

## Conducting City Diplomacy A Survey of International Engagement in 47 Cities

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### Executive Summary

The impact of global challenges such as climate change and the COVID-19 pandemic manifests most acutely in urban settings, rendering cities essential players on the global stage.

In the 2018 report *Toward City Diplomacy*, the Chicago Council on Global Affairs presented findings from a survey of 27 cities on the capacity of local governments around the world to network internationally—and the perceived barriers to that engagement. The report found that cities “need to invest in resources, expertise, and capacity to manage their relationships and responsibilities to conduct city diplomacy effectively.”

In our new survey of 47 cities, we find that advice to still ring true. City officials broadly recognize the importance of engaging internationally but lack the necessary formal diplomacy training and resources for conducting that engagement to maximum effect. Nevertheless, cities maintain a strong commitment to global agendas, and international frameworks are increasingly influential in municipal affairs. For example, more than half of survey respondents said they track their city’s performance against the metrics of the United Nations’ Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Furthermore, we found that cities and their leaders are confident in their capacity to tackle global challenges. For instance, the majority of survey

respondents said that city governments have greater potential for impact on climate change mitigation than their national government counterparts do, especially when acting collaboratively through city networks and multilateral urban programs.

The individual stories of five cities whose officials participated in the study offer lessons for a variety of challenges and approaches to city diplomacy. Based on the survey results, we discuss the three primary obstacles cities must overcome in order to strengthen the role of city diplomacy globally: inadequate funding and resources for international engagement, insufficient training in city diplomacy, and the failure of national and multilateral bodies to fully recognize and formalize city engagement in diplomacy.

We conclude with a framework for ensuring that city-diplomacy efforts are systematic and institutionalized rather than reliant on the personalities and connections of powerful city leaders. This capacity-building strategy can help cities leverage international coordination, information sharing, and intersectoral collaboration to address the complex and interconnected problems that will characterize the 21st century.

<sup>1</sup> Michele Acuto, Hugo Decramer, Juliana Kerr, Ian Klaus, and Sam Tabory, *Toward City Diplomacy: Assessing Capacity in Select Global Cities*, Chicago Council on Global Affairs, February 7, 2018, <https://www.thechicagocouncil.org/publication/toward-city-diplomacy-assessing-capacity-select-global-cities>.

<sup>2</sup> Kris Hartley, Glen Kuecker, and Jun Jie Woo, “Practicing Public Policy in an Age of Disruption,” *Policy Design and Practice* 2, no. 2 (June 2019): 163–81, <https://doi.org/10.1080/25741292.2019.1622276>.

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## Introduction

Climate change, migration, financial instability, and pandemics are problems that are not enclosed within local borders. Consensus is growing that collaboration and coordination are crucial, but nationalist divides and the multilateral world's lack of agility impede progress. In this context, cities' involvement and engagement in the global policy scene have grown. Many local governments no longer defer to national governments when developing strategies and terms for international engagement on key issues. Mayors, city councilors, metropolitan commissioners, and representatives of local authorities are reaching out directly to one another and to international actors, including corporations, UN agencies, and nongovernmental organizations.

These trends are reflected in increasing media attention and a growing array of documentation produced by formalized city networks. Practitioners and public commentators have also taken note.<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, formal and systematic analysis of city networking tends to be confined to highly visible collaborations that combat climate change and address sustainability. Building capacity in city diplomacy requires a more robust understanding of how cities conduct, resource, and orient their international engagement.

This report attempts to contribute to that understanding by examining the city-diplomacy activities of 47 major cities through a survey of their top-level international officials (Figure 1). Conducted by the Connected Cities Lab at the University of Melbourne in 2019, the study builds on an initial collaboration between the Lab and the Chicago Council on Global Affairs in 2017–18 that involved a survey of 27 cities.<sup>2</sup>

The previous survey (conducted in 2017 and published in 2018) led to the following findings:

- A majority of cities surveyed had an international strategy and a dedicated international office.

- A majority of cities were part of international city networks.
- A majority of officials said that city diplomacy had a positive impact on their cities.
- The city budget for global engagement was often minimal.
- Few cities reported that their staff had undergone dedicated training for city diplomacy.

In addition to providing new research on a significantly expanded set of cities, the updated study delves into city officials' attitudes toward city diplomacy and incorporates interviews with them to provide insight into formal and informal means of international engagement, capacity levels within city governments for these engagement activities, and the logic and purposes behind engagement.

## City Diplomacy: Background and Challenges

In the global scramble to collate responses to complex, universal policy challenges such as climate change, several multilateral organizations have proposed visions and plans focused on improving sustainability and living standards. Of these, the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are the best known among lay audiences.

The institutional architecture of the global policy community has roots in the immediate aftermath of World War II, when the fiscal and diplomatic imperatives of rebuilding and maintaining stability were paramount. A sustained period of economic growth throughout the mid-20th century helped a handful of countries in Europe and North America secure economic and diplomatic superpower status, boosting their influence over the global development agenda. In 2000, the long-running postwar mandate to align the rest of the world on governance, institutions, and measures of development compelled the global community to

articulate a consensus of aspirations: the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). The second iteration of the MDGs—the SDGs, adopted by the United Nations in 2015—incorporated a broader range of aspirations into what had been primarily an economic agenda. The SDGs also emphasized that many issues such as political liberalization, equity, and human dignity are universal challenges irrespective of location. With a deadline of 2030, the 17 SDGs and their 231 accompanying indicators collectively represent one of the most ambitious multilateral efforts to address global problems.

Thanks to a concerted advocacy effort by coalitions of local governments, cities play an important role in the SDG agenda, not only through a dedicated goal (Goal 11: Make cities inclusive, safe, resilient, and sustainable) but also through repeated reference across the entire SDG framework. This is no novelty: since 1972, at least 1,246 acknowledgments of cities have been present across 32 UN frameworks (e.g., the Paris Climate Agreement and the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction), with nearly half recognizing cities as actors in these agendas.<sup>3</sup> Cities are crucial in addressing mounting global challenges, and they are increasingly recognized for this purpose—both as places for action and as actors in their own right.

### Adopting a Global Vision

Cities are stepping up on the global scene. Until recent years, discourses and actions on global problems were the domain of national governments and global institutions. But the absence of a local perspective was a gap too glaring to ignore.

Indeed, cities of all types face local challenges that are related to global problems, and many lack the capacity or expertise to address those challenges effectively. Megacities, often portrayed as cautionary examples of contemporary urbanization, are home to many marginalized communities that

are highly vulnerable to threats such as climate change and health inequality.

At the same time, income inequality in developed cities continues to exacerbate gaps in well-being, education, and broader social outcomes, and rising property values accelerate gentrification and force lower-income households to the urban fringe.<sup>4</sup> In cities of all types, an influx of migrants displaced by economic crises and social conflict can stress fiscal and operational capacity while drawing nativist political opposition. Seeking to connect these and other local challenges to the global conversation and searching for venues to share knowledge, city governments have been reaching beyond their national borders for opportunities to collaborate. This is the impetus for the rise of city diplomacy: macro-trends in the economy, the environment, and society have forced mayors and councils to expand their focus beyond the operational mechanics of urban service delivery.

### Evolving from Bilateral Cooperation to City Networks

City diplomacy in modern world politics has deep roots extending well before the birth of the current nation-state system. Scholars have described how this activity has undergone multiple “generations” in the past century, evolving from intercity relationships based on culture to a complex mechanism and circuit for international coalition building and policy exchange.<sup>5</sup>

In the early 20th century, the first modern generation of city diplomacy was based on formalized bilateral relationships (in many cases opportunistic or idiosyncratic in nature) that were mainly centered on cultural, economic, or humanitarian purposes. This is the period of “sister city” relationships—or what has become known as “twinning”—many of which persist to the present day.<sup>6</sup> The City of Chicago, for instance, currently

Figure 1



has 28 sister cities (Bogotá, Durban, and Paris) with shared historical, social, and geopolitical origins that range from economic missions to the Cold War to Chicago's migrant communities. Focusing on activities such as cultural exchange, diaspora relations, and commercial market development, these arrangements often reflected the particular aspirations of political leaders, city governments, or stakeholders at any given time. Nevertheless, these relationships laid the foundation for what would become more systematic, coherent, and institutionalized city-diplomacy efforts.

In the mid-20th century, especially in the context of post–World War II recovery and mobilization, collectively organized forms of city cooperation began to emerge beyond twinning or trilateral collaborations. Twinning networks began to scale up with the launch of programs such as the Sister Cities International network (founded in 1956). This period of city diplomacy saw municipalities and metropolitan governments establish—and experiment with—collaborative efforts to exchange ideas and facilitate business. It also saw the broadening of this approach to a complex system of transnational communities of practice.

This period also saw the emergence of city networks designed to act as forums for collective action and as advocacy bodies to ensure that urban and local voices would be heard by higher levels of government and international interests.<sup>7</sup> This model, echoing historical precedents such as the Hanseatic League, had already been tested in the early days of modern multilateralism. For instance, the International Union of Local Authorities was founded in 1913 to promote city interests within the League of Nations. The mid-20th century saw burgeoning activity along these lines.

The 1970s—an era of US federalism and evolving local government engagement in many other parts

of the world—saw the emergence of a concept that came to be known as *paradiplomacy* in the 1980s.<sup>8</sup> This term refers to the international diplomatic activities of governments at subnational levels (e.g., provinces, regions, and cities). *City diplomacy*, a subset of paradiplomacy, has received recognition only more recently.

Our preliminary work from 2017–18, which drew on existing literature, defined city diplomacy as “the conduct of external relations undertaken by official representatives of cities with other actors, particularly other cities, nation-states, nongovernmental organizations, and corporations.”<sup>9</sup> In this definitional context, the late years of the Cold War and the early 1990s witnessed a mix of “first generation” forms of city diplomacy, such as Mayors for Peace (founded in 1982), a global campaign of cities to promote disarmament. The era also witnessed the emergence of novel forms of city networking engagements that, as with ICLEI Local Governments for Sustainability (founded in 1990), relied not only on city-to-city exchange but also on more explicitly institutionalized secretariats whose role was to facilitate policy mobility and drive some degree of resources and knowledge exchange among cities.<sup>10</sup> At the same time, UN agencies—including UNESCO on culture, UN-Habitat on urban settlements, and the World Health Organization on health—embarked on many such efforts, further encouraging the progressive transformation of city diplomacy from symbolic twinning to a more practical diplomatic activity that engaged thousands of local governments around the world.

Today's cities are increasingly likely to participate in the international system—especially as many of them see a mandate for action in global policy domains often neglected by national governments. This is particularly true where national and city governments are controlled by separate

inward-looking political parties promoting divergent narratives about the urgency of problems such as climate change, migration, and socioeconomic inequality.<sup>11</sup>

As the role of cities on the global stage has grown, institutionalized city diplomacy has proliferated. The world currently has more than 200 multiparty urban networks that address a variety of policy issues. According to our previous research,<sup>12</sup> networks have formed primarily around issues related to development and the environment and, to a lesser degree, around infrastructure and health. As noted in our 2018 study, cities are increasingly turning to one another to promote economic growth, advocate for city issues, and find independent and city-led solutions to the problems facing nation-states.

But while cities now enjoy a broad spectrum of networking opportunities, the global networking landscape is increasingly fragmented and may be reaching saturation point. This is evident in heightening competition among networks, UN agencies, and the private sector for local governments' resources. Additionally, in a pattern reminiscent of social sorting, networks have formed around shared characteristics such as population size, development level, and geographic proximity.<sup>13</sup> Some networks continue to be exclusive clubs, while others are exercises in solidarity among cities in marginalized or poorly resourced settings. While the vast number of networks provides cities with many alternatives in efforts to break national-level policy gridlocks,<sup>14</sup> there are mounting concerns that the sheer multitude of available arrangements could overwhelm resource-constrained cities. Cities must have the capacity to not only engage with partners but also benefit by contributing ideas and implementing initiatives that emerge from networks. Passive engagement may serve political and image-management purposes but brings little improvement to governance or material benefit for citizens.

## Key Survey Findings

In 2019, the Connected Cities Lab and the Chicago Council on Global Affairs partnered with CityNet, Eurocities, and Metropolis (World Association of the Major Metropolises) to survey city-diplomacy officers and representatives (e.g., director of international affairs) worldwide. Respondents participated in an online survey and had the option of completing an online interview to offer additional context for their responses. (For more, see "Methodology" on page 23).

The findings indicate that while international offices and positions are relatively new in many cities, they have become commonplace. A primary obstacle to growth and progress is a lack of formal strategies, training, and funding. Survey respondents had varying opinions about the relationship between cities and their national governments when it came to international affairs, as well as which level of government has a bigger impact on the global conversation. They generally agreed, however, on the importance of city leaders' personalities and personal networks in pursuing city-diplomacy agendas.

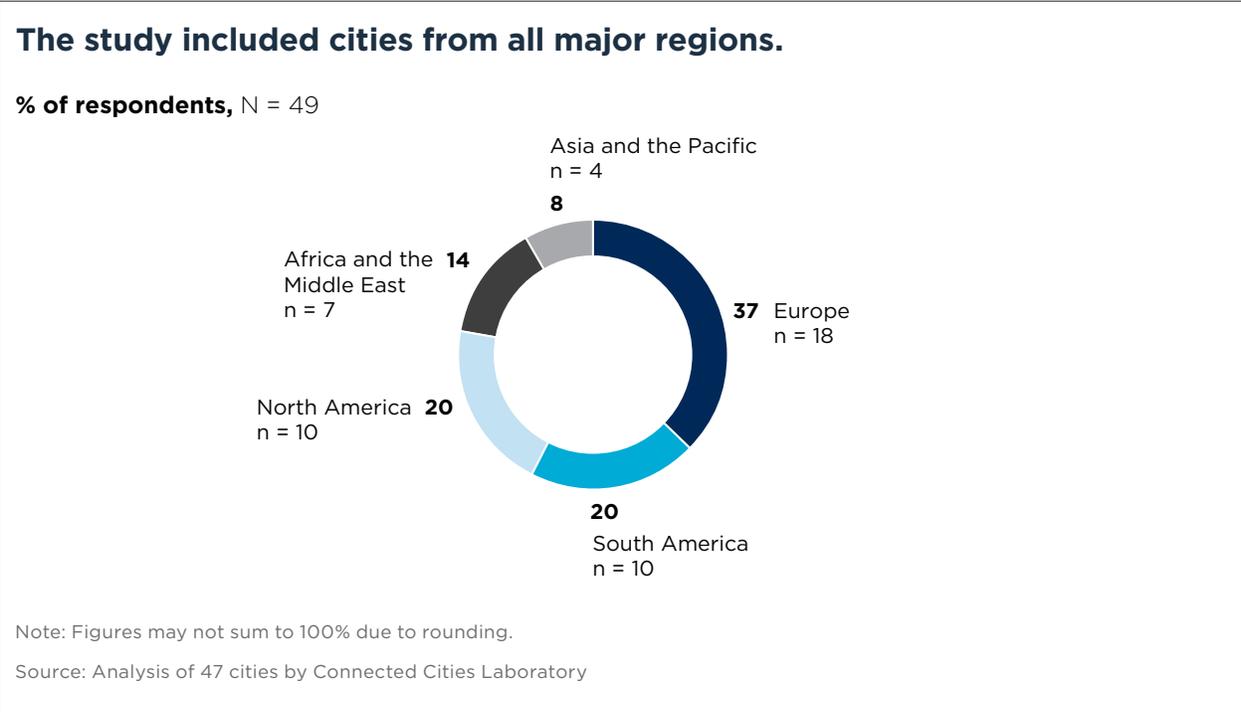
## Overview of Respondent Characteristics

Of the 49 respondents,\* a plurality (37 percent) represent cities based in Europe, followed by South America, North America, Africa and the Middle East, and Asia and the Pacific (Figure 2). The geographic spread of respondents is not a basis for inferences about the distribution of city-networking activities; rather, it reflects the idiosyncrasies of the sampling method.

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\* The study covered 47 cities, but two cities responded twice. The total number of responses is noted in each figure.

Figure 2



The majority of respondents (75 percent) had worked within their organization or role for five years or fewer. This may reflect the relative novelty of dedicated international offices and positions in cities as well as the relatively modest staffing levels of those offices. It also reflects the expansion of cities’ international activities over the past decade.

### International Offices and Funding

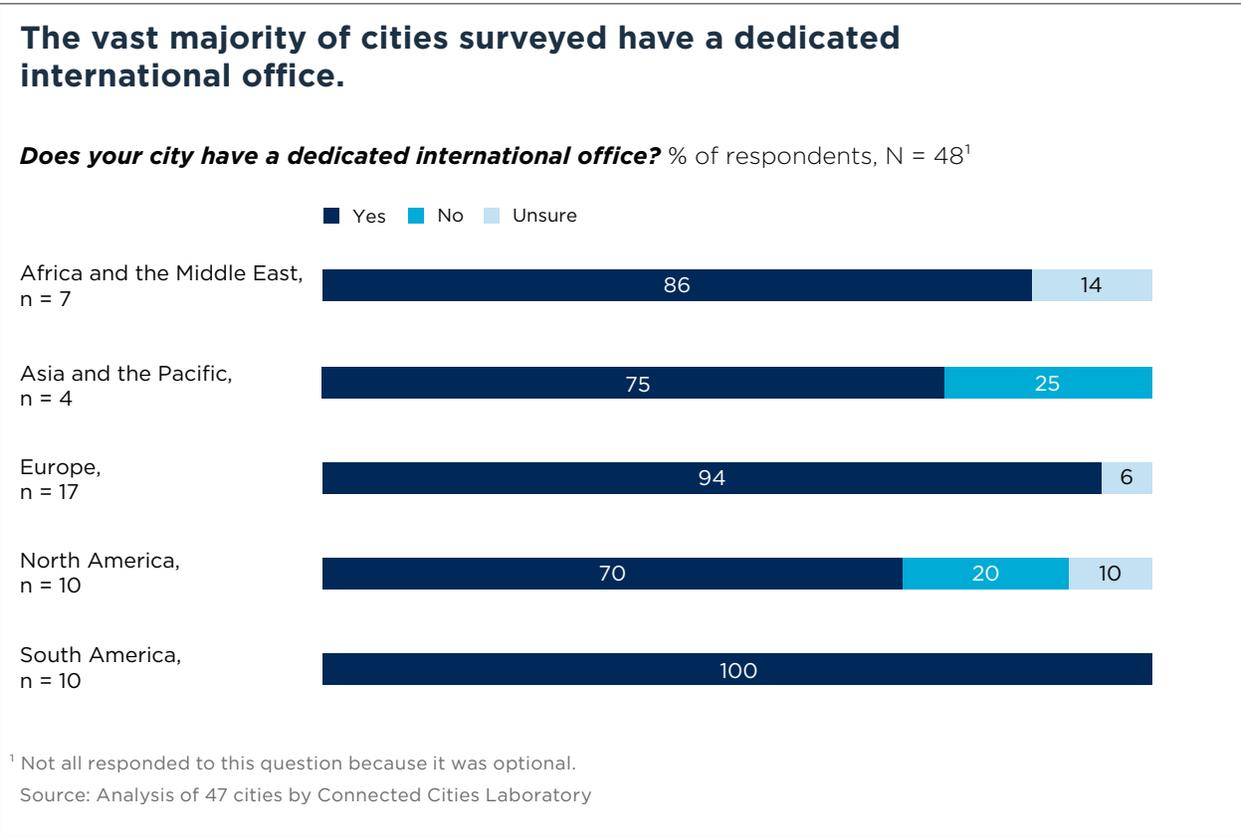
Eighty-six percent of respondents said their city has an official international office (Figure 3). Ninety-three percent reported the existence of a senior manager who deals specifically with international relations, 40 percent said they have dedicated funds for staff to travel internationally, and 38 percent said they allocate money for international conferences and other international events.

A majority of respondents pointed to funding as a primary obstacle to city diplomacy: 78 percent said they would engage more in city diplomacy if they had dedicated funds for that purpose. Funding allocations toward city-diplomacy activities vary by region. Africa, the Middle East, and North America account for the largest share of those with funding deficits, followed by Asia and the Pacific.

### International Strategies

Half of survey respondents said they currently have a stand-alone international strategy, while 19 percent have an international strategy nested within another document. About a quarter of respondents didn’t answer this question, which may point to a lack of clarity about what an international strategy is.

Figure 3

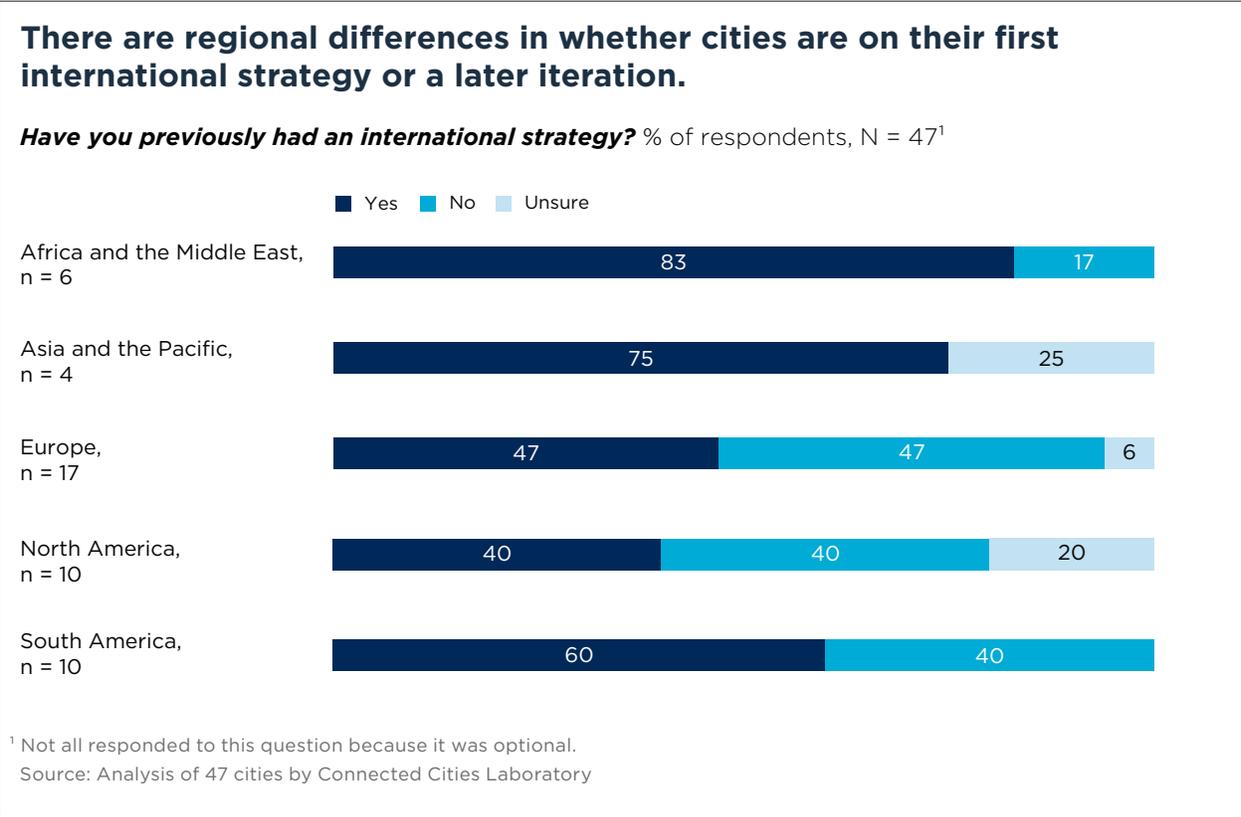


In addition, the leader may be reluctant to admit that their cities have not embraced what has become a global norm in city planning, as revealed in a review of city leadership and urban governance spanning more than 200 cities (including the majority of the cities included in this study).<sup>15</sup>

Identifying cities that have had previous iterations of their current international strategies sheds light on which cities have been building and refining their strategies over time. There are wide-ranging regional differences in responses to this question (Figure 4). For example, a higher proportion of

North American respondents indicated they had not previously had an international-engagement strategy or were unsure whether they had. The majority of respondents from Africa and the Middle East had developed international strategies in the past. This is in contrast to Europe, where responses were evenly split between those that had a previous strategy and those that did not. (This information should be understood in the context of the difference in sample sizes between the regions: seven respondent cities are in Africa and the Middle East and 19 are in Europe.)

Figure 4



### International Activity

Nine in 10 respondents said their cities are involved in twinning or sister-cities programs, and the same proportion said they conduct official economic or cultural missions to other cities. Participation in international events and programs (e.g., those sponsored by the UN) is similarly common. However, this level of participation may not be optimal; 55 percent of respondents said their cities would engage more if they had more information about which networks and international programs would fit their needs.

At the time of the survey, 55 percent of respondents indicated that they were actively tracking their cities' performance against the SDGs, 20 percent

indicated they had no tracking systems or practices, and 20 percent were unsure (with nonresponses accounting for the remaining 5 percent). In addition, more than half of officials have not received training on international-engagement activities (Figure 5). Respondents from 26 cities stated that they would publicly disclose the outputs of tracking, while the majority did not respond to the question. The nonresponse rate is noteworthy in that it may indicate an unwillingness to reveal a lack of compliance with growing global norms regarding adoption of international protocols and standards.

A plurality of respondents (28 percent) indicated that climate change was one of their top focus areas,

Figure 5



followed by resilience and development (9 percent each). Issues that cities would prefer to address but currently do not include homelessness, trade policy, and other economic matters.

Many among those who indicated available training also indicated its tendency to be informal or self-guided (Figure 6), highlighting that formal capacity building for international engagement is limited in cities. And some of the training modes that respondents referenced, such as degrees or certificates in international affairs or related fields, may be a recruitment prerequisite rather than an accreditation received while in the position. None of the training types mentioned in the survey has more than 15 percent uptake, implying a possible lack of consistency in training strategies across

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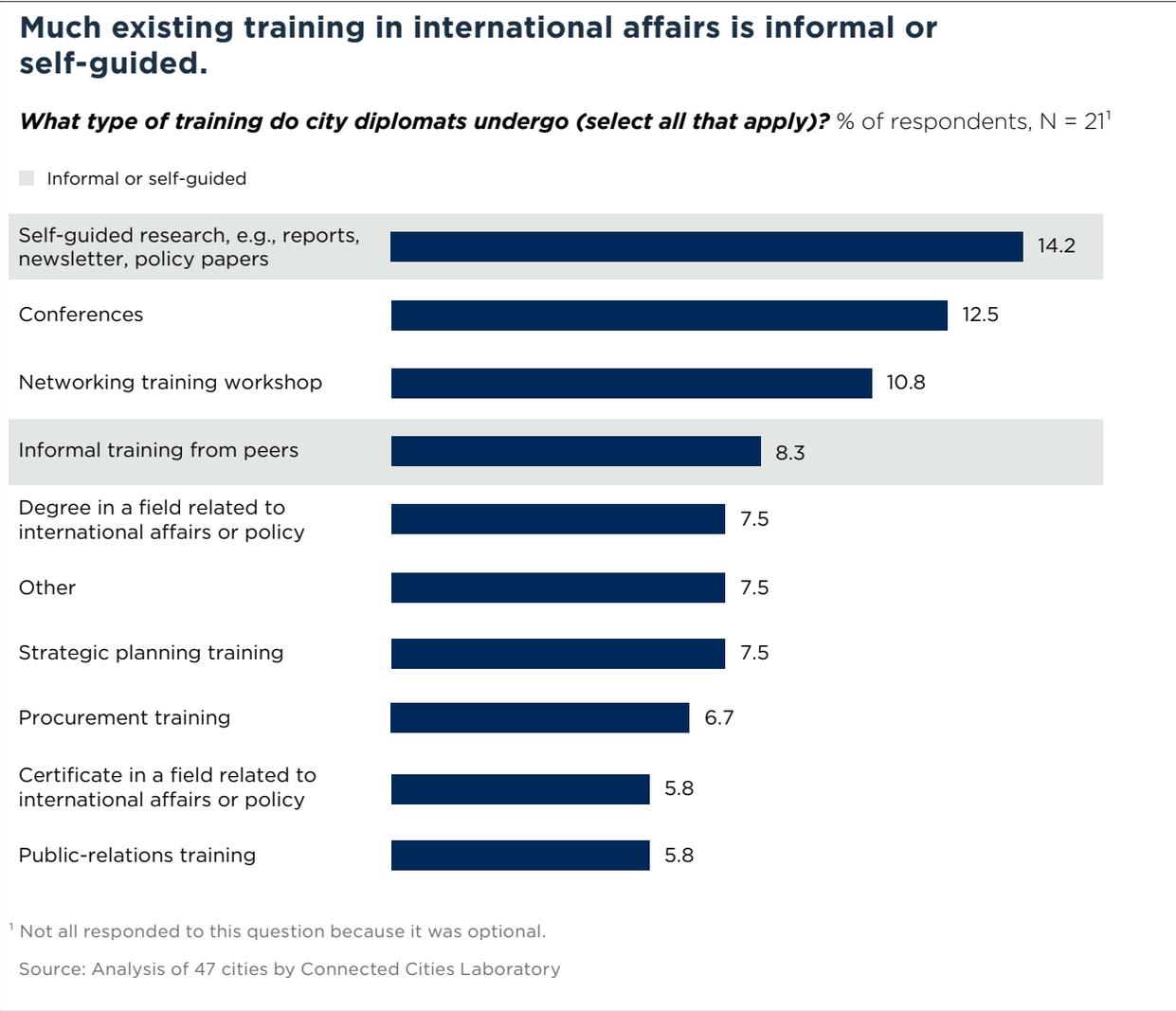
cities and a general absence of international programs dedicated to city diplomacy across regions or globally.

All told, 58 percent of respondents said their city would engage more in city diplomacy if they had better capacity building and training in international issues and negotiations.

### Mode of Engagement and Public Support

Thirty percent of respondents said that membership in city networks has more impact on their city's policies than the other options listed, followed by twinning and sister-cities relations, climate-based summits, and high-level political forums.<sup>16</sup> Notably, respondents said that their citizens tend to agree; among the options listed, twinning and sister-cities programs and membership in city networks garner the most support from the public, while the other activities are not as widely seen to be beneficial. Overall, half of respondents indicated that their citizens understand and agree that international engagement is important (28 percent disagreed, and 22 percent were neutral).

Figure 6



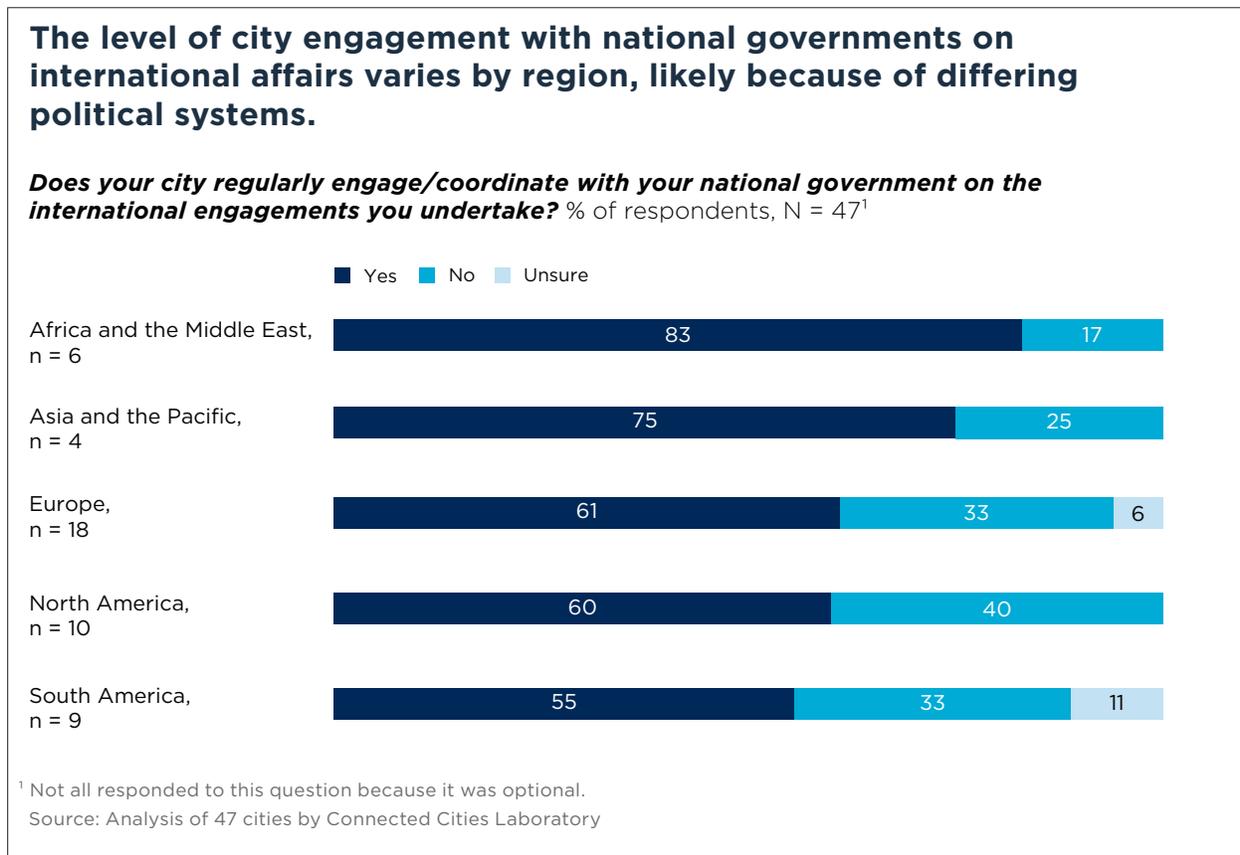
### The Role of Cities on the International Stage

A full 83 percent of respondents agreed that cities should play a role internationally, while just 10 percent believed international affairs are the realm of national governments. Most cities said they engage with their national governments to coordinate their own international activities.

Two-thirds of these efforts are ad hoc, and just 14 percent are regularly scheduled.

Looking at regional differences, just over half of South American cities regularly engage with the national government in their international activities (Figure 7). Meanwhile, Africa, the Middle East, Asia, and the Pacific had the highest percentages of cities that engage regularly with national governments.

Figure 7

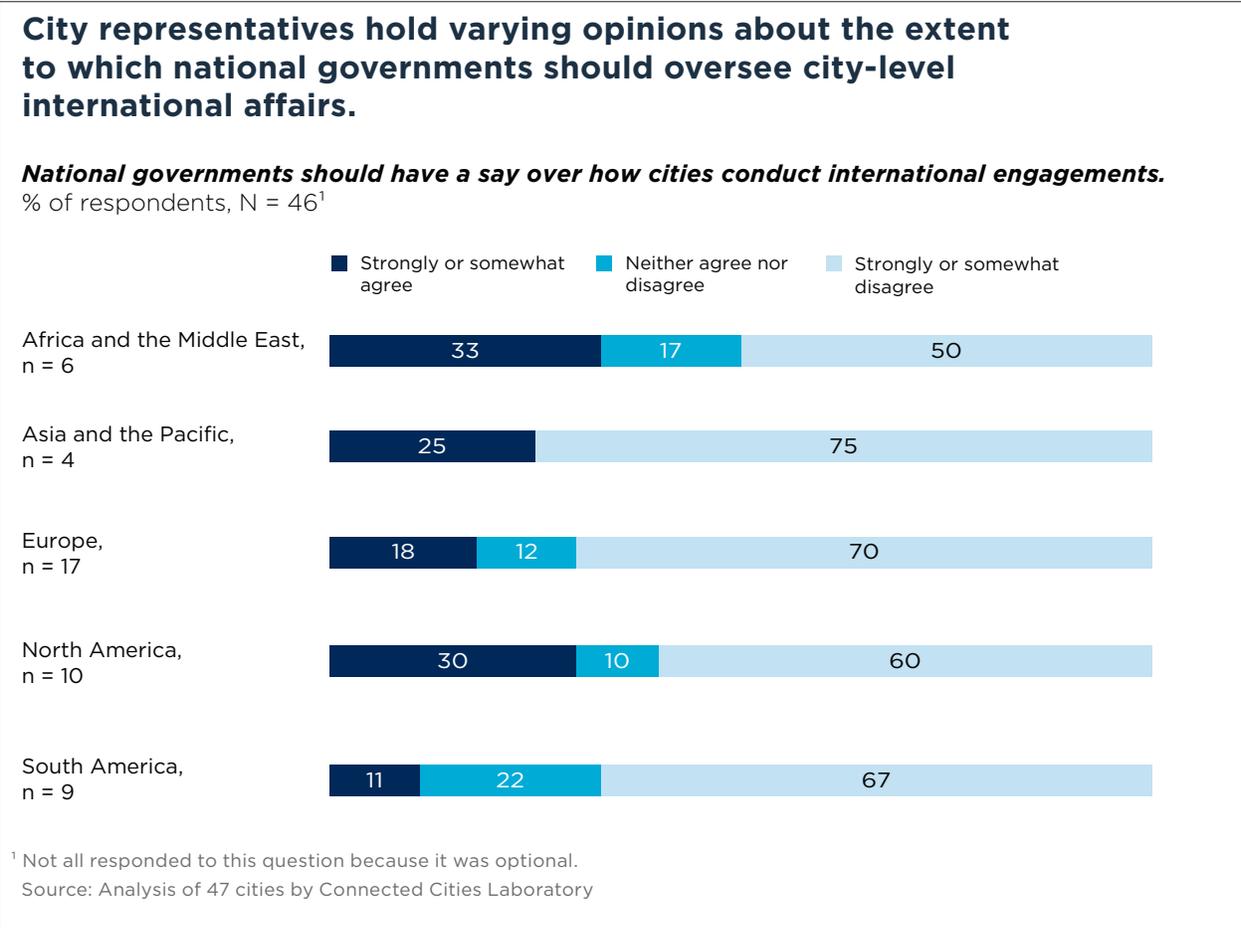


There was disagreement about how much influence national governments should have over city diplomacy (Figure 8). While a majority of respondents in most regions tended to agree that national governments should not have a say in how cities conduct international diplomacy, officials in Africa, the Middle East, and North America expressed more polarized opinions. This could highlight more contentious relationships between these cities and their national governments.

Perhaps one of the most telling findings of the study is that more than two-thirds of respondents believe cities have a greater impact on global challenges such as climate change than national governments

do (Figure 9). Supporters of city diplomacy have often espoused this perspective on the grounds that city governments are close to their constituents, they can govern directly, and—because urban policies often attract less scrutiny than their national counterparts—they can take immediate and tangible action to create more sustainable environments. The perception that cities have a greater impact is also likely due to the effective campaigning and advocacy work of networks like C40 Cities, ICLEI, and the Global Covenant of Mayors in directing substantial worldwide attention to the capacity of cities to act as coalitions on climate change.

Figure 8



However, many city officials said they do not have explicit authority on international issues, making them reluctant to pursue city-diplomacy efforts. In a similarly worded question about whether cities have a larger impact on promoting a global agenda than national governments, the spread of opinions was more even, with the highest number of respondents neither agreeing nor disagreeing (Figure 9). So while the majority agree that local governments can have a stronger

impact on climate change, there is less agreement regarding cities' comparative impact on the overall global agenda.

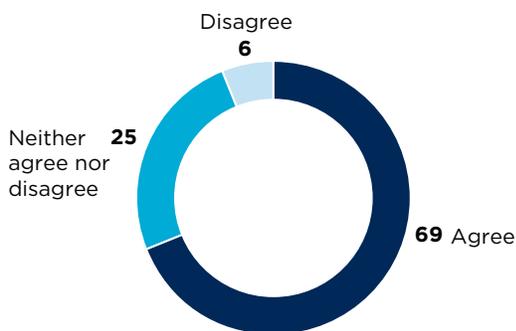
**The Role of Individual City Leaders on the International Stage**

More than half of respondents believed that the personalities of their city leaders have a direct impact on their city's level of international engagement. The range of responses by

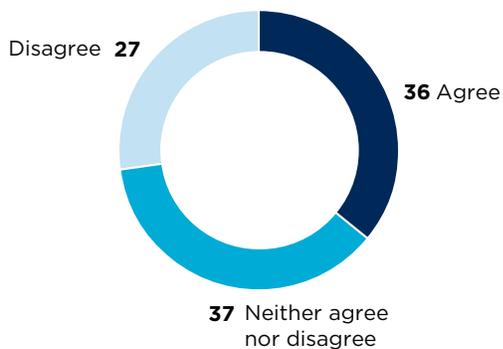
Figure 9

**Respondents tend to agree that cities can have an outside impact on global challenges such as climate change, but national governments still set the global agenda.**

**Cities can have a greater impact than national governments on global challenges such as climate change.** % of respondents, N = 46<sup>1</sup>



**Cities have a larger impact on promoting global agendas than national governments.** % of respondents, N = 46<sup>1</sup>



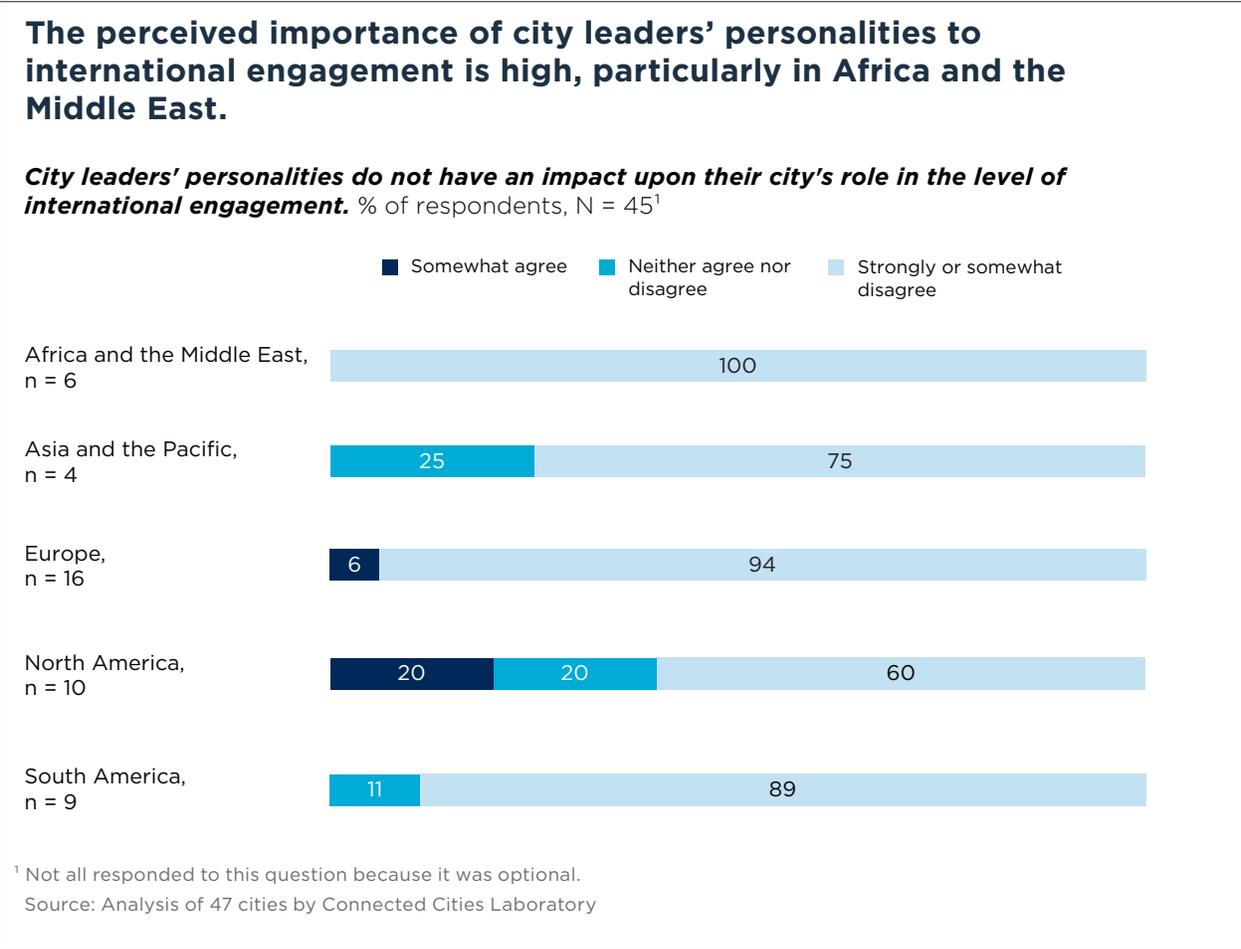
<sup>1</sup> Not all responded to this question because it was optional.  
Source: Analysis of 47 cities by Connected Cities Laboratory

region is notable: respondents from Africa and the Middle East unanimously agreed that city leaders' personalities play a key role, but responses from the other regions showed more variation (Figure 10).

Similarly, more than 80 percent of respondents agreed that city leaders' personal networks help cities achieve international goals. These results suggest that there is high importance placed on both the personality and connectedness of

city leaders who engage in city diplomacy. Furthermore, 86 percent believed that city leaders are legitimate actors in world affairs. Overall, these responses clearly indicate that international officers of cities feel empowered to engage in the international arena and to assume an active role on global issues—but they also underscore the idiosyncratic nature of a form of diplomacy that relies on individuals in leadership roles rather than on formal, institutional mechanisms.

Figure 10



**A Deeper Dive: Five Vignettes of City Diplomacy**

Following the survey, we conducted in-depth interviews to shed more light on what’s going on in city halls around the world when it comes to city diplomacy. The successes and challenges of these cities highlight a variety of experiences that can inform cities’ pursuit of international-engagement offices, staff, programs, and cooperation, as well as the importance of tying such pursuits to the well-being of city residents.

Taipei: “Bring Taipei to the World, and the World to Taipei”

The government of Taipei, Taiwan’s largest city, works closely with the national government to ensure that the city’s international affairs policies align with those of the federal government. This engagement occurs on an ad hoc basis in the absence of an established mechanism or process. According to a respondent from Taipei, the city’s growing engagement in international affairs has been supported by the public, as indicated by a concurrent rise in mayoral approval ratings.

But the politically contentious relationship between Taiwan and China has influenced Taipei's international engagement. For instance, it has prevented Taiwan from joining the United Nations, in turn, limiting Taiwan's engagement opportunities with UN organizations—many of which are long-standing pillars of city diplomacy. Nevertheless, Taipei takes an active global role through its membership in 100 other international associations, including United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG) and CityNet. The city's global engagement allows it to bypass its geopolitical sensitivities and avail itself of numerous international-engagement opportunities.

According to the respondent from Taipei, "It is less difficult for cities in Taiwan to engage with international organizations [than it is for the Taiwanese government], so we try our best to be more internationally engaged with these international . . . activities, meetings, and conferences to expose Taiwan or Taipei City. Not only the city itself, but Taiwan as a whole."

In some ways, city diplomacy provides a pathway for Taiwan to effectively engage and be "seen" internationally. But mutual understandings with networks such as UCLG stipulate that Taipei represent itself only as a city, not as part of a national body. Although the global city-diplomacy setting provides a venue for Taipei to deepen global engagement, city officials still recognize it as distinct from the diplomacy and foreign engagement of Taiwan.

Taipei has a strong track record of participation in the sister-cities program, having established relationships with 49 other cities. The city's bilateral relationships are based on four focus areas: economic development (including trade opportunities), exchange of technology, encouragement of tourism between cities, and student exchange. However, because of

*All stakeholders have an interest in how their cities conduct international diplomacy and how transnational relationships affect the practical experiences of urban life.*

fluctuations in Taiwan's political tensions with China, approximately one-third of those 49 sister-city relationships have not survived. This demonstrates how diplomatic relationships beyond the city level can determine the fate of city-to-city relationships.

## Montréal: A "Good Citizen of the Planet"

The City of Montréal, Québec, takes an active role on the global stage. In addition to its visibility at global events, Montréal has hosted three major conferences in the past three years: the Global Social Economy Forum, the ICLEI World Congress, and the Metropolis World Congress.

The city's global role is supported by a large team allocated specifically to international activities. Montréal's International Affairs Office has 12 employees, and the city's Protocol Office has 18—and all of them support international activities. According to a respondent from Montréal, the city government views its international contributions as part of its role as "a good citizen of the planet" and fulfills this role by promoting climate-change action both in the city itself and at the global level—for example, by participating in the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration.

Although some might see issues such as migration as an overreach for city government policies, Canada's governance arrangement ensures that national, provincial, and city government priorities and actions complement one another. Montréal

works closely with the governments of Québec and Canada on international negotiations while maintaining autonomy over its own policies—a clear example of the potential of power-sharing arrangements among levels of government and political parties. Of course, because this cooperation relies on political leaders to work together, it can be interrupted by elections.

Montréal also works formally with international organizations, including UNESCO on inclusive and creative cities initiatives, the UN High Commissioner for Refugees and the International Organization for Migration on migration issues, and various climate networks and summits. But city representatives told interviewers that engaging with international organizations is not as important as engaging with city networks and through bilateral city relations. These bilateral engagements are not without their challenges: many cities around the world still cannot act outside national government policies and are therefore constrained in their ability to foster institutional city-to-city partnerships. This constraint makes it difficult for some cities to achieve the scale needed to meaningfully engage in international settings and have an impact on global issues.

Interviews with Montréal city representatives also underscore the importance of hiring staff with the right qualifications and training to engage internationally. Montréal leaders recognize that individuals with experience in international diplomacy are particularly vital for promoting city diplomacy, as they have critical contacts with agencies like the UN and with other ambassadors and global leaders. These contacts and diplomacy skills help Montréal activate its global engagement agenda—illustrating the significant influence of experienced diplomats when pursuing a city’s global aims.

## Paris: The Importance of Communicating with Constituents

Paris has a long history of city leadership on global affairs, as demonstrated by its crucial role in creating the UCLG. Climate change is a key issue in Paris’s international engagement and has bolstered its influence in encouraging cities to embrace the goals of the Paris Agreement. Paris officials acknowledge the growing international role of cities, highlighting the growing consensus among multilateral organizations and city networks that cities are legitimate actors.

The French language provides a common pathway for connection between Paris and other francophone cities through channels such as the Organisation Internationale de la Francophonie. Paris also engages with the World Bank on climate cooperation and biodiversity; the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, through the Champion Mayors program; and bilaterally with the UN secretary general on the role of cities more generally. As one interviewee put it, “Networks are . . . important; they have a huge capacity to amplify the voices of cities.”

Despite Paris’s admirable record and image as a global city, Parisians are largely unaware of the city’s global role and are often surprised that the city has a 30-employee international engagement department. There is concern within the department about whether Parisians appreciate the value of city-based global engagement, and the department

*Many cities around the world still cannot act outside national government policies and are therefore constrained in their ability to foster institutional city-to-city partnerships.*

faces challenges in communicating its value to residents. Indeed, the department receives questions from the public about how city funds are allocated to international activities and city diplomacy efforts.

Further, while the city and the national government are strongly aligned on the topic of climate change, they face larger disparities on issues such as migration, leading to tensions between the two levels of government. Interviewees from Paris's international office said the role of the city on the global stage is particularly important when it comes to situations such as these.

## Los Angeles: City Diplomacy Beyond High-Level Delegations

Establishing relationships across borders is essential to successful, durable city-diplomacy efforts. However, cross-border relationships brokered by officials and elected representatives sometimes exclude citizens and other representative groups, which narrows the range of partnerships that cities and other local government entities can establish.

Some cities have begun to tackle this problem by establishing professional and educational opportunities for people and groups to represent their city internationally. For instance, in 2018, the Los Angeles Office of International Affairs launched the Mayor's Young Ambassador (MaYA) program. A city-funded international travel program for students attending California community colleges as part of the College Promise program, MaYA is funded through the City of Los Angeles Mayor's Fund and various private entities.

MaYA has two functions. First, it aims to equip a cohort of young community college students with an international perspective on local and global

affairs. The Office of International Affairs partners with foreign consulates in Los Angeles to host MaYA participants in their respective countries. While abroad, students meet with municipal government officials and foreign-affairs staff and interact with local community groups. Since 2018, the program has sent nearly 130 students to cities in Australia, Egypt, France, Japan, Mexico, Taiwan, and Vietnam.

Second, the program seeks to broaden the range of age, experience, and background of those representing Los Angeles internationally. By engaging with residents of underresourced communities through the official channels of the Los Angeles municipal government and empowering these residents to represent the city on the global stage, MaYA presents a much richer picture of Los Angeles to the world. In addition to strengthening community involvement through official international-engagement efforts, the program gives residents another way to express their interests and connect their neighborhoods with global networks.

Citizen-focused programs like MaYA are expensive and labor intensive, and they may not be feasible for some cities. They may also perpetuate the asymmetry of exchange programs that privilege students and professionals from wealthy areas over citizens from poorer areas. However, well-funded efforts that actively engage with groups outside of traditionally advantaged communities have the ability to create meaningful and lasting transnational relationships beyond official circles and negotiating tables. Such efforts can be strengthened by cities working together toward proportional funding models that help such programs become shared, extending internationally.

## Amsterdam: A Whole-of-City Approach to International Diplomacy

Municipal governments do not necessarily monopolize a city's international engagement. Universities, private enterprises, civil-society groups, cultural institutions, and trade unions all have an interest in how their cities conduct international diplomacy and how transnational relationships affect the practical experiences of urban life.

Recognizing this, the Municipality of Amsterdam (MoA) developed a partnership model that connects intracity actors with international diplomatic efforts. All international delegations from MoA comprise representatives from the city government, private industry, and knowledge partners, including universities and museums. Interviewees described this whole-of-city networked model as analogous to the consensus-based industrial-relations *poldermodel* used by Dutch local governments during the 1980s and 1990s. For example, when the mayor of Amsterdam travels internationally, representatives from a variety of partner organizations join the delegation—bringing a range of interests that may not be adequately served by a delegation consisting only of MoA officials. Delegation members and roles vary depending on the destination and purpose of each mission.

The University of Amsterdam, for instance, is frequently included in the mayor's international diplomatic efforts. In an effort to strengthen this relationship, the university's Strategic Framework for Internationalization makes explicit the need to align its strategic goals with those of the MoA—thereby prioritizing the cooperative establishment of a strategic direction. MoA officials indicated in interviews that engaging both internationally and locally to support the interests of the city has been successful.

But heavily imbricated partnerships between government and private enterprises can obscure the line between legitimate cooperation and undue influence. The development of close relationships between businesses or other private entities and international partners and municipal governments by way of government delegations has the potential to erode public trust in the lawfulness of international activities. While the *poldermodel* of the 1980s was a useful mechanism to achieve strategic diplomatic harmony between business and trade unions, it did not produce or rely on such an intricate overlay of private and government interests as exists today.

## Bridging the Capacity Gap

City diplomacy is a varied but widespread pursuit, and our research finds that cities have a growing appetite for international engagement. To date, however, policy and scholarly debate on the topic has been stymied by a lack of systematic evidence regarding the obstacles to cities' efforts in official international engagement. The data from our survey help build a picture of the institutional, strategic, and attitudinal realities of city diplomacy and demonstrate that international engagement is largely seen as a useful and necessary activity for local governments in developed and developing countries.

Our findings also point to two primary barriers facing many cities: insufficient resources, particularly funding, and a lack of effective city-diplomacy training. To a lesser degree, respondents also cited the lack of explicit authority to conduct international engagement as a constraint to more effective city diplomacy. Cities can wield tools such as the policy-capacity framework to bridge the gaps and extend the reach and effectiveness of their city-diplomacy efforts.

## Primary Obstacles to City-Diplomacy Efforts

Despite the finding that nine of the 10 cities that participated in this study have an official international office and a senior manager who deals specifically with international relations, fewer than half have designated funds to enable staff to travel internationally or attend conferences and other international events. This lack of adequate funding and other resources is preventing cities from pursuing city diplomacy to its fullest potential.

Furthermore, many city officials reported a significant lack of adequate and systematic training underpinning their international engagements. Many individuals recruited into roles in city-diplomacy offices and internationally oriented projects and portfolios also lack formal education and training in the practices of diplomacy, negotiation, and external engagement—practices that are perhaps more common among their national and even private-sector counterparts. Only a handful of interviewees and survey respondents, for example, had explicit training or professional experience in international relations. This limitation generally forces staff to turn to self-guided and ad hoc professional development methods—with possibly suboptimal results.

In addition, half of respondents cited a lack of explicit authority on international issues as a reason they don't engage more. This finding reflects an

*Limited explicit training or professional experience in international relations generally forces staff to turn to self-guided and ad hoc professional development methods—with possibly suboptimal results.*

often overlooked institutional or administrative variable and the still ambiguous positioning of cities vis-à-vis the international system (e.g., UN agencies and multilateral banks), international activities beyond their locality, and the sprawling realities of cross-border challenges affecting urban life around the world (e.g., climate change, public health, and migration).

In the absence of additional resources, professionalization, and authority for city officials to engage internationally, the determinants of city diplomacy are idiosyncratic—as demonstrated by the importance of city leaders' personalities and connectedness. Some cities benefit from this dynamic, but others may not. The quality of a city's diplomacy thus does not reflect administrative capabilities so much as incidental factors.

## A Framework for Improving City-Diplomacy Efforts

City leaders can look to the extensive academic work that has been done in public policy as a guide for best practices. The policy-capacity framework, which provides insights into the development of capacity for institutional engagement, is one example.<sup>17</sup> This matrix overlays three levels of application (individual, organizational, and systemic) with three types of competences (analytical, operational, and political) to generate nine combinations of perspectives for improving (including individual—analytical and organizational—political). The framework has been used to evaluate policy capacity at a variety of scales and for multiple governance indices.<sup>18</sup> It provides not only an assessment mechanism for existing capacities but also a road map to help cities focus their limited resources and efforts, particularly as an early-stage initiative to begin building capacity.

The characteristics of city leaders—as found by our survey to be a determinant of the nature and quality of international engagement—can be viewed within the capacity framework as being *individual–political*. The crucial issue for cities in systematizing engagement capacity is moving capacity from the individual level (whether analytical, operational, or political) to the organizational level. This requires cities to view the exercise of analysis and engagement as an organizational undertaking with two benefits: checks and balances inherent in organizational protocols (as opposed to the whims of powerful individuals and leaders) ensure that diplomacy is undertaken systematically, equitably, and democratically; and the development of institutional knowledge ensures that the departure of a powerful individual or leader does not compromise a city’s ability to continue engaging effectively.

For instance, academic research about policy capacity by Michael Howlett, a professor at Simon Fraser University in Canada, has outlined how key elements of organizational analytical capacity relate to “levels of interorganizational trust and communication.”<sup>19</sup> While the human element of diplomacy is crucial, the organizational perspective on engagement capacity applies the notion of “relationships” and “trust” between individuals to groups of individuals as representative of organizations in strategic partnership. According to Howlett, elements of individual political capacity include “understanding the needs and positions of different stakeholders,” “judgment of political feasibility,” and “communication skills.”

At the same time, the lack of proper training revealed by the survey underscores the need

*The crucial issue for cities in systematizing engagement capacity is moving capacity from the individual level to the organizational level.*

to develop individual analytical and managerial capacity. According to Howlett, elements of individual analytical capacity include “knowledge of policy substance and analytical techniques and communication skills,” while elements of individual managerial capacity include “strategic management, leadership [and] negotiation and conflict resolution.” Civil servants whose portfolios include international engagement should be equipped with the ability to analyze issues that involve and affect city diplomacy. This includes the ability not only to monitor conditions at the systemic level (e.g., global-scale policy challenges and the geopolitical contexts that shape diplomacy itself) but also to recognize how city resources (money and personnel time) should be applied to engagement efforts in order to derive the most value.

## Conclusion

Cities have dedicated offices and units for a variety of policy subsectors, including infrastructure, housing, social services, safety, and health. Given the growing interconnectedness of global problems, the fact that those problems often manifest most acutely in urban contexts (e.g., pandemics have a higher impact in high-density settings), and the characteristics that bind cities together in their pursuit of solutions (e.g., addressing sea-level rise in

coastal or low-lying neighborhoods), city diplomacy must be institutionalized and resourced to build international-engagement capacity. Policy topics identified in the survey—including climate change, resilience, development, and trade—mandate a global perspective and are matters of particular relevance to the local scale. Establishing an office or manager of international engagement is an important start, but it's only a start: city diplomacy must be expanded and deepened.

As the role—and perhaps the plight or positional ambiguity—of cities in the current era of global disruption is increasingly recognized by international organizations and at international events like the UN World Urban Forum, the urgency grows for cities to develop systematic capacities for global engagement. While the political leaders of cities are often visionary, engaging, and inspirational, the fate of international engagement should not be dependent on the characteristics and capabilities of a single person. If adequately resourced, cities should approach city diplomacy in the same way they approach the provision of all urban services: with the collective professionalism that ensures stability and effectiveness. ■

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## Methodology

This study was undertaken through a collaboration among the Connected Cities Laboratory, the Chicago Council on Global Affairs, CityNet, Eurocities, and Metropolis (World Association of the Major Metropolises). The broad combined reach of these networks allowed researchers to canvass a variety of cities across developmental contexts and geographies. Targeting managers working in the international-engagement offices of cities, the survey addressed the characteristics of cities'

global engagement agendas and capacities with a focus on the presence of a dedicated international office, international strategy, adequate staff training, coordination with national government on global issues, and personal views about the roles and rights of cities in addressing global problems as independent actors.

This study relies on work developed through *Toward City Diplomacy*, a preliminary review conducted by the Lab and the Council in 2017 and published in 2018. That report was based on a smaller survey across 27 global cities participating in the annual Chicago Forum on Global Cities (now Pritzker Forum). Our new study takes a mixed-methods approach, incorporating a survey of city officials and a set of semi-structured interviews. With the help of the Metropolis network, we created an online survey in both English and Spanish using the survey platform Qualtrics. The survey was then shared electronically with approximately 100 current and directly relevant officers and representatives (e.g., director of international affairs) from cities around the world, as identified through existing contacts by the Lab and the Council and with support from Metropolis, CityNet in Asia and the Pacific, and Eurocities in Europe. We received 49 full survey responses (discarding partially answered and thus noncomparable responses), and this study incorporates opinions and relevant information from those responses. The mix of contacts was designed to ensure geographical diversity and to target managers in the international-engagement offices of cities.

Questions were divided into five sections. Section 1 captured information regarding the respondent, including city, position, and years in the role. Section 2 addressed the city's official resource allocation and funding arrangements

for international engagement, presence of formal international-engagement strategies, and associated personnel training. Section 3 addressed the specifics of international engagement, including participation in international initiatives such as SDG tracking, city networks, and other means of engagement with governments and international organizations. Section 4 elicited perceptions about the impact of city engagement on international policies and processes.

Finally, Section 5 addressed barriers to city-level international engagement, as understood through research on behavioral change,<sup>20</sup> including capabilities (psychological and physical), opportunities (social and physical), and motivation (reflective and automatic). The goal was to reveal reasons why cities fail to engage in city diplomacy. Section 5 is wholly made up of

statements linked to a five-point Likert scale (ranging from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree,” with “unsure” as a midpoint response).

Interview participants were identified from the pool of survey respondents through an opt-in process. The final question of the survey asked whether the participant was interested in undertaking an online interview to discuss issues raised in the survey. Interviews were semi-structured, conducted online, and planned to last no longer than approximately 30 minutes. Interviews were not transcribed, as they were used only to provide context for interpreting survey responses. The interviewer prompted interviewees with open-ended themes for discussion, with the aim of allowing interviewees to steer the conversation.

Table 1

<b>Details of survey process</b>
Hosted by Qualtrics through Connected Cities Lab
Emailed to contacts at cities pre-selected by the Lab, Council, Metropolis, CityNet, and Eurocities
Allowed a response time of two weeks
Designed to take no more than 20 minutes to complete
Featured a majority of multiple-choice questions, with minimal open-ended responses

Table 2

<b>Example questions used in interview</b>
Do you believe that your city plays an important role in the international sphere?
Do you believe that your constituents feel that engaging internationally (as a city) is important?
Do you feel that your city has different goals and aspirations in comparison to those of the national government regarding similar topic areas?
Do you engage with other international cities? If so, with whom, in what forum, and how often?
What are the main themes and issues that you discuss with your counterparts in other cities?

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