
The recent volume Cities and Global Governance: New Sites for International Relations, edited by Mark Amen, Noah J. Toly, Patricia L. McCarney, and Klaus Segbers, presents cities as new clusters for driving international policy, whether on economic development, diplomacy, or climate change. The authors’ analysis presents a theoretical construct followed by case studies of how cities are becoming pacesetters for international policy. By linking modernity and international relations theories, the book presents cities as new institutional actors in the market system to implement public policies.

Broken into three subthemes—the diverse ways in which cities influence foreign policy, the dimensions of urban environmental policy, and methods of measuring a city’s global impact—the book is a collection of new articles related to cities. Beginning with a theoretical chapter on paradiplomacy, the subsequent eight chapters are thick case study descriptions of this new theoretical concept.

In essence, the idealism/liberalism thought follows the Wilsonian tradition of promoting global peace but allows a core of realism by taking existing institutions of the state, cities, to engage in international relations. The authors cite Castells (1977), Harvey (1973), and Friedmann (1986) to establish the “world city” hypothesis as part of the historical movement of industrial capitalism and connect this with modern international relation theory. After all, cities are the modern link to the post-Fordist economy of the localized deindustrialized era. Today, cities represent the most important element of urban economic life and the places where a majority of the world population now lives.

By combining Sassen’s concept of the “global city” with the analysis of megacities, megalopolises, and megaslums by the United Nations Human Settlements Programme (UN-Habitat), the book
Sassen’s (2006) and Hall’s (2001) approach of high-level global cities further carries the argument that cities are subnational actors of the state for building international diplomacy. In this volume, Monica Salomon cites the use of paradiplomacy in the developing world, where many cities have become institutional actors for developing substantial global engagement. She notes that the concept of paradiplomacy was coined by Panayotis Soldatos and Ivo Duchack in 1990 and has gained momentum since then, particularly in Latin American scholarship. The para-prefix depicts a parallel diplomacy, as the subnational actor in foreign policy, that also imitates the national government when representing the state.

Several examples of paradiplomacy can be found in Brazil and the Western Hemisphere. Cities such as Curitiba’s effort to demonstrate participative budgeting and rapid bus transport to other global cities such as Seoul, Tokyo, and Bogotá is just one. Rio de Janeiro’s ever-more active mayor’s involvement in global events, from hosting the 2010 UN-Habitat World Urban Forum and the 2012 UN Conference on Sustainable Development (Rio+20) to the more popular events of the 2014 World Cup and the 2016 Olympics, is another. Emmanuel Brunet-Jailly presents research on the cross-border regions of the United States and Canada, as additional places where city authorities are taking the lead to resolve interstate conflict through day-to-day cooperation. Rafael Velázquez Flores has done similar research on U.S.—Mexico border cooperation, especially the current Merida Initiative to confront narcotics trafficking.

While the book is successful at demonstrating the new institutional actions of city public officials, little attention is given to the administrative structures of these global megalopolises. Traditional public administrative analysis of form of government, intergovernmental relations with the central government, and the size, type of government, and international political realities are overlooked.

The book pays considerable attention to the popular topic of global city indicators. Daniel Hoornweg of the World Bank presents the work of the Global Cities Indicators Facility, and Paul James and Andy Scerri describe the work of the UN Global Compact Cities Program in creating the Circles of Sustainability approach to establish indicators. The basic premise of these programs is to create comparable measures of cities’ quality, economic development, social well-being, and climate vulnerabilities. In recent years, many UN agencies have found willing actors among mayors of cities and towns to engage in their lofty missions. The indicators programs justify their existence and provide baseline scales for measuring progress.

Further chapters are devoted to the new political ecology and geography of the city related to climate change and provide evidence of collective action of cities through networks to combat the negative effects of urbanization. Prominent authors such as Saskia Sassen and Peter Taylor have chapters in this edited edition describing their work to index global cities.

Overall, the authors do a good job of redefining the traditional office of international engagement that many municipal governments have. The publication also describes the transformation of city officials in international policy. City officials’ global engagement has begun to take effect. Even the U.S. Department of State has taken these actions into account by establishing in 2010 the Office of the Special Representative for Global Intergovernmental Affairs, which reports directly to the secretary of state, to work with state and local leaders within the United States to reach their counterparts abroad.

What is still unclear is how cities’ international relations offices will help strengthen the technical capacity and management roles of the typical local government in the developing world. Practical public management options for how cities could finance sustainable investments—for instance, in housing, water, electricity, urban planning, and transport—are not addressed in the volume. New Public Management scholars such as Light (1998) and Kettl (2000) are not mentioned, nor are Blakely and Bradshaw’s (2002), Feiock, Moon, and Park’s (2008), and others’ assessments of cities’ effort to improve the global economy through local public action. There is virtually no description of how the successful implication of international public policy will lead to stronger national governments and economies overall.

One can and perhaps should question the intentions of these cities’ actions. Are they as noble as sharing best practices such as bus rapid transport with one another, or are public officials seeking other lines of engagement? For example, could a developed country engage subnational actors to promote a policy or program knowing that the foreign national government disapproves? Are there instances in which a developing nation would engage an international organization for support when it knowingly does not have the support of its national government? How does party affiliation align in these types of programs? Perhaps horizontal supports of networks are implementing policies that may benefit the global interest and not national ones.
If this is the case, what are the disadvantages of these for current international diplomacy efforts?

What is more, governance is in the title of the book, but little attention is paid to in-depth analysis of how to improve these cities internally, which is much of what the public administration literature tries to accomplish, in order to implement global policies. Regardless of these practical, theoretical, and political omissions, the book captures global problems and finds valid solutions by using cities as conduits for change.

References