

# Building city political agency across scales: The Johannesburg International Relations Strategy

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# « City political agency »



The 'growing 'empowerment' of cities at the international and global scale

**CITIES ALLIANCE  
IN ACTION**



**Johannesburg-Lilongwe Partnership Leads to a Robust City Development Strategy**

**TOWARDS A NEW  
INTEGRATED  
INTERNATIONAL  
RELATIONS STRATEGY  
FOR THE CITY OF  
JOHANNESBURG**



International circulation of  
urban policy models

« Political agency of city » at the  
international and global scale

Changing geopolitics and  
South/South cooperation

Michele Acuto: *Global Cities, Governance and Diplomacy, The Urban Link*. London, New York: Routledge, 2013. Pp. 232. \$145.00. ISBN: 9780415660884.

Benjamin Barber: *If Mayors Ruled the World. Rising Cities, Declining Nation States*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013. Pp. 432. \$22.00. ISBN: 9780300164671.

Sofie Bouletiger: *Cities, Networks, and Global Environmental Governance. Spaces of Innovation, Places of Leadership*. London and New York: Routledge, 2011. Pp. 240. \$42.95. ISBN: 9781138813110.

Nman Curtis (ed.), *The Power of Cities in International Relations*. London and New York: Routledge, 2011. Pp. 192. \$140. ISBN: 9780413572875.

Mawdsley, E (2012a) The changing geographies of foreign aid and development cooperation: contributions from gift theory, *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, 37, pp. 256–272.

Mawdsley, E. (2012b) *From Recipients to Donors: The Emerging Powers and the Changing Development Landscape*. London, Zed.

## City political agency: Framing and theorizing the political agency of cities at the international and global scale

International affairs, global governance, diplomacy

Significance of their new functions, capabilities and influences

The “active capacity as actors in politics” (Acuto, 2013, p. 5); capacity to have a significant impact on the state of affairs; the capacity to purposefully impact the state of affairs

## Empirical observation of an « active presence »

“City diplomacy”; City-to-city cooperation

Participation to transnational networks and alliances of cities and local governments (UCLG, Africities, Metropolis)

Participation to global governance networks (C40, ICLEI)

Collaboration with international organisations (UNICEF, UNESCO, UN-Habitat) on the definition of international laws and global politics (Nijman, 2009)

Production of international norms and regulations

Attempt to gain an official status in the UN

Attempt to have a greater influence in decision-making in international relations

# Why are cities becoming so prominent in international politics?

- Cities as major command centres in the global economy, as major sites of innovation (Barber). Growing importance of global urbanisation processes (the “planetary urbanisation” thesis)
- “Urban issues and cities are becoming understood as increasingly central and relevant in global politics” (Ljungkvisst p. 52); “Global challenges are made into urban issues” (Ljungkvisst 2014, p. 54); “Contemporary global “risks” are described as having increasingly urban facets” (Ljungkvisst 2014, p. 49)

- City political agency overlooked in geography and urban studies
- Little theorization in political science and international relations

Local governments and the decentralization of international relations

Non-state actors and the new geography of global governance: role of networked forms of governance

Attribution of position of power to cities: engagement, empowerment, resources

Establishment of power relationships, creation of specific understandings (hegemony)

Pooling global influences and shaping norms and values

Political power of individuals, catalytic effects of mayors

Cities identities and representations: Southern cities position

- Gaps in geopolitics

# City of Johannesburg's international relations strategy

Shaped by political history, inter-governmental relations, economic process and strategic positioning of the city within different geopolitical spheres of interests

Municipal autonomy – alignment of objectives, priorities and values with national and provincial government

- Internal objectives:
  - Joburg 2040 Growth and Development Strategy
  - 2012/16 Integrated Development Plan
- In line with:
  - National Government IR Strategic Plan (DIRCO) 2011 – 2014
  - National Development Plan – Vision for 2030
  - Gauteng Provincial Action Plan 2009 – 2014
  - SALGA IR Strategy
  - March 2012 ANC Policy Discussion Documents





# Building capacity for collective action at the urban scale

Cities as places where local experiences and expertise can be leveraged, shared and enhanced as part of bilateral or multilateral cooperation. This cooperation is used to support and assist cities in developing strategies that promote local growth and development and minimize the impacts of global shocks.

A relational understanding of urban and regional economies  
(inter-related, inter-dependant)

Cities are actors that can act beyond their territorial boundaries: they can contribute solving global issues in crucial areas (climate change among others) by shaping the international norms, values that are produced and diffused through transnational networks (van der Pluijm 2007).

Cities as “networking agents” (Acuto 2013, p. 151)

Cities can help contribute building privileged relationships with strategic countries according to national geopolitical and economic interests.

Cities as instrument of foreign policies and national  
diplomacy

# Conclusion

We need to engage with a wider range of disciplinary fields and theoretical frameworks – within and outside the field of geography and urban studies

An interdisciplinary conceptual and theoretical framework is still missing to overcome the limitations and gaps of international relations and political science literature

Exploring the production and shaping of norms and values and the positionalities of cities

How to assess the outcomes and impacts of cities in international affairs and global governance. Which methodologies?