



CONCEPT NOTE

CITY DIPLOMACY INITIATIVE

**Empowering Local Leadership and Fostering Community
Participation in Global Engagement and Governance**

1. Introduction

City Diplomacy refers to the engagement of cities and other subnational governments in international affairs to achieve political, economic, cultural, and social objectives. It involves building strategic partnerships, fostering cooperation, and representing city interests on the global stage. City diplomacy encompasses a diverse array of activities that span across various fields and come in different forms, such as city networks, twinning, multilateral projects, and international events.¹

Cities leverage their unique position as hubs of innovation, culture, and economic activity to influence global governance, address transnational challenges, and promote sustainable urban development. However, while the increasing significance of city networks in global affairs is noteworthy, it is important to recognize that not all cities may be equally equipped to pursue their aspirations regarding diplomatic activities in the current political and economic context.²

City diplomacy is not only about mayors, governors, and city officials; it must also reflect the **realities and aspirations of local communities**. Grassroots engagement ensures that international cooperation directly improves the daily lives of residents, from safer neighborhoods and affordable housing to resilient infrastructure and inclusive economies.

2. Background and Rationale

The 21st century has witnessed cities emerging as pivotal actors in international affairs. Urban areas concentrate populations, economies, and innovation, making them frontline spaces for addressing transnational challenges such as climate change, migration, trade, security, and public health. Increasingly, cities engage directly in international cooperation through forming networks, negotiating with multilateral bodies, and shaping global agendas.

For Africa, and particularly rapidly urbanizing regions, city diplomacy is not only a tool for international visibility but also a means of driving local development. As metropolitan hubs in Kenya, East Africa, and the COMESA region grow, their ability to articulate local priorities globally becomes essential. Yet, institutional and capacity gaps hinder cities from leveraging this opportunity.

A key challenge is ensuring that global conversations align with **localized priorities such as waste management, public transport, clean water, informal economy support, affordable housing, and community safety**. Without connecting global diplomacy to these tangible issues, city diplomacy risks being perceived as elitist or disconnected.

A structured program on city diplomacy will therefore provide training, policy guidance, and platforms to amplify urban voices in global governance. It is against this background that the **International Relations Society of Kenya (IRSK)**, **Kenya Alliance of Residents Association (KARA)** and the **African Urban Lab (AUL)** have come together to organize the City Diplomacy Initiative.

¹ Koç University, Universitat Pompeu Fabra, and University of Amsterdam (2023). City Diplomacy, p.3.

² Ibid.

3. Objectives

The program seeks to:

- a) Build capacity of city officials and local leaders to engage effectively in international relations.
- b) Strengthen cities' ability to negotiate and participate in global, regional, and cross-border frameworks.
- c) Promote exchange of best practices in urban governance, sustainability, and economic development.
- d) Enhance partnerships between cities, private sector, academia, and multilateral institutions.
- e) To promote cultural exchange and mutual understanding among diverse urban populations
- f) Create structured **feedback loops** where global commitments are translated into local priorities, and community voices shape international agendas.

4. Program Components

The proposed program will be composed of the following components:

- a) **Capacity Development:** Training modules on international negotiation, global governance, cross-border cooperation, and public diplomacy for city officials **and grassroots actors** (residents' associations, youth groups, women leaders, informal sector representatives).
- b) **Policy Dialogue:** Annual forums convening city leaders, national governments, regional bodies, international partners, **and community organizations** to shape urban foreign policy priorities.
- c) **Knowledge Hub:** A repository for research, case studies, and toolkits on city diplomacy tailored to African contexts, including **community-driven pilot projects** such as neighborhood-level resilience initiatives, city branding through local culture, and slum-to-slum exchanges across African cities.
- d) **City-to-City Partnerships:** Facilitation of bilateral and multilateral cooperation between cities on areas such as climate action, smart technologies, migration management, cultural exchange, **waste management, pedestrian mobility, safe school zones, and informal market development.**
- e) **Youth and Community Engagement:** Programs to include civil society, entrepreneurs, refugees, artists, and youth in shaping the external relations of cities, through **local dialogues, community forums, and cultural diplomacy exchanges.**
- f) **Identity and City Branding:** Initiatives to strengthen city identity by promoting local arts, sports, heritage, and innovation as part of diplomatic engagement.

5. Expected Outcomes

The expected outcomes for the program are as follows:

- a) Enhanced diplomatic and negotiation capacity of city administrations and grassroots leaders,
- b) Stronger integration of cities in regional and global policy processes.
- c) Increased foreign investment, innovation partnerships, and exchange opportunities for participating cities.
- d) Institutionalized frameworks for sustainable city-to-city cooperation that **connect global policies to community priorities**.
- e) Greater alignment between local development priorities and global agendas such as the SDGs and AU Agenda 2063.
- f)) Empowered **communities who see direct benefits of city diplomacy** in everyday urban issues (safety, housing, transport, environment).

6. Implementation Approach

The program will be implemented through a phased, multi-stakeholder approach:

- a) **Phase I:** Needs assessment and pilot training workshops in selected cities, including **community consultations at ward and neighborhood levels**.
- b) **Phase II:** Development of a regional **City Diplomacy Network** and policy engagement forums.
- c) **Phase III:** Institutionalization of the program as a long-term platform supported by regional organizations, national governments, and international partners, with **established feedback loops** from communities to decision-makers.

7. Target Audience

The target audience for the program include the following stakeholders:

- a) City mayors, governors, and senior municipal officials.
- b) Urban planners and local economic development officers.
- c) Representatives of national ministries engaging with cities on international affairs.
- d) Private sector leaders, academia, and civil society actors contributing to city-level global engagement.
- e) Residents' associations, informal settlement leaders, youth movements, women's networks, migrants and refugees, artists, and community-based organizations.

8. Potential Partners

The potential partners for the initiative include:

- a) Regional bodies (e.g., COMESA, African Union, EAC).
- b) International organizations (e.g., UN-Habitat, UCLG, World Bank).
- c) Diplomatic missions and development partners.
- d) Academic and policy research institutions.
- e) Private sector actors invested in urban development.
- f) Community-based organizations, cultural institutions, and grassroots networks.

9. Conclusion

Cities are increasingly central to shaping global outcomes. A program on City Diplomacy will empower urban leaders to act strategically in international arenas, driving sustainable development and reinforcing Africa's agency in global governance. Through training, dialogue, and partnerships, this program will bridge the gap between local realities and global decision-making, ensuring that cities are not just subjects of policy but active shapers of the international system, by grounding diplomacy in neighborhoods, engaging communities in shaping city identity, and linking global commitments to tangible urban improvements, this initiative ensures that city diplomacy is not an elite exercise but a **shared tool of empowerment** for African citizens.

10. Partnering Organizations

International Relations Society of Kenya (IRSK)

IRSK is the premier professional body for the international affairs and diplomacy fields in Kenya. The Society serves as a policy-neutral forum for thought leadership, networking, and collaboration among those involved in the study, teaching, and practice of international relations and diplomacy in the country. Through policy research, dialogue, and advocacy, IRSK works to raise awareness, promote informed decision-making and catalyze action on pressing international and diplomatic issues at national, regional, and global levels.

The Kenya Alliance of Resident Associations (KARA)

The Kenya Alliance of Resident Associations (KARA) is a membership Civil Society Organization registered in the year 2000 under the Societies Act cap 108 of the laws of Kenya. KARA is the apex body representing the voice and pro-active action of Resident Associations on access to better service delivery at the neighborhood, County and National level. Over the years, KARA has established itself and contributed effectively in attainment of better service delivery through policy advocacy and influence; capacity building; community mobilization and networking; formation and facilitation of the work of Resident Associations across the country; mediation and dispute resolutions. KARA's strength is drawn from the extensive membership (Resident Associations) it has across the country that extends up to the grassroots level and it's unique capability to establish structured & sustainable engagement between communities, the government, private sector, media and institutions of higher learning.

African Urban Lab (AUL)

Africa Urban Lab (AUL) is a research and implementation center at the Africa School of Economics–Zanzibar dedicated to advancing sustainable urbanization across Africa. Through the **Urban Expansion Program (UXP)**, AUL supports cities with data-driven planning, scalable solutions, and capacity building to promote inclusive, resilient, and well-planned urban growth across the continent.