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The Evolution of City Diplomacy in Africa

Impact, Potential, and Ongoing Challenges of African Cities' International Activities

Sub-saharan
Africa Center

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Abstract

Over the past decades, African cities have ranked among the leading players in the evolution of city diplomacy. Indeed, municipalities across the continent have gone beyond simply adapting to shifting trends in international cooperation. They have been shaping the current partnership approach that sees local authorities worldwide working together to pursue shared goals and address common urban challenges such as climate change, migration, and social justice.

This paper employs an analysis of the three main evolutionary stages of African city diplomacy to identify the quantitative and qualitative elements that have propelled the emergence of African urban leadership on the regional and global stage. Furthermore, the comparative study of international city networks' membership and leadership on the continent provides evidence of processes of cities' internationalization that, while strongly driven by expanding demographic and economic indicators, are not strictly defined by them. The lens of city diplomacy thus casts light on how local African leaders transform into reality a vision placing international relations at the service of sustainable urban development.

The paper concludes with an analysis of the main challenges that still limit the full deployment of city diplomacy in Africa, offering insights on how to address them.

Résumé

Au cours des dernières décennies, les villes africaines se sont hissées au rang des principaux acteurs de l'évolution de la diplomatie des villes. En effet, les municipalités du continent ne se sont pas seulement adaptées aux nouvelles tendances de la coopération internationale. Elles ont façonné l'approche actuelle du partenariat où les autorités locales du monde entier travaillent ensemble pour relever des défis urbains communs tels que le changement climatique, la migration et la justice sociale.

Cette *Note* de l'Ifri s'appuie sur une analyse des trois principales étapes de l'évolution de la diplomatie des villes africaines pour identifier les éléments quantitatifs et qualitatifs qui ont favorisé l'émergence d'un leadership urbain africain sur la scène régionale et mondiale. En outre, une étude comparative de l'appartenance aux réseaux internationaux de villes et de leur leadership sur le continent fournit des preuves des processus d'internationalisation des villes qui, tout en étant fortement motivés par des indicateurs démographiques et économiques en expansion, ne sont pas strictement définis par ces derniers. Le prisme de la diplomatie des villes éclaire ainsi la manière dont les dirigeants locaux africains transforment en réalité une vision plaçant les relations internationales au service d'un développement urbain durable.

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Introduction

In July 2022, a particularly severe storm hit the city of Abidjan, causing flooding and temporary interruption of the water and sanitation systems. Many of the roughly 500 participants present in the Ivorian capital for the COP of Cities interpreted this phenomenon as a warning from Mother Nature about the stakes that had brought them together.

Such an atmospheric event may indeed have contributed to the emphasis and determination with which, over the course of two days of work, mayors and local leaders united their voices in emphatically urging global decision-makers to recognize the pivotal role of local climate action and empower it with much-needed financial resources.[1]

The COP of Cities, co-organized by the Autonomous District of Abidjan, the International Association of Francophone Mayors (AIMF), and the City of Paris as a response to the limited involvement of cities in intergovernmental climate forums such as COPs, is one of the most significant examples of the growing leadership and convening power of African cities in deploying city diplomacy as a context-specific and result-driven path to address humanity's present and future urban challenges.

City diplomacy, intended as the conduct of international relations by cities and local governments with the overall purpose of advancing their own priorities, ranks among the most significant recent developments in both international relations and urban governance. As implemented by cities in Africa and the rest of the world, such practice has emerged as a fully-fledged form of diplomacy run by the closest political institutions to citizens. Indeed, city diplomacy parallels each of the five functions of Hedley Hull's famous definition of diplomacy, namely (I) facilitating communications between political leaders, (II) negotiating agreements, (III) gathering information, (IV) minimizing friction, and (V) symbolizing the existence of an international society.[2]

1. COP des Villes, "Le Manifeste d'Abidjan pour le climat", Paris: AIMF, Abidjan Autonomous District, July 2, 2022.
2. H. Bull, "The Anarchical Society: A Study of Order in World Politics", Fourth Edition, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012, pp. 163–166.

This paper focuses on the evolution of city diplomacy in Africa, as well as its possible future developments. The first part is devoted to analyzing the three consecutive thematic priorities of such a practice as conducted and experienced by African cities. The second part uses the lens of international city networks (ICNs) to identify the key institutional, political, economic, demographic, and linguistic determinants underlying the spread and leadership of city diplomacy on the continent. The third part focuses on the major ongoing challenges and risks linked to the spread of city diplomacy in Africa. Finally, the conclusion presents two emerging prospects for synergy that could empower African cities and local governments to navigate the many opportunities and risks of city diplomacy proficiently.

Emergence and spread of city diplomacy in Africa

Over its little more than a century of existence, city diplomacy underwent a gradual broadening of its functions. A reasonable level of simplification of this dynamic allows us to identify three consecutive stages, each featuring its own thematic priority and tools to implement it. A rising number of African cities has been at the forefront of these evolutions, contributing to the positioning of African cities as international relations actors.

Technical cooperation and solidarity (1913 onwards)

The founding act of city diplomacy is generally considered to have taken place in 1913 in Ghent, in Flanders, with the creation of the International Union of Cities. Later renamed the International Union of Local Authorities (IULA), this ancestor of all modern ICNs predated the creation of the League of Nations by seven years, thus providing the first evidence of cities' capacity to anticipate evolutions of international relations.

IULA's imprinting featured problem-solving and impact-oriented technical cooperation at its core. In the words of the initiative's promoter, then-Mayor of the Flemish city Emile Braun, the reason for mayors to come together was to "deliberate [...] on the major problems that arise from the universal nature of the conditions of present-day life, which are more or less the same everywhere."

In the following decades, this appeal translated into the spread of international city-to-city solidarity. Alongside a rising number of ICNs, whose number increased from 36 in 1960 to over 100 in 1990 and to over 300 today,[3] cities made extensive use of bilateral partnerships known as city twinning or sister-city agreements. Such bilateral partnerships featured primarily humanitarian and reconciliation goals that were seen as instrumental to resuming peaceful relations between nations that had faced each other in World War II or in the process of decolonization[4]. In such contexts, one of the key characteristics of city diplomacy emerged, namely that of enabling dialogue and fruitful collaborations between countries with sometimes marked adversarial relationships.

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3. M. Acuto and B. Leffel, "Understanding the Global Ecosystem of City Networks," *Urban Studies*, Vol. 58, No. 9, July 2021, pp. 1758–1774, available at: https://journals.sagepub.com.
4. L. Kihlgren Grandi, *City Diplomacy*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020, pp. 39–40, available at: https://link.springer.com.

Comparing twinning in the framework of the decolonization of Francophone Africa was evidenced by the participation of French cities in the First African Conference on Global Intercommunal Cooperation. Held in Dakar in 1964, just four years after Senegal's independence from France (Image 1), this conference recognized twinning agreements as tools to enhance international cooperation.

In 1971, the United Nations General Assembly used a similar language in a resolution describing city-to-city collaborations as "a natural complement to co-operation between States and intergovernmental organizations," highlighting its added value in terms of "intellectual and spiritual enrichment, technical and material support" resulting from interactions between local leaders and communities from both industrialized and developing countries.[5]

In Africa, such contribution of city diplomacy to relations between nations has been recorded in the context of territorial disputes that have polarized the continent. For example, in the context of decade-long strained ties between the bloc of African countries supporting the independence of the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic from Morocco, led by Algeria, and the bloc led by Morocco itself, city diplomacy enabled the continuity of dialogue and collaboration.[6] More recently, a similar role of local authorities was observed in the context of entrenched conflictual ties between the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Rwanda, and Burundi. The Platform of Local Authorities of the Great Lakes Countries–PALPGL, launched in 2012 with the support of AIMF, emerged as a voice for peace through recurrent meetings and declarations by local leaders. Moreover, PALPGL contributed to securing and enhancing cross-border trade.[7]

Similar city-led dynamics also resulted in easing tensions between African cities and those in neighboring regions. This is notably the case of city diplomacy's support for the normalization of relations between Tunisia and Kuwait, which had been soured by the former's support of the Iraqi invasion.[8]

With regard to North-South relations, the decades following World War II saw more and more African cities' being integrated into generally financially unbalanced city-to-city partnerships. The main driver for cities in the Global North to get involved with their African peers appeared to be solidarity-led development aid, mainly in the form of economic and technical support. In France, this approach, sometimes not exempt from a

5. UN General Assembly, "Town Twinning as a Means of International Co-Operation," 2861 (XXVI) Resolutions adopted on the reports of the Third Committee §, 1971.
6. Interview with Rahmatouca Sow Dièye, Political Affairs and International Relations Adviser, United Cities and Local Governments of Africa, interview by the author (Zoom), February 12, 2024.
7. G. Magambo Budundwa, "Les maires et la gouvernance de l'espace transfrontalier dans la région des grands lacs", *Raisonnance*, Paris: AIMF, October 2023.
8. Interview with Souad Sassi, Head of International Relations, City of Tunis, interview by the author, (Zoom), February 7, 2024.

paternalistic attitude,[9] took the name "decentralized cooperation," which French national law identifies as a branch of public development aid provided by local authorities.[10] The French Ministry of Foreign Affairs has been periodically issuing decentralized cooperation grants to support initiatives undertaken by French local governments in the Global South, including specific grants for French-speaking countries.[11]

These donor-recipient relationships also appeared evident in the context of city networks. Alongside city twinning, Africa bears witness to the spread of ICNs dedicated expressly to North-South solidarity-oriented technical cooperation. This is particularly the case within networks conceived to connect cities of the same linguistic-cultural area resulting from colonialism: the above-mentioned AIMF (created in 1979) for cities in French-speaking countries, the Union of Portuguese-speaking Capital Cities – UCCLA (1985), and the Commonwealth Local Government Forum – CLGF (1995).

Although financially unbalanced, the participation of African cities in this first city diplomacy stage should not be considered merely receptive. From the viewpoint of African cities, the bilateral and multilateral connections in this initial stage allowed them to establish their roles as essential development actors on both national and international stages. With the active support of regional and global city networks, African cities presented themselves internationally as the most appropriate government tier for understanding and addressing the continent's considerable urban challenges. Fast-paced and often unplanned urbanization across the continent emerged as a driver of unprecedented inequalities related to topics as diverse as adequate housing, access to water and food, and exposure to natural hazards.

Parallelly, North-South city diplomacy contributed to enhancing the role of African diasporas as development cooperation actors. Cities in Global North countries such as France, Spain, and Italy leveraged the potential of diasporas in facilitating city-to-city projects in their cities or regions of origin via technical knowledge, contacts, and, in some cases, even funding.[12]

9. R. Ries, "La coopération décentralisée pour des villes durables en Afrique," in B. Bariol-Mathais (ed.), *Vers des villes africaines durables*, Paris: FNAU Gallimard-Alternatives, 2020, pp. 152–153.
10. L. Kihlgren Grandi, "Le nouveau rôle international des villes (et pourquoi il faut l'encourager)", Paris: Terra Nova, March 13, 2020, pp. 14–15, available at : https://tnova.fr.
11. "Appel à manifestation d'intérêt Francophonie", France Diplomatie, Ministère de l'Europe et des Affaires étrangères, December 5, 2023, available at: www.diplomatie.gouv.fr; "Appel à projets franco-sénégalais," France Diplomatie, Ministère de l'Europe et des Affaires étrangères, January 8, 2024.
12. M. Fauser, "Co-Development as Transnational Governance: An Analysis of the Engagement of Local Authorities and Migrant Organisations in Madrid", *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, Vol. 40, No. 7, July 3, 2014, pp. 1060–1678, available at: www.tandfonline.com; C. Vincent-Mory, "Migrant Organizations and Local Government Cooperation for Development Programmes: A Comparative Analysis of Two Competing Local Authorities in Lyon, France", in T. Lacroix and A. Desille (eds.), *International Migrations and Local Governance: A Global Perspective*, Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2017, pp. 111–29, available at: https://link.springer.com; L. Kihlgren Grandi, "How Cities Cooperate to Address

Moreover, cities in the North have also been able to provide international political solidarity and visibility to their foreign counterparts' human rights and democratic challenges, often in a more assertive way than their own national government. This is the case, for example, with British cities, whose vocal advocacy accompanied by economic boycott measures supported the fight against apartheid in several cities in South Africa, leading to the signing of twinning agreements.[13]

Economic development, between cooperation and competition (1990 onwards)

The late 1980s and early 1990s were marked by the spread of an "entrepreneurial" approach to city diplomacy, encouraged by scholarly literature-backed evidence on the emergence of global cities, i.e., the increasingly pivotal hubs of the globalized economy.[14] While offshoring allowed by advancements in transport and telecommunications reduced the role of cities as centralized production sites, the globalized economy provided them with a new economic relevance. Economic transformation resulted in an unprecedented spatial concentration of functions, allowing for the coordination and servicing of globally and regionally spread economic systems. Despite the highest performances with regard to connectivity to global markets being found in Global North cities, a rising number of African cities has emerged as increasingly more influential nodes of global, regional, and sub-regional economies.

An authoritative and widespread quantification of this performance is provided by the Globalization and World Cities Research Network (GaWC). Through their Interlocking Network Model developed by Peter Taylor and his colleagues, GaWC examines cities' international connectedness based on the connectivity of four "advanced producer services" (accountancy, advertising, banking/finance, and law). Since 2000, the rankings have associated major urban economies with the Alpha, Beta, and Gamma classes, each with subclasses indicated by the + and – signs. GaWC rankings also feature two classes for less connected cities that, nevertheless, have high sufficiency or sufficiency of services, thus not depending overtly on more globalized cities.

Transnational Challenges", in *The Palgrave Encyclopedia of Urban and Regional Futures*, Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2022, pp. 1–10, available at: https://link.springer.com.

13. N. J. Cull, "British Cities versus Apartheid: UK Local Authority Activism as City Diplomacy", *Diplomatica*, Vol. 3, No. 1, June 23, 2021, pp. 187–199, available at: https://brill.com.

14. S. Sassen, *The Global City*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991, available at: www.jstor.org; P. J. Taylor, "Specification of the World City Network", *Geographical Analysis*, Vol. 33, No. 2, April 2001, pp. 181–194, available at: https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com.

Comparing the 2022 ranking with the 2000 ranking, it is evident that all African cities in the latter have improved their position. As shown in Table 1, the ranking climbing goes from 1 position and one subclass for Cairo to 55 positions and four subclasses for Dar es Salaam. Johannesburg, which rose to become the first and only Alpha-city in Africa, confirmed its primacy on the continent, followed by the three Beta+ cities of Cairo, Casablanca, and Nairobi.[15]

Table 1: The evolution of African cities' integration into the globalized economy

2022 GaWC African Ranking	City	Country	2022 GaWC Global Ranking	2000 GaWC Global Ranking	Variation
1	Johannesburg	South Africa	30	43	↑13
2	Cairo	Egypt	58	59	↑1
3	Casablanca	Morocco	70	110	↑40
4	Nairobi	Kenya	75	99	↑24
5	Lagos	Nigeria	86	123	↑37
6	Cape Town	South Africa	88	94	↑6
7	Tunis	Tunisia	108	141	↑33
8	Accra	Ghana	139	149	↑10
9	Dar es Salaam	Tanzania	140	195	↑55
10	Kampala	Uganda	148	173	↑25

GaWC Classes

Alpha-	Beta+	Beta	Beta-	Gamma+	Gamma	Gamma-	High Sufficiency	Sufficiency

Source: 2018-2022 GaWC Reports. © Ifri, 2024.

15. "World Cities 2000", Globalization and World Cities (GaWC), The World According to GaWC, 2000, available at: https://gawc.lboro.ac.uk; Globalization and World Cities (GaWC), "World Cities 2022" Globalization and World Cities (GaWC), The World According to GaWC, 2022, available at: https://gawc.lboro.ac.uk.

The improved performance of African top urban economies in global rankings parallels the generally positive trend of social urban development indicators across the continent. Despite striking inequalities and rapid population growth, African cities saw an overall improvement in their development and quality of life as measured by access to essential services over the past three decades.[16]

Parallelly, the continent-wide decentralization process made it possible for African cities to engage in proactive urban development strategies. Since the 1990s, most African governments adopted decentralization reforms, often backed by financial and technical support from international partners.[17] As local authorities obtained greater responsibilities for their own development, city diplomacy was frequently tasked with the additional goal of enhancing local finances and economic development. The case for engaging in city diplomacy for such a purpose was supported by the fact that, more frequently than not, central governments did not provide local authorities with the financial means to properly manage the improved scope of their responsibilities.[18]

Like their peers across the world, a growing number of African cities started embracing private sector practices to increase their attractivity to the scarce yet coveted resources of foreign direct investments, tourists, and talented professionals. This was particularly evident in the branding techniques adopted by some African cities aiming at presenting themselves as entry points to the continent's economy. The best-documented example comes from the branding campaigns of Africa's major urban economy, Johannesburg, whose outward perspective generated the "Gateway into Southern Africa" and "Golden Heartbeat of Africa" brands.[19]

Nevertheless, major African cities' ambitions and goals for economic competitiveness were only partially met due to a conflicting trend in Global North's city diplomacy. The increased focus on harnessing the economic potential of international relations has generated widespread spatial reconfiguration of international city-to-city partnerships. Since the early 1990s, numerous local governments in Europe and North America have shifted their focus from African and Latin American cities to some of Asia's fastest-paced urban economies, predominantly located in Japan, South

16. OECD, UNECA, and AfDB, *Africa's Urbanisation Dynamics 2022: The Economic Power of Africa's Cities*, Paris: OECD Publishing, 2022, available at: www.oecd-ilibrary.org.
17. J. Erk, "Federalism and Decentralization in Sub-Saharan Africa: Five Patterns of Evolution," *Regional & Federal Studies*, Vol. 24, No. 5, October 20, 2014, pp. 535–536, available at: www.tandfonline.com.
18. S. Allou, "Finances locales : le maillon faible", in B.Bariol-Mathais (ed.), *Vers des villes africaines durables*, op. cit., pp. 136–139; R. Ries, "Vers des villes africaines durables", FNAU, 2020, available at : www.fnau.org.
19. Z. Mbinza, "Exploring Place Branding in the Global South: The Case of Johannesburg, South Africa", *Place Branding and Public Diplomacy*, Vol. 20, No. 2, June 1, 2024, pp. 232–243, available at: https://link.springer.com.

Korea, China, and the Gulf monarchies, with the purpose of enhancing export and attracting investments. As a result, several partnerships between African and Global North cities were scaled down or discontinued.[20] Partially balancing this trend, African cities have seen their interactions with their peers in the Global South gradually increase. This trend is especially noticeable among cities in some of Africa's most dynamic economies. Since its launch in 2011, the BRICS Friendship Cities and Local Government Cooperation mechanism has enabled South African cities, joined in 2024 by those of Egypt and Ethiopia, to benefit from a formal collaboration framework.

Partnerships for common goals (2015 onwards)

Despite the impact of the 2008 global financial crisis, Global North cities' declining commitment to cooperative projects with African peers was subsequently mitigated by a major evolution in multilateralism. The impetus emanates mainly from the 2030 Agenda and its Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), adopted by all UN member states in September 2015. To the decreasing appeal of the Millennium Development Goals, which called for a global community effort in favor of the countries most in need, the 2030 Agenda responded by proposing a mutually beneficial partnership approach towards shared priorities (SDG 17-"Partnership for the Goals"), among which one is explicitly devoted to "Sustainable Cities and Communities" (SDG 11). The Agenda's contribution to global awareness of cities' centrality in sustainable development is further underscored by the fact that local authorities' involvement is essential to achieving at least 105 out of the 169 SDG targets.[21]

Moreover, this form of recognition of the role of cities in the pursuit of the primary goals of the 2030 Agenda is consolidated in numerous UN activities.[22] COPs, the World Urban Forum, the Forum of Mayors, and the International Dialogue on Migration are just a few examples of the many UN-hosted instances contributing to the emergence of a "voice of cities" on global priorities.[23] Additionally, the UN Human Settlements Program (UN-Habitat) and UN Regional Commissions (UNECA for Africa) have developed a series of indicators and guides to support the "localization" of

20. L. Kihlgren Grandi, "Le nouveau rôle international des villes (et pourquoi il faut l'encourager)", op. cit., pp. 11–12.
21. "A Territorial Approach to the Sustainable Development Goals: Synthesis Report", *OECD Urban Policy Reviews*, No. 76, OECD, 2020, available at: www.oecd-ilibrary.org.
22. M. Acuto et al., "The City as Actor in UN Frameworks: Formalizing 'Urban Agency' in the International System?," *Territory, Politics, Governance*, January 18, 2021, pp. 1–18, available at: www.tandfonline.com.
23. L. Kihlgren Grandi, *City Diplomacy*, op. cit, pp. 42–43.

SDGs and their voluntary review by local governments[24] and regularly provide opportunities for city leaders to discuss major sustainable urban development issues. With the 2030 Agenda, therefore, the development ambitions of a growing number of mayors in Africa and around the world received increased visibility

Over the last couple of decades, the combination of strong political leadership and the increasing professionalization of municipal administrations in Africa has allowed mayors from the continent to rise to prominent positions in global city diplomacy.

The election of Mpho Parks Tau as the president of United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG) in 2016 highlighted this trend. Parks Tau, who was then the president of the South African Local Government Association (SALGA) and a former Mayor of Johannesburg, took on this role after previously serving as the president of Metropolis, UCLG's metropolitan section. Today, African mayors lead several of the most influential global city networks, as shown by Freetown's Yvonne Aki-Sawyerr, who serves as the co-chair of C40 and sits on the board of the Mayors Migration Council, Nouakchott's Fatimetou Abdel Malick, who acts as the co-president of UCLG and chairs its Standing Committee on Gender Equality and its African section, UCLG Africa, or Dakar's Barthélémy Dias, who is the current president of Metropolis. The leadership and contributions of African mayors are increasingly sought after by global city networks to lend authority and legitimacy to advocacy efforts aimed at shaping sustainable development, particularly concerning climate issues. This growing global role of African mayors is progressively rebalancing ICN ownership and involvement, which has traditionally favored cities in the Global North.[25]

24. UNECA, UN-Habitat, and UCLGA, *Africa Voluntary Local Review Guidelines*, Addis Ababa: UNECA, 2022, available at: https://unhabitat.org.
25. S. Bouteligier, "Inequality in New Global Governance Arrangements: The North-South Divide in Transnational Municipal Networks," *Innovation: The European Journal of Social Science Research*, Vol. 26, No. 3, September 1, 2013, pp. 251–267, available at: www.tandfonline.com.

Understanding the participation and leadership of African municipalities in international city networks

For a long time, city diplomacy, in both its bilateral and multilateral dimensions, has been the object of limited mapping, monitoring, and quantitative analysis in general. This dynamic has recently started to shift due to the criteria set by public and private funding institutions for international city-to-city projects, as well as the increasing interest from academia in these matters. Nevertheless, additional work is still needed to transform the available data into keys to understand city diplomacy scope and impact thoroughly.

This section of the paper aspires precisely to use the available data on African cities' international networking to identify and understand its drivers. From a methodological point of view, the choice to focus on city networking rather than on twinning stems from the greater availability of quantitative information, whose collection is usually among the duties of networks' secretariats. Moreover, the COP of Cities mentioned in the introduction reveals the eagerness of African cities to make an impact on multilateralism. While city-to-city bilateral collaboration continues to be pursued and to generate significant impacts, there is no doubt that cities around the world are focusing on a multilateral approach. With more than 300 ICNs today, municipal governments have multiple alternatives to navigate in terms of priorities, engagement, advocacy, knowledge exchange, and joint project management.[26]

This section's multilateral city diplomacy analysis framework is built upon two types of ranking, each reflecting a specific angle of African cities' international networking:

- **ICN membership:** Table 2 ranks African cities based on the number of memberships in ICNs as reported in the African subset of the 2017 *City Networks Membership Dataset* authored by Michele Acuto and Benjamin Leffel.[27] This data is supplemented with membership in UCCLA as of 2017 to avoid the underrepresentation of Portuguese-

26. Kihlgren Grandi, "How Cities Cooperate to Address Transnational Challenges", op. cit.
27. M. Acuto and B. Leffel, "City Networks Membership Dataset", The University of Melbourne, October 14, 2022, available at: https://figshare.unimelb.edu.au.

speaking compared to English-speaking and French-speaking ones since the CLGF and AIMF networks are accounted for in the dataset.

- **ICN leadership:** Table 3 ranks African cities based on the number of executive positions held by their mayors in some of the major ICNs active on the continent: AIMF, C40, ICLEI (global network and African section), Metropolis, UCCLA, and UCLG (global network and African section).[28] The ranking weights three different types of network leadership: presidency or chairpersonship (indicated by P in the table, with a value of three points), vice-presidency/vice-chairpersonship (V in the table, two points), and simple membership in boards and executive bodies (M, 1 point).

In the following paragraphs, the two rankings are interpreted in light of four discriminants related to cities: national status, integration into the global economy, level of decentralization, and belonging to linguistic areas. Each of these perspectives makes it possible to infer significant correlations in the two tables and to provide a rationale for deviations.

City networking and national status: political and economic capital status, population size

The vast majority of African cities in the top six positions of the two tables have a similar national status: they are the political and economic capitals of their country and have the highest number of residents.

Several factors can account for these shared features, potentially occurring in combination:

- **Availability of human and financial tools:** Compared to their peers in their respective countries, these cities generally have higher means to hire skilled city diplomats and cover the costs related to managing membership, participation, and leadership processes in ICNs, including international travel costs and network fees.
- **City networks priorities:** While criteria related to size are essential in only a few ICNs, such as Metropolis, political and economic capitals, along with larger cities, tend to have a greater representation in networks, both in terms of membership and leadership roles. This results in ICN actions and priorities that might be less relevant to other tiers of cities.

28. Absent among the networks is CLGF, on whose board there are no city representatives but those of ministries and five national networks of local authorities: Nigeria (Vice-chairpersonship), Uganda, Namibia, Botswana, and Ghana. Source: CLGF Website, www.clgf.org.uk (accessed on October 14, 2024).

- **Political clout of city leaders:** Leadership positions in capitals and major cities often hold significant political influence and visibility at the national level. In centralized countries, this political clout might lead to increased latitude in engaging in bilateral and multilateral relations allowed by the national government.
- **Proxy foreign policy:** Recognition by the central government of the potential that these cities hold for enhancing international relations may, particularly in contexts characterized by limited decentralization, lead to a clearly defined and stringent mandate for participation in specific ICNs. Such a practice is often known as "proxy foreign policy" by virtue of the steering role of national governments. It should be pointed out, however, that there is a lack of in-depth research to date that can quantify this dynamic in Africa, as current research on the topic has concentrated on Chinese local authorities almost exclusively[29].

With regards to the deviations, the cases where the highest-ranking cities for both ICN membership and leadership are not their countries' political/economic capitals and most populous cities belong to South Africa and Morocco. The Moroccan case is particularly telling. Rabat's superior performance compared to the larger Casablanca in terms of ICN membership and leadership may be attributed to its status as the capital. Nevertheless, the presence of Chefchaouen (42,577 inhabitants in 2014) at the same leadership rank as Rabat requires taking into consideration other urban features. Paragraph 2.3 utilizes the decentralization ranking compiled by UCLG Africa and Cities Alliance to account for both Moroccan and South African exceptions in Tables 2 and 3.

City networking and economic globalization

Comparing GaWC's *Interlocking Network Model* rankings with those related to ICN membership and leadership provides insights into the correlation between the integration of the urban economy into the global economy on the one hand and city networking membership and leadership on the other. First, Table 2 on ICN membership includes cities with highly globalized economies. On the contrary, Table 3 shows that ICN leadership does not necessarily align with global economy interconnectedness, with 9 of the 15 cities in the top five positions (counting several equal rankings) not making it into the GaWC list.

29. D. Mierzejewski, "The Role of Guangdong and Guangzhou's Subnational Diplomacy in China's Belt and Road Initiative," *China: An International Journal*, Vol. 18, No. 2, May 2020, pp. 99–119, available at: https://muse.jhu.edu; I. Klaus and S. Curtis, "Ties that Bind: China's BRI and City Diplomacy in a Shifting World Order", ISPI, July 6, 2020, available at: www.ispionline.it.

The deviation between GaWC rankings and the two city networking rankings seems to be related to two main dynamics, the effect of which can add up.

- **Level of decentralization:** Several cities in countries with a high level of decentralization (see paragraph below) perform well in Tables 2 and 3 despite the fact that their own level of integration into the globalized economy does not qualify them to join the GaWC ranking.
- **Membership in language areas:** It is noteworthy that some of the most notable hiatuses between the ICN leadership and GaWC rankings are French-speaking cities that do not make the latter, starting with Nouakchott (1st position in ICN leadership) and Rabat and Chefchaouen (tied for 3rd position). As will be illustrated in paragraph 2.4, French-speaking African cities enjoy privileged channels in city diplomacy, both in the North-South and South-South dimensions. This is likely linked to the local leadership enhancing role of the global network dedicated precisely to cities that share that language, AIMF, and to the current relevance of French within UCLG Africa, whose headquarters is located in a French-speaking city (Rabat) and with a president (Fatimatou Abdel Malick, president of the Nouakchott Regional Council) and secretary general (Jean Pierre Elong Mbassi) who are native French speakers.

City networking and decentralization

It should come as no surprise that cities in countries with higher levels of decentralization—understood as the national government's devolution of powers to local authorities and the creation of an enabling environment in the execution of such local prerogatives—perform particularly well in the two tables.

The *Cities Enabling Environment (CEE)* reports elaborated by UCLG Africa and Cities Alliance since 2012[30] provide evidence of a generally slow but steady process of decentralization across the continent. Although the vast majority of African governments have in recent years taken legal steps to increase the capacity of their local authorities to act, the current state of affairs remains unfavorable or rather unfavorable for 31 of the 50 countries analyzed in 2021 (shown in red and orange respectively in the two tables).

Tables 2 and 3 show a clear correlation between decentralization and high rankings in both membership and leadership within ICNs. As previously mentioned, the ICN membership ranking indicates that the only countries with cities besides their capitals in the top five positions are South

30. UCLG Africa and Cities Alliance, "Assessing the Institutional Environment of Cities and Subnational Governments in Africa", Rabat and Brussels: United Cities and Local Governments of Africa (UCLG Africa), Cities Alliance, November 2021, available at: www.citiesalliance.org.

Africa and Morocco, ranking first and fourth, respectively, in 2018's CEE ranking. Furthermore, considering the ICN membership ranking, only Maputo's third place (tied with Tunis and Nairobi) belongs to a country among the least decentralized. Regarding ICN leadership, the significance of decentralization appears even stronger. In Table 3, the city that holds the highest rank within a challenging environment for local governance is Brazzaville, which is positioned fifth overall or sixth if linguistic and cultural networks are not taken into account. Concurrently, the Moroccan cities of Chefchaouen and Casablanca appear in the top five positions for ICN leadership.

To account for deviations in the networking/decentralization correlation in both tables, the consideration of the cities' national status seems relevant. In both tables, all cities belonging to an unfavorable national environment for local authorities are the political and economic capital and the most populous city of their country. These statuses, as commented on above, have a strong correlation with higher performance in both ICN membership and leadership rankings.

City networking and linguistic areas

Applying the linguistic angle to the ICL membership ranking offers a fairly evenly distributed podium, with two English-speaking cities (Cape Town in first position and Nairobi in third equal), two French-speaking cities (Dakar in second and Tunis in third equal), and one Portuguese-speaking city (Maputo, third equal).

In contrast, the ICN leadership podium is made up of only French-speaking cities. The highest-ranking English-speaking cities, Freetown and Lusaka, are positioned fourth, while Luanda, the first among the Portuguese-speaking cities, holds the fifth place. Moreover, as highlighted in the preceding paragraphs, belonging to the French-speaking world seems to emerge as a potential explanation for deviations related to the city's primary role in its own country (2.1) and level of integration into the global economy (2.2).

It is worth pointing out that the leadership ranking is affected by the absence of mayors on the CLGF board, unlike AIMF and UCCLA. However, even when removing language-cultural ICNs from the ranking, the podium remains entirely French-speaking, despite Rabat's retrocession to the fourth place.

The markedly better performance of French-speaking African cities in Table 3 highlights the link between linguistic areas and cities' capacity to play a leadership role in ICNs. Alongside personal talent, international city leadership includes a set of negotiation skills that extensive exposure to cross-border partnerships, projects, and events can reinforce. The

combined action of French cities and AIMF seems to offer this kind of opportunity to cities in their linguistic area.

French cities of all sizes are among those with the most significant financial capacity for city diplomacy compared to their peers from Europe and across the world.[31] The inclination of French cities to engage in international interactions in their native language –which, as mentioned above, the French government supports with grants – results in increased opportunities for French-speaking African cities.[32] In such projects, the French partner typically bears the primary share of the costs.

Similarly, the direct activities of the AIMF secretariat in Africa concentrate on providing technical and financial support for on-the-ground project implementation. This support can complement the initiatives carried out by cities in France and other French-speaking countries in the Global North.[33] Moreover, AIMF enhances its mayors' leadership skills through in-person and online capacity development activities and peer-learning tools such as its magazine *Raisonnance*.

Such strong emphasis placed by French cities and the AIMF on projects and capacity building could help illustrate the performance of French-speaking cities in the ICN leadership ranking. At the same time, such a favorable environment for French-speaking cities might explain why they do not necessarily have an interest in or feel the need to interact with ICNs that primarily use English.

While this does not have a determining impact in Table 3 on ICN leadership, which contains large ICNs committed to multilingualism, such as UCLG, ICLEI, and Metropolis, English is necessary for most ICNs with lower staffing and financial means accounted for in Table 2 on ICN membership. The next section will give due consideration to the separating and, in many ways, the suboptimal impact of African city diplomacy partitioned into linguistic areas.

31. French cities enjoy particularly favorable national legislation designed to provide cities with the means to conduct city diplomacy, including using part of the revenues from their activities as service providers. Source: L. Kihlgren Grandi, "Le nouveau rôle international des villes (et pourquoi il faut l'encourager)", op. cit.

32. The ranking of the top recipients of French decentralized cooperation sees the local authorities of five French-speaking African countries in the top six positions, namely Senegal (1st with 492 projects), Burkina Faso (2nd, 427 projects), Mali (4th, with 367 projects, although most of them are now frozen due to friction between the two national governments), Morocco (5th, 358 projects) and Madagascar (6th, 287 projects). Only the historical connection with the local governments of Germany, in third place with 393 projects, discontinues this strong preference for Francophone. Source: *Atlas français de la coopération décentralisée*, Commission nationale de la coopération décentralisée, 2024, www.cncd.fr.

33. This is the case, for example, for Nouakchott, which has been able to attract funding to strengthen its water and sanitation network from a wide range of partners from the Francophone world that include the AIMF, the metropolis of Metz, and the cities of Bordeaux and Lausanne. Source : Association Internationale des Maires Francophones, "Accès à l'eau : à Nouakchott, inauguration des infrastructures appuyées par la coopération décentralisée francophone," *AIMF* (blog), February 8, 2024, www.aimf.asso.fr.

In summary, the four prisms illustrated above prove helpful in analyzing the current geography of African cities' membership and leadership in ICNs. Recurring criteria in cities that qualify for the top positions of both include:

- The status of political and economic capital and the most populous area of their country;
- A high level of interconnectedness to the globalized economy;
- A decentralized national framework.

Additionally, the opportunities offered to French-speaking Africa by French cities and the AIMF network help explain the overrepresentation of cities from these language areas in the highest rankings related to leadership in ICNs.

African city diplomats' ongoing challenges

Most primary and secondary sources related to city diplomacy focus on its innovative nature and value-adding potential for sustainable urban development. Nevertheless, the evolution presented in the first section generated three main types of challenges that could ultimately undermine city diplomacy's further expansion and potential in Africa and worldwide.

The first critical issue affecting cities in Africa and the world pertains to a potentially negative impact on territorial cohesion within and across national boundaries. The focus of foreign cities, development agencies, international organizations, and multilateral development banks has, for years, overwhelmingly benefited cities that have a solid international relations department, resulting in an unequal allocation of international resources and partnerships and paving the way to project overlaps and duplications.[34] This is particularly evident in Africa, where an expanding but still limited number of cities have been attracting foreign and international resources and expertise to an extent that can hardly be replicated by most of their peers across the continent.

Nevertheless, enabling small and intermediary cities to benefit from international partnerships in managing their rising urbanization challenges and opportunities[35] sustainably has emerged as a central theme in city networks active in the continent, starting with UCLG Africa. A notable example of the latter's commitment in this regard is the 2022 edition of the network's flagship event, *Africities*, dedicated precisely to "The Role of Intermediary Cities of Africa in the Implementation of Agenda 2030 of the United Nations and the African Union Agenda 2063". Hence, should this trend consolidate, Chefchaouen's presence in the ICN leadership ranking (Table 3) is likely to become less of an exception in the future.

The second ongoing critical issue emerges as a legacy of the specific history of the African continent and is linked to its linguistic sub-regionalism. As mentioned above, similar to what has happened at the level of national governments, African cities have often maintained privileged relationships within their linguistic area shaped by colonization. This

34. L. Kihlgren Grandi, *City Diplomacy*, op. cit., pp. 58–59.

35. If, in the past, urbanization in the continent concentrated in cities between 500,000 to 1 million inhabitants, future city growth in the continent is expected to accelerate, with an average rate of more than 3% for cities of all sizes. Source: UNDESA, *World Urbanization Prospects: The 2018 Revision*, New York: United Nations, 2019, pp. 72–73.

dynamic has been further reinforced by the technical and financial support of European foreign affairs ministries and national development agencies for city-to-city cooperation projects with former colonies. As the example of France illustrates, this support from the national government can be interpreted as the realization that city diplomacy represents a unique channel for public diplomacy and soft power.[36]

In terms of multilateral city diplomacy, such a privileged relationship finds its major expression in cultural-linguistic ICNs, i.e., the above-mentioned AIMF, CLGF, and UCCLA. Furthermore, the impact of language blocks also seems to extend to pan-African city networks, potentially limiting collaboration. Johannesburg, for example, has expressed a concern that its engagement within UCLG Africa may be negatively affected by the inclination of French-speaking member cities to prioritize collaboration among their own groups.[37]

The linguistic capabilities of international relations offices typically make it possible to overcome these barriers by profitably coming to identify common advocacy and priorities – such as those embedded in the *COP of Cities Manifesto* or *Africities Declarations*.[38] Pending the eventual consolidation of Swahili as an official pan-African language,[39] the adoption of English-French bilingual city diplomacy has already proven itself for projects of a technical nature, as in the case of the African Smart Towns Network (ASToN), where Portuguese- and Arabic-speaking cities also participated.[40]

Nevertheless, additional focus by African municipalities on breaking the language barriers seems appropriate. Anecdotal evidence collected by the author suggests that the concrete application of projects across language areas is often hindered by limited foreign language skills within municipal departments other than those in charge of international relations.

The third critical issue related to the spread of city diplomacy itself is linked to the political-economic risks it generates. The newly introduced category of "city diplomacy risk"[41] is highly pertinent to African cities'

36. S. Amiri and L. Kihlgren Grandi, "Cities as Public Diplomacy Actors: Combining Moral 'Good' with Self-Interest," in C. Alexander (ed.), *Frontiers of Public Diplomacy: Hegemony, Morality, and Power in the International Sphere*, Vol. 159, New York: Routledge, 2021.
37. F. Nganje, "African Agency in Transnational City Networks: The Case of the City of Johannesburg," *Regional & Federal Studies*, Vol. 34, No. 3, May 26, 2024, p. 326, available at: www.tandfonline.com.
38. COP des Villes, "Le Manifeste d'Abidjan pour le climat"; "Final Declaration", UCLG Africa, 9th Africities Summit, May 21, 2022, available at: www.uclga.org.
39. I. Mwangi and N. Makanji, "Renewed Push for Use of Kiswahili by AU and UNESCO," Africa Renewal, United Nations, April 6, 2022, available at: www.un.org.
40. S. Lazar, "Towards Inclusive (Smart) City Diplomacy in Africa: Lessons Learned from the ASToN Network – City Diplomacy Lab", *City Diplomacy Lab*, June 4, 2024, available at: www.citydiplomacylab.net.
41. L. Kihlgren Grandi, "Localising Political Risk: A Framework for Analysing Political Risk Associated with City Diplomacy", in C. E. Sottilotta et al. (eds.), *The Routledge Handbook of Political Risk*, New York: Routledge, Forthcoming, available at: www.routledge.com.

international action due to external powers' conflicting geopolitical and geoeconomic ambitions over the continent's urban areas. This emerging literature has opened a breach in the still-dominant narrative depicting a supposed ethicality of international city-to-city relations based on cooperation, solidarity, and the "moral good."

Central governments are becoming increasingly aware of the potential of city diplomacy in terms of soft power and economic development. As a result, there is a growing body of evidence of national policies aimed at strategically reshaping city-to-city partnerships, aligning their objectives with broader foreign policy goals. This phenomenon reflects a conscious effort by various governments to leverage local collaborations to further international interests and diplomatic relations. In decentralized democracies, such dynamics unfold on a purely voluntary basis, in accordance with the principle of political autonomy of local authorities in matters under their own jurisdiction. The grants issued by the French government are a pertinent example. On the contrary, the international activities of local governments in autocratic countries could hardly deviate from the course set for them by the central government. For example, Chinese local governments' adherence to strategic goals determined by the central government and implemented through provincial-level "Foreign Affairs Leading Groups"[42] makes the line between city diplomacy and foreign policy blurred, at the very least. Often overlooked risks related to city diplomacy include precisely foreign autocratic governments' practice of orienting their cities' international partnerships to dissimulate geopolitical and geoeconomic interests and ambitions.

Globally, there is a persistent lack of awareness among city officials regarding this emerging category of risk.[43] As African cities are increasingly emerging as coveted targets in a game of influence by governments of competing blocs, comprehensive opportunity/risk analysis by African local governments engaging in city diplomacy is particularly timely and pertinent. In particular, this scrutiny appears to be indispensable to ensure that the objectives of foreign actors are in line with the best interests of the local population. Additional caution will be required for African cities whose national governments, increasingly aware of the potential of city diplomacy, may also seek to steer it for objectives other than those of the local communities involved.

42. D. Mierzejewski, "The Role of Guangdong and Guangzhou's Subnational Diplomacy in China's Belt and Road Initiative", op. cit.
43. L. Kihlgren Grandi and C. E. Sottilotta, "Opportunities and Challenges of City Diplomacy for Urban Resilience", in *Activities of the Geneva UN Charter Centres of Excellence*, UNECE Committee on Urban Development, Housing and Land Management, Eighty-Fifth Session, Geneva, Switzerland: United Nations Economic and Social Council, 2024, pp. 14–15, available at: https://unece.org.

Conclusion

Over a little more than a century, the spread of city diplomacy in Africa found its main foundation in the demonstrated potential to impact local development trajectories favorably. Such added value became all the more explicit since the introduction in 2015 of the United Nations' 2030 Agenda, whose implementation requires the direct involvement of local governments to which a specific Sustainable Development Goal is dedicated. As illustrated above, the "partnership among peers" approach inscribed in such an agenda has indeed resulted in empowering African cities as essential actors in building a sustainable urban future for humanity. The voices of African mayors and local leaders increasingly resonate today in ICNs' boards and assemblies, as well as in global forums and summits convened to shape such a future.

Nevertheless, engagement in city diplomacy still appears limited to a minority of cities, whose recurrent features are analyzed in the second part of this paper. Through a continental-scale review of city networking, the evolution of African city diplomacy emerges as driven by the interaction between multiple factors, ranging from demographics to integration in the global economy and national level of decentralization. Further quantitative research is needed to assess the applicability of the multilateral city diplomacy analysis framework introduced by this paper to bilateral city-to-city partnerships.

Moreover, this paper highlights three main challenges linked to city diplomacy in Africa: territorial inequality driven by uneven capacity to access international partnerships, segmentation of pan-African city-to-city cooperation along linguistic lines, and "city diplomacy risk" deriving from foreign governments' steering of their cities' international activities to conceal geopolitical and geoeconomic ambitions not necessarily pursuing the common good.

Navigating city diplomacy is, today more than ever, a complex endeavor. Municipal leaders and their teams in Africa and globally may find the design and management of international relations increasingly challenging. However, two entities are emerging as potentially valuable allies of cities in that challenge. These are international organizations and academia, many of which have expanded their activities to include the field of city diplomacy.

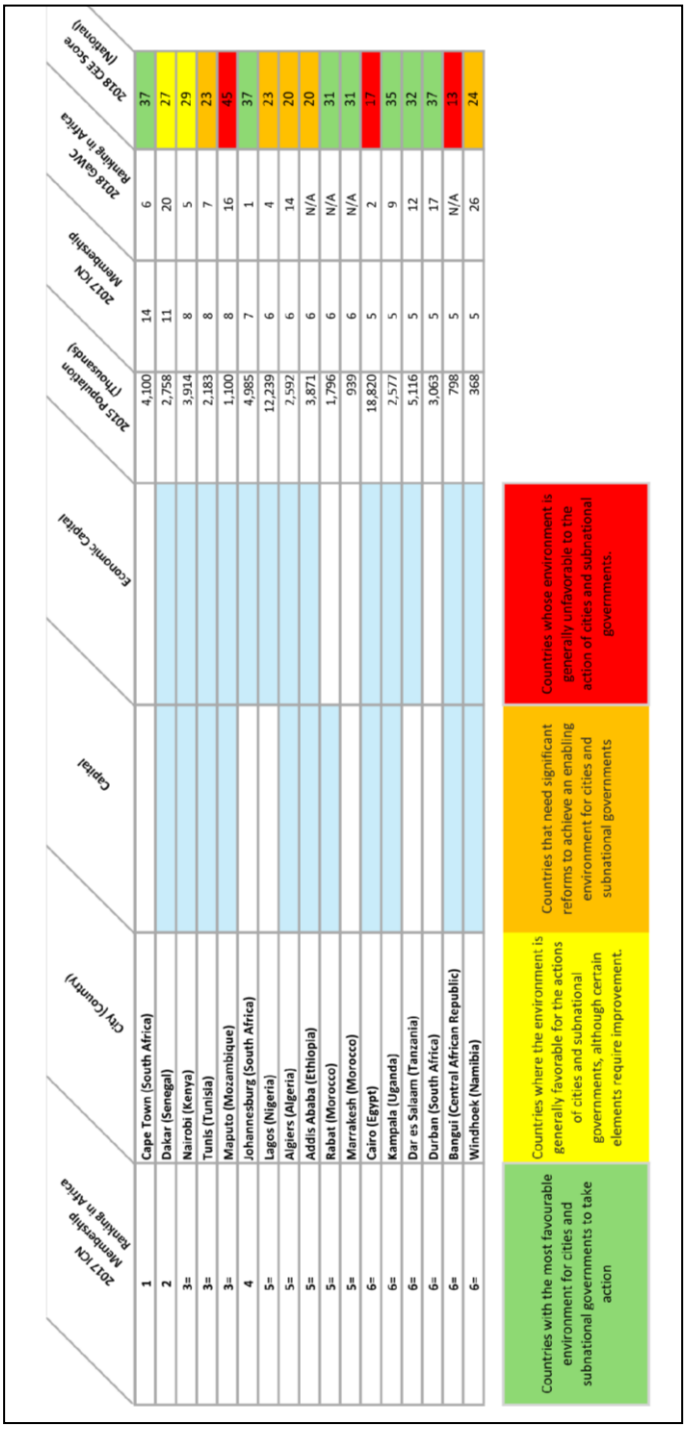
On the one hand, international organizations are multiplying programs and actions to support and empower cities' contribution to international development agendas, starting with the SDGs. In addition to providing cities with unprecedented opportunities for international advocacy and networking in global fora, international organizations regularly offer capacity development tools and programs designed to foster the formulation, funding, and implementation of local solutions to the major global challenges affecting Africa and the world, including climate change, rising inequalities, and migration.[44]

Alongside support from international organizations, cities can increasingly benefit from that of academic and research institutions. The engagement heralded by American universities to help identify and implement solutions to humanity's major challenges has led to the creation worldwide of numerous institutes, centers, laboratories, and programs aimed precisely at directly supporting cities and local governments in their sustainable development path. The remarkably rapid university development underway in Africa is likely to include among its benefits the multiplication of opportunities for cities to rely on in-depth dialogue with local experts to harness the unique potential of city diplomacy thoroughly.

44. L. Kihlgren Grandi, "How Cities Cooperate to Address Transnational Challenges", op. cit.

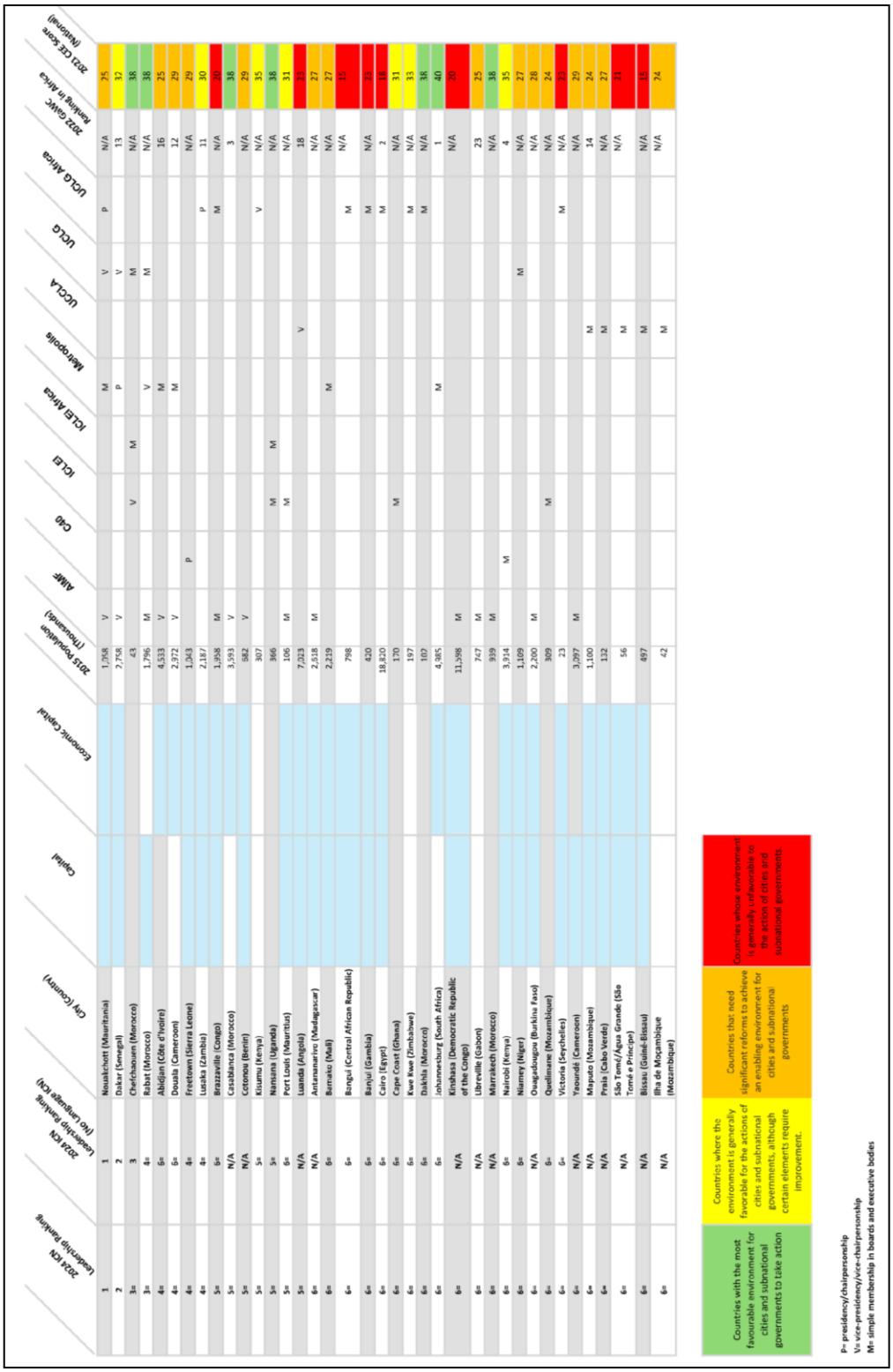
Annexes

Table 2: ICN Membership in Africa

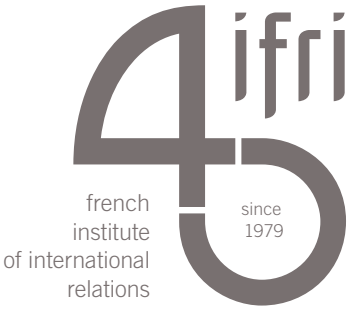


Sources: M. Acuto and B. Leffel, "City Networks Membership Dataset", The University of Melbourne, October 14, 2022, https://figshare.unimelb.edu.au; UCLG Africa and Cities Alliance, "Assessing the Institutional Environment of Cities and Subnational Governments in Africa", Rabat and Brussels: United Cities and Local Governments of Africa (UCLG Africa), Cities Alliance, November 2018, www.citiesalliance.org; "World Cities 2018", Globalization and World Cities (GaWC), The World According to GaWC, 2018, https://gawc.lboro.ac.uk; UNDESA, World Urbanization Prospects: The 2018 Revision, New York: United Nations, 2019.

Table 3: ICN Leadership in Africa



Sources: UCLG Africa and Cities Alliance, "Assessing the Institutional Environment of Cities and Subnational Governments in Africa", Rabat and Brussels: United Cities and Local Governments of Africa (UCLG Africa), Cities Alliance, November 2021, www.citiesalliance.org; "World Cities 2022", Globalization and World Cities (GaWC), The World According to GaWC, 2022, https://gawc.lboro.ac.uk; UNDESA, World Urbanization Prospects: The 2018 Revision, New York: United Nations, 2019; AIMF website: www.aimf.asso.fr (accessed on October 14, 2024); C40 website: www.c40.org (accessed on October 14, 2024); ICLEI website: https://iclei.org (accessed on October 14, 2024); ICLEI Africa website: https://africa.iclei.org (accessed on October 14, 2024); Metropolis website: www.metropolis.org (accessed on October 14, 2024); UCCLA website: www.uccla.pt(accessed on October 14, 2024); UCLG website: https://uclg.org (accessed on October 14, 2024); UCLG Africa website: www.uclga.org (accessed on October 14, 2024).



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