
The Rise of City Diplomacy in Uganda: Para-diplomacy and the Strategic Role of Subnational Governments

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Abstract

City diplomacy, also called urban diplomacy, has emerged as a critical dimension of international relations, permitting subnational governments to engage globally to reach economic, political, cultural, and environmental objectives. This study examines city diplomacy in Uganda, focusing on major urban centers such as Kampala, Jinja, Mbale, Mbarara, and Gulu. These urban centers are evaluated against how they influence international networks to increase local governance, resource mobilization, and citizen engagement. Drawing on secondary sources, the paper identifies key dimensions of city diplomacy, including economic, cultural, environmental, educational, and political diplomacy. The study also highlights opportunities, challenges, and strategic implications for sustainable urban development and international cooperation. The findings contribute to debates on the evolving role of cities in global governance and offer policy insights for enhancing Uganda's subnational diplomatic initiatives.

Keywords: City Diplomacy, Para-diplomacy, Urban Governance, Urban Centers.

1. Introduction

City diplomacy has altered the landscape of international relations by enabling subnational governments to participate strategically in global affairs alongside nation-states (Acuto et al., 2021). Unlike traditional state-centric diplomacy, city diplomacy empowers urban centers and municipalities to advance political, economic, cultural, social, and environmental priorities through cross-border partnerships, collaborative platforms, and transnational knowledge-sharing networks (Amiri & Ghourchi, 2024). This shift echoes a broader transformation in global governance, where cities' ability to innovate, mobilize resources, shape policies, foster partnerships, and address global issues such as climate change and public health positions them as key actors in international cooperation (Goniewicz et al., 2025).

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Rapid urbanization and globalization have disclosed the strategic importance of cities in shaping paths of economic development, environmental resilience, and cultural exchange (Zulfiqar et al., 2024). For developing countries, this shift offers fresh opportunities to harness urban resources and capacities to strengthen global engagement. For instance, in Uganda, cities such as Kampala, Jinja, Mbale, Mbarara, and Gulu are emerging as key actors in attracting investment, fostering technological innovation, and promoting sustainable development (Nuwagaba & Rutanga, 2025a). Through city diplomacy initiatives, these cities progressively engage in regional and international networks aimed at strengthening institutional capacity, improving service delivery, and increasing citizen participation in global urban agendas (Groen, 2022). This study addresses three key research questions:

1. What are the key dimensions of city diplomacy in Uganda?
2. What are the benefits and challenges associated with city diplomacy in Uganda's international relations?
3. How can Ugandan cities strategically benefit from city diplomacy to advance local and national development objectives?

The paper contributes to ongoing debates on subnational diplomacy by applying para-diplomacy theory to the Ugandan context, showing how cities act as autonomous actors in the international arena while complementing national foreign policy. This paper explores city diplomacy in Uganda, examining how subnational actors engage internationally to promote local development and governance. It begins by conceptualizing city diplomacy and situating it within para-diplomacy theory, highlighting the roles and capacities of subnational actors on the global stage. Key dimensions, mechanisms, and debates are reviewed, followed by an analysis of documentary evidence from Kampala, Jinja, Mbale, Mbarara, and Gulu. The discussion interprets these findings in light of resource capacity, specialization, and citizen engagement. Finally, the paper presents policy implications for maximizing city diplomacy to support sustainable development and governance objectives and concludes with key insights for theory and practice.

2. Conceptualizing City Diplomacy

City diplomacy refers to how cities engage externally to pursue political, economic, cultural, environmental, and legal objectives beyond their immediate municipal affairs. The term encompasses city-to-city ties, networks, associations, participation in international governance, and city involvement in global issues (Sizoo et al., 2008).

Cities are increasingly assuming roles as active participants in international affairs, going beyond their traditional functions as local service providers. They now engage in cross-border networks, global governance initiatives, and international partnerships. City diplomacy can be understood as the process through which cities and territories promote themselves globally by forming cooperative frameworks, partnerships, and participating in multilateral networks (Zeng et al., 2024). This development marks a shift away from state-centered models of diplomacy, in which cities were largely passive actors, toward a model where cities exercise independent agency in shaping international relations (Szpak et al., 2025). Historically, cities have engaged in cross-border relations, from consular posts in Renaissance Italian city-states to modern sister city partnerships (Clausen, 2022). For instance, Szpak et al. (2022) note that such diplomacy predates nation-states and now links urban governance with international relations.

3. Para-diplomacy Theory: Subnational Actors on the International Stage

Para-diplomacy theory provides a vital framework for understanding the international engagement of subnational actors, including regions, provinces, and cities, which operate alongside or independently of national foreign policy. Transformation processes in the international arena have increased the importance of transnational affairs and recognized the influence of nonstate actors on global politics (Ali & Jasem, 2024). Within this context, para-diplomacy has emerged as a key concept to analyze the participation of local and regional governments in international relations (IR). It has become an increasingly important subject of study for IR scholars, helping to systematize and make visible the behaviors of subnational authorities, particularly their contributions to international engagement (Oddone, 2023).

Over time, the concept of para-diplomacy has evolved beyond individual case studies, shaping an emerging field of research. Ideas and practices now diffuse across borders through academic communities via congresses, seminars, publications, and technical meetings, highlighting the growing global relevance of subnational diplomacy (Antunes et al., 2024). Despite these advances, the para-diplomacy research agenda remains relatively nascent, and there is a clear need for deeper, systematic analysis at regional and global scales. In the Ugandan context, this framework is particularly useful for understanding how cities are strategically engaging in international networks, complementing national foreign policy, and asserting agency as subnational actors in global governance (Kamiński, 2018).

In Uganda, cities such as Kampala, Jinja, Mbarara, and Gulu increasingly pursue bilateral and multilateral initiatives to attract investment, promote cultural exchange, and advance

environmental and urban development agendas (Tulibaleka et al., 2021). These practices illustrate the core principles of para-diplomacy, where subnational actors exercise agency in global networks to achieve strategic goals that extend beyond the traditional state-centric diplomatic model.

City diplomacy in Uganda represents a specialized application of para-diplomacy, focusing specifically on urban actors and their instruments, including city networks, urban alliances, and smart city platforms (Surmacz, 2018). While city diplomacy complements national foreign policy by enhancing development outcomes and international visibility, it also raises questions about coordination and coherence, as subnational initiatives can potentially create parallel channels of influence (Erdem & Ersavaş, 2025). This dual dynamic highlights why para-diplomacy offers a useful lens for interpreting how Ugandan cities are beginning to assert themselves as purposeful actors within international governance arenas.

4. Key Dimensions and Mechanisms of City Diplomacy

City diplomacy operates through a multidimensional framework that enables urban actors to engage strategically on global, regional, and transnational levels. Contemporary scholarship identifies economic, cultural, environmental, educational, political, and digital mechanisms as central to the practice of city diplomacy, reflecting the varied objectives cities pursue in international relations (Kihlgren & Sottilotta., 2024). Each dimension represents both a tool and a sphere of influence through which cities can project authority, attract resources, and enhance their global visibility.

i) Economic Diplomacy

Economic diplomacy represents one of the most tangible and visible mechanisms of city diplomacy. Urban governments actively engage in investment promotion, trade missions, and urban branding to enhance competitiveness, attract foreign direct investment, and stimulate entrepreneurship (Kumar & Rassias, 2024). For example, cities may participate in international expos, establish urban business councils, or negotiate city-level economic agreements with foreign partners. Economic diplomacy is often operationalized through public-private partnerships, targeted sectoral promotion, and the development of investment-friendly regulatory frameworks. Scholars argue that cities engaging in economic diplomacy can enhance local development, improve infrastructure, and integrate into global value chains (Manfredi et al., 2021). However, tensions arise regarding equitable benefit distribution; economically

oriented city diplomacy may disproportionately favour urban elites and external investors, raising questions about inclusivity and local accountability (Groen, 2022).

ii) Cultural Diplomacy

Cultural diplomacy encompasses efforts by cities to build recognition, foster intercultural understanding, and project soft power through non-economic channels. Mechanisms include cultural festivals, heritage preservation initiatives, international arts collaborations, sister-city programs, and people-to-people exchanges (Piaget & de Lombaerde, 2024). Such initiatives facilitate cross-cultural dialogue, enhance tourism, and cultivate a city's global brand. Cultural diplomacy also allows cities to assert identity and symbolic presence in global forums, particularly for cities in the Global South seeking recognition in international governance spaces (Wagaba, 2019). Nonetheless, scholars caution that cultural diplomacy can be instrumentalized for political legitimacy or economic promotion, potentially overshadowing authentic engagement with citizens and local communities (Jendia, 2019).

iii) Environmental Diplomacy

Environmental diplomacy has emerged as a critical mechanism in city diplomacy, reflecting the growing role of cities in addressing climate change, urban resilience, and sustainability challenges (Hasan & Rizwanullah, 2024). Cities participate in global networks such as C40 Cities Climate Leadership Group, collaborate on green infrastructure projects, and adopt climate adaptation strategies in partnership with international agencies. Environmental diplomacy serves both normative and practical functions: it positions cities as proactive global actors in sustainability and provides access to technical expertise, financial resources, and innovation networks. Yet, environmental initiatives often require substantial financial and human capital, creating disparities between well-resourced cities and smaller municipalities, and raising debates about capacity and equity in global urban governance (Nguyen et al., 2020).

iv) Educational and Knowledge Diplomacy

Educational and knowledge diplomacy encompasses city-level engagement in academic, research, and innovation networks aimed at advancing knowledge production and fostering international collaboration (Knight, 2022). Key mechanisms include student and faculty exchanges, joint research initiatives, innovation hubs, smart-city projects, and active participation in global knowledge-sharing networks. Through these avenues, cities build intellectual capital, facilitate technology transfer, and strengthen their competitiveness in innovation-driven economies. This approach underscores the interplay between soft power and

human capital development, framing cities not merely as administrative entities but as strategic hubs of global learning, research, and innovation (Wang et al., 2022). In the context of Uganda, the rise of city diplomacy illustrates how subnational governments engage in para-diplomacy to assert strategic roles in international networks, leveraging knowledge and innovation to enhance local development and global connectivity (Balbim, 2021).

v) Political and Institutional Diplomacy

Political or institutional diplomacy focuses on the formal engagement of city governments with international actors. Cities participate in global municipal networks such as United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG), sign international cooperation agreements, and take part in global governance fora to influence policy agendas and advocate for urban interests (Martinez, 2023). These mechanisms extend beyond bilateral partnerships, enabling cities to shape transnational policy discourses, coordinate multilevel governance, and contribute to the development of international standards in urban management. Importantly, political diplomacy complements educational and knowledge diplomacy by providing the formal institutional and policy frameworks that support international collaborations in research, innovation, and knowledge exchange. However, political diplomacy can intersect with national foreign policy, potentially creating coordination challenges or tensions over legitimacy and authority between subnational and central governments (Stone et al., 2019).

vi) Citizen and Digital Diplomacy

In the digital age, city diplomacy increasingly integrates citizen participation and digital platforms as strategic instruments of global engagement. Municipalities gain from social media, urban branding campaigns, and online networks to engage residents, enhance international visibility, and facilitate cross-border collaborations (Fasinu et al., 2024). Digital diplomacy allows cities to communicate directly with global audiences, complementing formal political and educational diplomacy while fostering more participatory forms of governance. By combining traditional municipal networks with digital outreach, cities can strengthen their role as nodes of transnational knowledge exchange and innovation. Yet, the effectiveness of these digital mechanisms is contingent on local institutional capacity, digital literacy, and equitable access, raising critical questions regarding inclusivity and representation in city-led global engagement (Azeez et al., 2023).

5. Debates and Tensions in City Diplomacy

Despite the promise of these dimensions, several debates persist in the literature regarding the strategic role of cities in global governance. A central tension arises from the dual role of cities as both “agents of globalization” and “actors of solidarity.” As agents of globalization, cities compete for international recognition, investment, and resources, mobilizing networks, educational programs, and innovation hubs to enhance their visibility and competitiveness on the world stage (Vaz & Reis, 2017). Conversely, as actors of solidarity, cities engage in collaborative efforts to address transnational challenges such as climate change, migration, and social inequality, often prioritizing shared global responsibilities over competitive advantage (Mvuyana, 2025). The experience of Ugandan cities exemplifies this duality: subnational governments actively pursue para-diplomacy to assert strategic roles in international networks, using both formal political mechanisms and knowledge-based initiatives to advance local development while contributing to global agendas (Utomo, 2024). This dual function underscores the complexity of city diplomacy, highlighting the need for integrated approaches that balance competitive ambitions with collaborative commitments in global urban governance.

Another critical issue in city diplomacy concerns questions of legitimacy. As Pejic et al. (2025) observes, city-led international engagement may disproportionately reflect the priorities of urban elites, foreign investors, or municipal administrations rather than the broader citizenry, highlighting potential democratic deficits in subnational diplomacy. These challenges are compounded by resource constraints, overlaps with national foreign policy, and inter-city inequalities, which complicate both the implementation and assessment of city diplomacy initiatives (Valeriani et al., 2025). Such debates emphasize the urgent need for empirical research to evaluate the effectiveness, inclusivity, and long-term impact of city diplomacy, particularly in contexts like Uganda, where institutional capacity and financial resources remain limited, and subnational governments must navigate complex political and governance landscapes to assert their international roles.

6. Empirical Gaps and Context in African City Diplomacy: The Case of Uganda

City diplomacy and para-diplomacy have gathered significant conceptual and theoretical interest, yet empirical research remains uneven, particularly in the Global South. Most studies to date concentrate on cities in Europe, North America, and East Asia, where municipalities

benefit from substantial resources, institutional capacity, and established international networks (Acuto et al., 2021). By contrast, African cities, despite their increasing participation in global networks, remain underrepresented in empirical research. A central obstacle to assessing how they engage in and benefit from these networks is the absence of a standardized framework for defining and comparing cities across the continent. Wide variations in administrative structures, population distribution, and functional urban boundaries make it difficult to evaluate their international integration in a consistent and methodologically coherent way (Rogromel & Rozenblat, 2024).

Building on this gap, recent research on African city diplomacy shows that municipalities across the continent are expanding their roles in international cooperation (Kihlgren, 2024). However, systematic evidence on the mechanisms they employ, the institutional arrangements that support these engagements, and the measurable outcomes of their diplomatic activities remains limited. This lack of empirical data restricts our ability to evaluate how city-level international action contributes to tangible economic, social, and developmental gains, particularly in environments marked by resource constraints and evolving governance systems (Rogromel & Rozenblat, 2024).

In Uganda, empirical scholarship on city diplomacy is particularly scanty. Most research focuses either on national foreign policy or domestic urban governance, rarely integrating the two dimensions to examine the international roles of subnational actors (Ikome & Retshegofetse, 2023). Cities such as Kampala, Jinja, Mbale, Mbarara, and Gulu have increasingly participated in international networks, signed sister-city agreements, and collaborated with global institutions. Yet, systematic analyses of how these initiatives influence local development, resource mobilization, governance innovation, or citizen participation are largely absent. This gap limits the capacity to assess both the effectiveness and legitimacy of city diplomacy in the Ugandan context (Kyohairwe et al., 2024).

Significant empirical gaps persist in the study of city diplomacy in Uganda. First, there is limited information on the institutional structures and legal frameworks that support municipal engagement in international affairs. Few studies provide a detailed examination of municipal foreign offices, specialized urban diplomacy units, or the regulatory instruments governing subnational international activities (Erdem et al., 2025). Understanding these structures is essential for evaluating the capacity and autonomy of cities to engage externally. Second, the evidence regarding the outcomes and effects of city diplomacy covering areas such as economic

investment, cultural exchange, environmental resilience, and social innovation remains sporadic and largely anecdotal. In the absence of systematic empirical evaluation, it is challenging to assess whether city diplomacy genuinely promotes local development objectives or primarily functions as a symbolic or elite driven activity (He et al. 2025). Third, citizen engagement and public perception remain underexplored. The degree to which residents participate in or benefit from city diplomacy initiatives, and the impact of such involvement on municipal legitimacy and accountability, is seldom investigated (Abdi et al., 2025). Finally, comparative studies across Ugandan cities are sparse, leaving questions about how factors such as city size, governance structures, and institutional maturity shape diplomatic engagement and outcomes unanswered (Nuwagaba & Rutaga, 2025a).

Appreciating these empirical gaps requires situating Uganda within its urban and governance context. Uganda has experienced rapid urbanization over the past two decades, with the urban population increasing from about 12% in 2002 to over 25% in 2022, and projections indicating continued growth (World Bank, 2023). Urban expansion has transformed cities from administrative hubs into centers of economic, social, and political activity, intensifying the importance of municipal governance and external engagement. Uganda's governance framework is decentralized, granting local governments authority to plan and implement policies, although national legislation does not explicitly address international municipal engagement (Vermeiren et al. 2012; Naijuka & Mayaja, 2024).

Uganda's key cities play distinct roles in the practice of city diplomacy. Kampala, Uganda's capital, serves as the political, economic, and cultural center of the country, hosting government institutions, major businesses, and international organizations. Strategically located along Lake Victoria and surrounded by hills, the city functions as a hub for social and economic interactions, with 1.8 million residents and 3.5 million daily commuters. Hosting refugees and internally displaced persons adds a complex humanitarian dimension, while growing international investment, notably from China, highlights Kampala's expanding global connectivity. These factors collectively position the city as a focal point for national and international diplomacy (Ernstson & Mukwaya, 2021). Kampala, Uganda's capital, serves as the political, economic, and cultural center, hosting government institutions, major businesses, and international organizations. Strategically located along Lake Victoria, the city supports social and economic interactions for 1.8 million residents and 3.5 million daily commuters. Hosting refugees from countries like South Sudan, Sudan, Ethiopia, Somalia, Eritrea, Kenya,

Rwanda, and Burundi and internally displaced persons, and attract international investment, notably from China and other Asian countries, Kampala is a focal point for national and international diplomacy (Ernstson & Mukwaya, 2021).

Additionally, Jinja, situated along the River Nile, capitalizes on its tourism and industrial assets to promote economic and cultural diplomacy. Key attractions include storytelling, reptile watching, horseback riding, cultural experiences, and children's recreation, supported by craft shops and catering facilities. Tourism stimulates local businesses, though challenges like pollution remain, highlighting the city's potential as a center for sustainable domestic and international tourism (Wagaba, 2019). Mbale, near Mount Elgon, emphasizes environmental sustainability and eco-tourism, fostering international collaborations. Collaborative resource management improves community-park relations, strengthens cooperation between residents and park authorities, and increases household income through taungya farming (an agroforestry practice that combines tree planting with crop cultivation) and beekeeping by 26–28%. These initiatives reduce inequality, support sustainable rural livelihoods, offer pathways out of poverty, and enhance multi-stakeholder engagement in environmental governance (Cavanagh et al., 2015)

Further, Mbarara, a regional economic and agricultural hub, uses urban planning and agribusiness initiatives to support cross-border knowledge exchange. Its growing population expands the market for agricultural produce and encourages diversified urban farming. State-led infrastructure development and city visibility attract investment and programs that strengthen livelihoods. Urban farming remains essential for food security, income, and employment, demonstrating its potential for sustainable urban livelihoods with coordinated planning and policy support (Nuwagaba & Rutanga, 2025b). Gulu, in Northern Uganda, highlights cultural resilience, post-conflict recovery, and heritage preservation through collaborations with international institutions. The Acholi people's cultural traditions encompass extensive knowledge and practices that facilitate effective conflict resolution. Embedded positive norms and skills foster peaceful coexistence, offering locally grounded, sustainable alternatives to militaristic strategies. Such culture-based approaches present significant opportunities to advance peace, reconciliation, and community cohesion in regions affected by conflict (Jendia, 2019).

City diplomacy in Uganda is driven by globalization, which provides access to investment, knowledge exchange, and transnational networks (Acuto et al., 2021). Urbanization elevates

the strategic importance of cities such as Kampala, Jinja, Mbale, Gulu, and Mbarara, incentivizing municipal governments to engage externally for local development. Sustainability and climate action further encourage collaboration on green infrastructure, climate resilience, and environmental governance (Kihlgren Grandi., 2024; Kyohairwe et al., 2024; Nuwagaba & Rutanga, 2025a). Focused research on institutional structures, engagement mechanisms, outcomes, and citizen participation can address empirical gaps, clarify the effectiveness of city diplomacy in resource-constrained contexts, and offer lessons for other Global South municipalities, highlighting the strategic role of subnational governments in Uganda's urban diplomacy.

7. Methodology

This study employs a **documentary review** to examine city diplomacy in Kampala, Jinja, Mbale, Mbarara, and Gulu. Documentary review is well suited to contexts with limited primary data, allowing systematic analysis of secondary sources to explore the conceptualization, mechanisms, outcomes, and citizen engagement in urban diplomacy (Tight, 2019; Chand, S2025). Data were drawn from multiple credible sources, including government reports and policy documents (e.g., the Constitution of Uganda, 1995; Local Governments Act, 1997; Ministry of Local Government and Ministry of Foreign Affairs publications), municipal websites, city plans, and reports from international organizations such as the UN, World Bank, C40 Cities, UNESCO, and IFRI. Academic literature from 2019–2025 provided global and regional perspectives, helping to identify theoretical and empirical gaps and capture diverse stakeholder viewpoints.

The study combines **content analysis** and a **comparative case study framework**. Content analysis systematically codes and categorizes information to identify key themes, mechanisms, and outcomes of city diplomacy (Ersavas et al., 2024). While, the comparative case study examines differences and similarities across the five cities, highlighting how governance structures, economic capacity, and institutional arrangements influence urban diplomacy (Dilworth, 2020). Triangulating multiple sources increases reliability and validity. This dual approach enables thematic depth and cross-city comparison, identifies patterns, challenges, and gaps, and provides actionable insights for policymakers and municipal authorities, offering practical guidance to strengthen city diplomacy in resource-constrained contexts whereas addressing mechanisms, outcomes, and citizen participation (Johnson et al., 2017; Meydan & Akkas, 2024; Mbatha & Mwova, 2025).

8. Findings and Analytical Interpretation: City Diplomacy in Uganda

The documentary review shows that Ugandan cities participate in multiple forms of city diplomacy, with the extent and focus of engagement shaped by factors such as available resources, institutional capacity, and local priorities. Findings indicate that Kampala, Jinja, Mbale, Mbarara, and Gulu are actively involved in economic, cultural, environmental, and political or institutional diplomacy. For instance, Kampala demonstrates strong economic diplomacy through sister-city partnerships and trade missions, while Gulu prioritizes cultural diplomacy through post-conflict festivals and collaborations with UNESCO. Mbale focuses on environmental diplomacy via initiatives such as eco-tourism and partnerships with the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP). To strengthen the reliability of these qualitative findings, multiple documentary sources were cross-checked following the methodological approach recommended by Johnson et al. (2017); Meydan & Akkas (2024); Mbatha & Mwova (2025). Overall, these results correspond with the conceptual dimensions of city diplomacy (Acuto et al., 2021; Amiri & Ghourchi, 2024; Goniewicz et al., 2025) and affirm the applicability of para-diplomacy theory in the Ugandan context, demonstrating that cities act as autonomous subnational actors capable of pursuing local objectives internationally (Ali & Jasem, 2024; Antunes et al., 2024; Oddone, 2023). The table below shows multidimensional city diplomacy practices in selected Ugandan cities.

Table 1: Shows Multidimensional City Diplomacy Practices in Selected Ugandan Cities

City	Economic Diplomacy	Cultural Diplomacy	Environmental Diplomacy	Political/Institutional Diplomacy	Digital/Citizen Diplomacy
Kampala	Sister-city agreements, trade missions, international investment promotion (notably from China and other Asian countries)	Hosting international cultural festivals, heritage promotion	Participation in global climate networks, urban green projects	Engagement in UCLG and global urban governance fora	Emerging use of social media for international engagement
Jinja	Industrial partnerships, local investment promotion	Tourism diplomacy: storytelling, adventure tourism, horseback riding,	Emerging eco-tourism initiatives	Participation in selected municipal cooperation programs	Social media campaigns promoting tourism

		craft and cultural experiences			
Mbale	Trade partnerships with regional cities	Promotion of cultural heritage events	Environmental diplomacy with UNEP, eco-tourism, agroforestry (taungya farming), and beekeeping	Limited network engagement	Minimal digital engagement
Mbarara	Agribusiness trade agreements, cross-border knowledge exchange	Regional cultural events	Agricultural sustainability programs, urban farming	Participation in regional city networks	Minimal
Gulu	Limited economic diplomacy	Post-conflict cultural festivals, heritage preservation, UNESCO collaborations	Small-scale environmental projects	Minimal network engagement	Emerging citizen awareness initiatives

Source: Documentary Review Method.

8.1 Interpretive Analysis of City Diplomacy in Uganda

At a second level of analysis, several patterns emerge. First, institutional capacity shapes city diplomacy outcomes. Kampala demonstrates integrated economic, cultural, and political diplomacy, reflecting that subnational actor with higher autonomy and organizational maturity engage more effectively internationally. Kampala's capacity to host over 3.5 million daily commuters, accommodate refugees from countries such as South Sudan, Sudan, Ethiopia, Somalia, Eritrea, Kenya, Rwanda, and Burundi, and internally displaced persons, and attract international investment, particularly from China, enhances its role in city diplomacy by strengthening its economic, cultural, and political engagement at both national and international levels. In contrast, smaller cities such as Gulu and Mbale engage selectively in cultural and environmental initiatives, reflecting functional para-diplomacy in which cities leverage specific local strengths, including Gulu's post-conflict festivals and Mbale's eco-tourism partnerships with UNEP, to enhance their international diplomatic presence.

Second, cities exhibit issue-based specialization, aligning diplomacy with local resources. Jinja leverages tourism through storytelling, adventure activities, and craft promotion. Mbarara emphasizes agribusiness cooperation and cross-border knowledge exchange, while Mbale focuses on eco-tourism, agroforestry practices such as taungya farming, and beekeeping initiatives that promote sustainable livelihoods. These approaches demonstrate how subnational actors strategically tailor diplomatic efforts to their economic, cultural, and environmental strengths, enhancing competitiveness and using city diplomacy as a tool to address societal and environmental challenges.

Third, digital and citizen engagement remain limited. Across all cities, online platforms are minimally used to involve citizens in diplomacy. While social media initiatives are emerging in Kampala and Jinja, the absence of participatory mechanisms in other cities suggests that international engagement is largely elite-driven. This gap indicates that city diplomacy can only fully translate into sustainable development outcomes when citizens are actively involved, strengthening accountability, ownership, and legitimacy in the process.

Fourth, comparative insights underscore resource-dependent variation. Larger, well-connected cities such as Kampala are able to diversify diplomatic activities across multiple sectors, whereas smaller or resource-constrained cities focus on specific areas. This pattern reflects the path-dependent nature of city diplomacy: cities with strong institutions and established global networks are more likely to sustain and expand international engagement, accumulating advantages in investment, governance innovation, and global recognition.

Fifth, city diplomacy contributes to local development when aligned with national goals.

Kampala's trade missions and sister-city agreements strengthen economic ties and enable knowledge exchange in urban planning. Mbale and Mbarara's environmental and agricultural initiatives including eco-tourism, sustainable farming, and urban agriculture which promote livelihoods and food security. Gulu's cultural diplomacy fosters post-conflict recovery and social cohesion, leveraging Acholi cultural traditions for peacebuilding and reconciliation. Collectively, these cases demonstrate how cities convert institutional knowledge, networks, and cultural capital into sustainable competitive advantage, highlighting the strategic role of subnational actors in resource-constrained settings.

Finally, city diplomacy contributes to local development when aligned with national goals. Kampala's trade missions and sister-city agreements strengthen economic ties and facilitate

knowledge exchange in urban planning. Mbale and Mbarara use environmental and agricultural initiatives, including eco-tourism, sustainable farming, and urban agriculture, to enhance livelihoods and food security. Gulu leverages cultural diplomacy to support post-conflict recovery and social cohesion, drawing on Acholi traditions for peacebuilding and reconciliation. These examples demonstrate how subnational actors, in line with para-diplomacy theory, convert institutional knowledge, networks, and cultural capital into sustainable competitive advantage, showing that autonomous city diplomacy can produce tangible developmental benefits even in resource-constrained contexts.

9. Discussion: Interpreting City Diplomacy in Uganda

The findings indicate that Ugandan cities are increasingly active subnational actors in international affairs, reflecting global trends in which urban governments shape governance through networks, partnerships, and cross-border collaboration (Acuto et al., 2021; Tulibaleka et al., 2021). This aligns with studies by Cavanagh et al. (2015), Wagaba (2019), and Nuwagaba & Rutanga (2025a), which highlight that city such as Kampala, Jinja, Mbarara, Mbale, and Gulu are now engaging in political, economic, cultural, and environmental initiatives that illustrate para-diplomacy, where local governments pursue external relations to complement national development objectives. Similarly, Kyohairwe et al. (2024) emphasize that participation in international networks strengthens institutional learning, supports sustainable development agendas, and enhances visibility within global urban systems.

Ernstson & Mukwaya (2021) observe a marked disparity in municipal capacities, with Kampala emerging as the most advanced city, characterized by structured and diversified international engagements supported by its economic base, administrative infrastructure, and global connectivity. Ugandan cities thus exhibit differentiated approaches to city diplomacy, influenced by resources, capacities, and local contexts. Larger cities such as Kampala pursue comprehensive initiatives spanning economic promotion, environmental projects, knowledge exchange, and political networking (Balbim, 2021; Erdem et al., 2025). In contrast, smaller or newly emerging cities pursue targeted strategies leveraging local strengths: Gulu emphasizes cultural diplomacy and heritage preservation to foster peace and cohesion (Jendia, 2019); Mbale focuses on environmental cooperation and eco-tourism, promoting sustainable livelihoods around Mount Elgon (Cavanagh et al., 2015); and Jinja centers on tourism promotion to stimulate local economic development (Wagaba, 2019). These patterns illustrate that even

resource-limited cities can exert international influence through context-responsive strategies aligned with local priorities (Nuwagaba & Rutanga, 2025b).

These dynamics resonate with broader para-diplomacy literature, which emphasizes that subnational foreign engagement depends on governance capacity, resource availability, and local development priorities (Oddone, 2023; Ali & Jasem, 2024). Compared with cities in Europe or East Asia typically benefiting from stable funding, institutional frameworks, and dedicated international offices, Ugandan municipalities operate under constrained administrative and financial conditions (Acuto et al., 2021; Rogromel & Rozenblat, 2024). Nonetheless, they demonstrate adaptability by pursuing specialized initiatives: tourism in Jinja (Wagaba, 2019), climate partnerships in Mbale (Cavanagh et al., 2015), agribusiness exchanges in Mbarara (Nuwagaba & Rutanga, 2025b), and cultural-heritage diplomacy in Gulu (Jendia, 2019). These examples underscore the potential for meaningful international influence when initiatives are strategically focused and context-sensitive (Kyohairwe et al., 2024; Kihlgren Grandi, 2024).

Despite these achievements, several constraints limit city diplomacy effectiveness. Weak institutional structures, absence of dedicated international offices, unclear mandates, and limited budgets restrict participation and alignment with national foreign policy (Erdem et al., 2025; Groen, 2022). Concerns regarding democratic legitimacy arise when initiatives prioritize municipal or elite interests over community needs (Pejic et al., 2025). Besides, Ugandan cities face reduced visibility relative to better-resourced global counterparts (Kihlgren, 2024; Acuto et al., 2021).

Overall, the Ugandan case demonstrates that city diplomacy in the Global South is viable when municipalities adopt context-sensitive strategies, maximize unique local assets, and strategically engage transnational networks. Strategic specialization in areas of comparative advantage looking at tourism, climate action, agribusiness, or cultural heritage which enables cities to assert influence despite structural constraints, highlighting the interplay of governance capacity, resourcefulness, and alignment with local development priorities in shaping subnational international engagement (Oddone, 2023; Ali & Jasem, 2024).

10. Policy Implications: The Rise of City Diplomacy in Uganda

- vi) Strengthen institutional capacity for subnational diplomacy: The findings indicate that institutional capacity is a key determinant of the scope and effectiveness of city diplomacy. Kampala's integrated engagement across economic, cultural, environmental, and political domains demonstrates that cities with robust administrative structures, organizational maturity, and international connectivity can sustain diversified diplomatic initiatives. Policymakers should prioritize building institutional capacity in smaller and emerging cities, such as Gulu and Mbale, through targeted investments in municipal staffing, specialized training programs, and the establishment of dedicated city diplomacy offices. Such support will enable these municipalities to expand their international engagements beyond isolated initiatives, enhancing their ability to leverage city diplomacy for sustainable development.
- vii) Promote context-responsive and sectoral specialization: Ugandan cities illustrate the benefits of aligning diplomatic efforts with local strengths and resources. Jinja's focus on tourism, Mbarara's emphasis on agribusiness, and Mbale's eco-tourism and agroforestry initiatives highlight that context-specific strategies maximize developmental impact. Policymakers should encourage cities to identify and capitalize on comparative advantages when designing international initiatives. This could include developing sectoral strategies, facilitating partnerships with international organizations aligned with local priorities, and integrating city diplomacy into broader regional and national development plans. Such an approach ensures that diplomatic engagements generate tangible benefits for economic growth, environmental sustainability, and cultural preservation.
- viii) Foster inclusive and citizen-centered diplomatic engagement: The analysis reveals limited digital and participatory mechanisms in city diplomacy, suggesting that international engagement is often elite-driven. Sustainable development outcomes are most effectively achieved when citizens are actively involved, promoting accountability, ownership, and legitimacy. Policymakers should therefore support initiatives that integrate citizen participation into diplomatic processes, including digital engagement platforms, public consultations, and community-driven projects linked to cultural, environmental, or economic diplomacy. By fostering inclusive practices, cities can enhance the legitimacy of their international activities while simultaneously reinforcing local development objectives, bridging the gap between global networks and local needs.

11. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that city diplomacy is an increasingly influential dimension of international relations in Uganda. Examining Kampala, Jinja, Mbale, Mbarara, and Gulu reveals multiple dimensions of urban diplomatic engagement including economic, cultural, environmental, educational, security, and digital diplomacy through which cities leverage international networks, partnerships, and knowledge exchange to advance local development objectives. Kampala exemplifies robust economic and political diplomacy via sister-city agreements, trade missions, and participation in global municipal networks. Gulu emphasizes cultural diplomacy, fostering post-conflict recovery and international recognition through heritage projects and festivals. Mbale and Mbarara illustrate environmental and agribusiness-focused initiatives, demonstrating functional specialization consistent with paradiplomacy theory.

The study contributes to theory by situating Ugandan city diplomacy within the framework of paradiplomacy, confirming that subnational actors can exercise meaningful international agency even in resource-constrained contexts. Cities emerge as autonomous actors capable of complementing national foreign policy, mobilizing resources, and addressing global challenges locally. Findings also highlight the critical role of institutional capacity, citizen engagement, and digital platforms in enhancing the legitimacy, reach, and effectiveness of city diplomacy initiatives.

Practically, the study underscores the potential of Ugandan cities to generate tangible benefits for local communities while enhancing the country's global visibility. Strategic international engagement strengthens economic growth, promotes cultural heritage, supports sustainable livelihoods, and fosters environmental resilience. However, challenges including limited resources, inadequate legal frameworks, coordination gaps with national authorities, and limited citizen participation constrain the full potential of city diplomacy. Addressing these gaps through targeted capacity-building, formalized municipal diplomatic structures, and participatory approaches can optimize outcomes and ensure equitable benefits.

Future research should consider longitudinal analyses to assess the long-term impacts of city diplomacy on urban development, economic performance, and environmental sustainability. Investigating citizen perceptions and participation would illuminate the inclusivity and legitimacy of diplomatic initiatives while systematic evaluation of legal and institutional frameworks could guide policy reforms to strengthen subnational international engagement.

In conclusion, Ugandan cities demonstrate that context-sensitive, resource-aware, and strategically focused diplomacy allows subnational actors to transform networks, knowledge, and cultural capital into sustainable competitive advantages. This study bridges conceptual theory and empirical evidence, offering practical and scholarly insights into city diplomacy in the Global South and providing a foundation for policy and research that enhances the role of cities as active participants in global governance.

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