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The Paradiplomacy Worldwide

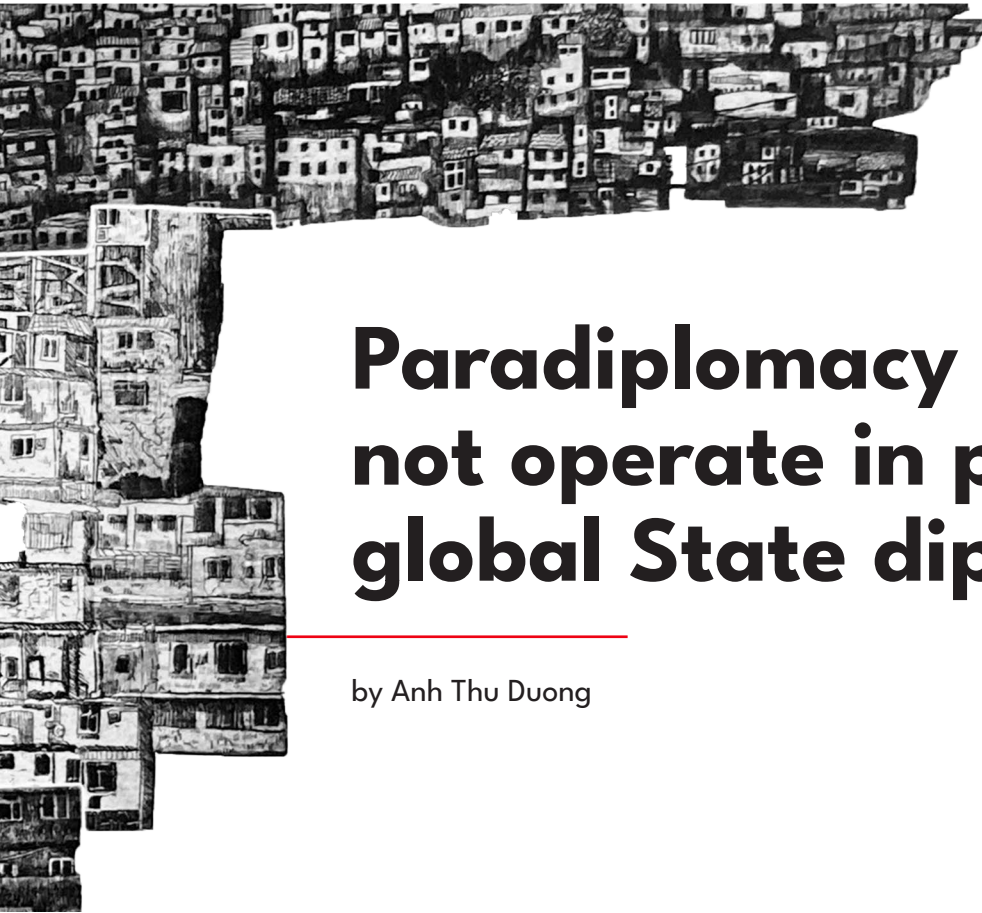
V2. Practical Approaches



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Paradiplomacy should not operate in parallel to global State diplomacy

by Anh Thu Duong

For many decades, city diplomacy has evolved in parallel to global State diplomacy. The etymology of the term paradiplomacy (the Greek prefix para- means alongside, besides, next to) aptly reflects this relationship. As a newcomer to the dynamic landscape of city diplomacy, the Global Cities Hub (GCH) seeks to embed it within the broader framework of global State diplomacy. To achieve this, it favours direct engagement of Local and Regional Governments (LRGs) with States and their international organizations and advocates for the creation of a new status for LRGs at the United Nations (UN). This would allow LRGs to participate in intergovernmental meetings, speak in their own capacity and contribute to more inclusive and effective multilateral outcomes.

CITY DIPLOMACY ENCOMPASSES MULTIPLE DIMENSIONS

City diplomacy – or paradiplomacy as referred to in the context of this journal – is a broad concept encompassing multiple dimensions. These include diplomacy between cities, diplomacy through city networks and diplomacy at the international level through direct engagement with States and international organizations. These dimensions not only complement each other but may also overlap, creating a comprehensive strategy for any LRG seeking to engage in city diplomacy.

1. City-to-city diplomacy: The oldest form of city diplomacy involves relationships established between cities and regions themselves. Cities existed before States and have long engaged in relations with one another, mainly for trade or protection purposes (e.g., in ancient Greece, Ath-

ens formed alliances with other cities to counter the Persians). Over the centuries, these alliances evolved from trade and military cooperation to city twinning initiatives aimed at fostering reconciliation and friendship in the aftermath of the Second World War. The cities of Ludwigsburg in Germany and Montbéliard in France were the first to conclude a twinning agreement in 1950. Today, city-to-city diplomacy touches upon an incredibly wide range of areas, where cities and regions work to advance various economic, political or cultural objectives. A key aspect of this city-to-city diplomacy is “decentralized cooperation”, i.e. development aid carried out by and for LRGs, which is also undertaken through city networks. For instance, the partnership between Lausanne in Switzerland and Nouakchott in Mauritania has improved access to water and sanitation for the population in Nouakchott.

2. City diplomacy through city networks: LRGs often coalesce through city networks to collectively shape policies, create lobbying platforms and address transnational issues, such as migration, climate change, security, etc. Today, there are hundreds of city networks worldwide, such as ICLEI which gathers more than 2500 LRGs committed to sustainable urban development; the Mayors Migration Council, a mayor-led coalition accelerating

global action on migration and displacement; and the Strong Cities Network which is dedicated to addressing all forms of extremism in cities. While transnational issues used to be the main purview of States some decades ago, LRGs now increasingly address them through national or international city networks. These networks have several functions: exchange of knowledge, best practices and policies; joint projects on urban issues through pooled resources and expertise; and capacity-building. They also serve as a vehicle for city diplomacy by advocating for policy changes at national and/or international levels. For instance, the global network United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG) has organized numerous World Assemblies of LRGs in the margins of international meetings. While city networks are not new, they have recently dedicated more resources to international advocacy, seeking to influence multilateral policy making processes. Examples include the Global Taskforce of LRGs which brings together major city networks and coordinates joint advocacy work in global policy processes such as the recent UN Summit of the Future; ICLEI and C40 which effectively lobby during Climate Change CoPs to include multi-level governance into intergovernmental negotiated outcomes; and the Urban 20, a platform that allows cities to collectively influence G20 negotiations).



3. City diplomacy through direct engagement with States and international organizations: By “direct engagement”, the GCH refers to LRGs actively participating in or contributing to intergovernmental debates or negotiations, aiming to influence the outcomes of State-led multilateral processes. This dimension of city diplomacy holds the greatest potential for growth and city networks have recognized this, as they increasingly engage with States and their international organizations. However, direct engagement remains challenging. The primary reason is straightforward: States cherish their sovereignty and are not always willing to directly engage with subnational actors at the international level. The current political order continues to revolve primarily around States, which dominate global diplomacy and guide international organizations. This is particularly evident at the UN, where other stakeholders, such as non-governmental organizations (NGOs), hold a distinct and limited role. The UN system has been created by States, for States and is run by States. As a result, LRGs rarely have opportunities for direct engagement with States and international organizations in formal settings and often remain on the margins of international meetings. Another reason for the difficulty LRGs face in directly engaging with States and their international organizations is that they encounter significant obstacles in terms of resources, capacities and expertise needed to engage sustainably and effectively in multilateral processes. Unlike States, not all LRGs have external relations offices capable of handling this demanding task.

ENGAGING WITH UN SECRETARIATS DOES NOT SUBSTITUTE THE NEED FOR DIRECT INTERACTION WITH STATES

For too long, city diplomacy has evolved alongside global State diplomacy. City-to-city diplomacy

focused on fostering relationships among cities, without the need to involve States and their international organizations. International city networks established parallel systems where LRGs would come together to discuss and exchange ideas. However, these networks seldom explored the possibility of directly engaging with States. Instead, they preferred to interact with the secretariats servicing State-led international organizations. To be fair, though, city networks have made significant progress by convincing heads of UN entities of the importance of LRGs’ participation and contribution to various State-led multilateral processes. Through their advocacy, the UN has become more receptive to LRGs, recognizing them as the level of government closest to the people, with the power and capacity to translate global agreements into tangible, real-world impact.

That said, liaising with the UN secretariats does not replace the need for direct interaction with States at the international level. It is important to remember that the UN cannot act independently of its Member States. The UN is mandated by States, through the outcomes of multilateral negotiations, to undertake a wide range of tasks. Therefore, it is crucial for LRGs to influence these outcomes, so that the UN can better integrate the role and perspectives of LRGs into its activities.

A NEW STATUS IS REQUIRED FOR LRGs TO ENGAGE DIRECTLY WITH STATES IN UN PROCESSES

The GCH is convinced that the third dimension of city diplomacy (i.e. LRGs’ direct engagement with States and international organizations) must be strengthened. A better recognition of the role and perspectives of LRGs on issues addressed by States at the international level

would help achieve more effective multilateral outcomes. This is due to LRGs' close connection with their populations, their deep understanding of local contexts, their ties to local stakeholders and their ability to implement these outcomes on the ground. Involving LRGs in international processes would help prevent a disconnect between international decisions and local realities.

For LRGs to engage directly with States in UN processes, a distinct status would be required, as currently LRGs have no official standing at the UN. To participate in formal UN meetings and gain access, LRGs must currently either be part of their national delegation, represent city networks (which are recognized as NGOs within the UN system) or be invited as a speaker or standalone participant (for instance, in 2022 mayors were invited by the UN secretariat to speak during a plenary meeting of the UN General Assembly on the New Urban Agenda). Since its inception, the GCH has been advocating for the creation of such status within the UN. Similar to the consultative status granted to NGOs by the ECOSOC or other observer statuses conferred by some UN entities (e.g., by the UN Environment Programme), the GCH argues that States could create a distinct status for LRGs, who wish to take part in UN meetings in their own capacity. However, for this to materialize, the political will from States ready to champion the cause is essential.

Consequently, the GCH strives to build a compelling narrative for States, highlighting the added value of LRGs' participation in multilateralism (as outlined in its policy paper on the subject here), and aims to increase the visibility of LRGs at the UN. For instance, the GCH is a staunch supporter and official partner of the UN Forum of Mayors, the only formal body where LRGs can have their voices heard in UN intergovernmental processes. With the Forum of

Mayors, the GCH hopes that local governments will gradually gain more space and influence at the UN, through direct engagement with Member States. Additionally, the GCH seeks to weigh in on State-led negotiations with concrete language proposals advancing the cause of LRGs (see GCH's position on the treaty on future pandemics or the position of the Local and Subnational Governments Coalition to End Plastic Pollution, of which GCH is a founder). Last year, the GCH engaged directly with the core group of States that submitted a resolution on local government and human rights at the UN Human Rights Council (see here), encouraging both States and the international human rights system to enhance their interactions with LRGs. The GCH also supports establishing precedents for LRG's formal participation in international conferences. A notable example was the 2023 Global Refugee Forum where LRGs formed their own delegation (separate from national delegation or city networks) and presented their commitments to implement the Global Compact for Refugees during plenary meetings. This is however more challenging in conferences where States negotiate international agreements. In such settings, LRGs are currently unable to register in their own capacity often relegating them to the margins and limiting their participation to side-events and other informal gatherings, as seen in climate change CoPs, UN Environment Assemblies or World Health Assemblies.

LRGS WILL CONTINUE TO PLAY A CRUCIAL ROLE IN SHAPING SOLUTIONS TO GLOBAL CHALLENGES, REGARDLESS OF THE FUTURE OF GLOBAL GOVERNANCE

Transforming the UN multilateral system will take years, if not decades, until a group of States decides to take the initiative to create a new status for LRGs. This however should not hinder

efforts to provide more visibility to LRGs on the international stage allowing them to speak out, share their perspectives, offer local solutions to global challenges, advocate for issues that matter at the subnational level or initiate collaborations with international stakeholders.

Some may argue that these efforts are futile, given the ongoing multilateral crisis, which has been unfolding long before 20 January 2025. Is it worth investing resources and energy for LRGs to integrate into a system that has seen its legitimacy and trust erode over the past decade? Would it not be more practical to establish a parallel system instead? Regardless of what the future brings, the GCH believes that LRGs will become even more significant on the international stage, whatever form global governance takes in the coming years. As the world continues to massively urbanize, LRGs will remain essential pivotal in shaping solutions to address the numerous and complex global challenges that lie ahead, including climate change, mass migration, environmental protection, pandemics, sustainable development, peace and security. They will bring a new elan to international cooperation by fostering more inclusive and effective multilateralism. In time, LRGs may even take a central role alongside certain States to preserve and strengthen multilateralism and create channels of dialogue focusing on fundamental and concrete issues, such as climate change and sustainable socio-economic development.

While the path forward remains uncertain, one thing is clear: it is worth investing in raising the profile of LRGs on the international stage and fostering a more inclusive multilateralism that responds to the needs and expectations of com-

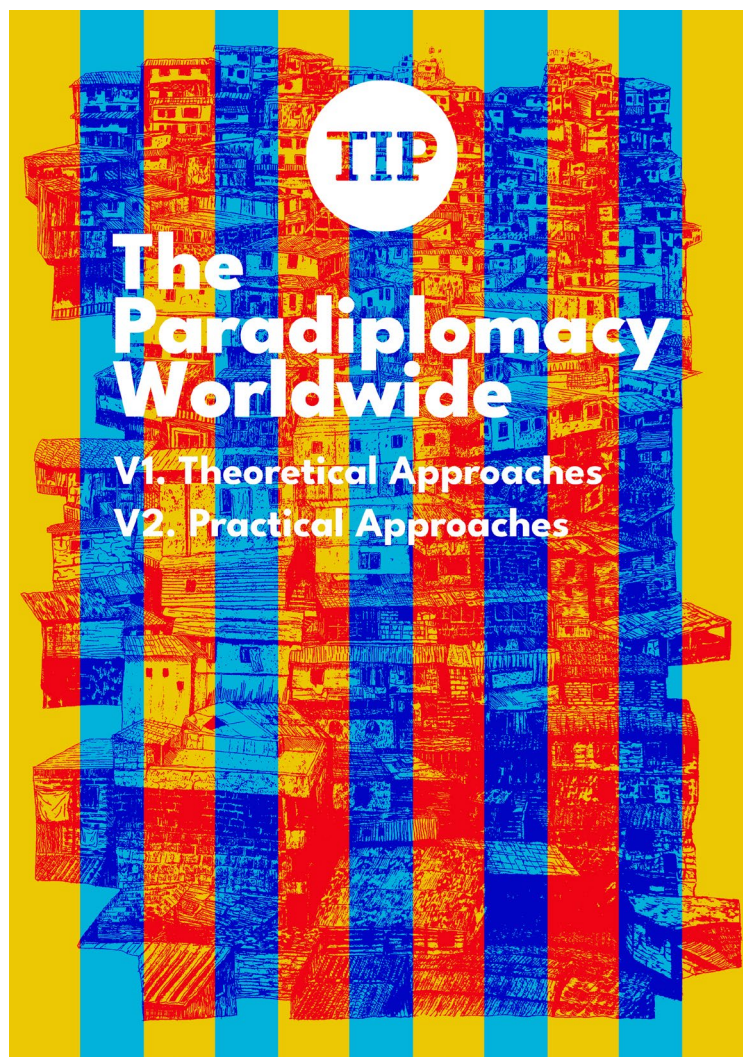
munities on the ground, that draws on local solutions and leads to tangible and trusted outcomes.



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