

IAN KILBRIDE

NEWS VIEWS AND OPINION



Cities Are Going International, But What's The Benefit?

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For the first time in human history, the majority of people now live in cities. By 2050 some 70% of the global population will be city dwellers and already 80% of global GDP is generated in cities. Amazingly, currently half of global economic output is generated from just one percent of the earth's land mass. To place the economic scale of global cities into perspective, Paris has a larger economy than South Africa, the entire Canadian economy is smaller than Tokyo's, London's economy matches that of the Netherlands, the Los Angeles economy almost approximates that of Australia and the New York economy is larger than all but 20 nation states. Aggregating the world's ten largest metros equates to the economies of Japan and Germany combined. Housing most of the world's major centres of culture, education and innovation, cities are a vital space for the development and sustainability of humankind.

But with scale and population density, comes problems. Cities produce over two thirds of the world's energy, yet contribute to a similar quantum of greenhouse gas emissions. Rapid urbanization is placing unprecedented demands on infrastructure, which is exacerbated by unplanned migration. As the Covid-19 pandemic illustrated starkly, cities are epicentres of communicable and non-communicable diseases and epidemics, thus placing extraordinary pressure on public health infrastructure. Crime rates and levels of inequality are highest in metropolises, all of which present city leadership with complex governance challenges. Indeed, such is the pressure on global cities that many have gone bust. New York, Detroit, Liverpool and Birmingham are a few notable examples of major cities that have failed financially. Closer to home, 43 South Africa municipalities have collapsed, with some 150 currently on the brink.

These contrasting pictures of economic scale and unprecedented challenges are two key motivations for cities increasingly conducting their own international relations. Twinning has been a feature of cities' international relations since the end of the second world war, but late twentieth century globalisation has provided the need and opportunity for cities to cultivate international networks in areas of shared experience and threat, such as climate change, migration, public health and security.

More than 300 city networks are now active across the globe, underpinned by the famous maxim of former New York Mayor, Michael Bloomberg, who observed, "states talk – cities act". City leadership is closer to the day-to-day challenges thrown up by urbanisation than their national counterparts, and often more directly accountable to its citizenry. This is particularly true in the case of South Africa where local government elections are based on direct ward-based voting and proportional representation.

One of the main drivers of what has become known as 'city diplomacy' is the sharing of experience and best practice. Driven by the desire to achieve local economic growth and development, city leaders are often freer of the political and national straightjackets constraining their national counterparts in their international engagements, and more solutions orientated. While cities lack the legal standing and recognition of states, for example, they cannot enter into internationally binding treaties, they engage with and sign up to soft law and in turn, can exercise significant soft power. Moreover, cities are now recognised by a plethora of United Nations agreements and enjoy institutional status in forums such as the UN Climate Change conferences.



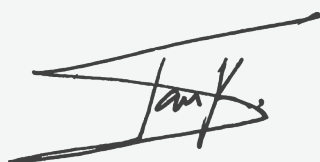
City diplomacy can be a double-edged sword however. Typically in the case of unitary or authoritarian states, cities' international engagements and policies are aligned with or supportive of national foreign policy. In federal systems, and more devolved national governance frameworks, cities can and often do adopt positions and policies somewhat at variance with national government. The most notable case in point was the decision by more than 70 US cities to defy President Donald Trump's 2017 decision to withdraw the United States from the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change and to remain bound by the 2016 Paris climate agreement.

City mayors and mayoral networks are also playing a more prominent role in international relations and again, sometimes at variance with national governments. Locally, the example of the City of Cape Town's antipathy to the docking of the Russian Lady R vessel, or Western Cape Premier Alan Winde's 'threat' to have Russian President Vladimir Putin arrested should he enter the Western Cape come to mind.

South African cities have participated in the wave of city diplomacy sweeping the globe. In addition to housing formal diplomatic consulates, the cities of Johannesburg, Durban and Cape Town conduct a raft of international relations ranging from twinning agreements, through to membership of highly advanced and sophisticated international networks such as the United Cities and Local Government (UCLG) and the C40s city climate leadership group.

Yet, apart from engaging in leadership exchanges, hosting international vanity projects and enhancing the international prestige of the city, the major challenge confronting city diplomacy remains that of delivering economic, social and governance benefits to citizens. To date, the material, economic and developmental benefits of South African city diplomacy are not evident, at least not to the neediest.

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A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Ian K.', enclosed within a stylized, hand-drawn rectangular frame.

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