

Toward City Diplomacy: Assessing capacity in select global cities

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Executive summary

Cities are now more connected than ever before on a global scale. Yet local governments are not just spectators of this networked age: they are actively forging links across borders, taking part in setting the international agenda, and shifting the landscape of urban politics from local to increasingly global.

There are hundreds of formalized city networks around the world addressing a broad range of issues, and the potential of cities' external engagements is as vast as it is untapped. City diplomacy is and must become a strategic activity for cities worldwide if they are to remain relevant in the new global order.

To get a more systematic look at the capacity of local governments around the world, select global cities were reviewed to explore their strategies, structure, expertise, and participation in networks. The following findings will inform future efforts to build capacity for more effective global engagement:

- The majority of cities have an international strategy and a dedicated international office.
- The city budget for global engagement is often minimal.

- Only a few cities reported that their staff has undergone dedicated training for city diplomacy.
- A majority of cities participate in international networks.
- A majority of cities reported that city diplomacy has had a positive impact on their cities.

Building on these initial findings, cities seeking to expand their international influence need to consider the following:

- Define a clear international strategy and coordinated approach.
- Better deploy resources toward managing international relationships and strategy.
- Prioritize engagements to avoid both over-commitment and opportunistic, short-term ventures.
- Measure the impact and value of city diplomacy.
- Integrate local demands with international agendas.

As cities increasingly become influential actors on the global stage, they need to invest in resources, expertise, and capacity to manage their relationships and responsibilities to conduct city diplomacy effectively.

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The City Leadership Lab at University College London tackles globally relevant city challenges that are practically oriented and often locally focused. The distinct endeavor for applied inquiry reflects the Lab's desire to meet and unravel constraints on leadership, with a view toward reimagining city leadership for the 21st century.

The Melbourne School of Design is the graduate school of the Faculty of Architecture, Building, and Planning at the University of Melbourne. The Faculty actively seeks to extend the linkages between education, research, and practice in the built environment, and aims to inspire learning through interdisciplinary reflection, and its integration of research, teaching, and practice around the implications of all forms of urbanization.

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Introduction

Why should cities, traditionally focused on local politics, concern themselves with international relations?

It is an inevitable evolution. Cities are increasingly held responsible for dealing with city-level issues that have global implications, such as pollution, health, safety, climate change, migration, and economic well-being. In response, cities are formalizing city-to-city cooperation on the international stage and developing networks and partnerships to develop solutions to these challenges. Today there are at least 200 city networks connecting local authorities across borders and continents, and the political-economic clout of cities is growing. Long-lived national coalitions of cities, some more than 50 years old, have been created to make the voices of cities heard within national politics. There is also a growing number of intercity economic twinings, which are more relevant than ever as cities make up an increasingly larger portion of global GDP.

Whether it is to promote economic growth, advocate on city issues, or find independent and city-led solutions to problems with which nation-states struggle, cities are increasingly turning to each other, often through multilateral platforms spanning the world, and conducting a new form of city diplomacy. The consequences of this new type of engagement is unknown, but this research topic deserves a more thorough and methodological investigation.

Nation-states have long practiced diplomatic functions such as facilitating communication, negotiating agreements, gathering information, preventing conflicts, and taking part in international society. Cities are now using similar tactics, mirroring and engaging with state-level diplomacy and tackling issues such as local infrastructure needs or bottom-up approaches to peacekeeping.

City diplomacy is the conduct of external relations undertaken by official representatives of cities with other actors, particularly other cities, nation-states, NGOs, and corporations. Today, city diplomacy has become more than a symbolic relationship or cultural exchange, and cities are increasingly recognized in their potential to shape international processes and global agendas. Furthermore, the boundaries of cities are blurred as borough, municipal, metropolitan, and regional authorities see the benefit of engaging globally and representing their domains on international stages.

City diplomacy is increasingly formal. A recent UCL City Leadership Lab study of 200 city networks found that a quarter met at least once a year, with another 20 percent scheduling irregular meetings and conferences. More than 44 percent of the city networks have produced joint policies.

Indeed, as evidenced by groups such as the C40 Cities Climate Leadership Group, the Global Covenant of Mayors for Climate & Energy, ICLEI-Local Governments for Sustainability, and the Rockefeller Foundation's 100 Resilient Cities, city networks have massive potential to help cities mobilize resources, shape global agendas, and connect urban innovation across the world. Yet there are mounting concerns that resource-constrained cities could be overwhelmed by the multitude of twinning and network arrangements available to them. To take full advantage of the growing cadre of city diplomacy opportunities (Exhibit 1), cities must work to better navigate the global landscape of urban networks and understand how local governments are building capacity to support international engagement activities.

City diplomacy is the conduct of external relations undertaken by official representatives of cities with other actors.

Exhibit 1

City diplomacy type	Key characteristics
Place-based global engagement	City diplomacy is not necessarily conducted in the halls and fora of international affairs; it can happen in cities as international actors engage with local markets, politics, and cultures.
Municipal foreign policy	More and more cities are currently taking international engagements more seriously. This adjustment, in many cases, equates delineating a more explicit "foreign policy" for municipal governments, an activity that (in its modern form) dates back to at least the 1970s—if not centuries.
City twinning and bilateral relations	City-to-city bilateral relations are still an important mode of engagement by cities internationally, regionally, and nationally, and cities have a long-lived track record of collaborations.
City networks	City networks are possibly the most common instantiation of the mix of place-based global engagements and municipal foreign policy; they connect local innovation with international collaboration, linking cities with other national and international actors.
Nonmunicipal city networking	International networking is not limited to bilateral city-to-city cooperation or formalized city networks. In fact, these two modes of municipal foreign policy could be the tip of a much broader iceberg of city diplomacy and globalizing connections between city hall and the world.

Source: Analysis of 27 cities by the Chicago Council on Global Affairs, City Leaders Lab at University College London, and the Melbourne School of Design

The capacity of cities

To offer a preliminary international outline of contemporary efforts, we asked a diverse sample of 27 global cities to anonymously respond to a series of questions related to their strategies and budgets, structure and leadership, expertise and training, and participation in networks. (For the full list of cities, see the Methodology.) The following sections discuss key findings based on respondents' feedback.

Strategies and budgets

When assessing city diplomacy in global cities, it is important to see local governments establish

an explicit strategy backed with resource allocations. Most of the cities reported having dedicated international engagement strategies of some kind (Exhibit 2), although they were not consistently defined. Some strategies encompass efforts to attract foreign direct investment, while others outline strategic global relationships for the city to pursue. Half of the respondents said their strategy was part of a broader city strategy or plan, such as an overall city vision or a wider economic development document. In about one-third of those cases, the strategy was publicly available online.

Exhibit 2



Three-quarters of the cities reported having a dedicated budget for city diplomacy, yet in the majority of cities the budget represented less than 1 percent of the overall city budget. We also asked cities if their budgets for international engagement had increased, decreased, or stayed the same over the past five years. Nearly as many cities said their budgets increased as those that said it decreased, raising questions about which cities are choosing to invest in city diplomacy and why. Activities related to international relations remain mostly subsidiary to wider goals of local government administrations and appear to be generally underfunded.

Structure and leadership

Formalized structures and offices in government are key to sustaining—and maximizing—international relationships. Some cities have an equivalent to a nation-state’s foreign office, but it is unclear whether these offices are central, or a priority, to the city’s overall governing agenda.

All but one of the respondent cities reported having a dedicated international office. In more than half of the cities, it is an integrated office that is a part of another office, such as economic development, trade, or protocol—but about one-quarter reported that their international offices are totally independent from other city departments rather than integrated in existing agencies.

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Most cities with independent international offices said the office is positioned within the executive office of the mayor or within the municipality—demonstrating that when cities have an international office, the activities are perceived as close to the core needs and operations of a connected global city.

While city diplomacy can be undertaken by a variety of official representatives in local government, more than three-fourths of the cities reported having a dedicated senior figure in charge of city diplomacy. The titles varied; in about half of the cases, the individual was named chief adviser on international matters. Other respondents identified a position at the deputy mayor level for diplomacy and a chief diplomat or chief international negotiator. It is unclear if the specific roles and responsibilities of these positions are consistent from city to city. Regardless of title, for an example of the activities under the purview of this position, see sidebar, “Sample responsibilities of a city director of global affairs.”

Sample responsibilities of a city director of global affairs

Reporting directly to the mayor, the city director of global affairs is responsible for:

- Developing, implementing, and assessing the City’s global engagement strategy.
- Serving as the City’s official liaison to, and maintaining the City’s relationships with:
 - Other layers of government and governance, such as central and regional governments, committees and authorities, business coalitions, and other cities, nationally and internationally.
 - The worldwide international community, including foreign governments, the multi-lateral system (UN agencies, multilateral banks, the G20, international treaties, and so forth), NGOs, civil society groups, corporations, and city networks.
- Advising the mayor and City staff on questions of global affairs.
- Representing the mayor and the City at key meetings and events on global issues.
- Organizing and overseeing the mayor’s interactions with external dignitaries and delegations, partner cities, and representatives of business civil society, including both strategies and logistics of visits and trade missions involving the City’s executive.
- Serving as the point person for sharing of best practices with other cities, governments, and nongovernmental entities, and overseeing the signing of agreements.

Expertise and training

Just a few cities reported having a dedicated international office led by a global expert or specialist team trained in global affairs or international relations. And while some “chief diplomats” can be found in a handful of cities, it is unclear if the cities have a sustainable, long-term plan of expanding activity and building more expertise and capacity.

When cities were asked whether their municipal officers undergo any dedicated training for city diplomacy, more than half said they did not; several

other cities did not know. In fact, only a few cities reported that their staff had received dedicated training for city diplomacy.

Of the few cities that offer training, the curriculum across cities is neither consistent nor detailed, raising questions for further areas of research and understanding. Training could include international and current affairs, international business, negotiation and diplomacy, and city branding and public relations, among other topics.

When asked to identify the most important skills they think a city diplomat should have, a clear

Only a few cities reported that their staff had received dedicated training for city diplomacy.

majority of cities said communication skills are the most important. More than half of the cities also stated that the capacity to work across different sectors and have familiarity with representation and national and/or international protocol are crucial. Surprisingly, less than half of the cities said leadership and managerial skills, the capacity to promote trade and investment, the capacity to work with emerging international actors, and negotiation skills were among the most important skills. Fluency in foreign languages and the capacity to work with the media were among the lowest priorities reported.

Participation in networks

With sprawling global, regional, and national connections, the capacity to engage in city networks is an indicator of a city's external engagement. When asked about the primary focus areas of the networks in which they participate, four—governance and democracy; climate change; the environment; and urban planning, land management, and sustainability—surfaced as the leading themes around which cities collaborate and exchange best practices. These priorities likely emerged due to the abundance of and momentum around networks addressing these issues worldwide.

After these top four themes, the responses varied. A majority of cities reported participating in national urban networks, such as the United States Conference of Mayors. Topics such as business and commercial activities, and culture, rounded out the leading focus areas.

A majority of the cities also reported participating in regional networks such as Eurocities. Other topics such as health and citizen well-being, disaster preparedness and post-disaster management, education, and inequality rounded out the leading focus areas of regional networks. Surprisingly, most of the respondent cities reported participating in international city networks, more than in national or regional networks (Exhibit 3), emphasizing the growth and success of networks that increase collective impact worldwide. In the international networks, cities ranked energy policy almost as highly as the top four themes. Culture, business and commercial activities, disaster preparedness and post-disaster management, and inequality also ranked high.

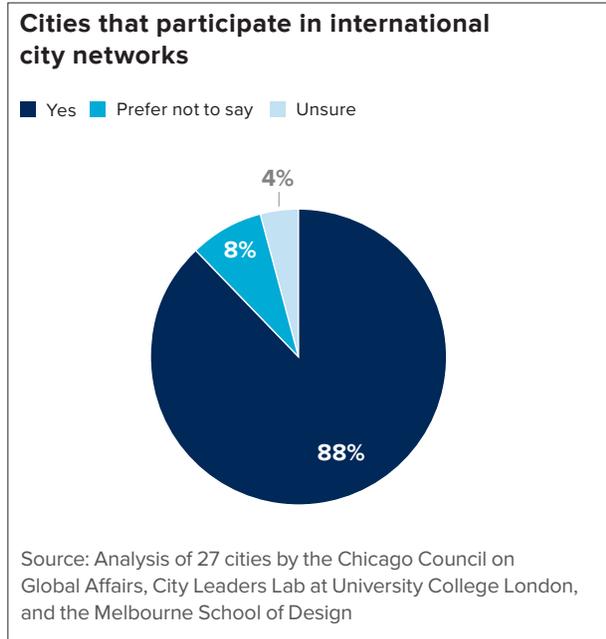
Furthermore, most of the respondent cities reported actively participating in major international and multilateral conferences such as the 2015 Paris Climate Conference in December 2015 or the UN Habitat III in Quito, Ecuador, in October 2016 to work toward realizing the New Urban Agenda.

Other themes included in the questionnaire, such as safety, security, and crime; peace-building; transportation; tourism; research; and poverty, did not rank among leading areas of focus in any of the networks.

In all three network structures—national, regional, and international—more than half of the respondent cities said they play an “executive role” in these networks. Specific functions of those roles were not specified.

Most of the respondent cities reported participating in international city networks, more than in national or regional networks.

Exhibit 3



Reported benefits and impact

Nearly all of the cities reported that city diplomacy has had a positive, and in some cases big, impact on their cities. Only one respondent said city diplomacy has had a small impact.

More than three-quarters of the cities reported that the ability to network and partner with other cities is the most useful benefit they see from engaging in city networks. Among other leading benefits are practical knowledge sharing, collective advocacy and lobbying activities, peer-to-peer exchanges, and awareness of information and data from new reports and research.

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When asked to list some of the most tangible outcomes from participating in city networks, more than half of the cities reported having changed a local policy, built the capacity of existing staff, implemented pilot projects based on the experience of other cities, or a combination of the three. In other cases, city networks have helped cities facilitate funding for projects or develop upcoming project plans. Almost none of the cities reported that their networks changed national, regional, or supranational policies.

- #### Top benefits of city networking
- 1 Networking and partnership with other cities
 - 2 Practical know-how
 - 3 Advocacy and lobbying
 - 4 Peer-to-peer exchange
 - 5 Findings from reports and research

Participation and limitations

According to city responses, city networks appear to communicate regularly with their member cities. About one-third of the networks in which respondent cities participate communicate daily, while the remainder communicate on a weekly or monthly basis. None of the respondents said that city networks communicate every six months, once a year, or never, which demonstrates their recognition that regular communication is key to progress.

However, cities said the limitation of city leaders' time is the biggest barrier to increasing their involvement with the networks—or joining in the first place. Cities also acknowledged that traveling to attend meetings and conferences is difficult, their external engagement budgets are limited, there are too many networks and events competing for limited time and resources, and their city offices are short-staffed.



Ensuring effective city diplomacy

These initial findings were workshopped in multiple conversations and platforms with urban scholars, practitioners, government officials, and representatives of multilateral organizations. Discussions revealed an overall consensus that cities are increasingly vulnerable to global dynamics and need to network, partner, and exert collective influence to mitigate the challenges. The fact that a clear majority of cities participate in international networks reveals their interest in exchanging best practices and sharing experiences and knowledge. Yet the lack of evidence of impact, or action-oriented outputs, raises questions about the amount of resources a city is willing or able to put behind such efforts.

Mayors and urban policymakers seeking to build on this analysis and subsequent conversations to expand their international influence and global engagement efforts must consider taking the following steps:

- Define clear international strategies: Cities use the term “city diplomacy” for a variety of initiatives, ranging from a foreign direct investment plan to strategic engagement on broader global issues and partnerships. To ensure successful outcomes, they need to define clear international strategies that support a streamlined and coordinated city diplomacy approach.
- Better deploy resources: Many cities facing budgetary constraints endow existing departments with international duties. Cities need to allocate distinct resources, budgets, trained staff, and responsibilities toward managing international relationships and strategy, as well as establish new norms to ensure citywide coordination.

- **Prioritize engagements:** Global cities cannot be expected to sit on every international and regional urban network and advocate forcefully for every pressing global issue. Cities need to prioritize on which issues they will engage, to what extent, with whom, and where they will take on leadership roles.
- **Measure impact:** Cities need to develop tools and mechanisms to measure the impact of their engagement in city diplomacy and to determine which urban networks will deliver the greatest benefits to their cities in the coming years. This information can also be shared with local populations, who need to understand the return on investment in global engagement for their cities, economic opportunities, and quality of life.
- **Influence international agendas:** Once cities have determined they will play this global role, they need to demonstrate legitimacy with multilateral processes and negotiations, such as addressing the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals.

As cities increasingly become influential actors on the global stage, they will need to increase their investment in resources, expertise, and capacity to manage their relationships and responsibilities to conduct city diplomacy effectively. ■

Methodology

We disseminated the city questionnaire in the spring of 2017 via email to numerous points of contact at municipal offices around the world. Twenty-seven cities responded, including: Amsterdam, Athens, Atlanta, Auckland, Bangkok, Bilbao, Buenos Aires, Cape Town, Chicago, Dublin, Gothenburg, Helsinki, Johannesburg, Kyoto, Los Angeles, Madrid, Melbourne, Mexico City, Milan, New York, Paris, Rio de Janeiro, Santiago,

Stockholm, Tokyo, Vienna, and Warsaw. These cities represent a diverse sample by geography, size, and economic activity. All 27 cities are frequently present in global city indexes and represented in regional and international city networks. Responses were anonymous.

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Want more on city diplomacy?

Varied literature on city diplomacy offers scholarly and practitioner insight into the external relations of cities. For further reading, see:

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