A Governance System that Supports City Diplomacy: The European Perspective

Peter Kurz
Mayor, Mannheim, Germany
ob.kurz@mannheim.de

Received: 20 December 2021; revised: 6 January 2022; accepted: 1 February 2022

Summary

Although the concept of city diplomacy is not new, we are seeing exciting developments in the ways that cities work together to address local and global challenges. This article explores how the global political system must evolve to harness the full potential of a city diplomacy that is well-integrated into global governance. In order for city diplomacy’s promise to be unlocked, we must take action in four central areas: facilitating knowledge exchange between local, national and international governance; embracing networks as an integral part of global governance; systematically expanding municipal development co-operation; and revitalising the idea of a world charter of local self-government.

Keywords

city diplomacy – cities – networks – international city networks

1 Introduction

As the mayor of the City of Mannheim, I have watched both the discourse on and the reality of city diplomacy evolve over the past decade and a half. The concept is not new, but we are seeing exciting developments in the ways that cities work together to address local and global challenges.
Already over two decades ago, then-UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan observed at the Urban 21: Global Conference on the Urban Future:

More and more countries are coming to understand that decentralization does not mean strengthening one level of government at the expense of another. A State which treats local authorities as partners, and allows public tasks to be carried out by those closest to the citizens, will be stronger, not weaker. Weak cities will almost certainly act as a brake on national development, whereas strong local democracy can be a key factor enabling a country to thrive in the new global economy.¹

Today, as we face the ongoing COVID-19 and climate crises, Annan’s words are more relevant than ever. City diplomacy offers a powerful potential to address these issues and strengthen the efforts of all other levels of government. However, this potential is underexplored and not well integrated into global governance. In this article, from a European perspective, I will explore how the global political system must evolve to harness the full potential of city diplomacy that is well integrated into global governance.

2 The Significance of Local Governance for Successful City Diplomacy

In Germany, the right to municipal self-government is guaranteed in our constitution and protected at the European level through the European Charter of Local Self-Government of the Council of Europe (1985). It is also recognised in the European Union’s primary law (Art. 4 TEU). These laws strengthen municipalities as such and also strengthen the EU in both its legitimacy and its ability to act.

However, not all nations protect these rights fully. The Charter is monitored by the Council of Europe, which finds that many nations do not fulfil the commitments they made in the pact. Germany has been criticised for not having a direct consultation process between the federal government and cities.

The African Union developed the African Charter on the Values and Principles of Decentralisation, Local Governance and Local Development in 2014. However, only seventeen national governments have signed the charter, and only six have ratified it. It cannot be effective without broad support

or mechanisms put in place to ensure that national governments are held accountable for implementing it.

Decentralisation and local self-government are prerequisites to success in both local governance and effective city diplomacy. However, local self-government is far from universal and it is still not included in funding and development strategies.

3 The Role of International Organisations in the Integration of City Diplomacy into Global Governance

Beyond the right to local self-government, existing structures of international organisations in charge of global governance also shape the way that cities interact with one another and participate in debates on the global stage.

For example, when United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG) emerged in 2004, the hope and expectation was that cities would have a stronger say in the United Nations system. UCLG was able to make an impact, especially in the area of agenda setting.2 Immediately after its founding, the organisation signed a co-operation agreement with UN-Habitat in which both parties agreed on the implementation of important initiatives, such as the Global Observatory of Local Democracy and Decentralization and the Advisory Committee of Local Authorities.3

UN-Habitat has proved to be an essential point of entry for cities into the UN system. In March 2019, the City of Mannheim and UN-Habitat signed a memorandum of understanding in which Mannheim committed to submitting a Voluntary Local Review with a view to implementing the UN 2030 Agenda. UN-Habitat in return committed to presenting these results at major UN events.

The World Urban Forum, hosted every two years by UN-Habitat, offers cities and city networks the opportunity to engage in global governance debates and exchange best practices, in particular on issues of international urban development policy. However, this cannot be confused with formalised participation in policy-making processes. On the contrary, there is a risk of echo chambers in such formats: mayors talk to other mayors about the need for the involvement of mayors in addressing global issues. Such dialogue is an important means to advancing urban-based solutions, but it is not an end in itself.

---

2 Salomon and Sanchez Cano 2008, 141.
3 UN-Habitat and WACLAC 1998.
4 Why City Diplomacy Must Be an Integral Part of Global Governance

Solutions to global challenges cannot come exclusively from the top down and must be tailored to fit local circumstances and environments. The connections between the global and the local — and between the local and the local — are where the potential of city diplomacy lies. I see this potential in five key areas.

4.1 Conflict Prevention and Social Cohesion

When modern city-twinning projects first emerged in the 1950s in post-war Europe, they were an important force in conflict resolution. Promoting cultural exchange, diaspora relations and economic activities after devastating conflicts, these bilateral relationships helped heal the rift between citizens and stabilised peace agreements. Mannheim’s partnership with Toulon, France (1958), dates back to such an agreement and remains a vibrant relationship, with active school and commercial exchanges.

Cities still have an important role to play in preventing conflict and addressing its impacts. Our ongoing project in Kilis, Turkey, came about because Mannheim residents with roots in the area identified a problem that they wanted to help solve. Kilis — a town of 90,000 on Turkey’s border with Syria — has more than doubled in size with the arrival of refugees from the war in Syria. In order to improve the educational and career prospects of Syrian refugee women and to promote social cohesion between the local and refugee populations, Mannheim initiated a bilateral development project in co-operation with the Working Group of Islamic Communities Mannheim.

Notably, when the project began in 2017, the relationship between the German and Turkish national governments was tense on both sides. Funded in part through the German Federal Ministry of Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ), despite tensions at the national level, the project nonetheless promoted social cohesion in Kilis, between our two cities, and in Mannheim.

Furthermore, Kilis has been a success not just in terms of educating women and promoting social cohesion in Turkey. It has also been a success in engaging Mannheim residents as global citizens. Many residents have offered their expertise for the project or shown their commitment through donations.

4.2 Urban Development and Participatory Policy-Making

The power of cities in development work is increasingly being recognised, especially as more funding becomes available for such projects. In Mannheim, we saw the value of city-to-city development work in a trilateral project we undertook with the capital of Moldova, Chişinău and the city of Chernivtsi...
in Ukraine. Over a period of two years, municipal experts from all three cities came together and redesigned public spaces according to modern standards of urban development and with the active involvement of local citizens. This project has allowed us to deepen our understanding of participatory processes and has strengthened democratic structures at the municipal level in both Chișinău and Chernivtsi.

4.3 **Economic Cooperation and Innovation**

Innovation and sustainability are driven by the exchange of ideas. The search for modern solutions cannot be organised from the top down or facilitated exclusively through national policies. Cities can work directly with one another to seek solutions for local challenges, supported by international frameworks.

With the support of the EU International Urban Cooperation programme and in the broader context of China's Belt and Road Initiative, Mannheim has strengthened its economic relationship with Chongqing, China. This partnership resulted in the establishment of a direct railway connection between the two cities in 2018. This answered calls from companies in both regions to develop a connection, given that the cities both have large industrial sectors and transport hubs.

Another example of the close connection between municipal development co-operation and local economic development is Mannheim's partnership with Hebron (Palestinian Territories). The project was based on evidence that a particular obstacle to economic and social development in Hebron is the high unemployment rate among well-educated young people. The cities developed a co-working space and start-up infrastructure in Hebron to support local residents, in particular women with IT backgrounds, in starting their own businesses.

4.4 **Cultural Exchange and Policy Advocacy**

Cultural exchange between cities has always been the backbone of city-to-city co-operation. Exchange through cultural activities can connect people in a personal way that national governments cannot.

The close interpersonal relationships we develop can enable co-operation on complex and important topics. When in 2019, for example, nearly 100 Polish provinces and municipalities, with support from their national government, declared themselves ‘LGBT ideology-free zones’, they were faced, thankfully, with strong opposition from European institutions, national, regional and local governments in the EU and civil society.

Our twin city, Bydgoszcz, took the opposite approach of many Polish cities and created an equality council to support LGBTI residents. Mannheim organised a meeting with city council members and our LGBTI commissioner to
offer support. At a time when the national government and many municipalities in Poland were pursuing a homophobic agenda, Bydgoszcz found support from its twin cities.

4.5 Engaging Local Constituents in Global Affairs

The common thread to all the examples outlined above is a high level of citizen participation and engagement as a driving force in city diplomacy. Cities, as the level of government closest to the people, are where political frameworks are transformed into concrete ideas. We see this clearly in Mannheim. The funding for the projects described above came largely from national or international institutions, but our citizens shaped the project design.

This process also works for larger political frameworks, such as the 2030 Agenda or the European Green Deal. Mannheim has already adapted the Agenda for Sustainable Development into a local framework. The process was supported through the World Urban Campaign of UN-Habitat, with annual Urban Thinkers Campuses with our citizens. Most recently, the same process was applied to localise the European Green Deal, which we recently presented at the UN Climate Change Conference (COP26) in Glasgow.

5 Challenges and Risks

A comprehensive description of the status quo of city diplomacy should also name challenges and risks. The comparison between international cooperation projects with and without the active involvement of cities and mayors makes it clear, on the one hand, that a strong local dimension can significantly improve the technical quality and sustainability of cooperation. However, on the other hand, the personal commitment of a mayor is not only a success factor, but also a risk: if there is a political reorientation due to a change of a municipal leader, this can also call an existing cooperation project into question. This makes it all the more important for city diplomacy to be permanently anchored as a strategic task in a city government’s portfolio of responsibilities.

The national foreign policy community and the think tanks advising it have recently identified a further risk of strengthened city diplomacy. They state that there is a lack of awareness of foreign and security policy risks in cities. However, this objection can be countered very effectively by having

---

4 Kirch 2022, 63.
an intensive dialogue and exchange between the political levels, which at the same time lays the foundation for multilevel diplomacy.

6 Recommendations for Action to Unlock the Full Potential of City Diplomacy

The potential of city diplomacy has been described and proven many times. To use it consistently and efficiently, we can and must take concrete action. Here, all levels of government are called upon to act in the spirit of collaboration at eye level and to tread new paths.

6.1 Facilitating Knowledge Exchange between Local, National and International Governments

We need to improve information flows between cities, national governments and international institutions. Through our city diplomacy efforts, local governments generate expertise, develop projects with real impact and make meaningful connections with other cities. However, national governments are often unaware of what is being done at the local level, so they do not know how to harness these efforts.

Likewise, local governments are often not properly informed about the goals and priorities of national governments and international institutions, meaning they cannot align their efforts and offer their expertise and input. Better lines of communication must be developed in both directions to ensure that the full potential of city diplomacy is realised.

6.2 Embracing Networks as an Integral Part of Global Governance

City organisations and networks can be used to enable city diplomacy and facilitate exchange between all levels of government and international institutions.

The Global Parliament of Mayors (GPM) is an example of an organisation that works to build bridges between cities and harness the power of city diplomacy. The GPM is not simply a city network; it is a blueprint for a governance body of, by and for mayors. Over the past five years, the GPM has grown into an influential platform that shapes debates and produces visible results.

Recently, in July 2021, the GPM held an official side event at the UN's High Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development to discuss climate-related migration. Mayors came together with representatives of national governments, as well as the International Organization for Migration and the UN Refugee Agency. These debates are important as they ensure that city leaders do not simply speak in echo chambers to one another and instead are building
bridges with other levels of government. Organisations such as the GPM can help us ensure that cities have the support, networks and resources they need to conduct effective city diplomacy.

6.3 **Systematically Expanding Municipal Development Co-operation**

International development co-operation is still considered the domain of national agencies, such as USAID (USA) or GIZ (Germany). Their activities are complemented by supranational organisations such as the European Union, specifically the European Commission’s Directorate-General for International Partnerships.

However, concrete project experience shows that international development co-operation often focuses on issues that are the core responsibility of cities, including municipal services, education and economic development. Municipal development co-operation, which transforms municipalities from subjects of project co-operation into autonomous actors, ensures that the vast majority of municipal co-operation projects are not one-off or short-term consulting projects, but instead a long-term form of co-operation designed for sustainability and based on trust and solidarity. This ensures that co-operation is generated at eye level, since it involves genuine peer consultation.

German cities and municipalities alone maintain 480 such international development co-operation relationships, which receive financial contributions from the Service Agency Communities in One World funded by the German Federal Ministry of Economic Cooperation and Development. Development co-operation offers real potential, but it has not yet been unlocked. This would require more systematic co-ordination between supranational, national and municipal development co-operation, which would ensure that the goals at all levels are coherent and, in particular, that the municipal level in the target countries is legally and financially strengthened when defining the terms and conditions of international co-operation.

6.4 **Revitalising the Idea of a World Charter of Local Self-Government**

In September 2020, the GPM sent an open letter to the UN Secretary-General, which was included in the UN report ‘The Future We Want, the United Nations We Need’. The letter urged the United Nations ‘to open up a transition period and discuss the best ways to install representative bodies of cities in the UN system.’ The letter concluded, ‘the UN 75th anniversary [should] be an opening to take into consideration the existing format of the global order’.

---

UN programmes, such as UN-Habitat, have a close proximity to cities and are committed to exchange with cities. However, UN-Habitat’s governance structure is based on member states, not cities. This means that participation rights for cities in international policy processes must be enshrined in national law.

In 1996, the UN General Assembly asked the Commission of Human Settlements to review ‘its working methods in order to involve in its work the representatives of local authorities or international associations of local authorities’. In May 1998, the United Nations Centre for Human Settlements (Habitat) and the World Associations of Cities and Local Authorities Coordination presented the draft World Charter of Local Self Government, which was largely based on the European Charter of Local Self-Government.

Although this vision did not become a reality in the late 1990s, the basic idea underlying the Charter remains valid and is more relevant than ever. The challenges outlined by the UN 2030 Agenda and the Paris Agreement on Climate Change are of great urgency. At the same time, the local level is widely recognised as the central level of action in addressing these challenges.

It is clear that now is the right time to restart this conversation. The local level is particularly affected by global challenges. However, it can only take effective action if it has the skills and financial resources to do so. A World Charter of Local Self-Government would assure cities that they regulate and manage a substantial share of public affairs under their own responsibility and in the interests of the local population and that they are entitled to adequate financial resources of their own, which they may dispose of freely within the framework of their powers. Local self-government strengthens local democracy, which is an important prerequisite for good governance to ensure effective protection against corruption and mismanagement.

As long as the UN system is of and for nation states, cities’ rights of participation in international politics must be enshrined in national (constitutional) law. A minimum requirement is that cities and their legitimate representatives must be involved in the political will-making process in the UN system whenever decisions and agreements have an impact on the local level. As long as no municipal chamber is anchored in the UN system, the UN states themselves must guarantee the right of local participation.

Of course, a relaunch of the debate on a World Charter of Local Self-Government cannot be a resumption of the attempt to introduce the European

---

6 UN Resolution A/RES/51/177.
7 UN-Habitat and WACLAC 1998.
8 Ninth European Conference on Sustainable Cities & Towns 2020.
Charter at the UN level with slight modifications. Instead, it must be about starting a new process that is inclusive.

In order to address global challenges, local self-government is needed in cities around the world. At the same time, we need to reform our international institutions. The disappointing results of COP26 highlighted, once again, the fact that cities must be included in negotiations and cannot be treated simply as stakeholders or implementers of international agreements. I believe firmly that the UN would be a much stronger institution if local governments could participate as acknowledged partners and an important level of government. Such a change would unleash the full potential of city diplomacy. As then-UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan observed at the beginning of the millennium, by strengthening the local level, we will strengthen the national level as well and enable nations to thrive.9

Bibliography


*Peter Kurz*

has served as the Mayor of Mannheim, Germany since 2007. In 2019, Dr. Kurz led a process to localise the United Nation’s seventeen Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) with the city’s mission statement, Mannheim 2030. Mayor Kurz is active in a variety of European and international organisations, including the United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG), Council of European Municipalities and Regions (CEMR) and the European Committee of the Regions (CoR). He was also one of the founding members of the Global Parliament of Mayors (GPM) in 2016, and has served as its chair since 2019. In recognition of his commitment to international co-operation between cities, he received the 2021 World Mayor International Award from the City Mayors Foundation.