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Global challenges, urban solutions

As national governments struggle to address foreign policy issues such as migration, cities are stepping up to the challenge

The world is witnessing a volatile and uncertain global environment, worsened by social and economic disparities that the Covid-19 pandemic has magnified. At the domestic level, inflation, unemployment increasing climate dangers, the surge of populism and the gradual erosion of democracy affect everyone. The combination of these crises is forcing us to reconsider the way governance and policy decisions are being made.

In an increasingly interconnected world, cities have become more influential than ever in global affairs, often overshadowing nation-states in making and executing policies on both national and global matters at the supranational level. As a result, the traditional domain of foreign policy has expanded beyond state actors to encompass cities and their local governments. This shift has been driven by the complex challenges of globalisation, which demand localised responses and innovative solutions. One of the most compelling examples of this phenomenon is the intersection of migration and refugee issues with city diplomacy and governance. But how have cities become pivotal players in addressing foreign policy issues focusing on migration diplomacy, and how can they propose complementary policies to address migration?

City diplomacy

Data from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees indicates that 'the majority of refugees reside in urban environments rather than in camps'. This brings forth a crucial question concerning the availability of social and public services for refugees living in cities, as they encounter very different obstacles than those in refugee camps, where government bodies or humanitarian organisations ideally offer such services. At the same time, this underscores the urgent need for sustainable solutions, urging urban areas to integrate refugees into their social service frameworks, thus positioning them as essential contributors in the migration governance processes largely influenced by central

authorities. With their proximity to citizens, cities are better positioned to understand and respond to their populations' immediate needs in housing, healthcare and educational opportunities, which require agile and responsive governance. This has led to the emergence of city diplomacy as cities engage directly with international organisations, other cities and national governments to address migration challenges.

Cities face numerous challenges as they must respond to global and local issues with minimal resources and legal authority.

City diplomacy has involved cities taking proactive roles in international forums, participating in global networks and advocating for policies that support their local needs. For example, cities like New York, London and Istanbul have established their own international affairs offices to manage their global engagements, ensuring that local perspectives are included in global discussions. Cities facing similar challenges have also found value in working together, pooling resources, sharing knowledge, and advocating collectively for better policies and resources through inter-city collaboration (ICC). These have emerged as vital platforms for cities to address issues that transcend municipal boundaries, such as migration and refugee integration. For example, the EUROCITIES network in Europe facilitates collaboration among major European cities on various issues, including migration.

There is no question that these developments highlight the crucial role of city agencies in enabling civil society and citizens to take an active part in decision-making processes, as these groups find it easier to access and monitor local governance via civic spaces. Consequently, this fosters democracy and enriches civic life by promoting greater participation in local decision-making.

However, this can also create issues in the cooperation between national and local authorities in unified nations, resulting in the development of multi-level governance. Especially authoritarian populist regimes are more and more attempting to concentrate power, shift focus away from actual issues and keep solutions out of reach by deepening divisions.

A large refugee population has also led to social and economic tensions. The competition for jobs, housing and public services has sometimes fuelled resentment among local residents, highlighting the need for effective communication and community-building initiatives. As a result,

cities face numerous challenges as they must respond to global and local issues with minimal resources and legal authority.

The case of Istanbul

In Türkiye, cities like Istanbul have become focal points for refugee integration. Istanbul is home to 532 018 of the 3.2 million Syrian refugees who are under temporary protection, and it accommodates 576 437 of the 1.1 million foreign nationals with residence permits in Türkiye. Accordingly, Istanbul has been assigned to manage a diverse array of migration flows beyond just Syrian refugees, necessitating various strategies. This urban concentration has prompted a re-evaluation of the city's approach to governance and the distribution of resources.

However, certain restrictions exist concerning local governance. Firstly, there is a lack of a standardised legal framework for migrants. The hierarchical dynamics between central and local governments result in prolonged decision-making processes. Municipalities governed by opposition parties often find themselves subordinate to those led by ruling parties. They operate with restricted budgets allocated by central authorities and have limited autonomy in their decision-making activities. Collaboration among migration agencies across different government sectors remains minimal. On a global scale, there is a pressing need for enhanced direct engagement with international institutions or organisations, particularly concerning funding, as this funding often circumvents local governments and is directed towards central governments.

The experiences of cities like Istanbul demonstrate the potential of city diplomacy to create inclusive and resilient urban environments.

In the context of Istanbul, its international collaboration with other cities and organisations has notably increased, particularly since 2019. Istanbul is involved in numerous city networks, with the mayor of Istanbul currently serving as the term president of the B40 Balkan Cities Network. The city has taken cues from successful initiatives implemented in various global cities, as evidenced by the creation of an urban planning agency that promotes cooperation between different stakeholders and residents.

The city diplomacy of Istanbul has engendered significant partnerships with international organisations, including the 'sister cities', with a particular emphasis on migration and social cohesion. The living conditions of refugees and migrants have been improved through

alliances with external sources, which have enabled them to address unpaid essential service bills through initiatives like the 'Pay It Forward' project. However, national regulations still restrict the city's ability to offer services directly to migrants, leading to a reliance on external projects and partnerships to address migrants' requirements.

The intersection of foreign policy issues with city diplomacy and governance represents a significant shift in addressing global challenges. Migration is a dynamic phenomenon requiring national, international, regional, bilateral and multilateral cooperation. Cities have emerged as key players in managing migration and refugee issues, leveraging their unique strengths in local governance and collaboration. The experiences of cities like Istanbul demonstrate the potential of city diplomacy to create inclusive and resilient urban environments. The lessons learned from integrating refugees in cities like Istanbul and the collaborative efforts of networks like EUROCITIES provide valuable insights into how cities can effectively address foreign policy challenges. By building on these experiences, cities can remain at the forefront of global solutions, promoting peace, prosperity and inclusion.



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