

'Diplomacy' in the 21st century: Why Sri Lanka's local mayors must become global players

blogs.lse.ac.uk/southasia/2017/05/08/diplomacy-in-the-21st-century-why-sri-lankas-local-mayors-must-become-global-players/

2017-5-8

Rapti Ratnayake makes the case for why Sri Lanka should pursue 'diplomacy', where mayors and municipal leaders take a more active role in foreign policy by forging collaborative partnerships with other cities. She writes that if Colombo is to achieve its aspiration of becoming a globally competitive metropolis, embracing the opportunities afforded by paradiplomacy will be essential.



For the first time in human history, a majority of the world's population lives in cities. According to United Nations data, city-dwellers accounted for [54% of the global population in 2014](#). [This figure is expected to grow to over 60% by 2050](#). The transformation of the 21st century into the 'Urban Century' means that cities are emerging as global actors in their own right, with profound changes in the practice of diplomacy. For a rapidly developing and urbanising country like Sri Lanka, city-to-city and mayor-to-mayor diplomacy offers additional opportunities that should not be missed.

The new diplomats in town

In addition to [global hubs like New York, London and Tokyo](#), cities from the developing world – such as São Paulo, Mumbai and Istanbul – are beginning to perform international functions that were once the exclusive purview of national governments. These metropolises are playing an active role in foreign policy by forging collaborative partnerships beyond the confines of traditional political boundaries. As a consequence, mayors and municipal leaders around the globe are now increasingly expected to become international political and economic diplomats – a phenomenon fittingly dubbed '[diplomacy](#).'

Diplomacy and other forms of 'paradiplomacy' (diplomacy practiced by sub-national governments) have long been considered the poor cousins of 'real' diplomacy practiced by foreign ministries and embassies. Paradiplomacy has traditionally been limited by the principle that a nation needs a coherent foreign policy, and a corresponding concern that multiple sub-national actors can dilute or even contradict that policy. In practice, however, a country's foreign policy is a broad coordinating framework, rather than an exclusive agent of its foreign relations. That framework can and should foster creative international initiatives from mayors and other local leaders.

Rationale for 'diplomacy'

Indeed, a country *needs* multiple agents at multiple levels to maximise its opportunities in international relations. Diplomacy is growing because of policymakers increasingly realising that cities and mayors – unlike national governments – are more likely to deliver services that are perceived as necessary or desirable by grassroots communities. The current Mayor of Seoul, Park Won-soon, recognised this reality in an [interview](#) where he stated that, "Everything revolves around the public. If a couple of [national] policymakers were to just sit around a table randomly coming up with new policies, most of them would not be plausible, because they are not based on people's real needs."

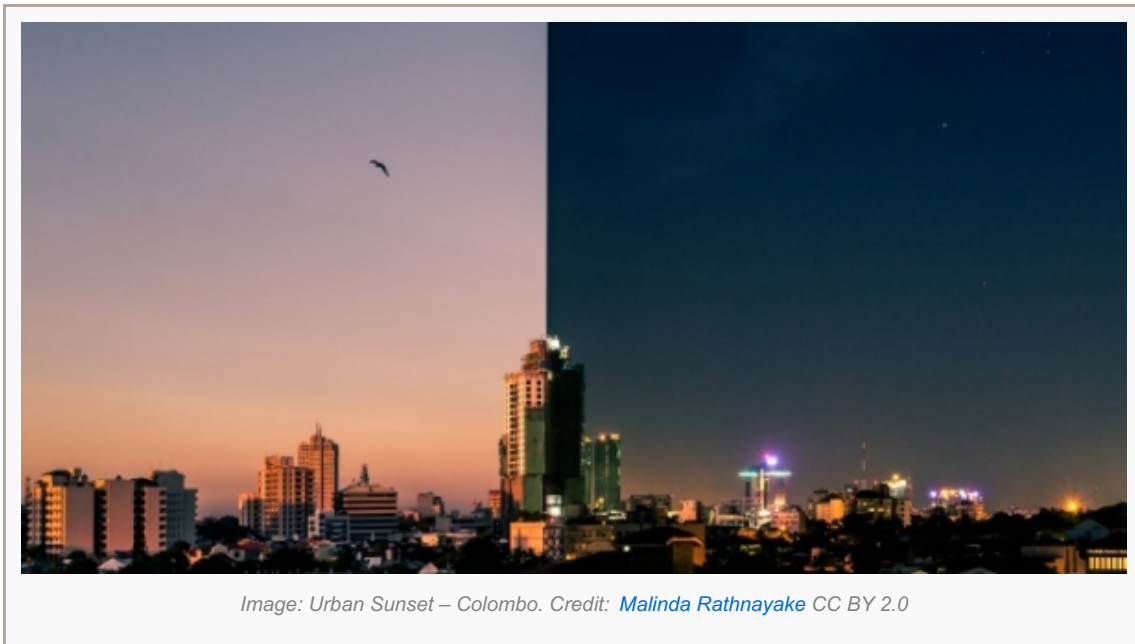
Municipal leaders hold positions at the frontlines of everyday problems. They are exposed to the simplest of daily, grassroots issues – such as traffic congestion, pollution, waste collection, and the spread of disease – while simultaneously being at the heart of global flows of goods, capital, and labour to and from their jurisdictions. More importantly, mayors are the individuals best-equipped to manage growth in a way that would avoid [urban fragility](#). Urban fragility occurs when [city authorities are ill-equipped](#) to provide basic public services to a burgeoning urban

population. Examples can be seen in Sub-Saharan African cities; it is predicted that by 2030, over 700 million of Africa's population will be living in cities and towns, [with 72% of this figure living in slum conditions](#) .

Today's complex and diverse policy issues need collaborative action by those who can bridge the gap between everyday problems and international opportunities. Mayors and municipal leaders are well-positioned to take on this role. On an international level, mayors should be propelled to take on global roles that would allow them to forge international networks and city-to-city links. On a domestic level, mayors are able to provide solutions to nuanced issues of grassroots development that could lead to faster and more effective change on the ground.

Sri Lanka's international paths for city-to-city partnerships

The city of Colombo provides a valuable case study in showing the need for diplomacy. It aspires to become a regional hub and financial centre, with the potential to transform itself into a globally competitive metropolis through trade, tourism and foreign investment. However, as Sri Lanka's Minister of Megapolis and Western Region Development, Champika Ranawaka, has observed, there remain "a multitude of issues to be solved, including livelihoods for slum dwellers, schools for children, issues pertaining to health services, and of course, inefficiency of the transport sector." (Oxford Business Group's 2015 Report).



Sri Lanka's supercharged plans for development do not come without the possible pitfalls of urban fragility. The recent tragedy in Colombo's suburb of Meethotamulla, where the collapse of a [91-meter high rubbish dump](#) killed over [20 people](#), exposes critical deficiencies in municipal management, and should compel the Sri Lankan government to rethink conventional methods of development. This requires building a high-performing team of municipal leaders who are not only well informed about the threats facing their cities, but also visionary and capable of driving lasting change throughout Sri Lanka's urban centres.

Sri Lanka's municipal leaders could begin by joining established international partnerships that focus on transcending urban fragility. These include international networks of cities such as the [ICLEI Local Government for Sustainability](#) network and [100 Resilient Cities](#) that work together to achieve sustainability and adaptation. Although relatively new, these groups have already had a significant impact. Members of 100 Resilient Cities, including Byblos (Lebanon), Porto Alegre (Brazil), and Semarang (Indonesia) have been working closely together to develop urban strategies that address social, environmental and economic challenges.

Similarly, the [Global Parliament of Mayors \(GPM\)](#), a recently established network of municipal leaders from global

cities including Amman, Cape Town, Warsaw and Quito aims to devise pragmatic, bottom-up policies on issues such as climate change and migration. Networks like these are also valuable gateways to access support from prominent industry and business actors, such as [Microsoft](#), [Siemens](#) and [Cisco](#), who could provide innovative and technologically up-to-date solutions at a municipal level.

Colombo should also foster independent diplomatic channels with nearby regional cities. An instructive case study in successful diplomacy can be found in the international relations of Brazil's richest city, São Paulo. The city's overall success has been linked to successful paradiplomacy and the visionary leadership of Governor Geraldo Alckmin. São Paulo houses about 10% of Brazil's population, but generates about 20% of its overall GDP, and impressively [ranks second amongst the top FDI destinations in the Americas](#), closely following New York City.

In particular, the development of city-to-city trade links between São Paulo and Miami led to about [\\$74 billion of trade in goods between Brazil and the United States](#). São Paulo and Miami also share strong cultural connections and have [cemented their city-to-city links through university partnerships](#). In addition, São Paulo has made strong attempts at confronting the challenges of urban fragility, by teaming up with [mayors from Dar es Salaam, Jakarta and Mexico City](#) to develop strategies that address risks facing the urban poor in light of climate change threats and disaster relief.

São Paulo's success in municipal paradiplomacy stems from the understanding that in a globalised world, subnational governments cannot meet their responsibilities within national boundaries. Sri Lanka may not currently be in a position to jolt its municipal leaders into becoming global leaders like those in São Paulo, since these processes of transformation take time. What is clear however, is that the new imperative of the 21st century diplomacy is to transform municipal leadership from urban to urbane. This could be the key to building Colombo into a new city on the world stage.

Thanks are due to colleagues at the Lakshman Kadirgamar Institute for helpful comments on earlier drafts of this article. The opinions expressed in this article are the author's own and not the institutional views of LKI. They do not necessarily represent or reflect the position of any other institution or individual with which the author is affiliated.

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