

Local Cohesion through International Relations? Testing the Impact of City Diplomacy on Territorial Development via Agent-Based Models.

Abstract

Since the 1990s, awareness of the pivotal role of global cities in the international economy has sparked the determination of their respective local governments to shape and accelerate development through proactive management of their positioning and role on the international scene. Today, global cities have indeed become the champions of so-called “city diplomacy,” consisting of a broad set of bilateral and multilateral projects and partnerships mainly intended to enhance local development. Parallely, small and middle-size cities’ underrepresentation in city diplomacy — largely due to a lack of human resources — might add to the drivers of territorial inequity within and across national borders.

Nevertheless, the diplomacy of global cities increasingly features resource mutualization and coordination with surrounding municipalities to create territorial platforms whose integration and synergies enhance the economic dynamism and local governance of all their components. To date, however, the identification and quantification of such dynamics by both scholars and practitioners have been extremely limited.

This paper aims to address this knowledge gap by analyzing the impact on territorial cohesion of one of the most sought-after impacts of global cities’ diplomacy — the possibility to boost their economic and technological development by hosting world events such as the Olympic Games. To this end, the paper analyzes big data collection, analysis, and mutualization between the core city and surrounding municipalities carried out as part of the preparation for the Milan-Cortina 2026 Winter Olympics. This analysis uses the data-driven agent-based models, particularly those based on mobile phone data, to gain insights into city diplomacy’s territorial cohesion spillovers through scalable and transferable tools intended to refine local governance strategies and enhance public service delivery.