejic et al., 2025). This was an increase over previous iterations of this research. Globally, there have been evolutions in the models through which national governments attend to city diplomacy, whether they are highly institutionalised such in the case of China; independent but with a range of interconnectivity at national levels such as France; or have legislated controls such as in Australia. A 2025 Symposium on Strategic Subnational Diplomacy funded by the US Department of State brought together multilevel representation from nine democratic countries to share approaches to city, state and regional diplomacy and included

a session on how this relates to the multilateral system (Meridian International Center, 2025). As city networks become more embedded within the international architecture of multilateralism, greater coordination with national governments seems likely. Local governments will, however, need to navigate their scope for autonomy within these domains (Martinez and Bunnell, 2024) and in many countries this may lead to or further exacerbate central-local tensions.

The complex network of formal interfaces between city networks and the multilateral system has not come about by chance, but rather through now over three decades of dedicated and strategic advocacy and engagement from local governments themselves, as well as a range of supporting organisations. Cities have often been acknowledged within these domains as fresh voices and pragmatic actors and their recognition in UN frameworks has increased over time. However, the severe crisis impacting the UN system and multilateral cooperation more broadly raises the questions of whether these efforts have been ill-placed and whether multilateral engagement will continue to be an effective domain for cities to seek solutions for global and local challenges. Across many policy domains, we have seen how fragmentation of global governance can provide opportunities for new actors to exert international agency. Cities and their networks have a strong story to tell of how to foster purposeful, dynamic and pragmatic international collaboration in spite of challenging geopolitics. These results, coupled with an increasing professionalism of city diplomacy, place local governments in a position where they can make a valid claim to a more central role in future international collaborative efforts. Given the fractious nature of interstate relations and rising threats from authoritarianism, disinformation and coercive politics, this future multilateralism may not resemble the current system. However, in a predominately urban world, the importance of cities will remain essential to meeting current and future global challenges.

As city networks become more embedded within the international architecture of multilateralism, greater coordination with national governments seems likely.

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LOCALISING THE SPIRIT OF BANDUNG? CITY DIPLOMACY AND THE GLOBAL SOUTH'S STRUGGLE FOR A JUST AND EQUITABLE WORLD ORDER

Fritz Nganje

Associate Professor and Head of Department,
Politics and International Relations, University of Johannesburg

Introduction

Research and debates on the legacy of the 1955 Bandung Conference have largely focused on the role and agency of states in the Global South and their formations such as the Group of 77 and the Non-Aligned Movement. A major blind spot in this literature and discourse has been the role and agency of cities in the Global South in localising the Bandung spirit through their internationalisation efforts. This is the case even though cities, including those in the Global South, have in recent decades re-emerged as significant actors in global affairs, using their bilateral and multilateral engagements to not only promote their economic interests, but increasingly to also influence global debates and policies on questions of migration and climate change, as well as global poverty and inequality. In this chapter, I take up this line of inquiry by examining the extent to which the spirit of Bandung has been kept alive in the internationalisation efforts of city governments in the Global South. Drawing on both documentary sources and interviews with city officials, I identify and analyse key moments where the struggle for a just and equitable world order has inspired, or shaped, the diplomatic involvement of Johannesburg in South Africa and Porto Alegre in Brazil. I show how these cities have at some point in their recent history used their international engagements to champion the social justice agenda embodied in the Bandung spirit. However, I argue that city diplomacy as a mechanism for localising the Global South's struggle for justice and equality faces significant challenges, which are reflected in the often ephemeral nature of this form of global activism and solidarity. The chapter reflects on some of these constraints, chief among which is the disciplining power of the dominant neoliberal paradigm, which, as seen in the pervasive influence and world-making capacity of the global city concept (Kangas, 2017), limits the imagination and pursuit of alternative forms of urbanisation and internationalisation. The remainder of the chapter is divided into three sections. Following this introduction, I review the legacy of the Bandung Conference to underscore its transformative undercurrents. This is followed by a discussion of city diplomacy as a tool for localising the Bandung spirit, drawing on the cases of the Brazilian city of Porto Alegre and the South African city

City diplomacy as a mechanism for localising the Global South's struggle for justice and equality faces significant challenges, which are reflected in the often ephemeral nature of this form of global activism and solidarity.

of Johannesburg. In the last section of the chapter, I reflect on the implications of these two models of transformative city diplomacy from the South and the constraints they face.

The legacy of Bandung 70 years later

The Bandung Conference has been described as the manifestation of a moment of awakening of the people in what is currently referred to as the Global South, as they grappled with the legacies of Western imperialism (Eslava et al., 2017). The Bandung Conference and its final communique thus captured and crystallised the spirit of the raging struggle by previously colonised people for recognition, self-determination, socioeconomic justice, and peaceful coexistence in a world structured for and by Western interests. Notwithstanding its order-affirming undercurrents, the Bandung Conference bore the hallmark of an anti-imperial and antiracist movement, reflecting the colonised world's repudiation of a Eurocentric world order in which people of other races and civilisations were considered subordinate to European and Western societies (Phillips, 2016).

It also agitated for an alternative world order, while giving birth to a Third World/Southern solidarity movement. The former speaks to the more radical undercurrents of the gathering that advocated for the transformation of the international order, to rid it of its colonial and imperial vestiges. For scholars such as Umar (2019), while the bold vision of an alternative post-hegemonic and post-capitalist international order would be dimmed by subsequent domestic political challenges in postcolonial states and the dynamics of global politics, the conference was nonetheless transformative to the extent that it entrenched the global politics of decolonisation as a defining and enduring feature of the modern world order.

But perhaps the most important legacy of the Bandung Conference, stemming from what Phillips (2016) calls the order-building dimension of the conference, is that it advocated for and catalysed a South-South solidarity movement as an alternative to the prevailing North-South paternalistic relations and a strategy for constructing a more progressive world order. In the years following Bandung, the call for political solidarity gave rise to various formations and movements, including the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) and the Group of 77 developing countries at the UN, as well as the agitations for a new international economic order (NIEO), which would underscore the potential for the Global South, working together, to challenge Western-dominated patterns of development and transform the international order.

The triumphalism of the neoliberal global capitalist system after the 1970s, coupled with the contradictions inherent in what Weber and Berger (2009) call the politics of emancipatory nationalism, would greatly contribute to undermining the nascent agency of this Third World project. As Weber and Winanti (2016) argue, the Bandung spirit and its associated politics no longer resonate as much with the elites as they did in the 1950s and 1960s. The solidarism of the Bandung spirit, according to the authors, resonates most clearly today at the societal level, as evident in the struggles for

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justice, equality and development by transnational indigenous coalitions, peasant movements, the Occupy movement, and the politics around the World Social Forum, directed mainly against the reigning neoliberal orthodoxy. As demonstrated in the remainder of the chapter, it is a cause that has also featured prominently in the internationalism of some city governments in the Global South, in the context of the re-emergence of cities as significant actors in global politics.

City diplomacy and the localisation of the Bandung cause

The contemporary diplomatic involvement of cities is not without precedent. Not only did city diplomacy predate the diplomacy of sovereign nation-states (see, for example, Nijman, 2016), but even in the height of interstate diplomacy, cities and other municipal governments have at various points in history projected themselves onto the world stage, notably as advocates for a more progressive and humane internationalism. Consider, for example, the municipal foreign policy movement in the US in the 1980s as documented by Benjamin Leffel (2018), or the nuclear-weapon-free world solidarity campaign of the Mayors for Peace. There is no denying, however, that the current manifestation of city diplomacy is quantitatively and qualitatively different from these previous iterations of the practice. This is mainly because it is embedded in global structural transformations that have recast the character and fortunes of cities in the global political economy.

The shift from a state-regulated international economy to a market-led globally integrated economy that occurred in the last decades of the 20th century (see Nijman, 2016) created conditions for the emergence of a new category of city whose fortunes are untied to the fate of the nation-state. These so-called global cities have become the strategic nodes and constitutive elements of the global capitalist economy, serving as the locus from which the latter is commanded and controlled by global oligopolies and other transnational corporations (Sassen, 2005). As Anni Kangas (2017) has argued, the very concept of global city has become a world-making tool, with the power to fashion the world in a form that privileges the city at the expense of the sovereign state. The implications of these global processes for governance and development in so-called or aspiring global cities in the South is significant. In addition to exacerbating urban poverty and inequality, the urbanisation of neoliberal global capitalism has also contributed to disenfranchising urban residents (Purcell, 2002).

In the context of the interplay between global economic pressures and lingering socioeconomic contradictions and their underlying politics at the domestic level, it is not surprising that the globalisation of cities in the Global South is in itself a contradiction of sorts. On the one hand, city governments in the South have sought to capitalise on the global cities phenomenon to enhance the competitiveness and grow the economies of their localities, while also leveraging the power of networking to access resources for socioeconomic development. This is particularly significant in a context where administrative decentralisation and the relative domestic autonomy of cities over urban governance and development are often not accompanied by substantial transfer of resources and fiscal authority. On the other hand, recognising the global and historical conditions that

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continue to drive urban poverty, inequality, insecurity and environmental degradation, some city mayors and their governments have found inspiration in the order-challenging, order-transforming and order-building currents of the Bandung spirit to develop city diplomacy agendas that attempt to subvert or circumvent the very system that is credited, at least partially, for the contemporary globalisation of cities (see Balbim, 2024; Nganje and Tladi, 2023; Nganje, 2024).

Porto Alegre as 21ˢᵗ century Bandung

Writing on the experience of cities in Brazil in city diplomacy and city networks, Trevas (2015), quoted in Balbim (2024, p. 52), argues that "Brazilian cities are the consumers of the world, not the producers", reinforcing a general perception that cities in the South engage in city diplomacy and city networks mainly as agenda-takers and hardly as agenda-setters. But it is also in Brazil that we have witnessed some of the most activist forms of city diplomacy from the South, which are aligned with the anti-hegemonic and alternative world order agenda of the Bandung legacy. As many scholars have documented (see, for example, Balbim, 2018; Balbim, 2024; Salomon, 2011; Gandin, 2011), the activist internationalism of Brazilian cities, notably Porto Alegre, can be attributed first and foremost to the emergence of the left-wing Workers Party (PT) as a major force in Brazilian politics in the 1980s. Owing to the nature of politics in Latin American countries and their geopolitical alignment at the time, these countries were not invited to the 1955 Bandung Conference. Yet as Bissio (2015) notes, key states in Latin America have since the 1990s aligned themselves with the Bandung spirit, with the formation and rise of the PT in Brazil an indication of this trend.

As a critical component of its domestic social democratic agenda, the international activism and solidarity of the PT is founded on an anti-imperialist and anti-neoliberal globalisation discourse, making the party a contemporary torchbearer of the Bandung legacy. It is no wonder that Porto Alegre, the first Brazilian city to be governed by the PT, has been nicknamed "Today's Bandung" (Hardt, 2022). Under the leadership of the PT, Porto Alegre hosted four editions (2001, 2002, 2003, and 2005) of the World Social Forum (WSF), using the gatherings to not only forge global consensus around the possibilities of an alternative world that is not defined by the dictates of neoliberal capitalism, but to also showcase and propagate the city's participatory budgeting process and its model of deliberative democracy more broadly. As Gandin (2011) argues, Porto Alegre attained the status of a global city not because of its economic and financial importance in the world, as is the case with conventional global cities, but rather because it experimented with an alternative, counter-hegemonic vision of the world. Throughout the period when the PT was in power in Porto Alegre (1989–2004), the city leveraged its progressive urban policies, such as participatory budgeting and the citizen school project (see Gandin, 2011), to conduct one of the most proactive city diplomacies in Brazil, which was not merely in opposition to the dynamics of neoliberal globalisation but also sought to project and diffuse locally generated and transformative alternatives. In addition to its hosting of the WSF, Porto Alegre also championed the creation of the Forum of Local Authorities for Social Inclusion and Participatory Democracy (FAL), a platform for progressive local governments across the world to

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discuss and exchange experiences in the fight against global problems linked to social exclusion, including poverty, human rights violations and social justice (Salomon, 2011, p. 53). The FAL network has since been institutionalised as the Committee on Social Inclusion, Participatory Democracy and Human Rights, one of the four Committees of United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG), dedicated to the global promotion of social inclusion, participatory democracy and human rights.

As part of its counter-hegemonic internationalisation outside the framework of the WSF and FAL, Porto Alegre was also able to capitalise on its brand as a "global solidarity city" or "democracy network city" (Salomon, 2011, p. 58) to pursue an active decentralised South-South cooperation programme centred mainly around the diffusion of its participatory budgeting model. According to Goldfrank (2012, p. 2), these efforts were embedded in a broader campaign by the PT, which encouraged its mayors to widely disseminate the participatory budgeting model, based on the slogan "*Orçamento Participativo – Bom para todo mundo*" (Participatory Budgeting – Good for Everyone, or Good for the Whole World). For example, it was predominantly thanks to the influence, mentorship and technical support from Porto Alegre that Maputo initially adopted and experimented with the idea of participatory budgeting in its radical democratic conception (Nylen, 2014). Brazil and Mozambique, it should be recalled, share a colonial legacy in the form of having Portuguese as the official language. According to Carolini (2015), besides the interest demonstrated by Maputo officials in the Brazilian model of participatory budgeting, there was also a push from local government authorities in Porto Alegre. In 2006, the mayoral office in Porto Alegre invited a group of technical experts from Maputo to take part in an international workshop on municipal administration and to learn more about participatory budgeting. The then mayor of Maputo from 2003 to 2008, Eneas Comiche, is also believed to have visited Brazil to familiarise himself with the participatory budgeting process. This is in addition to Maputo sending two municipal employees as interns in Porto Alegre. It was thanks to the exposure and support from Porto Alegre that the city of Maputo would initially adopt a framework for participatory budgeting that approximated what Nylen (2014) has described as a "maximalist" Brazilian-style model, which has its normative roots in the empowering and emancipatory discourse of the PT's radical conception of democracy (see also Nganje, 2016).

Johannesburg and the localisation of the Bandung spirit

The city of Johannesburg in South Africa presents another interesting case in which city diplomacy has been deployed to localise and pursue the legacy of the Bandung Conference. Unlike the case of Porto Alegre, Johannesburg's status as an aspiring global city is not unconnected to its role in global capital flows. Johannesburg is South Africa's biggest city and the country's economic and financial hub. With the most diversified and globally connected economy in South Africa, Johannesburg is a quintessential globalising African city. It is home to major global firms offering financial, legal, accounting, advertising, telecommunication and media services. As the hub of central and southern Africa's linkages to the global economy, Johannesburg is classified alongside cities such as Seoul, Buenos Aires, Istanbul, Melbourne and Atlanta as an Alpha-minus

world city by the Globalization and World Cities Research Network (GaWC, 2024).[1] Alpha-minus level world cities are considered important links between major economic regions and the world economy, with the latter coordinated by first league world cities such as London, New York and Hong Kong. Not surprisingly, Johannesburg describes itself as "a World Class African City of the Future" (Nganje, 2024, p. 5).

But Johannesburg is also a symbol of the entrenched socioeconomic and spatial inequalities that are the enduring legacy of apartheid in South Africa. Thus, as an aspiring global city, Johannesburg is characterised by the coexistence of a globally integrated advanced producer services sector with an impoverished informal economy. It is in this context that the internationalisation of successive city administrations has featured both order-affirming, as well as order-challenging/building undercurrents. The period between 2011 and 2016, coinciding with the mayorship of Parks Tau, marked the zenith of Johannesburg's activist city diplomacy that resonates with the Bandung spirit. Besides the then mayor's internationalist orientation and domestic political ambitions, Johannesburg's attempts to localise the Bandung spirit were significantly inspired by the progressive internationalism doctrine of the African National Congress (ANC), South Africa's foremost liberation movement turned political party, which governed both at the national level and in the city of Johannesburg at the time. The ANC had sent a delegation to the Bandung Conference in 1955, and upon assuming the reins of power in South Africa in 1994, it would ideologically anchor the country's foreign policy in the legacy of the conference, notably the agitations for greater development space and the need for cooperation and solidarity among the countries in the South. After all, for the ANC, the difficulty in resolving South Africa's national question, defined in terms of the continued economic dispossession of the country's majority black population by the enduring legacy of apartheid policies, lies partly in the inequalities and injustices of the Western-led international order.

It is in this context that, despite Johannesburg's aspirations for global economic competitiveness, the city's internationalisation has always featured an uncharacteristic emphasis on solidarity partnerships with cities such as Ramallah in Palestine, St Petersburg in Russia and Ho Chi Minh City in Vietnam. The partnership with Ramallah is of particular significance as it underscores the ANC and South Africa's continued support for the Palestinian cause, considered to be a symbol of the Global South's enduring struggle for recognition and self-determination. While the ANC has been in power in Johannesburg, the city has expended significant material and political resources to demonstrate its solidarity with Palestine, despite opposition in some quarters. In 2016, it donated a bronze statue of the late South African freedom fighter and statesman, Nelson Mandela, which was erected in the Palestinian city. As noted by the then mayor of Ramallah, the initiative was intended to convey a message of freedom and equality to the world, in the context of the continued struggle of the Palestinians against what they consider to be an illegal and immoral occupation by the State of Israel (Anadolu Agency, 2016). As part of its commitment to diplomatic relations with the people of Palestine, the city council recently adopted a resolution to rename a popular street in the key business district of Sandton after the Palestinian freedom fighter, Leila Khaled. Given the location of the US Consulate on this street and the designation of Khaled as a terrorist by the US government, this decision

1. The GaWC classifies cities according to their level of global connectivity through four advanced producer services: accountancy, advertising, banking/finance and law. It uses the categories: Alpha, Beta, Gama and Sufficiency.

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has stirred significant domestic and geopolitical controversy, at a time when US-South African relations are at an all-time low (Mkentane, 2024).

Johannesburg's role as a torchbearer of the Bandung spirit was most evident from 2011 to 2016, when Parks Tau was mayor of the city. As an anti-apartheid activist and a key figure of the ANC in his native Soweto, Tau came to office embodying the ANC's liberation ethos, including its belief in progressive internationalism as a doctrine against global injustices. Thus, throughout his time as mayor of Johannesburg, and president of UCLG (2016–2019), Tau championed a campaign that, on the one hand, sought to urbanise global development discourse and policy and, on the other, embodied an attempt to localise South Africa and the Global South's struggle against the legacy of Western domination. Having identified multilateralism and networking as key sites for global influence, Johannesburg under Parks Tau would use the convening and advocacy power afforded by these avenues to introduce and canvass for the adoption of new ideas and norms on urban policy and development, which draw on alternative worldviews to the neoliberal order, and embody values such as solidarity, a sense of community and the material construction of rights. For example, Johannesburg introduced and advocated for the concept of "caring cities" to be mainstreamed within the work of the city network Metropolis. The concept is rooted in the humanistic values of the African philosophy of Ubuntu and speaks to the need to transform urban policy and governance into tools for promoting socioeconomic redress, inclusiveness, respect for diversity and sustainability (see Nganje, 2024). It is also through this prism that Parks Tau's efforts to reorganise the decision-making structures and processes of UCLG during his tenure as president of the network could best be understood. I have argued elsewhere that this reform agenda, which included introducing UCLG Policy Councils and an Ubuntu Advisory Panel designed to enhance policy ownership and political participation among the network's membership, was consistent with various bilateral and multilateral attempts by countries in the Global South to transform Western-dominated institutions of global governance. In this case, the goal was to curtail the power of the UCLG Secretariat, which was seen to be having an undue influence on the policy agenda and direction of the network, at the expense of the democratic participation and ownership of network policies by its members, especially those from developing counties with limited representation in the network's secretariat (Nganje, 2024).

Concluding reflections: The limits of city diplomacy as a tool for global social justice

This chapter is premised on the observation that, despite their historical marginalisation in the global economy, cities in the Global South have not always been bystanders in the making of world order. They have at one point or another been sites of agency that has sought to challenge, transform or at the very least demonstrate the potential for an alternative world order, based on progressive principles and values such as those that inspired the Bandung Conference. The significance of Bandung in this context thus lies in its embodiment of the liberatory aspirations of previously colonised societies that continue to suffer from the legacy of Western imperialism and domination. The cases of Porto Alegre and Johannesburg discussed here are by no means unique but

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speak to the pressures and dilemmas that city governments in the South are confronted with, as they seek to navigate a globalising economy that is also increasingly urbanised, but which remains steeped in colonial and imperial legacies. Given their unique context, it is inevitable that city diplomacy in the Global South would in one form or another, subtly or overtly, embody the South's historical struggle for recognition and self-determination, despite the fact that the present-day internationalisation of cities is to a large extent enabled by neoliberal globalisation, which, as Samir Amin (2017) argued, is the current organising principle challenging the emancipation of postcolonial societies.

From the perspective of city diplomacy, two distinct models for the localisation of the Global South's emancipatory agency can be identified from the cases discussed in this chapter. On the one hand is the Porto Alegre model, which took the form of the municipal institutionalisation of what was essentially a grassroots and workers' social movement driven by a counter-hegemonic ideology. Arguably, its relatively successful impact, as seen in the global adoption of, and the discursive contestations around, the concept and practice of participatory budgeting, owed much to the coproduction of both the city's domestic and diplomatic initiatives by city officials and civil society actors. Moreover, in the Porto Alegre model, city diplomacy as emancipatory internationalism was partly enabled and strengthened by being embedded in a multilayered diplomatic structure that emerged in Brazil when the PT took over control of the national government in 2003. This experience contrasts significantly with the Johannesburg model, which although sharing a similar goal, was built predominantly on the vision and drive of the mayor. Johannesburg's approach to localising the Bandung spirit also relied heavily on the city's attractiveness to global centres of capital and networks of power, as opposed to drawing on the agency of its marginalised urban population, as was the case in Porto Alegre. This, together with the personalised approach to international relations, arguably prescribed the limits of what could be achieved from the city's diplomacy of solidarity and emancipation.

It is worth underscoring that, as mechanisms for localising the Global South's struggle for justice and equality, both the Porto Alegre and Johannesburg models of city diplomacy were enabled in varying degrees by changes in the structure of the global capitalist economy, which have allowed cities to assume a prominent role in the construction of world order. As Anni Kangas (2017) argues, these global capitalist cities operate under conditions of neoliberal dominance, which has a disciplinary effect on their internal and external organisation, as well as their transformative aspirations. This, in my view, constitutes the single most important structural constraint on the agency of city governments in the Global South to localise the Bandung spirit. The example of Porto Alegre is illustrative in this regard. Despite the largely grassroots foundations of its progressive municipal internationalism, the city would in subsequent years undergo governance transformations that are consistent with the principles of neoliberal urbanism and the conservative politics increasingly associated with it. This has contributed to not only diluting the city's radical experiments in participatory democracy, but also to dimming its alternative vision of the world (see Leubolt et al., 2008; Lothaire et al., 2021). In Johannesburg,

the disciplining power of the neoliberal paradigm has always been a major determinant of the city's internationalisation efforts, dictating the parameters of the adoption and diffusion of the leadership's progressive ideas in global city networks and other forums, and generally crowding out its emancipatory agenda with alternative, externally driven agendas and priorities. It is in this context that Parks Tau would face considerable backlash for attempting to localise the carbon emission reduction campaign promoted by the city network C40 by introducing a US$4.9m bicycle lane project in 2014, without due consideration of the social values, alternative transport systems, politics and topography of the city. While the idea of commuter cycling in itself has merits in a congested city like Johannesburg, the mayor was accused of putting the cart before the horse by championing the network's agenda over the priorities of the city's marginalised population (Morgan, 2017). Faced with similar neoliberal systemic pressures as a member of the Rockefeller Foundation's 100 Resilient Cities (100RC) programme, the South African city of Durban responded differently by opting to pull out of the network rather than embrace a foreign conception of resilience that was not rooted in the politics and realities of the city. The constraining effect of the neoliberal hegemony on the transformative agency of cities in the South and how Durban chose to respond to it, in the context of the transnational discourse and practice of urban resilience, is succinctly captured in the following reflection by officials and scholars in the city:

> Durban reflects negotiated just resilience, critical resilience and socio-ecological resilience. 100RC's approach is more strongly aligned with mainstream approaches to resilience, which are less political, more technocratic and less cognizant of the structural relations that produce the need for resilience. It is perhaps these conceptual differences that resulted in Durban and 100RC parting ways. The 100RC programme did not have the space for different approaches, as this would undermine the rolling out of a global model of urban resilience upon which a market of resilience tools, instruments and practices could be built. Durban's core resilience team was not willing to shift the resilience strategy to the level required by 100RC, to align with its hegemonic approach, as this would have undermined the particular quality of the resilience building required in a city with transformative social, environmental, economic and governance goals…What surprised the authors the most in reflecting on this journey was that there was no space within 100RC's initiative for this debate or difference. When this dissent emerged, 100RC attempted to use its dominant global position to assert power over resilience building in Durban by trying to influence politics in the city. This is unfortunate, as we believe that both Durban and the 100RC lost an opportunity to work together and to develop innovative practices and knowledge for building transformative resilience in cities in the South, and more particularly in Africa. (Roberts et al., 2020, pp. 20–21).

The case of Johannesburg further brings to light the challenges to emancipatory city diplomacy associated with geopolitical dynamics. In the first instance, the enduring Francophone-Anglophone divide in Africa, a legacy of European colonialisation on the continent kept alive by continued French influence in its former colonies, has worked to undermine unity within the local government fraternity in Africa, in the

same way it has beset regional and continental diplomacy. Through a network of paternalistic institutions and so-called decentralised cooperation partnerships, France and French interests have remained embedded in the sociocultural, economic, political and diplomatic imaginations of francophone African cities. This neocolonial influence disguised as cooperation limits the space for Pan-African cooperation, coordination and solidarity necessary for amplifying the agency and effects of transformative city diplomacy initiatives such as those championed by Johannesburg from 2011 to 2016.[2] Geopolitics as a constraint on the agency of cities in the Global South to localise the Bandung spirit is also evident in the apparent backtracking of the city of Johannesburg in renaming Sandton Drive after a Palestinian freedom fighter. As noted earlier, the city council adopted a resolution to rename the street in 2018 to bolster its diplomatic relations with Palestine. However, in the context of rising geopolitical tensions between Pretoria and Washington, and mindful of the diplomatic implications of renaming the street, the city recently opted to subject the decision to further consultations, with the mayor arguing that solidarity with global causes such as support for Palestine should not be used to undermine South Africa's partnerships with other nations (Sidimba, 2025).

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2. To the extent that the Commonwealth can be construed as a neocolonial instrument, a British influence can also be identified in the development of city diplomacy in Africa, through the activities of the Commonwealth Local Government Forum. Arguably, this fades in comparison to the pervasive French influence over its former colonies.

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68   LOCALISING THE SPIRIT OF BANDUNG? CITY DIPLOMACY AND THE GLOBAL SOUTH'S STRUGGLE FOR A JUST AND EQUITABLE WORLD ORDER

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SINGAPORE'S ROLE IN CITY DIPLOMACY: LESSONS FROM ITS LEADERSHIP IN DEVELOPING THE ASEAN SMART CITIES NETWORK

Melinda Martinus

Lead Researcher, ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute

Introduction

Transnational city diplomacy refers to the active engagement of cities in international relations. It enables urban governments to pursue shared interests, address transnational challenges, and build cross-border coalitions, outside from national foreign policy frameworks. While international diplomacy has traditionally been the purview of sovereign states, the past few decades have seen its increasing decentralisation. Cities, empowered by their growing economic influence and interconnectivity through global flows of infrastructure, technology, and information, are asserting agency on issues of direct relevance to their urban development agenda, including climate change, digital governance, and infrastructure expansion.

This trend can be seen in Asia. Cities across the region have raised their international profiles. For instance, with the rise of mass rapid transit funded by the Chinese-backed Belt and Road Initiative, land-locked Laotian cities such as Luang Prabang and Vientiane are now connected to several cities in China, particularly Kunming, integrating them more closely into global trade corridors (Chanthevivanh et al., 2023). At the same time, some Asian cities have gained recognition for their innovation and governance capacities. In the 2025 Smart City Index developed by the International Institute for Management and Development, Singapore (9th globally), Seoul (13th), Beijing (14th), Shanghai (15th), and Hong Kong (19th) are among the world's top performers, underscoring how Asian urban centres are increasingly influential on the global stage (IMD, 2025). Cities across Asia also pursue their own forms of diplomacy to advance their economic interests and showcase their expertise globally. This includes Seoul's Global Metropolitan Partnership (GMP) programme, which provides technical support and training for international city officials (Lee, 2023). Tokyo likewise leads initiatives on urban disaster resilience, particularly after the 2011 Great East Japan Earthquake, offering lessons and its expertise to other Asian cities (Ranghieri & Ishiwatari, 2014).

In Southeast Asia, city diplomacy has gained momentum in tandem with rapid urbanisation and the growing recognition of cities as engines of regional economic integration and innovation. Cities across the region, such as Jakarta,

Manila, Singapore, Bangkok, and others, have been actively engaged in various *paradiplomacy* platforms, including ICLEI (Local Governments for Sustainability), UCLG (United Cities and Local Governments), C40 Cities Climate Leadership Group (C40), WeGO (World Smart Sustainable Cities Organization), the Resilient Cities Network (R-Cities, formerly 100 Resilient Cities), and the Strong Cities Network (SCN) (Martinus, 2020).

The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), as the region's sole multilateral organisation, also has been influential in facilitating city-to-city cooperation, even though its agenda has traditionally focused on security and geopolitics and facilitating state-to-state cooperation. Within this framework, Singapore in particular, as a founding member of ASEAN, plays a distinctive role. As both a city and a sovereign state, Singapore blurs the line between national and municipal diplomacy, making city diplomacy a central component of its international relations (Martinez & Bunnell, 2024). This dual identity enables Singapore to advance its interests simultaneously at the state and city levels.

Singapore's influence has been further reinforced through its turns in ASEAN's rotational chairmanship. The chairmanship, which is rotated among the ten member states in alphabetical order, gives each country the opportunity to shape the regional agenda. Singapore has consistently used this platform to introduce initiatives that reflect its own national priorities while also contributing to broader regional objectives.

During its chairmanship in 2018, Singapore launched the ASEAN Smart Cities Network (ASCN)[1] (Centre for Liveable Cities & Ministry of Foreign Affairs Singapore, 2018)**,** a pioneering initiative designed to foster collaboration among city governments across the region, enabling them to articulate shared interests, co-develop smart urban solutions, and connect with like-minded partners across and beyond the region. This marked a new direction for ASEAN. The regional governance structure operates primarily at the state level, with coordination led by the Ministries of Foreign Affairs (MoFAs) of each member state and sectoral cooperation initiated through thematic mechanisms involving various ministries within each government. With the launch of the ASCN, now ASEAN is expanding its scope across localities in the region.

Singapore's role in the establishment of the ASCN is worth examining. Its strategic motivations are driven by both national and regional interests: nationally, the city-state aims to showcase its expertise, export technological capacities, and expand its homegrown industries' footprints into Southeast Asian markets; regionally, it seeks to connect ASEAN cities with potential partners and investors. The paper explores the formation of the ASCN and the challenges encountered in implementing such a regional platform, and is structured around three interrelated themes. The first section establishes the theoretical context by examining how spatial dynamics and governance practices intersect with the study of international relations. The second section explores the operation of the ASCN, highlighting its institutional design, implementation challenges, and the key lessons that emerge from Singapore's leadership role. The third section considers the network's broader contribution to the evolving discourse on diplomacy and regional cooperation. It concludes by discussing the wider implications for Southeast Asia's regional architecture and the future of subnational diplomacy.

1. https://asean.org/our-communities/asean-smart-cities-network/.

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The nexus of geography, spatial governance, and international relations

The intersection of geography, spatial governance, and international relations provides a critical lens for understanding how space, scale, and political authority interact in shaping global urban processes. This interdisciplinary approach draws on insights from political geography, urban studies, and global governance scholarship to reveal how power is exercised and negotiated through spatial arrangements and territorial practices. Deploying this framework allows the analysis to move beyond state-centric perspectives and instead highlight the ways cities operate as autonomous yet interconnected actors within a multilayered global order.

The growing influence of urban actors in shaping multilateral arrangements has been well documented across numerous contexts. According to the most recent World Bank estimates, 57% of the world's population resides in cities or urban areas as of 2024, a figure projected to rise steadily in the coming decades (Trading Economics, nd). This demographic shift has positioned cities as critical actors in global governance, central to addressing transnational challenges such as sustainable development, climate change, and digital transformation. Increasingly, cities operate not only within national governance structures but also across borders, engaging in multilayered networks and partnerships that range from formal coalitions to informal forums connected with multilateral institutions (Acuto, 2013). Cities' growing significance can also be seen in Sassen's (2005) illustration of "global cities" like New York, London, and Tokyo, which function as command and control centres of the world economy, demonstrating how spatial concentration generates new forms of political and economic agency.

Building on this foundation, cities today are advancing their interests through *paradiplomacy* – subnational diplomacy that allows them to forge alliances, participate in international forums, and even negotiate agreements independent of their national governments (Tavares, 2016). This evolution is often explained through multilevel governance theory, which emphasises the dispersal of authority across national, regional, and local levels (Marks & Hooghe, 2004). Within such frameworks, cities are not merely implementers of national policies but proactive shapers of global governance outcomes. Scholarship drawing on relational geography and critical planning theory further underscores that urban knowledge, planning norms, and spatial imaginaries circulate across borders, revealing how city-level governance is as much political as it is technical (Massey, 2005).

The relevance of these theoretical insights is particularly evident in the face of contemporary urban challenges, including climate change mitigation, digital transformation, and infrastructure development, which demand cross-border coordination. City diplomacy has emerged as a practical mechanism for addressing these issues. One of the most compelling regions in which to examine the practice of city diplomacy is Southeast Asia, a region undergoing rapid urbanisation and where cities are increasingly recognised as engines of economic growth, innovation, and regional integration (Yap, 2017). The ASEAN region's urban population is expected to rise from 49% in 2018 to 66% by 2050, with countries like Singapore already fully urbanised (ASEAN Secretariat, 2022).

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The practice of city diplomacy in Southeast Asia is shaped by considerable diversity in institutional capacity, urban governance, and political systems.

Yet the practice of city diplomacy in Southeast Asia is shaped by considerable diversity in institutional capacity, urban governance, and political systems. Singapore, for example, projects a highly centralised, technocratic, and infrastructure-driven urban model rooted in digital innovation and strategic land use planning. Cities like Jakarta (Indonesia), with extensive informal settlements, or Luang Prabang (Lao PDR), where heritage conservation intersects with resource constraints and shape the livelihood of most residents, require planning approaches that differ significantly from Singapore's. Adopting urban models in these cities is not a matter of following successful practices implemented elsewhere; it involves adapting ideas to fit local realities and negotiating what works in each unique context. It also entails contestation, negotiation, and adaptation as ideas travel across distinct sociopolitical and spatial contexts (Robinson, 2011).

Against this backdrop, city diplomacy must be conceptualised not merely as a tool for international engagement but as a spatial and political practice that reshapes how urban futures are imagined and governed. This theoretical framework foregrounds the entanglement of diplomacy with geography and spatial governance.

Singapore's experiences with the ASCN

The ASEAN Smart Cities Network (ASCN) was inaugurated in 2018 under Singapore's ASEAN chairmanship as a flagship initiative to institutionalise urban cooperation across the region. Conceived as a platform to leverage digital technologies and sustainable infrastructure, the ASCN seeks to enhance urban liveability, economic competitiveness, and environmental resilience. By formalising city-to-city collaboration, it embodies the principles of multilevel governance, integrating state and non-state actors – including municipal governments, private enterprises, academia, and international organisations – into ASEAN's regional architecture.

Singapore's regional leadership in urban governance predates the ASCN. Since 2008, the city-state had demonstrated international leadership through the establishment of the Centre for Liveable Cities (CLC) and the launch of the inaugural World Cities Summit (WCS). According to its official brochure, the WCS was created to gather and share knowledge on building liveable and sustainable cities worldwide (World Cities Summit, nd) . Over time, the summit has expanded to include the WCS Mayors Forum, the Lee Kuan Yew World City Prize, and the WCS Young Leaders Symposium. These initiatives illustrate Singapore's broader strategy of positioning itself as a knowledge hub and innovation node in the region, as well as an important actor shaping urban agendas.

The ASCN reflects what Peck & Theodore (2015)with new ideas, fads, and fashions moving at social-media speed. New policy ideas, especially \"ideas that work,\" are now able to find not only a worldwide audience but also transnational salience in remarkably short order.   <i>Fast Policy</i> is the first systematic treatment of this phenomenon, one that compares processes of policy development across two rapidly moving fields that emerged in the Global South and have quickly been adopted worldwide?conditional cash transfers (a social policy program that conditions payments on behavioral compliance describe as *policy*

mobilities, whereby urban models are not merely replicated but strategically circulated and localised across different sociopolitical contexts. In doing so, it also exemplifies what Acuto (2013b) terms *urban diplomacy*, where cities influence international agendas through networks that operate alongside – and sometimes beyond – state-centric mechanisms.

There are several motivations for Singapore's pursuit of the ASCN:

1. Strategic regional influence**:** Singapore consolidates its leadership within ASEAN's evolving governance ecosystem, exercising global entrepreneurship by shaping urban policy agendas and institutional practices beyond traditional intergovernmental diplomacy.
2. Economic competitiveness: The network fosters regional connectivity, innovation ecosystems, and technology diffusion, aligning with Singapore's developmental trajectory as a knowledge-intensive, post-industrial economy and enhancing its regional economic centrality.
3. Exporting governance models: The ASCN functions as a vehicle for disseminating Singapore's technocratic, infrastructure-driven urban governance paradigm. This projection of governance practices constitutes a form of soft power (Nye, 1990), embedding Singaporean policy frameworks into regional urban imaginaries.
4. Addressing transnational challenges**:** Recognising that climate change, digital transformation, and urban resilience are border-transcending issues, the ASCN provides a platform for coordinated regional responses.

When it was launched in 2018, the network included 26 cities across ASEAN's ten member states, primarily capital and secondary cities with rapid urbanisation profiles and strong potential for scaling urban leadership. The network has since grown to 31 cities (ASEAN Secretariat, 2024). Singapore played a pivotal role in its creation: the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) provided strategic direction, while the Centre for Liveable Cities (CLC) acted as a key knowledge partner. Other contributing ministries and statutory boards included the Ministry of Trade and Industry (MTI), Enterprise Singapore, the Info-communications Media Development Authority (IMDA), and the Smart Nation and Digital Government Office (SNDGO) under the Prime Minister's Office (Tan et al., 2021).

Beyond Singapore's government agencies, the ASCN agenda was shaped and promoted by four additional stakeholder groups: (i) international and regional bodies, notably the ASEAN Secretariat through its Integration and Monitoring Directorate; (ii) private companies and government-linked corporations (GLCs); (iii) multilateral development institutions; and (iv) universities and think tanks providing research support and policy guidance (Tan et al., 2021).

Operationally, the ASCN functions as a platform for knowledge exchange and project matchmaking rather than a funding or regulatory body. According to the ASEAN Smart Cities Network Concept Note (2018), cities develop their own Smart City Action Plans, which outline priority projects and desired outcomes in areas such as mobility, energy, and digital governance. These plans are then presented to ASEAN member states and dialogue partners during annual meetings, where potential investors, technology providers, and development partners can engage directly with city representatives. This process facilitates the circulation of best practices and enables resource mobilisation, while allowing cities to

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retain discretion over project design and implementation. The network also convenes thematic workshops and capacity-building activities to strengthen technical expertise among participating cities and foster peer-to-peer learning. In addition to Singapore's foundational contribution, the network has received substantial funding support from ASEAN dialogue partners, including the Republic of Korea, Australia, the United States, and Japan, to offset the institutional cost of the network (Martinus, 2020). This funding model, reliant on support from external partners, reflects a pragmatic response to the fiscal constraints commonly faced by regional initiatives. Yet it also exposes the delicate balance between maintaining operational viability and navigating the potential influence or competing interests of donor states.

Still, the ASCN remains a nascent and experimental initiative. Its reliance on voluntary participation and diverse city capacities generates uneven engagement and limits policy coherence. Many ASEAN cities lack the fiscal autonomy, technical expertise, and digital infrastructure required for meaningful participation. Administrative asymmetries hinder reciprocity and slow project implementation. In countries like Vietnam and Lao PDR, cities are directly subordinated to state government, limiting their autonomy. Even in member states with legal decentralisation, such as Indonesia and the Philippines, political fragmentation weakens city-level coordination and decision-making. Moreover, even when initiatives are widely endorsed by ASCN members, due to ASEAN's long-standing norms of consensus endorsed at the state level, city-to-city initiatives often require central government approval, reducing their autonomy and agility.

The transferability of Singapore's model of technocratic urbanism also poses significant challenges. Its highly centralised and well-resourced planning system is difficult to replicate in many ASEAN cities, where informality, land tenure disputes, weak enforcement of zoning and building codes, and fragmented governance dominate urban management. This raises critical questions about whether Singapore's influence is truly transformative or primarily symbolic. As Martinez & Bunnell (2024) argue, Singapore's dynamism in city diplomacy is distinctive because it draws on the political authority and decision-making powers of a sovereign state, coupled with its commercial interests. Through this unique position, Singapore promotes the circulation of its urban model not only to shape urban development but also to influence regional geopolitics and interstate relations.

Furthermore, planning paradigms rooted in Singapore's emphasis on order, efficiency, and control may conflict with the sociocultural and political realities of other ASEAN cities, requiring ongoing adaptation and contextualisation. For instance, unlike Singapore, many Southeast Asian cities prioritise balancing rapid urban growth with pressing socioeconomic challenges, such as poverty reduction, affordable housing provision, and inclusive access to basic services. Their planning agendas are often shaped by demographic pressures, migration, and the need to integrate large informal economies into formal governance frameworks. For example, cities like Jakarta, Manila, and Ho Chi Minh City must contend with flood management, public health vulnerabilities, and infrastructure deficits that affect low-income populations most acutely. These realities mean that smart city projects cannot focus exclusively on technological optimisation

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or efficiency but must also address equity, livelihoods, and participatory governance. As a result, the ASCN's agenda requires contextual adaptation to ensure that its emphasis on digitalisation and data-driven governance does not exacerbate existing socio-spatial inequalities.

Finally, the ASCN operates within a competitive geopolitical environment due to the ASCN funding structure that allows the contribution of dialogue partners and donors. As a result, ASEAN cities are simultaneously courted by major external powers, including China's Belt and Road Initiative, Japan's Partnership for Quality Infrastructure, and US-led digital cooperation frameworks. This multipolar landscape complicates the ASCN's efforts to establish a cohesive regional vision, as city diplomacy becomes entangled with broader strategic rivalries and infrastructural competition.

This tension is evident in the case of Davao City and Metro Manila in the Philippines, which faced controversy over its decision to appoint Chinese technology company Huawei to supply a city-wide CCTV surveillance system (Romero, 2018). While the initiative promised enhanced public safety and smart monitoring capabilities, it triggered domestic and international debates about cybersecurity risks, data privacy, and the influence of Chinese technology in critical urban infrastructure. The episode illustrates the dilemma facing ASEAN cities: they must balance urgent local development needs with geopolitical sensitivities and national security considerations, often under divergent pressures from competing external partners.

The ASCN as an alternative regional architecture and a model for post-Western diplomacy

The ASCN represents an emergent experiment in regional governance that partially decentralises ASEAN's traditionally state-centric framework by granting a formalised role to subnational urban actors. Unlike ASEAN's treaty-based instruments or consensus-driven decision-making, the ASCN relies on voluntary participation, informal norms, and networked coordination among cities. This institutional flexibility allows ASEAN to address transboundary urban challenges such as digital infrastructure, sustainable planning, and climate resilience more rapidly and adaptively than its conventional mechanisms.

In theoretical terms, the ASCN aligns with the concept of inclusive regionalism of Amitav Acharya (2014), where the legitimacy of regional governance derives not solely from sovereign states but from broader stakeholder participation and collective problem-solving. By formally recognising cities as diplomatic and developmental stakeholders, the ASCN creates what can be conceptualised as a horizontal diplomatic arena. This horizontal layer complements, and occasionally bypasses, ASEAN's vertical, state-to-state channels, enabling new forms of norm production, policy transfer, and peer-to-peer learning that are less encumbered by the principle of non-interference.

Nevertheless, the ASCN's transformative potential is constrained by structural asymmetries. Voluntary cooperation generates uneven engagement across member cities and limited follow-through on project

ASEAN cities face a dilemma: they must balance urgent local development needs with geopolitical sensitivities and national security considerations, often under divergent pressures from competing external partners.

The ASCN should be read not merely as a technical initiative but as a prototype for a more distributed and adaptive form of ASEAN regionalism. Its long-term significance will depend on whether it can institutionalise city participation, mitigate capacity asymmetries, and navigate the geopolitical competition surrounding smart city infrastructure.

commitments. Well-resourced cities, such as Singapore, Bangkok, and Jakarta, tend to attract more attention from dialogue partners and are better positioned to influence agenda setting, while less-capacitated municipalities risk being followers, thereby reproducing the development disparities the initiative ostensibly seeks to reduce. Furthermore, ASEAN's consensus principle and respect for national sovereignty continue to mediate city participation, as most projects still require central government endorsement. Without institutional mechanisms to ensure inclusivity, build local capacity, and embed city-level initiatives into ASEAN's broader policy cycle, the ASCN risks becoming a showcase platform rather than a driver of structural transformation in regional urban governance.

From a diplomatic perspective, the ASCN exemplifies the ongoing reconfiguration of international relations in a multipolar, post-Western world. By elevating cities as legitimate actors, the initiative reframes diplomacy from a state-centred, high-politics activity to one focused on technical collaboration, innovation, and knowledge exchange. Its emphasis on pragmatic, solution-oriented engagement, guided by expertise, data, and technological standards, further underscores this shift.

This approach resonates with trends in Global South regionalism that emphasises pragmatic multilateralism and what Keshab Raj Acharya (2019) terms *localisation usability:* context-specific adaptations of global ideas into local practices. Rather than importing Western templates wholesale in terms of smart city concept and urban development imaginaries, the ASCN enables Southeast Asian cities to co-produce hybrid governance norms that reflect local developmental priorities while remaining globally connected. However, as noted in the previous section, the ASCN's funding model – reliant on external partners – reveals the persistent limitations of member cities in fully exercising their agency, underscoring the tension between maintaining operational viability and the potential influence or competing interests of donor states.

Crucially, the ASCN redefines the practice of diplomacy in Southeast Asia. Instead of formal treaties and binding commitments, influence is exercised through the ability to convene cities, diffuse planning norms, and mobilise finance and technical expertise for tangible urban solutions. This infrastructure- and technology-centric diplomacy reflects ASEAN's distinctive mode of regionalism – informal, consensus-based, and problem-oriented – while signalling a gradual broadening of its governance ecosystem beyond the state. However, certain limitations persist. Owing to ASEAN's practice of achieving consensus primarily at the state level, city-to-city initiatives, although regionally endorsed, often require central government approval, thereby constraining their autonomy and agility.

In sum, the ASCN should be read not merely as a technical initiative but as a prototype for a more distributed and adaptive form of ASEAN regionalism. Its long-term significance will depend on whether it can institutionalise city participation, mitigate capacity asymmetries, and navigate the geopolitical competition surrounding smart city infrastructure. If successful, it could offer Southeast Asia a model of post-Western, city-led diplomacy that expands the region's agency in shaping global governance and strengthens ASEAN's relevance in an era of increasingly multilevel and networked cooperation.

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Since the late 20th century, cities have progressively asserted themselves as influential actors in international affairs, propelled by their demographic centrality and economic weight. This outward orientation has been facilitated by the proliferation of transnational municipal networks, which provide institutionalised platforms for resource pooling, knowledge exchange, and the pursuit of collective policy objectives. City diplomacy, once a marginal phenomenon, has thus become an increasingly salient dimension of global governance.

The contemporary landscape of city diplomacy, however, is markedly more complex than a few decades ago. Its evolution must be understood in relation to both the internal dynamics of the networks themselves and the broader transformations of the international system. Internally, the institutionalisation of city networks has conferred growing authority upon their secretariats, while private sector actors have assumed a more prominent role in financing and shaping agendas. At the same time, intermunicipal relations are increasingly conditioned by the geopolitical interests of nation-states, exposing city diplomacy to the tensions generated by the erosion of multilateralism. Furthermore, the expanding international engagement of cities in the Global South signals a reconfiguration of power relations within global governance, challenging the historical predominance of Western actors.

The CIDOB Monograph *City Diplomacy in a Fragmented World: Geopolitical Tensions, the Crisis of Multilateralism, and the Rising Global South* gathers contributions by scholars from across the world to analyse the multiple dimensions of city diplomacy. It explores how cities and city networks are reshaping global diplomacy amid geopolitical turbulence, institutional fragility, and shifting power balances.