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**Building City Political Agency across Scales:  
The Johannesburg International Relations Strategy**

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## **Introduction**

There is a small but growing body of literature that explores the political agency of the city at the international and global scale, more particularly its increased role and impacts on international affairs, global governance and diplomacy. While cities' international activities are not new (see the history of city-to-city cooperation, transmunicipal movements and networks in Europe, paradiplomatic activities by sub-national entities in the USA) scholars are examining the key drivers and the mechanisms by which cities have been empowered in the last decades, mainly in the fields of international relations, political science and comparative politics, with insights from urban studies (Acuto, 2013). They question the significance of their new functions, capabilities and influences within the context of urban transformation, state rescaling, the reconfiguration of the international system and the trend towards networked forms of transnational urban governance (Pinson and Vion, 2000; Viltard, 2008, 2010; Nijman, 2009; Acuto, 2013; Curtis, 2014; Bouteligier, 2014, Lungkvist, 2014). This research complements other work from geographers, who explore the role of cities in global environmental governance, more particularly how municipal networks give power and influence to cities for addressing key global challenges in a context of multi-level governance (Betsill and Bulkeley, 2006; Bulkeley 2010).

This chapter aims at enriching the discussion on the internationalization of cities that takes place within the fields of geography and urban studies by critically assessing the hypothesis of the growing empowerment of cities at the international scale, as formulated by scholars from international relations and political science. It draws on the analysis of the Johannesburg's International Relation Strategy, whose objective is to strengthen the international status, role and influence of the city through a wide range of activities: city-to-city cooperation, participation in transnational urban alliances, associations and networks, as well as in the global system of governance through direct engagement with international organizations and forums (City of Johannesburg/CoJ, 2012, 2016). The chapter also aims at enriching the discussions by bringing attention to the geopolitical dimension of international city strategies from a Global South perspective, as an important factor that drives and shapes the political agency of a city (Peyroux, 2016). This underlines the importance of considering the positionality of (urban) space from which city stakeholders act (Sheppard, 2002).

The first section of the chapter reviews current debates on the political agency of a city at the international and global scale, mostly dealt with in political science and international relations. It underlines both the relevant insights offered by such fields as well as the limitations and gaps. The second section analyses the Johannesburg international relations strategy released by the metropolitan government in 2012<sup>1</sup>. It shows how political history, inter-governmental relations, in particular city/state relations, economic processes, as well as the strategic positioning of the city within different geopolitical spheres of influences shape Johannesburg's international activities. It emphasizes in particular how the strategy is embedded in the reconfiguration of power between northern and southern countries and the changing origin and nature of urban expertise. The geopolitical dimension has to be understood in the context of the growing economic, but also diplomatic, influence and power of Southern countries and cities, particularly within the BRICS alliance (Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa) (Véron, 2013). Whereas selective city-to-city cooperation is an important component of the strategy, the chapter underlines how the political agency of Johannesburg at the international and global scale is best understood as the capacity to influence the production of urban norms and values based on South African urban experiences and practices. This highlights the relevance of a networked

reading of political agency. While it is important to take a ‘southern standpoint’ in order to consider policy innovations, relations and flows circulating within the Global South (Robinson, 2011), it is also of importance to reflect upon the new positionalities of southern cities on the international scene and the way this produces a new categorization and hierarchy of cities in the South. The conclusion highlights the need for developing an interdisciplinary research agenda that can increase our understanding of the links between urban development processes, transnational dynamics and global policy making.

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

The internationalization of cities has been an ongoing topic of investigation for scholars from many disciplines (urban geography, political and economic geography, urban studies, sociology, anthropology, political science, and recently international relations) over the past decades and has largely contributed to renewing our understanding of and conceptualization of cities as sites, places and actors, and as nodes embedded in multi-scalar networks. The various dimensions of the internationalization processes (the internationalization of urban economies, the internationalization of urban policies, the internationalization of local governments) have been addressed by different, though overlapping, sets of literature: the world/global city literature, the policy transfer and ‘urban policy mobility’ literature, the literature on the ‘international action of cities’ and city diplomacy. While coming from different disciplinary and theoretical perspectives, these bodies of literature all examine the complex interconnections and interdependencies between urban spaces, the rescaling of statehood and urban governance, and the relevance of territorial processes in a world increasingly conceptualized in terms of flows and (city) networks. They have for the most part – in their own fields - demonstrated the limits of a predominantly state-centred and territorial perspective.

More recently, a recent, emerging literature from political science and international relations has started exploring ‘city political agency’ at the international and global scale, more particularly in the

environmental field (Acuto, 2013; Barber, 2013; Bouteligier, 2014; Curtis, 2014) (see Aust, 2015). By looking at global practices of cities and questioning their increased influence in international affairs, they have challenged traditional notions and approaches of international laws and brought new insights into the fields of international relations.

### **The increased political activities of cities at the international and global scale**

The conceptualization of the *political agency* of cities rests on the empirical observation that cities have an ‘active *presence*’ in world politics, international affairs and global governance (Ljungkvist, 2014, p.2). While cities’ international *activities* are not new, they have gained prominence over the past decades. City-to-city cooperation has become a worldwide policy instrument for promoting local development through exchanges between cities (North/South, South/South), in particular through the influence of international organizations and networks, such as United Cities and Local Governments of Africa (UCLGA), Africities, Metropolis. The goals have changed over time with the evolving geopolitical context: from promoting friendship and solidarity to contributing to urban development and economic growth. There is a *growing participation* of cities in transnational city networks and associations, international forums that cities use as platforms for developing further cooperation with cities or as a place to represent themselves, defend their interests, a site for political lobbying in order to promote their views and policy orientations. As underlined by van der Pluijm (2007, p.20):

The aim of UCLG for instance, the global association of municipalities, is to gain an official status at the UN in order to promote and protect the interests of cities worldwide in all of the issues in which the UN deals. Cities seeks to have a greater influence in decision-making in international organisations.

Cities are increasingly participating in *global governance* (see in particular the debates around cities and global environment governance) (Betsill and Bulkeley, 2006; Bulkeley, 2010; Curtis, 2014).

ICLEI (International Council for Local Environmental Initiatives) and UCLG are examples of city-based coalitions and engagements (Acuto, 2013, p.183) that establish an *urban presence* within the realm of global governance. C40 is considered the ‘most significant case of global city agency in

global environmental politics' (Acuto, 2013, p.99). Other aspects of the active political presence of cities relate to active presence and high visibility of their mayors in world affairs (Ljungkvist, 2014). Cities also develop direct interaction with regional and international organizations (UNICEF, UNESCO, UN-Habitat) and collaborate on international laws and global politics (Nijman, 2009). The New Urban Agenda that was adopted at the United Nations Conference on Housing and Sustainable Development in 2016 confirmed the key role that cities are expected to play in implementing the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (Barnett and Parnell, 2016).

### **From international activities and presence to city political agency, power and influence**

Despite the focus on cities' international activities there is still little theorization of the international city political agency. The literature on 'urban policy mobility' in geography and urban studies has been mostly concerned with the internationalization of urban policies, exploring how and why policy ideas move and travel, how elements from elsewhere are embedded in, and reshape local policymaking. They have focused on the nodes, circuits and networks that connect people and ideas, on the agents of mobility and transfer (individuals, epistemic communities, city officials, local governments). They have looked at the adoption and re-appropriation of urban policies 'in motion', often located in the context of the neo-liberalization of urban policies (Ward, 2006; Didier, Peyroux and Morange, 2012; Peyroux et al., 2012; Wood, 2014; Michel and Stein, 2015). Work on city-to-city cooperation has focused on the historical construction of transmunicipal partnerships and networks, particularly within the European context (Saunier, 2006; Clarke, 2012), on city policies and decentralized cooperation policies and their recent evolutions under changing economic and geopolitical contexts (Husson, 2000; Pasquier, 2012; Söderström, Dupuis and Leu, 2013; Söderström, 2014). They have explored the efficiency of intercity partnerships in terms of local capacity building and urban governance strengthening in the South (Bontenbal, 2009; Bontenbal and Lindert, 2009), their role as vectors of European integration (Pinson and Vion, 2000) or as a learning place (Campbell, 2009; van Ewijk and Baud, 2009). The literature exploring city's international activities in a broader perspective (including a wider repertoire of actions) has paid attention to the contextual factors determining the internal features of the 'international agency' of cities (Lefevre and d'Albergo 2007),

with the purpose of comparing cities across Europe and assessing their autonomy vis-à-vis global forces. The conceptualization, however, remains linked to the political status of the city within the national and local institutional system, as both enabling and constraining city actions.

There has been little theorization of the political agency of city at the international and global scale within the field of international relations (Ljungkvist, 2014). First, the integration of non-state actors in the field is recent. Second, acknowledging the power of cities in international relations destabilizes the assumptions that international relations make about the international system (Curtis, 2014): it challenges the state-centred (Viltard, 2010) and territorial perspective (Acuto, 2013, p.25), the fact that sub-national governments are under the (sole) influence and direction of national government (Betsill and Bulkeley, 2006). However, it has been acknowledged that the state is no longer the primary, single actor in international relations, foreign policies and diplomacy, that there are a plurality of non-actors, particularly in the field of global environmental governance (transnational networks, epistemic communities, networks of firms and NGO, but also subnational actors developing their own transnational environmental policies (Compagnon, 2013).

In this context three analytical challenges have captured research interests: assessing the shift of power between the state and the city (in terms of autonomy and independency); conceptualizing the agency of cities with transnational networks; and assessing the outcomes and impacts of current practices of cities at international and global level. This underlines two inter-related issues:

- The rising importance of cities in world affairs, international relations, global governance and diplomacy, linked to the changing international system, evolving modes of global governance and decision-making processes (the political and institutional processes that shape city agency)
- The ‘paradoxical importance of the local and urban in the contemporary global and globalizing age’ (Ljungkvist, 2014, p.53) (the framing of global challenges): ‘Urban issues and cities are becoming understood as increasingly central and relevant in global politics’ (Ljungkvist, 2014,

p.52); ‘Global challenges are made into urban issues’ (Ljungkvis, 2014, p.54); ‘Contemporary global “risks” are described as having increasingly urban facets’ (Ljungkvis, 2014, p.49).

The leading questions from the perspective of international studies are: Where does the growing power of cities derive from? What are the key drivers of the empowerment of cities? (Curtis, 2014). The discussion on the mechanisms that empower the city at the international level (resources, capacities, means) assumes that (global/izing) cities are already powerful. This assumption builds on the literature on the global city and its networks and extends it by bringing in the political role of cities (Bouteligier, 2014). The explanation is rooted in global urbanization and urban transformation processes, in the ‘political implication of new urban forms’ (Curtis, 2014, p.4) which are regarded as factors for understanding city power. Scholars acknowledge the ‘horizontal and vertical stretching of urban space’, the ‘transnational reach in a context of global urbanization’. The ‘extension of city’s capabilities and influence allows them a new functionality within the international system, including the power to engage in novel forms of global governance’ in a context where there are ‘growing convictions that states have failed to tackle some of the most pressing governance issues’ (Curtis, 2014, p.4).

The definition and characterization of the ‘political agency of city’ (Acuto, 2013, p.5) is dealt with in two separate, though overlapping sets of literature. A first set of literature in political science and international relations deals with the political agency of cities, indeed local governments vis-à-vis the state, mostly around the notions of ‘city diplomacy’, defined as a form of ‘*decentralized international relation’s management*’ (van der Pluijm 2007, p.11; Viltard 2008, 2010), ‘diplomacy from below’ (Krippendorf, 2000) or ‘municipal foreign policy’. This work focuses on *inter-governmental relations* and the redistribution of competencies between the different layers of government. The research explores the causes, motivations, forms and nature of city engagements (bilateral or multilateral), the nature of the relationships between central governments and sub-national governments in terms of competition, cooperation, complementary, replacement) (van der Pluijm, 2007; Viltard, 2008, 2010). Scholars formulate hypotheses about the fragmentation of the state, the loss of state sovereignty vis-à-



vis local governments and other new transnational actors, the ‘decomposition of the Westphalien system’ (Viltard, 2018, p.511). Networks are here defined as ‘diplomatic scenes’ (Viltard, 2010, p.599).

A second set of literature discusses the role and capacities of cities, mayors and transnational networks, as part of a *new geography of global governance* (Acuto, 2013). Cities and their relations to states, UN agencies and civil society are regarded as part of the ‘*development of a global architecture*’ (Acuto, 2013, p.27), of ‘multi-stakeholders arrangements that organize world politics’ (Acuto, 2013, p.19). The political agency of city is questioned in relation to the networked forms of urban governance, in particular how the organizational forms of transmunicipal networks attribute power position to cities, even those that are not global (Bouteligier, 2014). C40 is used as an example to show how such a network engages, empowers and resources cities, gives them the capacity to tackle environmental challenges, to position themselves as leaders, to become ‘vital actors’ in global governance (Bouteligier, 2014, p.62). This is accomplished through providing access to information, knowledge and partners (cities, multinational companies, foundations) (exchange of best practices, development of partnerships, implementation of concrete projects), and, most importantly through allowing cities to shape the activities and direction of the network via the establishment of ‘subtle power relations’ and the creation of specific understandings about social practices that can lead to the emergence of hegemonic, dominant patterns of thought and action (Bouteligier, 2014, p.63).

Transmunicipal networks, conceptualized as ‘collective agents of global projects’, can also allow a city to pool global influences and shape norms in global environmental governance. The participation alone to such networks is however not sufficient to grant such powerful or influential positions: skills are needed to take advantage of the networks. Finally, studies on the political agency of cities underline the political power of individuals, more particularly, the catalytic effects mayors can have on global governance in key areas (water management, climate change, gender...), and how their influence is framed by the discursive production of new ‘international identities’ for the cities they represent (Acuto, 2014). The issue of city identities and representations is all the more important to

consider, as it shows how southern cities gain central political positions that may challenge ‘West-centricity in city diplomacy’ (Acuto, 2014, p.72).

The literature on cities and climate change governance brings relevant complementary insights by exploring the relations of power and influence between sub-national and national state and non-state actors, questioning the emergence of non-hierarchical models of governance and examining how transnational networks of municipal governments (such as the Cities for Climate Change Protection programme) give power and influence to cities and contribute to the creation of new spheres of authority (Betsill and Bulkeley, 2006).

There are contrasting conclusions about the empowerment of cities and their capacity to act at the international and global scale. Such conclusions are seldom rooted in empirical work and based on evidence. Furthermore, a sound methodological framework to address these issues is still missing. Scholars working on city diplomacy acknowledge the resilience of state and international relations (Viltard, 2008). Acuto (2013, p.12) underlines that despite its extension, the geography of global governance still remains ‘international’. While showing more fluidity, city-oriented, and cross-cutting political connections ‘city-centric linkages displace the predominance of nation-states rather than replace central governments’ (Acuto, 2013, p.148). Betsill and Bulkeley (2006) argue that we are witnessing the emergence of a plural mode of governing that does not necessarily mean the weakening of the state, but rather a redefinition of its scope and scale of activity. Other authors, on the contrary, argue that major cities along with global institutions bypass the state (Nijman, 2009).

These studies lack conceptual clarity: the notion of ‘actors’ embraces the whole cities or local governments indiscriminately without considering the complex and heterogeneous nature of the city, the diversity of its interests and representations, its precarious limits and the contingency of its politics (Acuto, 2013). In fact, most of the works deal with the internationalization of local governments, their representatives or elected officials, including the mayor (Barber, 2013; Beal and Pinson, 2014) or with the strategy of networks or alliances that represent them (e.g. UCLG). They do not acknowledge the

different, even diverging positions and interests that cities may have within such networks and alliances and how this may affect their capacity to act. The analysis of networks should take into consideration the wide variety of public and private actors that compose them (such as Cities Alliance, which includes local government representatives, national governments, NGOs and multi-lateral organizations such as the World Bank and the UN-Habitat).

Similarly, the term ‘city diplomacy’ is too encompassing: it is important to make the distinction between town twinning, city-to-city cooperation, activities within transnational networks and participation in global governance, as these activities have different genealogies, contexts and timeframes. They are part of various institutional and political dynamics and, as we have seen, they relate to different debates regarding the political agency of cities.

Eventually, there are other driving forces and other motivations to consider in the exploration of the city political agency. Most of the literature does not take into consideration the role of the changing geopolitical contexts, how regional integration and regional alliances influence the role and positioning of cities, or how this shapes the production of norms and values. The understanding of geopolitics in the context of city strategies does not relate to conflicts as such or to claims over national or local territories and sovereignty issues. We are considering the competition and rivalries between cities in terms of their international positioning within a specific geopolitical context, as shown by the case study of Johannesburg. Political lobbying within transnational networks and organizations has to be understood in the context of emerging countries claiming different forms, relationships and norms of development cooperation that build on southern experiences and expertise (Mawdsley, 2012 a, b). We agree with the need to consider ‘how shifts in contemporary geopolitics are complicit in any reframing of the geographies of urban theory’ (McFarlane and Robinson, 2012, p.767).

## **Building city political agency across scales: the Johannesburg International Relation Strategy**

The political agency of Johannesburg in the international and global scale first involves exploring the relationship between the city and the state: here, the position of the city on the international scene should not be understood in terms of rivalry, but of alignment and mutual reinforcement of economic, political and geopolitical between the national and local authorities.

### **Local government and international relations in the context of Johannesburg**

The end of the diplomatic isolation of South Africa in 1994, the lifting of international sanctions and boycotts, which had been imposed since the 1960s, and the new legislation on local governments have allowed South African cities to develop and formalize their international cooperation activities. In South Africa the decentralized three-tier system of government is composed of the national, provincial and local 'spheres'. Established by the 1996 constitution as 'separate', 'interdependent' and 'interconnected', they are governed by an imperative of inter-governmental cooperation. Local governments can develop international relations under two conditions: they must help achieve the objectives fixed to them by the constitution; they must be implemented in collaboration with the other two spheres of government. They should therefore meet an internal objective - to contribute to local economic development and the strengthening of urban management capacity in line with the Growth and Development Strategy (the GDS 2040) - and external objectives – to strengthen the links between South Africa and other countries and to enhance its international position in line with the national geopolitical agenda.

In Johannesburg, international activities were initially conducted as part of a 'policy of municipal international relations' adopted by the central government in 1999 (The Municipal International Relations Policy Framework - MIR) (de Villiers, 2005; Ruffin, 2013). The South African government and the African National Congress (ANC) had recognized the importance of twinning for developing local government capacity and promoting a positive image of the new South Africa (De Villiers, 2005). MIR was established as an incentive and a non-binding framework for municipalities. It was defined as 'a relationship between two or more communities from two different nation-states, in which

one of the key players is a municipality. These links may include non-governmental organizations, community based organizations and private associations' (DPLG, 1999, p.3, quoted in de Villiers, 2005, p.248). Confusion about the nature of key players, however, dominates (DPLG, 1999, p.3, quoted in de Villiers, 2005, p.248). The foreword of the policy document emphasizes the role of municipalities: the MIR 'promotes partnerships between South African municipalities and municipalities around the world to ensure maximum learning, synergy and promotion of our national interests, including investment promotion' (DPLG, 1999, p.3, quoted in de Villiers, 2005, p.248). In Johannesburg MIR primarily concerned relationships between municipalities. In the late 2000s, the Johannesburg municipality was involved in several town twinning agreements with local governments in the North and South and was participating in two partnerships, whose objectives were to transfer management skills and expertise to the municipalities of Addis Ababa (Ethiopia) and Lilongwe (Malawi) (for more details on city-to-city partnerships, see Harrison, 2015).

The MIR was criticized for its limited implementation, its ceremonial dimension and the lack of coordination between actors (Interview 1, official of the CSU: Policies and Strategies, Johannesburg, 20/09/2011). In 2012, the Central strategy Unit (CSU) developed its own 'Strategy of International Relations' (SRI) (CoJ, 2012). Placed under the authority of the Office of the Executive Mayor, this unit is responsible for strategic planning, performance management, and the implementation of the long-term Johannesburg Growth and Development Strategy (GDS 2040). The metropolitan authority, established in 2001 following the territorial and administrative reforms inherited from the apartheid structures, wanted to consolidate the strategy in order to make it more efficient than the previous one (Interview 1, 20/09/2011). Based on an assessment of existing partnerships, the strategy establishes a method for selecting the partner cities based on economic and geopolitical criteria, a clear programme of action, structured around well-defined objectives, with concrete and measurable outcomes. Four types of activities are identified: 'cities to cities engagement' (twinning, collaboration on projects, 'mentoring' and 'peer programmes'), 'networking', 'intergovernmental relations' and 'knowledge management and learning', demonstrating the command of information and communications technology.

## **The preservation of municipal autonomy**

The analysis of the 2012 strategy shows that there is an alignment on its objectives, priorities and values to the central and provincial government rather than a formal collaboration between the different spheres of government. In fact, the municipality operates in an ‘institutional vacuum’ (Interview 1, 20/09/2011), which enables it to achieve a fair degree of autonomy. The Department of International Relations and Cooperation (DIRCO) (2010 to 2013) and the National Development Plan (NDP) Vision for 2030, which set the policy and strategy for the national government, provide no guidelines regarding the role that municipalities should play in the international positioning of South Africa (CoJ, 2012, p.57): the vertical integration of international activities of the three spheres are not described. It is up to the City of Johannesburg, through the nature and content of its international commitments, to reflect the objectives, priorities and values of the national and provincial government. The 2016 assessment of the Johannesburg International Relations Strategy, however, highlighted the need for formalizing the relationships between the DIRCO, which is the constitutionally mandated authority to lead and oversee South Africa’s foreign policy, and the CoJ, regarding its engagement in international travel (adherence to operational requirements, sharing programmes and informing about the hosting of foreign delegation, submitting post-engagement reports) (CoJ, 2016). Convergence of approaches has been facilitated by the leading position of the ANC holding the majority both in the national government and in the City of Johannesburg (at the time of the drafting of the 2012 strategy)<sup>2</sup>. The ‘inter-governmental relations’ component developed as part of the SRI aims at filling this institutional gap by ensuring a better alignment of each of the institutional players’ activities. The city of Johannesburg intends ‘to integrate the role of cities (...) on the national agenda as an essential component for achieving the objectives of growth and development of the region’ (CoJ, 2012, p.62).

Up to now, the concrete implementation of the strategy has remained under the responsibility of the municipality under the leadership of the Central Strategy Unit (CSU). The strategy is being hosted at the Group Strategy, Policy Coordination and Relations (GSPCR) since 2016. It involves a small number of officials from different departments or elected officials, including the mayor, who initiate

and participate in field trips (study tours), sign cooperation agreements, implement or support projects in the partner cities. The 2016 assessment noted the predominant role of the mayor in the implementation of the strategy and the limited knowledge of city officials with regard to the content of the strategy outside the GSPCR and the heads of city departments (CoJ, 2016a). The CSU, then the GSPCR developed cooperation between municipalities - and not directly between communities. Besides such activities with partner cities that fall under the strategy, municipal departments are also developing direct involvement with international development agencies (such as UN-Habitat) or foreign cities as part of content-driven projects or programmes. Over time, the partnerships have shifted; initially conceived as an instrument of friendship and exchange in the context of the past struggle against apartheid and the democratic transition, it is now regarded as a tool for local capacity building (Interview 3, an official of the CSU: Management, Johannesburg, 29/09/2011). It is planned to open partnership up to private actors in order to draw economic benefits from the relationships between cities, notably with the BRICS cities (Interview 2 official of the CSU: Policies and Strategies, Johannesburg, 10.21.2013). The 2012 strategy underlines the interest of developing business opportunities in the context of city-to-city cooperation, and this is reinforced in the new phase of the strategy as part of supporting business-to-business, economically-led activities prone to support investment in South Africa (Interview 6 with official of the GSPCR, 04/05/2017).

The strategy relies on a powerful marketing tool, the JIKE (Jo'burg Innovation & Knowledge Exchange), which receives requests for study tours and also hosts foreign visiting delegations. The JIKE promotes and disseminates the Johannesburg expertise nationally and internationally through newsletters (Insight Knowledge) and brochures showcasing its 'good practices'. Such practices are based on the narrative of the 'successful transition' achieved Johannesburg (1997-2001) when the city shifted from racially segregated municipalities to a single unified metropolitan authority (the so-called 'Johannesburg Transformation story') (Interview 4, official from JIKE: Knowledge Exchange Program, Johannesburg, 13/09/2011). This transition was, however, hotly contested at the time because of its interventionist and binding character, and its entrepreneurial and neoliberal orientation (Didier, Peyroux and Morange, 2012). The international relations strategy is supported by the

activities of the Visitor and Resource Centre (RC & V), opened in 2002 by the Mayor of Johannesburg.

The strategy has limited financial resources (it doesn't have its own budget; the funding of activities are supported by relevant departments involved in city exchanges) but it relies on the financial, technical and mediation support of national network (the South African local Government Association - SALGA), international organizations of local governments (UCLG), international organizations (World Bank) and the European cooperation agencies (GIZ), as is the case with Addis Ababa (Interview 5, independent consultant, Johannesburg, 21/09/2011).

### **Categorization and prioritization of cities in bilateral cooperation**

The Johannesburg SRI is designed as an extension of the City Development Strategy (GDS 2040). The objective of sharing experiences between cities is to improve governance, local administration and the provision of services for Johannesburg and the partner cities in order to meet the development goals set by the GDS 2040 (Peyroux, 2015), and more broadly, to contribute to the growth and development of the African continent. The strategy is based on a different categorization of African and BRICS cities.

Acknowledging the competition with emerging cities of West Africa, the strategy aims at positioning Johannesburg as a 'World Class African City of the Future' (CoJ, 2012, p.6). As the regional capital of SADC and a 'strategic economic hub', Johannesburg intends to affirm its position as a 'leader city' and maintain its 'competitive advantage' across Gauteng, SADC and the African continent (CoJ, 2012, p.10). As a newcomer among the BRICS cities (2010), Johannesburg also aims at occupying a strategic position within the emerging economies and at 'branding' the city and the whole country 'as the leading city of the country' (CoJ, 2012, p.8).

Partner cities are identified and selected based on their strategic value to Johannesburg and South Africa. This selection is based on a detailed analysis of international trends in urbanization, economic



development and growth, and of the challenges they pose to cities in a globalized world. Partner cities are selected according to geographical criteria (location), economic (weight, size, demographic growth potential, economic assets) and geopolitical interests (priority given to South / South relations).

### ***Consolidating a leadership position within the African continent***

Exchanges with African cities aim at supporting urban growth and development in the context of regional integration and the New Partnership for Africa's Development - NEPAD. It is based on a relational understanding of urban and regional economies, considered as interrelated in the context of economic globalization, particularly within the African continent (the example of African migrants coming in South Africa in order to escape from unstable political regimes and high poverty is cited). The cities are selected in order to ensure a strategic position of Johannesburg within the regional and continental economy: these cities are either 'corridors' or 'economic clusters' structuring regional development process, or cities with strong demographic potential and economic development prospects (Luanda, Lagos, Maputo). Cities prioritized in the next phase of the strategy include Dakar, Brazzaville and Kigali (CoJ, 2016b).

According to Johannesburg, sharing experiences about economic and urban policy allows to 'reduce the vulnerability of urban areas vis-à-vis global change' (CoJ, 2016b, p.6). Building capacity in the local government sector, particularly in Africa, is regarded as an imperative to 'reap the benefits of economic growth and urbanization' (CoJ, 2016b, p.6). Johannesburg considers itself in a good position to provide assistance to African cities, which are considered less able to respond to the challenges they are facing (the consequences of rapid urbanization, urban sprawl, the growth of informal settlements, the persistence of poverty and inequality) because of their poor resources and management capacity. The attention paid to Africa is in line with the priorities of the central government, which intends to 'meet the developmental needs of developing countries'. The explicit commitment to the African agenda and to Southern Africa was re-affirmed in the DIRCO 2015-2020 policy. Past cooperation agreements include a mentoring programme with the cities of Addis Ababa and Lilongwe in order to

help them prepare their City Development Strategy. Because of the importance of the assistance provided by the City of Johannesburg to the municipality of Lilongwe (Interview 1, 20/09/2011), these partnerships represent more than just a transfer of skills. It actually shows a form of co-construction local policies.

These partnerships between cities offer the means to disseminate the norms and values promoted by Johannesburg and South Africa. The City of Johannesburg promotes a ‘pro-poor’ policy, which must in its view, address persistent inequality that the rise of the middle class can not hide (CoJ, 2016b, p.7). It encourages public participation in policy making (as was the case in the partnership with Lilongwe) (Interview 1, 20/09/2011). Johannesburg wants to remain independent from international donors’ funding in order to keep a critical mind (CoJ, 2016b). The action of ‘development agencies’ that drives African cities’ development agendas are criticized for ‘failing to take into account the complex needs of [our] cities’ (CoJ, 2012, p.7).

### ***A strategic positioning within the BRICS alliance***

BRICS cities are recognized as ‘global cities of the future’, ‘hubs of competitiveness’ that will play an increasingly influential role on the international stage (CoJ, 2012, p.8). These cities are associated with resilience capacities with respect to the 2008 crisis, with major changes in their economic structure (including the rise of the middle class), and efforts in technology development and infrastructure (CoJ, 2012, p.8). Johannesburg acknowledges that the city is not up to the standards of the BRICS cities (in terms of population size, the Human Development Index) and aims at developing relationships with the most dynamic and innovative cities (Sao Paulo, New Delhi, Shanghai) through ‘peer to peer relationships’ that provide mutual benefits, particularly in Information and Communication Technology (China), housing (Brazil) and textile (India) (Interview 1, 20/09/2011). The strategy of Johannesburg reinforces the government's political agenda vis-à-vis the BRICS, which is considered too weak at the present time, by positioning South Africa as a ‘catalyst’ for the South / South relations (CoJ, 2012, p.54). Johannesburg is in line with the Discussion Paper on International Relations (2012), which considers that the alliance with the BRICS represents ‘a platform for

alternative ideas to the Washington consensus and neoliberal policies' (CoJ, 2012, p.54). In that regard, Johannesburg promotes a universal and public service provision. The strategy document argues that the city financial strategies should rely on elected municipalities and not solely on Public-Private Partnerships (CoJ, 2012, p.45). This 'alternative' to neoliberalism remains hotly debated (Didier, Peyroux and Morange, 2012; Parnell and Robinson, 2012). The next phase of the strategy intends to extend the scope of South/South cooperation beyond the BRICS focal area, where there is 'evidence of thriving economy, investment in infrastructure and improvement in quality of life' (CoJ, 2016b, p.35).

### ***A reassessment of partnerships with northern cities***

The partnerships with northern cities have been reassessed in the current context of declining financial resources allocated to town twinning by Northern cities as a consequence of the 2008 crisis.

Johannesburg also takes into consideration its changing needs. The North / South relations are no longer a priority (CoJ, 2016b, p.9). Since the restructuring of the metropolitan authorities (1997-2001), Johannesburg no longer considers itself in a learning phase in the traditional areas of cooperation (financial management, urban regeneration and safety) developed in the past with cities, such as Birmingham, London and New York (Interview 3, 29/09/2011). Johannesburg now states that partnerships must be 'smart'. Tangible benefits are expected in the field of health, low-carbon urban environment, the green economy and 'smart cities' (CoJ, 2012, p.67). Because of their status as regional capitals and their innovative practices as 'smart cities', a privileged partnership is being built with both Bilbao and New York (CoJ, 2012, p.80).

Developing privileged bilateral relations with BRICS cities highlights a shift in the perception of urban hierarchies from the City of Johannesburg: ten years ago the international strategy was meant to position the city as a 'sustainable global city' with regards to the 'big cities' or 'alpha cities' of the 'first world', such as London or New York. The emerging economies of BRICS cities have changed the situation (Interview 3, 29/09/2011).

## **Active participation in transnational networks and alliances**

The ‘networking’ activities play an important role in this strategy and continue to remain the focus in the next phase because it allows the gaining of traction with low resource levels (CoJ, 2016a). Because of the international exposure and the opportunities it offers to Johannesburg, they are even considered the most important activities (Interview 2, 10/21/2013). Participation in flagship events, such as conferences and forums (C40, Metropolis) offers a platform for presenting and therefore publicizing and disseminating Johannesburg ‘best practices’ in planning, urban management and governance. Such best practices include financial tools, such as green bond and pooled financing, for which Johannesburg is used as a reference) (CoJ, 2016a). These participations have been successful: the participation to the COP 21 in Paris in December 2015 was crowned with a C40 Cities Award for the city leadership in the fight against climate change (Green Bond initiative). Johannesburg was directly solicited by Cities Alliance, UCLG and SALGA to play the role of ‘mentor’ for the city of Lilongwe, following a presentation of its City Development Strategy in an international conference (this partnership was awarded a prize in 2011 by Metropolis, UCLG and a Chinese municipal government) (Interview 1, 20/09/2011). Local government networks do create partnership opportunities between cities with UCLG, facilitating the linking of cities and the replication of ‘best practices’ (CoJ, 2012, p.62). The mentoring programme has also been extended to other cities in South Africa, Malawi, Mozambique and Namibia (Interview 1, 20/09/2011). Johannesburg has built up a leadership position in the field of metropolitan management: Bamako recently asked Johannesburg’s assistance in the field of waste management, rural electrification and water (Interview 6, official, former External Relations Unit, Johannesburg, 11/09/2011).

The political agency of Johannesburg is best understood as the capacity to influence the production of urban norms and standards. Johannesburg promotes the participation in events likely to ‘forge public opinion’ and to have an impact on perceptions (‘opinions formers’, ‘events’, ‘content-based’ events) over ‘mega-events’ (Interview 2, 10/21/2013). The city hosted the annual meeting of Metropolis ‘Caring cities’ (which brought together 500 participants) in 2013, and in 2014 the 5th biennial C40 Mayors Summit gathering mayors worldwide. The city actively participated in the COP 17 in Durban

in 2011, when the mayor of Johannesburg, then president of SALGA, used this forum to put forward the position of the citizens of Gauteng and feed the national policy (Interview 6, 11/09/2011).

The city gives priority to ‘high level’ networks (Metropolis, UCLG), to networks or organizations that promote regional integration and South / South relations (The African Union, Africities, UCLGA, BRICS Friendship Cities and Local Government Forum) and forums that promote smart cities, innovation and the green economy (C40, ICLEI). The city lobbied for the election of the mayor, members of the Mayoral and City Manager Committees to key positions. Johannesburg, a member of ICLEI, hosted its secretariat and one of its mayors was a member of the International Office. Its previous mayor (2011-2016) is a member of the C40 Steering Committee, co-chair of Metropolis and was elected president of UCLG in 2016. Johannesburg also intends to play a strong advocacy role with North based organizations in order to facilitate the integration of the city in networks supporting smart cities practices.

Political lobbying within such networks and organizations has to be understood in the context of emerging countries claiming different forms, relationships and norms of development cooperation that build on ‘southern’ experience and expertise (Mawdsley, 2012 a and b). While this can provide the vehicle for promoting alternative conceptions of urban development, the Johannesburg case study shows that such discursive claims can also hide a more subtle form of reproduction of hierarchies between cities in emerging economies and cities in developing countries. By showing how city political agency may be related to geopolitical issues, Johannesburg shows how categories and hierarchies of cities are being recomposed through the political and economic leadership that some southern cities may have over others. The capacity of Johannesburg to actively engage in international networks should be compared and assessed in order to establish whether we are witnessing the growing importance of southern cities or just a new leadership by a handful of well-resourced southern metropolitan authorities.

## **Conclusion**

Recent work in geography, urban studies, anthropology, sociology and political science have expanded our understanding and theorization of the internationalization of cities by looking into urban economies, networks and flows, the interconnection and interdependencies between urban spaces and cities, scales and inter-city relations, urban governance and transnational urban policy making. The political role and agency of cities and local governments in international politics and global governance remain under-researched, calling for a wider engagement in disciplinary fields and theoretical frameworks – within and outside the field of geography and urban studies. While current theoretical debates in the field of international relations can enrich our conceptualization of the political agency of cities, its theorization however remains insufficiently rooted in empirical studies. Geography and urban studies must tackle this challenge in order to fully grasp the link between urban change and transnational political dynamics. This engagement with the international relations and geopolitics literature opens up relevant avenues for further research in terms of analytical focus, theory and methodology:

First, we need to locate the city into a wider network of diplomatic, political and geopolitical interests that are too often only associated to nation-states. This calls for confronting city international strategies with national geopolitical agendas in order to assess potential alignment or divergence of position between the different levels of government. This, however, should not be reduced to the sole analysis of inter-governmental relations as part of a conventional multi-level governance perspective, but rather reframed as part of transcalar governance (Betsill and Bulkeley 2006; Compagnon, 2013) that takes into account the specificities of cities as non-state actors vis-à-vis current conceptualizations of other non-state actors, such as NGOs and Multi-National Firms (Aust, 2016). Cities are places where local experiences and expertise can be leveraged, shared and enhanced as part of bilateral or multilateral cooperation. Cities are actors that can act beyond their territorial boundaries: as ‘networking agents’ (Acuto, 2013, p.151) they can contribute to solving global issues in crucial areas (climate change among others) by shaping the international norms and values that are produced and diffused through transnational networks (van der Pluijm, 2007). Cities are also an instrument of

foreign policies and national diplomacy that can help contribute to building privileged relationships with strategic countries according to national geopolitical and economic interests.

Second, we should investigate the uneven involvement of cities in policy networks and explore the reasons for that: is it linked to their economic position (as global or mega-cities)? To their capacity for technological and/or social innovation, irrespective of their size? To their capacity to build up alliances with other cities around shared norms and values? To their alignment to national state positions?

Third, we need to develop methodologies for assessing how cities contribute to or influence decision-making processes at the international and global level, what networks are contributing achieving via cooperation, what are their efficiency in translating global concerns locally to global norms-setting and global practices (Aust, 2015). This chapter calls for engaging in other relevant work, such as the ‘new geography of development’ (Mawsdey, 2012), in order to deepen our analysis of the international and global positionalities of cities beyond the traditional North / South divide.

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<sup>1</sup> The analysis is based on interviews conducted in Johannesburg in 2011 and 2013 with officials of the Johannesburg municipality in charge of the preparation and the implementation of the strategy, and on a content analysis of the political document adopted in 2012 (city of Johannesburg - CoJ, 2012)

<sup>2</sup> The election of a mayor from the opposition party (the Democratic Alliance) in August 2016 changed the power relations between the City and the national government.