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

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Towards a New Integrated International Relations Strategy for the City of Johannesburg

The ‘growing ‘empowerment’ of cities at the international and global scale

Johannesburg-Lilongwe Partnership Leads to a Robust City Development Strategy
International circulation of urban policy models

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

Changing geopolitics and South/South cooperation


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” (Ljunkvist p. 52); “Global challenges are made into urban issues” (Ljunkvist 2014, p. 54); “Contemporary global “risks” are described as having increasingly urban facets” (Ljunkvist 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
  – 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-depandant)

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?