CHAPTER 4

City Diplomacy for Peace

Abstract In the aftermath of the Second World War, the goal of contributing to conflict prevention and post-conflict reconciliation emerged as the main driver of city diplomacy’s expansion. Today, not only cities continue to be vocal supporters of world peace (e.g., through international advocacy campaigns and city networks such as Mayors for Peace), but their direct involvement in conflict-prone areas has repeatedly proved to be highly beneficial in descaling tensions and fostering reconciliation. Their focus on the local dimension of conflicts—often neglected by nations’ peace initiatives—matched with a more “neutral” image and a proneness to long-term involvement, make cities particularly praised as effective partners in these complex settings. Although, a few structural weaknesses strongly limit such action, namely the lack of an army to secure the zone and protect their officers on the ground, or the limited tools to acquire information on foreign conflicts. As a result, cities often need to cooperate with other actors involved in order to avoid risks of limited or even counter-productive impact. The chapter will discuss this action’s features and challenges from the perspective of municipalities inside and outside conflict areas.

Keywords City diplomacy · Conflicts · Post-conflict situations · War prevention · Peace-making · Peace-building · Reconciliation · Giorgio La Pira · Municipal Alliance for Peace in the Middle East · Balkans · COVID-19

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Cities’ Drive for Peace

The commitment of cities in addressing conflict and post-conflict situations has been one of the first components of city diplomacy to emerge and be recognized by states and international organizations. The initial definition of city diplomacy itself was limited to this specific field: “the tool of local governments and their associations for promoting social cohesion, conflict prevention, conflict resolution and post-conflict reconstruction with the aim of creating a stable environment, in which the citizens can live together in peace, democracy and prosperity” (UCLG 2008).

As mentioned in Chapter 2, the spread of twinning agreements after the Second World War is, to a wide extend, linked to the wish of cities to foster reconciliation among former enemies. In some cases, city diplomacy even pre-dated official cooperation between states, like it happened with the 130 twining agreements signed before the 1963 Élysée Treaty between France and West Germany (Garcia 2017). At the 1955 Mayors’ Conference in Florence, a call for peace was subscribed by mayors from all over the world, including from the USSR and the People’s Republic of China—the latter not yet officially recognized by countries of the Western bloc (see Box 4.1). Quite frequently, city diplomacy became a tool to voice a different approach to international relations to that of member states. This became particularly evident in the second part of the Cold War with the emergence of the “Municipal Foreign Policy Movement” in the United States and in Western Europe. In such a framework, cities opposed their federal foreign policy in mainly three areas:

1. Undocumented migrants—cities criticized US actions in Central America and the management of the connected refugee crisis—see Chapter 9 for the emergence of the Sanctuary cities movement;
2. Nuclear proliferation—the first International Nuclear Free Zone Local Authorities Conference took place in Manchester in 1984; over 160 US cities passed nuclear free zone ordinances, prohibiting production activities in their jurisdiction (Leffel 2018). A similar approach was taken by more than 3800 cities across the world (Ibidem).
3. Human rights abuse—Demand for harder condemnation of the South African apartheid regime and the boycott of involved businesses.
In cities enacting such an approach, municipalities often benefited from the support of local civil society organizations, activists, and religious groups, thus showing a united front based on shared values.

Besides their local impact—including, in the United States, winning legal battles against the federal government (ibidem)—it is hard to assess their influence over national governments’ foreign policy. Nevertheless, these local actions provided cities and their mayors with strengthened international exposure and fueled self-identification and peace branding of the involved cities.

Cities’ engagement for peace led to the creation of ad hoc city networks, both global—such as Mayors for Peace (1989)—and national, such as the Italian Coordination of Local Authorities for Peace and Human Rights (1986), or the Network for Municipal Peace Policy (PGV) in the Netherlands (1989). A pivotal moment in the global commitment of cities for peace was the first World Conference on City Diplomacy, which took place in The Hague in June 2008, organized by UCLG, the host city and the Association of Netherlands Municipalities (VNG), in cooperation with the province and city of Barcelona and the Italian Coordination of Local Authorities for Peace and Human Rights. The event featured the participation of representatives of many local governments from conflict areas, and produced *The Hague Agenda on City Diplomacy*. This declaration reaffirms city diplomacy’s role in “preventing and resolving violent conflicts“ and invites signatories to create a local government peace prize—whose first edition took place in 2016 as the UCLG Peace Prize (UCLG 2008; Stelder and Poelman 2017).

What is the driver of such cities’ commitment to world peace? Just like development cooperation, their involvement for peace stems mainly from the moral value attributed to transnational solidarity. The wider extent of such a trend in cities compared to nation-states, is to be connected to the nature itself of the municipal government. Called to ensure the quality of life of citizens, municipalities’ proximity to the electorate allows them to connect, and represent, their values, creating local coalitions advocating and acting for peace.1 Moreover, a key element of the fertile ground of pacifism in cities lies in the lack of tools to impose

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1. An example of cities’ capacity to partner with citizens to express their desire for peace is represented by the “Cities are not target” campaign launched in 2006 by Mayors for Peace and resulting in 1,020,000 signatures of citizens across the world (Mayors for Peace 2006; Shibata 2012).
their will on foreign populations. As armed forces are strictly a central government’s prerogative, cities’ identity has generally developed without those elements fuelling adversarial positioning between states, namely national myths of military power, ethnic/cultural superiority, political and economic expansionism, or desire for vengeance arising from military defeats.

CITIES’ ADDED VALUE IN CONFLICT AND POST-CONFLICT SITUATIONS

Cities within and outside conflict areas enjoy a series of unique assets supporting the de-escalation of violence and reconciliation. Their added value is found primarily in the three roles they can play before, during, and after armed violence: lobbyists, peace-makers, and peace-builders.

Lobbyists

As the closest institution to citizens, they can play a central role in calling for the reduction of violence and humanitarian cease-fires, raising awareness on the concrete impact on citizens’ lives, and asking for international support and humanitarian intervention. Over the last few years, such calls have been repeatedly issued by mayors in Afghanistan and Northern Syria (Pasta 2015).

Municipalities outside the area, even before the conflict starts, can raise attention on peace being at risk, express their opposition to the use of force, and advocate for a peaceful resolution. For example, this approach led to La Pira’s 1955 mayoral congress in Florence, to the creation of Mayors for Peace and the resolutions passed in 2013 by 70 US cities to ask the Federal government to refrain from military intervention in Iraq (van der Pluijm and Melissen 2007, 21).

For ongoing conflicts, cities outside the affected area can contribute to raising international attention on the impact of violence on citizens. This lobbying approach can complement that of municipalities in the affected area, or even substitute it when they are not in the possibility to build their own global reach campaign. To such purpose, cities can implement an extensive series of activities, including organizing conferences and round tables, issuing press releases, addressing letters to national governments and international organizations. An example is provided by the City of Florence’s Unity in Diversity conferences (three annual
editions between 2015 and 2017), featuring the participation of mayors from Syria, Afghanistan, and Iraq, among others (Zamparella 2020).

**Peace-Makers**

Cities in conflict areas stand out as facilitators or mediators in peace talks. Mayors played that role, for example, in the context of the South African conflict followed the end of apartheid, or in the framework of Touareg rebellions in Mali (Klem and Frerks 2008). Moreover, in the case of areas experiencing guerrilla movements, municipalities can be in a position to foster disarmament and reintegration in the socioeconomic tissue of combatants. It has been, for example, the case of the Municipality of Kauswagan, in the Philippines (Lanao del Norte province), who won the 2016 UCLG Peace Price for its “From Arms to Farms” program. In Kauswagan, local secessionism’s socioeconomic root causes are addressed by involving former combatants in agricultural education and dialogue programs with the other members of the community (Stelder and Poelman 2017).

Cities outside the conflict zone can act as a safe haven, and host formal and informal talks to ease tensions and contribute to a solution. This has been done repeatedly in the context of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict, with mixed results (see Box 4.2), and during conflicts generated by the dissolution of Yugoslavia. In that last context, between 1993 and 1995, the Hungarian city of Mohács hosted a series of meetings between young people and civil society organizations from Croatia, Serbia, and the Republic of Serbian Krajina, paving the way for regional reconciliation (Klem 2008).

Moreover, when both sides of the conflict accept their help, foreign municipalities can play an active role in peace-making, intervening in negotiations as a mediator. An example is provided by French city network *Cités Unies France*, which organized talks in Ivory Coast’s capital Yamoussoukro between mayors on opposite sides of the civil war (2010–2011) (Gallet 2012).

**Peace-Builders**

When armed violence has come to an end thanks to a peace agreement or a stable cease-fire, cities can play an influential role in peace-building,
i.e., descaling tensions by addressing the root causes of the conflict—often linked to a mix of political, economic, and cultural frictions between communities. Their role lies therefore in promoting a “culture of peace,” defined in The Hague Agenda on City Diplomacy as having two dimensions: “raising awareness of citizens for the importance of peace-building in conflict situations and promoting human rights and harmonious relationships within the municipality’s own community” (UCLG 2008).

As providers of basic services, municipalities in conflict areas can make sure inequalities in their access are duly addressed and solved. Once a diagnostics of the situation is produced, municipalities can share it with international partners and design with them actions responding to concrete needs and expectations by the diverse members of the urban community.

Moreover, cross-border cooperation has been a useful tool to ease perduration tensions. This is, for example, the case of the interethnic triangle of partnerships signed in 2001 by the cities of Novi Sad in Serbia, Tuzla in Bosnia-Herzegovina, and Osijek in Croatia, started with sport and cultural activities and quickly expanded to include business, academic, and environmental cooperation. This paved the way to the creation, in 2003, of the Association of Multiethnic Cities—Philia (Klem 2008; Klem and Frerks 2008; Popov 2010).

The combination of political and technical expertise at the local level—often neglected in peace-building initiatives led by international organizations and governments—matched with a more “neutral” image and a proneness to long-term involvement, provide cities from outside the conflict area with the potential to effectively contribute to paving the ground for long-lasting peace, namely by supporting local municipalities in providing essential services and by training their officers. The accent in this intervention is increasingly set on fostering the conditions for (I) an active reduction of inequalities, perceived as fuel for divisions and violence, and (II) a general improvement of socioeconomic conditions of urban residents through a focus on innovation-led local economic strategies (Zamparella 2020).

Finally, cities’ familiarity with both bilateral and multilateral long-term cooperation frameworks (i.e., city networks, twinning/cooperation/friendship agreements and MoUs) increases the likelihood for their involvement to perdure after the conflictual situation is solved, with the potential to evolve into a more balanced and mutually beneficial partnership.
Comparative Advantages with Other Involved Actors

Such manifold added value of cities in peace-making and reconciliation emerges therefore as unique, complementing the action of other actors sharing the same peaceful goals.

Compared with countries, cities’ involvement is generally more widely accepted. In the words of Johan Galtung, “Municipalities are generally less pathological than states, not serving as depositories of national traumas and myths, such as the idea of being chosen to be above everything else” (Galtung 2000). Moreover, in reconstruction, countries tend to focus on the national administration, leaving space for municipalities’ support to their peers.

Compared with intergovernmental organizations, the deployment of their action is often quicker, as there is no need for negotiations to avoid vetos.

Compared with NGOs, their action is less dependent on grants and fundraising, thus allowing for long-term partnerships. Moreover, cities’ diversity, by definition broader than NGO’s, might result in an asset, with the involvement of different categories of local actors (youth, women’s organizations, migrants—including those from the affected territory—cultural institutions, and the private sector).

Compared with religious groups, they benefit from broader acceptance in conflicts featuring a confessional component.

Nevertheless, cities’ can rarely act alone in conflictual situations, as highlighted by the following preconditions, whose absence either deeply limits or prevent cities’ action, as highlighted by Sizoo and Musch (2008, 24).

A Series of Preconditions

Cities outside the conflict zone face four main preconditions, which need to be met to allow the deployment of this component of city diplomacy:

1. Security. Violence must be under a sufficient level of control to allow the local involvement of foreign municipalities. While useful in guaranteeing the security of civil servants in times of peace, local police forces are usually not trained to act in conflict areas. In such a case, the deployment of foreign cities’ personnel in conflict situations
relies on their capacity to negotiate with national/multilateral armies involved in the conflict in order to obtain their military protection.

2. National politics. The central government might oppose such action and block it, on account of the risks for the involved personnel, and of the lack of personality of international law of local governments which would make it responsible for their action in such a delicate situation.

3. Local politics. Local governments might want to refrain from cooperating with their counterparts in conflict situations when the latter have taken an active part in the perpetuation of the conflict. Such involvement would almost surely be perceived as choosing a side in the conflict and open to instrumentalization.

4. Knowledge of the area. Cities wishing to contribute to peace processes need to possess a deep understanding of the different dimensions of the conflict, its chains of causality, and the actors involved. Lacking this information, foreign municipalities risk designing and implementing ineffective, or even harmful action, thus worsening the conflict. Such information is generally harder for cities to obtain than for states. Therefore, partnerships with their own Ministry of Foreign Affairs, as well as universities and research institutions, are often needed.

For municipalities inside the conflict area who are able to maintain their operating capabilities, the main precondition lies in national politics and institutional balance, as conflicts tend to involve a (re)centralization of power. Therefore, central governments—or the political entity exerting effective hierarchical control over municipalities—often limit, if not eliminate, the possibility of the latter to act independently on the international scene. In fact, the limited decentralization is in itself a factor worsening confrontations and violence, as it limits local authorities’ capacity to provide local communities with political representation and dialogue opportunities. The link between decentralization and peace, vocally highlighted by city networks such as AIMF (AIMF 2015; 2016a; Baillet 2020), has led to the creation of the Rwandese Association of Local Government Authorities (RALGA), officially launched in 2003 with the support of VNG International. Despite such best practices and the
general agreement on the connection between peace and decentralization, centralization remains the rule in many regions with widespread violence such as the Sahel, where national governments redirect city networks’ and single foreign cities’ cooperation activities to a limited number of cities. As a result, city diplomacy could worsen inequalities between cities and contribute to raising tensions within the poorest—and unsurprisingly most violent—urban areas.

Box 4.1: A city diplomacy founding father: Giorgio La Pira, Mayor of Florence

Since the end of the Second World War, municipal commitment to international peace has been a constant in contemporary geopolitics and has sometimes pushed cities to position themselves against the military escalation led by their respective central governments.

Following up to a proposal he presented the year before at International Committee of the Red Cross in Geneva, in 1955 the mayor of Florence, Giorgio La Pira, convened in his city the “Congress of the Mayors of Capital Cities”. 59 cities from across the world—including those from the Soviet Union and even from the People’s Republic of China, not yet recognized officially by Western governments—met to reaffirm their will to establish peaceful relations while denouncing the validity of war as a tool to solve international disagreements. La Pira’s declaration on this occasion constitutes one of the first definitions of city diplomacy: “We will give life, so to speak, to a new diplomatic instrument: an instrument which expresses the will for peace of cities around the world and which weaves fraternity pact at the very basis of the life of nations” (La Pira 2015).

The name of La Pira is also associated with that of United Towns Organization (UTO), which he chaired from 1965 to his death in 1977, notably enhancing mayors’ advocacy for peace in the framework of both the Cold war and of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict.

To commemorate his action, the City of Florence, in cooperation with Fondazione Giorgio La Pira, created the Giorgio La Pira Prize, awarded to cities and city networks who distinguished themselves for their commitment to peace, dialogue, and solidarity.

Sources La Pira (2015), Comune di Firenze (2015, 2018), and Taddei Elmi (2016).
Box 4.2: The Israeli-Palestinian Conflict

Successes and failures of the municipal approach to the Israeli–Palestinian conflict

In the complex framework of the Israeli–Palestinian situation, cities have been repeatedly active in an attempt to foster a climate of reconciliation and cooperation. Unfortunately, with some exceptions, city diplomacy initiatives have not been able to meet their goals. Nevertheless, a series of successes show how city diplomacy can lead to cooperation even when the respective counties are involved in a conflictual situation.

The most ambitious and structured municipal cooperation initiative in such a field has been the Municipal Alliance for Peace in the Middle East (MAP). MAP was launched in 2005 as a result of a process started in 1999 involving the Association of Palestinian Local Authorities (APLA), the Union of Local Authorities in Israel (ULAI), and a number of foreign municipal partners who joined APLA and ULAI in MAP’s board, namely VNG International, UCLG, the Federation of Canadian Municipalities, the European Network of Local Authorities for Peace in the Middle East, and the cities of Rome, Barcelona, Cologne, and Hamar.

MAP counted with the support of several international organizations, including the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), who hosted its secretariat in its Jerusalem office.

Despite initial successes in fostering a series of technical agreements between municipalities, operations were quickly hindered due to rising political tensions linked to Hamas’ victory at the 2005 Palestinian municipal elections. This caused the Alliance to experience a series of financing and managerial issues and swinging commitment by APLA and ULAI.

Since 2012, the Alliance remains dormant: its high institutional profile revealed to be an obstacle in such a tense situation. More informal, practical, and result-driven city diplomacy achieved results, such as in the case of the meetings between APLA and ULAI mayors hosted by the municipalities of Milan (2010) and Turin (2011, 2013) with the support of Italian NGO CIPMO. These talks led to technical agreements regarding issues such as purification of border waterways or wildlife management.

Unfortunately, over the last few years, despite a practical, pragmatic recognition of the importance of collaboration by many mayors on both sides, the very complex political environment has prevented them from pursuing operating procedures of cooperation.
Sources van Hemert (2008), UCLG (2013), Knip (2017), and Mushasha (2020).

Evolution and Future Challenges

Over the last few years, peace city diplomacy has been undergoing a broadening of its scope. If the accent was initially placed almost exclusively on armed conflicts between states, city diplomacy has been expanding the remit of its action to include all threats to urban security. Such an approach seems to respond to a threefold evolution of large-scale violence across the world: (I) most of it currently taking place within or across states, rather than between them; (II) it impacts mainly civilian population, and (III) it is frequently perpetrated by a plurality of non-state actors (terrorist groups, drug cartels, organized crime, paramilitary groups, etc.).

In line with that, the UCLG Peace Prize has been accepting applications from cities not currently involved in formal conflicts but experiencing high levels of violence, linked, for example, to widespread crime (such as the city of Canoas, Brazil) or drug trafficking (city of Palmira, Colombia).

Cities’ commitment to the localization of the Sustainable Development Goal number 16 on Peaceful and Inclusive Societies\(^2\) symbolized this shift to a broader concept of peace and security. Through UN-Habitat, the United Nations are providing technical support to cities affected by high levels of violence and promoting multilevel partnerships to tackle the problem. This approach is now common in city diplomacy itself, both within city networks such as VNG International and UCLG, through ad hoc capacity building initiatives such as the “Peace in Our Cities campaign” launched in 2019 by a coalition of eleven cities and thematic partners (United Nations 2019), and through the Strong Cities Network (SCN), launched at the UN in 2015. With more than 140 cities across 45 countries, the SCN aims at fostering city-to-city cooperation to

\(^2\)“Promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels”.
counter violent extremism in all its forms by building social cohesion and community resilience.

Nevertheless, the progressive dismissal of arms limitation international agreements (Sanger 2020), coupled with the expansion of military budgets by some of the most powerful states in the world (Sanger and Broad 2020), suggest rising risks of new formal conflicts. Meanwhile, the existing conflicts in countries such as Yemen, Syria, Libya, and Afghanistan are likely to perdure, despite the COVID-19 pandemic and the related appeal by UN Secretary-General António Guterres for an immediate global cease-fire to fight such a “common enemy” (United Nations 2020). Fortunately, there is little doubt that cities around the world will remain faithful to the commitment to peace and solidarity that has accompanied city diplomacy since its origin.

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