



A Space for Kinship in City Diplomacy: Re-imagining Sister Cities amid Global Migration

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Summary

In an era of escalating urbanisation and global migration, this research investigates the potential of sister city relationships in forging long-term and community-driven international ties. Are these city-to-city agreements outdated, or do they still offer contemporary benefits? The study is grounded in eight months of field research on relationships between US cities and the Ecuadorian cities of Cuenca and Quito during Ecuador's 2024 state of emergency. A sequential mixed-methods approach includes semi-structured interviews with cultural, diplomatic and economic stakeholders, and quantitative survey data, to identify broader trends in perceptions of sister city relations. Ethnographic observations in municipal offices in Cuenca and Quito anchor the research in practical governance challenges. The study contributes to international relations and paradiplomacy discourse by proposing an interdisciplinary theoretical

framework that blends ideas of social power, kinship and peripheral realism to analyse sister city partnerships as tools of agency and identity in the context of global diplomacy and displacement.

Keywords

city diplomacy – migration – sister cities – United States – Ecuador – diaspora diplomacy – paradiplomacy – kinship – social power

1 Exploring the Role of Sister Cities in Modern Diplomacy¹

One of the most pronounced trends of the 21st century is the cross-border movement of people. In 2023, roughly one in every 30 people lived in a country where they were not born, with global rates expected to rise.² At the same time, urbanisation is accelerating, with seven in ten people projected to live in urban areas by 2050.³ Surges in urbanisation and migration have been intertwined since cities emerged as centres of commerce, yet they have become even more pronounced in the era of the capitalist global economy.⁴ As global cities become increasingly powerful hubs of human and economic activity, their leaders must contend with challenges such as immigration, climate change and pandemics, necessitating engagement with international peers.⁵ National policy-makers are taking note, leading to the establishment of offices to monitor and support the international engagements of city and state leaders.⁶ Academic literature uses terms such as paradiplomacy, subnational diplomacy and city diplomacy to describe this phenomenon, but the impact on international relationships is not yet clear. This study contributes to this

1 Drafts of this article were presented and discussed at the World International Studies Committee (WISC) 2024 conference in Warsaw, Poland. The authors would like to thank discussants for valuable feedback, especially members of the Paradiplomacy Scholars Forum. The authors are also grateful for the constructive remarks received from the anonymous reviewers of *The Hague Journal of Diplomacy*. The research in this article was funded by the US Fulbright Program. A special appreciation goes to the Interdisciplinary Department of Space and Population (DIEP) at the Universidad de Cuenca.

2 Council on Foreign Relations 2023.

3 World Bank 2023.

4 Portes 2023.

5 Bouchet 2022; Marchetti 2021.

6 For example, the US Department of State created the Unit for Subnational Diplomacy in October 2022.

clarification by investigating the specific value of sister city relationships amid the twin phenomena of city-led diplomacy and migration.

Historically, US President Eisenhower sought to strengthen the connective tissue across countries through sister city relationships. This bilateral model was built on the power of 'people-to-people' connections aimed at fostering solidarity between global communities, not just mayors, and had the potential to galvanise local-level cooperation across the world. Yet today, the cultural exchange-based model is no longer the primary international channel for mayors. As mayors take on greater responsibility for global issues, policy-oriented coalitions of major cities often take priority.

As urbanisation and migration converge, the power of sister cities to form bridges between fluid populations and provide agency to displaced communities has been underexplored. The term 'sister city' itself stands apart from policy jargon and elicits salient ideas of kinship, or shared history and identity, between isolated groups. However, its utility as a contemporary tool of social power remains insufficiently analysed. This study addresses this gap by exploring whether sister city ties can empower the diaspora and non-governmental actors to engage in international partnerships. It makes a historic contribution by conducting field research on the sister cities between the US and Ecuador during Ecuador's 2024 state of emergency, which is projected to catalyse increased migration to the US.

The objective of the article is to explore the potential of sister cities in institutionalising channels between diaspora communities and those of origin in response to steady-state migration between the US and Ecuador. This research addresses theoretical opportunities for providing social power and agency as well as practical concerns about implementing sister city partnerships. To achieve this objective, the article poses three research questions: (I) Is the sister city model antiquated, or has it been underestimated and underinvested? (II) What factors influence the effectiveness of sister city relationships in fostering long-term collaboration between international partners? (III) Which stakeholders have been involved in and excluded from these relationships?

The article argues that the sister city model can have a renewed role and greater impact in the specific context of migration by building on the foundation of existing economic and cultural ties to construct enduring relationships that transcend municipal administrations. This contribution unites calls for greater research on non-state-centric approaches to migration and diplomacy.⁷ Diaspora communities, universities and chambers of commerce can be better

7 Alejo 2020; Alger 1977.

leveraged within city diplomacy because they are entities with influence yet are often unrecognised in traditional state-led diplomacy. Migrant activism and diplomacy challenge static notions of citizenship and sovereignty, providing more fluid, community-based diplomatic engagements that transcend national borders. Sister city agreements could offer an essential framework for formalising these connections by enabling sustained cultural, economic and educational collaborations that build a resilient web of connections beyond governments.

The article begins by outlining the theoretical framework based on social power;⁸ economic, cultural and political layers of paradiplomacy;⁹ kinship;¹⁰ and place branding.¹¹ It also employs a threefold structure of sister city relationships.¹² This is followed by a historical overview of the rise and retreat of sister cities' global prominence, before introducing the research methodology. US–Ecuador sister city relations are examined through case studies in Quito and Cuenca employing semi-structured interviews with multi-sectoral leaders and quantitative survey data conducted in 2024. Ethnographic analysis from participant observation in municipal offices in Quito (October–December 2023) and Cuenca (February–April 2024) anchors the research in the practical considerations faced by mayors. The results examine US–Ecuador relations, with case studies on Cuenca and Quito revealing insights into the power of sister cities in the context of migration. The article concludes by summarising the results and theoretical contributions, as well as planting ideas for future research.

2 Locating Sister City Relationships in International Relations Kinship Theory

The ambiguities within the implementation of sister cities are evident in Sister Cities International's own definition of a 'broad-based, long-term partnership between two communities in two countries'.¹³ To locate this concept, it is important to begin with the power dynamics shaping the position of substate actors in international partnerships. Since the 1900s, scholars have outlined

8 van Ham 2010.

9 Lecours 2008.

10 Haugevik and Neumann 2019.

11 Potapovs 2024.

12 O'Toole 2000.

13 Sister Cities International n.d.

the contours of a hierarchical world system in which economic development¹⁴ is based on asymmetrical relations between ‘core’ (developed) and ‘periphery’ (developing) states. The ‘citizen-centric doctrine’ of peripheral realism dissected the system further by analysing the role of a state’s society in the global system, contending that peripheral countries comply with the more powerful to protect their people’s welfare.¹⁵ More recent scholarship added how economic dependency further entrenches power asymmetries.¹⁶

The emergence of global urban hubs facilitated a conversation across disciplines about how cities and regions within ‘core’ and ‘peripheral’ states replicate global hierarchies,¹⁷ diverge from them¹⁸ or fluctuate in international prominence.¹⁹ The cooperation between these cities emerged as a fundamental variable that can shape the world system and influence national foreign policy.²⁰ The growing diplomatic power of subnational officials is evident in new federal policies to manage city diplomacy in countries such as China, the US and France, as well as reforms to include subnational voices at the United Nations.²¹ The focus on cities’ growing political autonomy and global presence marks a notable shift from previous state-centric approaches to international relations.²²

To explain the emergence of subnational cooperation, there has been a convergence of research across titles such as ‘paradiplomacy’,²³ ‘plurinational diplomacy’,²⁴ sub-state diplomacy²⁵ and ‘subnational foreign relations’,²⁶ as well as categorical nuances such as ‘proto-diplomacy’,²⁷ ‘constituent diplomacy’²⁸ and ‘multi-layered diplomacy’.²⁹ While authors have employed different phrases to parse their research, it is undeniable that local officials are taking on greater

14 Wallerstein 1974.

15 Escudé 2014, 50.

16 Margulis 2017; Palestini and Madariaga 2021.

17 Smith and Timberlake 1995.

18 Gereffi 1992; Leffel, Marahrens and Alderson 2022.

19 Friedmann 1995.

20 Smith and Timberlake 1995, 290; Keohane and Nye 1997, 179.

21 Examples include the UN Secretary General’s Advisory Group on Local and Regional Governments, the UN’s ‘New Urban Agenda’ and the Coalition for High Ambition Multilevel Partnership for Climate Action (CHAMP).

22 Soldatos and Michelmann 1990; Duchacek 1990.

23 Butler 1961.

24 Aldecoa 1999.

25 Crikemans 2010.

26 Michelmann 2009.

27 Cornago 2018.

28 Kincaid 1999.

29 Hocking 1999.

foreign policy responsibilities. The academic conversation describing this phenomenon is growing louder and more animated, yet further research is needed to understand the utility of diverse diplomatic strategies used by mayors.

Scholars propose varied classifications to make sense of the different motivations shaping the international role of mayors and local governments.³⁰ Distilling the existing literature reveals a focus on three main elements: economic, political and cultural aims.³¹ André Lecours³² elaborates on this framework by inserting 'layers' of paradiplomacy: 1) an economic layer consisting of foreign investment, tourism and exports; 2) decentralised cooperation, including cultural and educational exchanges and projects; and 3) political considerations where subnational governments try to shape international relations that 'affirm the cultural distinctiveness, political autonomy and national character of the community they represent'³³ or 'use diasporas to enhance their political influence'.³⁴ Lecours notes that these layers are cumulative, with economic concerns laying the foundation. Noé Cornago adds to this classification by stressing that paradiplomacy is always a 'form of political agency' with both an 'instrumental' dimension and a 'communicative or symbolically mediated' one,³⁵ putting equal value in project-oriented partnerships and values-based communication.

The academic articulation of paradiplomacy has been accompanied by characterisations within the framework of hard and soft power as well as high and low politics, with designations typically occupying the soft power/low politics quadrant.³⁶ Yet this is where the concept of sister cities diverges from many other forms of paradiplomacy. The relationship has been employed as an 'agent of change' and 'protest'³⁷ during moments of geopolitical tension such as the aftermath of the Second World War and the Cold War, blending the lines between high and low politics.³⁸ For example, mayors in Burlington, Vermont, and Hoboken, New Jersey, signed agreements with Puerto Cabezas, Nicaragua (1984) and Melitopol, Ukraine (2023), respectively, to affirm their values in human rights and democracy, while also providing humanitarian support.

30 Lecours 2008; Aldecoa and Keating 1999.

31 Aldecoa and Keating 1999.

32 Lecours 2008.

33 Lecours 2008, 3.

34 Aldecoa and Keating 1999, 5.

35 Cornago 2018, 5.

36 Aguirre 1999, 192.

37 Joenniemi and Jańczak 2017, 425.

38 Zelinsky 1991; Leffel and Amiri 2018; Joenniemi and Jańczak 2017.

Burlington's and Hoboken's political act of communicating certain values and attributes can be interpreted as a form of 'place branding' – a strategy that 'cultivates a compelling narrative' of a certain city, region or country.³⁹ Place branding seeks to carve out a unique and positive reputation for a community, even at a global scale.⁴⁰ Additionally, it can attract economic opportunities, foster tourism and promote overall development.⁴¹ Proclaiming a community's sister cities on welcome signs and monuments can also be encapsulated within place branding, which can be a powerful form of fostering social power. Social power refers to the 'ability to set standards and create norms and values that are deemed legitimate and desirable' and can be wielded by non-state actors to frame international or community issues.⁴² Through this lens, the community-centred approach articulated by Eisenhower can be understood as a powerful tool for influencing policy debates by expressing the perspective of local communities on national policy.

The distinctive title and structure of sister cities connects ideas of social power with kinship and nationalism. Conceptions of kinship can be constituted by blood or metaphor⁴³ and form 'stretchable nets'⁴⁴ that anchor disparate people in a sense of community. By activating a sense of kinship, leaders catalyse a profound statement of unity with global peers and commitment to strong and lasting engagement.⁴⁵ While academic descriptions of kinship in international relations have focused on national leaders, literal title and objective of sister city relationships fit neatly within the kinship structure.

Applying the kinship typology at a subnational level reveals the potential power of sister city ties in countering dynamics of peripheral realism by removing hierarchies between communities within core and periphery countries, thus providing agency to city leaders from periphery regions. The framing of 'sisters' places two cities on even ground and can be a 'catalyst for diplomatic interactions and practices ... which help tie states [or cities] closer together'.⁴⁶ This power cannot be underestimated, as 'kinship can be drawn upon to produce potent political metaphors that go on to change political realities'.⁴⁷

39 Potapovs 2024, 5.

40 Marchetti 2021.

41 Potapovs 2024, 6.

42 van Ham 2010, 8.

43 Haugevik and Neumann 2019.

44 Anderson 1983, 6.

45 Haugevik and Neumann 2019, 65.

46 Haugevik and Neumann 2019, 64.

47 Haugevik and Neumann 2019, 20.

The kinship lens therefore explains how sister city relationships can inhabit not only Lecours' first two layers of paradiplomacy but also the third, as Lecours notes that 'paradiplomacy can help manage situations of cultural diversity cutting across international borders' for a 'minority ethnic group isolated from political and perhaps even economic power'.⁴⁸ Lecours' insight can also be applied to diaspora communities, for 'diasporas disrupt the distinction between what is considered domestic or foreign',⁴⁹ as does paradiplomacy. These layered theories reveal the potential significance of city-to-city relations based on familial kinship ties to evoke broader metaphorical kinship between 'sister' communities across borders, thereby forming enduring relationships that can affirm both cities' values, attract investment and provide agency to both cities' constituents. A focus on diaspora diplomacy widens the aperture beyond state-centric perspectives on migration.⁵⁰

The nature of sister city relationships creates more space for kinship engagement between community actors than paradiplomatic activity solely managed by the city government. Scholars have classified the distinction as a 'middle ground' where sister city relationships are 'co-produced by official and domestic society actors',⁵¹ differentiating from city networks and summits. The existing literature further supports this slight variance by depicting how the structure of sister cities may deviate from primarily economic and project-based forms of paradiplomacy typically prioritised by local governments. Since kinship bonds involve a 'sense of shared history, similarity, and trust',⁵² these connections may be capable of weathering election cycles and polarisation to sustain long-term ties. These differences provide unique potential for generating social power and agency for 'periphery' communities, such as diaspora groups, within 'core' cities and countries. While this theoretical framework reveals the potential of sister cities, the following section exposes how they have fallen short in practice.

3 Tracing the Rise and Retreat of Sister City Partnerships

The concept of sister cities was originally intended as a form of diplomacy beyond the nation-state, sprouting from the same seed as many of the

⁴⁸ Lecours 2008, 6.

⁴⁹ Ho and McConnell 2019, 257.

⁵⁰ Alejo 2020.

⁵¹ Harrison and Huang 2022, 655.

⁵² Haugevik and Neumann 2019, 46.

international institutions that shaped the global order following the Second World War. Sister city relationships were defined as formal agreements between cities, limited neither to one project nor by time.⁵³ While Christian missionaries and international relief campaigns may have fostered initial efforts in the 19th century, the Second World War 'catalysed the movement' as European cities sought to stitch together relationships that had been destroyed by years of war.⁵⁴

The US government soon followed suit through a major initiative launched by President Eisenhower in 1956. In his speech launching the 'People-to-People' program, the precursor to Sister Cities International (SCI), Eisenhower expressed the objective of 'creating understanding between peoples' to 'build the road to an enduring peace'.⁵⁵ Eisenhower revealed his broader political motivations when promoting the program, claiming that the approach was needed 'if our American ideology is eventually to win out in the great struggle being waged between the two opposing ways of life'.⁵⁶ In 1971, the United Nations General Assembly acknowledged the increasing prominence of sister cities, describing it as an 'exceptionally valuable means of cooperation'.⁵⁷ According to a three-part classification of sister cities, this period marks the 'associative phase' based on international awareness and symbolic friendship.⁵⁸

The engagement of civil society and academia contributed to the 'reciprocal phase' including greater exchange of skills, resources and students between communities.⁵⁹ SCI was just one of many US-led civil society initiatives that aimed to deepen relationships between global communities, oftentimes those emerging from conflict. Sister cities connected locales in the US and Central America after civil wars and between countries in the former Soviet Union,⁶⁰ whereas Lions Club International promoted community service and humanitarian aid and Rotary International advanced educational exchanges around the world. Although sister city relationships were formally established through an agreement between two mayors, the management structure generally had more in common with the Lions and Rotary clubs than other city programs and were typically managed by independent volunteer-run organisations.⁶¹

53 Cremer, De Bruin and Dupuis 2001, 381.

54 Zelinsky 1991, 6.

55 The American Presidency Project 1956.

56 US Congressional Record 1957.

57 United Nations General Assembly Resolution 2861.

58 O'Toole 2000, 45.

59 O'Toole 2000, 45.

60 Leffel and Amiri 2018, 117.

61 Zelinsky 1991; Cremer, De Bruin and Dupuis 2001; Grandi 2020, 12.

While these groups included varied levels of local government participation,⁶² they were primarily self-funded and did not receive tax support.⁶³ Instead, these initiatives were sustained by grassroots diplomacy based on growing conceptions of global citizenship beyond city halls.⁶⁴

Trends in urbanisation, globalisation and decentralisation have changed the relative prominence of the sister city model in the field of subnational diplomacy. Today, 56 per cent of the world's population lives in cities as opposed to roughly 34 per cent in 1960.⁶⁵ At the same time, globalisation brought city and regional hubs into global markets, and as of 2023, over 80 per cent of the global GDP is generated in cities.⁶⁶ Decentralisation in Latin America and the Caribbean and the US⁶⁷ has given local officials greater autonomy in creating a unique identity and forming global partnerships in alignment. New organisations have arisen to help coordinate and advance city diplomacy, such as United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG), the C40 Cities Climate Leadership Group (C40) and Metropolis, among countless others. As a result, mayors possess greater tools for international engagement such that, in the 21st century, their individual diplomatic needs and priorities began to outstrip the older concept of sister cities.

Proponents of the sister city model claim that such relationships are adapting to these global trends, with some evolving to a 'commercial phase' that prioritises greater investment and tourism.⁶⁸ In 2015, SCI found that events, travel and student exchanges contributed \$190.4 million to the US economy and \$47.2 million to the economies of global partners.⁶⁹ Yet despite this adapted framing, the tension between the original notion of cultural exchange⁷⁰ and the push for an 'integrated approach'⁷¹ with commercial aims has contributed to a decline in such partnerships. Legal analysis of US state commitments with international peers reinforces this claim; since the 1990s, commitments have shifted from general sister city agreements to cooperation on specific issues.⁷² Due to factors such as city administration turnover, fluctuating capacity of

62 Harrison and Huang 2022.

63 Kincaid 1999, 121.

64 Alger 1977.

65 World Bank 2023.

66 World Bank 2023.

67 Nickson 2023; Leffel and Amiri 2018.

68 O'Toole 2000, 46.

69 Sister Cities International 2015.

70 O'Toole 2000.

71 Cremer, De Bruin and Dupuis 2001.

72 Scoville 2023, 345.

volunteers, and lack of consistent funding, many ostensibly timeless relationships have been ‘allowed to wither away for lack of lasting interest’.⁷³

The absence of a coherent and structured model appears to have caused many relationships to remain in a symbolic dimension without a consistent instrumental focus. Contemporary analyses tend to characterise the sister city model as leading to ‘opportunistic and idiosyncratic’ arrangements⁷⁴ that are only a small component of cities’ global engagement⁷⁵ and have since evolved into ‘projects of decentralised cooperation’.⁷⁶ As noted by the director of international relations for the city of Cuenca, Ecuador, for example, ‘the sister city model today is no longer what it was many years ago’.⁷⁷

4 Sister City Relationships Between the US and Ecuador

Grounded in eight months of field research during Ecuador’s 2024 state of emergency,⁷⁸ this study employed a sequential mixed-methods approach in collaboration with the Universidad de Cuenca and the Universidad San Francisco de Quito (USFQ).⁷⁹ The method was chosen to gain insights from leaders of economic, cultural and political institutions in Cuenca and Quito who are involved in their city’s international engagement, accompanied by survey data in Cuenca to expand on trends revealed by qualitative data.

Quito, as Ecuador’s capital and largest city, granted the most visible international platform. Cuenca is Ecuador’s third-largest city and home to the largest community of long-term foreigners, predominantly from Canada and the US. Cuenca is also the capital of Azuay province, which possesses the country’s highest rates of emigration.⁸⁰ While Cuenca and Quito have both maintained sporadic projects with US sister cities, neither has maintained consistent

73 Zelinsky 1991, 3.

74 Kosovac et al. 2020, 3.

75 Amiri and Dossani 2019.

76 Paradiplomacia.org 2023.

77 Interview with Felipe Ochoa Mogrovejo, Director of International Relations for the city of Cuenca, 2024.

78 On 9 January 2024, Ecuador’s president declared a state of armed internal conflict against criminal groups following several high-profile attacks on elected officials. The nationwide state of emergency expired on 7 April 2024.

79 All participants provided informed consent to participate in the study, and the research was approved by the USFQ Research Ethics Committee on Human Subjects.

80 Interview with Alder Bartlett, Program Office Director of the US Agency for International Development (USAID) Ecuador, 2024 (not speaking as a representative of USAID or USAID Ecuador).

relationships that withstand individual municipal administrations or institutionalise community involvement.

Limited previous studies have investigated the efficacy, or lack thereof, of sister city programming by interviewing entities responsible for managing the relationships,⁸¹ or by analysing archival research.⁸² This study explores greater terrain by incorporating the perspectives of broader community stakeholders. In President Eisenhower's initial speech, he made it clear that the intended participants of the program were 'professors, students, executives, doctors, and labour unions' and was adamant that 'governments can do no more than point the way and cooperate and assist in mechanical details'.⁸³ This article's research responds to Eisenhower's aims by seeking a distribution of views from government and non-government stakeholders, as well as Chadwick Alger's call for greater analysis of both citizen- and local government-led international involvement.⁸⁴

A literature survey allowed for the identification of deductive coding terms to structure the qualitative phase of the research design. Lecours' three layers of paradiplomacy and O'Toole's three phases of sister city relations were aligned to code data into three primary objectives: 1) economic collaboration, including business partnerships, artisan exchanges and new markets for investment; 2) decentralised cooperation projects, including cultural exchange programs between students and professionals and sharing of best practices; and 3) political power, incorporating symbolic political acts affirming cultural identity and engagement with diaspora communities. The study analysed sister cities' long- or short-term efficacy and measured the perception of current and future potential benefits. Inductive coding on migration and remittances was also employed given the semi-structured interview structure, and these results are explored in Section 5.

Given the complex and fluctuating approach to sister city engagement in city governments, the study additionally employed participant observation and anonymous surveys in Cuenca to gain a holistic understanding of the reality experienced by mayors. The principal investigator conducted nine-week internships in the Quito and Cuenca offices of international relations to understand the priorities shaping their direction during a period of national conflict. An anonymous survey to government employees offered further insights on new partnerships in Cuenca.

81 Guillén Gaibor 2013; Leffel and Amiri 2018; Harrison and Huang 2022.

82 Zelinsky 1991; Intentilia and Putra 2021; Kézai and Páthy 2023.

83 The American Presidency Project 1956.

84 Alger 1999, 205.

This section begins by presenting the contours of US–Ecuador relations to introduce the case studies on Quito and Cuenca. Despite fluctuating relations between national leaders, the US and Ecuador share deep cultural and economic links. Up to the end of the 20th century, the US was ‘almost exclusively’ the destination for Ecuadorian migrants, with the majority settling in New York.⁸⁵ The ‘core sending zone’ from the early 1970s to today has been Azuay province, of which Cuenca is the capital, and surrounding areas.⁸⁶ While the country’s economic crisis in 1999 increased and expanded Ecuadorian migration, the US remained a primary destination for Ecuadorians following informal networks of family and friends.⁸⁷ Although the US used to be Ecuador’s top trading partner, it is now in second place behind China, due in part to a 2023 free trade agreement.⁸⁸

Ecuador is now experiencing a similar emigration peak due to increasing gang violence and general insecurity.⁸⁹ Ecuadorian border apprehensions in fiscal year 2023 saw a 312 per cent increase over the rate in fiscal year 2022, and the first seven months of fiscal year 2024 saw 80 per cent as many apprehensions as the previous year.⁹⁰ The roughly \$5.3 million in remittances sent by migrants in 2023 made up 4.4 per cent of Ecuador’s GDP, the second-highest rate in South America.⁹¹

Both the US and Ecuador have decentralised political structures that grant local officials substantive leeway to form international relationships, as long as they do not contradict national treaties or require direct transfers of funds. According to the city of Cuenca’s director of international relations, ‘subnational diplomacy is much more complicated than national diplomacy’.⁹² Foreign policy between the US and Ecuador is molded by history, ideology and regional issues. When city leaders engage internationally, they have a mandate to produce concrete results for their constituents, regardless of ideology and largely unencumbered by an overarching political agenda.

85 Jokisch and Pribilsky 2002.

86 Jokisch and Pribilsky 2002; Interview with Alder Bartlett, 2024.

87 Interview with Freddy Hernández, Coordinator of Information Management for the International Organization for Migration Quito, 2024; Interview with Wladimir Zanoni Lopez, Senior Economist at the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB), 2024 (not speaking as a representative of IDB); Interview with Alder Bartlett, 2024.

88 Interview with María José Hernández, Director of Sustainability and Local Development for the Ecuador Chamber of Industry and Production, 2024.

89 Interview with Felipe Ochoa Mogrovejo, 2024.

90 US Customs and Border Protection 2024.

91 Maldonado and Harris 2023.

92 Interview with Felipe Ochoa Mogrovejo, 2024.

4.1 *Case Study 1: Quito*

In 1962, Quito signed a sister city agreement with Louisville, Kentucky, followed by one with Coral Gables, Florida, in 1975.⁹³ These relationships remained dormant under the previous two municipal administrations. In May 2023, Pabel Muñoz assumed office as mayor, resulting in a complete staff turnover in the city's office of international relations. The advisor overseeing sister cities underwent no transition process with their predecessor and the team discovered several sister city relationships through ambassadors.⁹⁴ The prevalence and impact of these abrupt transitions were underscored in 2022, when a professor from Quito visited Krakow, Poland, and was approached by the city's international relations team. Krakow had been attempting to revive its sister city agreement with Quito but had lost all contact with the city government.⁹⁵

The perspectives of Mayor Muñoz's international relations team highlight the complex factors contributing to stagnant relationships. In interviews, staffers emphasised the local effects of partisanship in Ecuador, noting the challenges in creating long-term city policies that are often discontinued by subsequent administrations.⁹⁶ Given this lack of continuity, the staffer responsible for sister city relations prefers short-term projects that can be completed within the mayor's mandate. Quoting Machiavelli, they observed that 'politics is the art of the possible, not the desirable'.⁹⁷

Quito's current sister city strategy is an extension of the mayor's priorities, not the community-based model articulated by President Eisenhower. When considering new sister city agreements in 2023, the team focused on cities across Latin America and Europe that possessed innovative policies or similar political alignment. While the director of international relations shared that sister city relationships take time to initiate and are historically long-term tools, she emphasised that any partnerships must advance Mayor Muñoz's current priorities.⁹⁸ The director also expressed that 'sister cities cannot be done

93 While the scope of this article is centred on sister city agreements between Ecuador and the US, it should be noted that Quito's 2023–2027 administration initially prioritised relationships with European and Latin American cities, although it did not forge new relationships or reactivate old ones during the first year in office.

94 Interview with Julio Peña y Lillo Echeverría, Coordinator of International Positioning for Quito's Office of International Relations, 2024.

95 Interview with Andrés Martínez Moscoso, Director of the Institute of Legal Research at USFQ, 2024.

96 Interview with Julio Peña y Lillo Echeverría, 2024.

97 Interview with Julio Peña y Lillo Echeverría, 2024.

98 Interview with Daniela Céleri, Director of International Relations for the city of Quito, 2024.

with different political positions', signalling the inevitability of policy shifts between administrations. Sister city relationships do not inherently generate their own financial resources, which limits the office's capacity to proactively form and manage these partnerships. Consequently, the model is viewed by the current team as a 'very limited' tool.⁹⁹ Nonetheless, the international affairs team still receives requests from foreign mayors and embassies, indicating that the sister city model remains relevant and cannot be entirely abandoned.¹⁰⁰

Economic and cultural actors in Quito largely shared the city government's perspective on the current ineffectiveness of sister city relationships. Every interviewee indicated that the model has minimal or negligible current benefits while still acknowledging their potential. However, views diverged on the question of long-term versus short-term vision, as every interviewee outside the city government believed that sister cities are more effective as long-term tools. City government interviewees cited a lack of resources as their primary obstacle. In comparison, city networks are managed by a secretariat and thematic experts that bring tangible opportunities for training and project funding and are therefore considered the city's most effective international tool.

The lack of multi-sectoral involvement in Quito's approach to sister cities can be partially explained by diametric views on the role of community actors. The director of international relations perceives the relationship solely at the mayoral level and is 'not hopeful that a community will see any benefit from an exchange with another community'.¹⁰¹ However, economic and cultural interviewees expressed interest in greater involvement and believed the model's primary problem to be the management structure and lack of engagement with non-governmental actors such as the private sector¹⁰² and academia.¹⁰³ Senior staff at the Ecuadorian-American Chamber of Commerce and Ecuador Chamber of Industry and Production underscored the potential of strengthening subnational relationships under sister city agreements,¹⁰⁴ and potential partners, such as the Rotary Club, are not connected to the city's sister city engagement, despite Rotary's own bilateral relationships with US-based clubs.¹⁰⁵

99 Interview with Daniela Céleri, 2024.

100 Interview with Daniela Céleri, 2024.

101 Interview with Daniela Céleri, 2024.

102 Interview with Felipe Espinosa, Executive Director of the Ecuadorian-American Chamber of Commerce (AmCham Ecuador), 2024.

103 Interview with Andrés Martínez Moscoso, 2024.

104 Interview with Felipe Espinosa, 2024; Interview with María José Hernández, 2024.

105 Interview with Kathy Meneses, Regional Governor, Rotary Ecuador, 2024.

Participant observation adds further nuance to this view by demonstrating the conflicting demands influencing Quito's international priorities. As the capital, Quito is frequently host to international delegations, which often puts the international relations team in a reactive position. With only eight full-time employees, the office lacks the flexibility to devote staff time to projects without fixed outcomes. Research results underscored the desire to engage the community, as the city's staffer managing sister cities noted that 'a challenge for the mayor's office is to build a social fabric that involves the greatest number of stakeholders'¹⁰⁶ and the director of international relations is spearheading initiatives to support Venezuelan migrants within the city. However, interviews demonstrated that the office has not prioritised considerations of kinship or diaspora engagement in their sister city approach.

Analysing Quito's current experience with sister city relationships within this article's theoretical framework sheds light on the lack of engagement. Lecours' layered paradiplomacy and O'Toole's 'commercial phase' underscore the importance of an economic base to sustain additional international activities, such as political statements or joint projects. However, not a single interviewee mentioned that the current or historical focus of sister cities in Quito had been economic aims, while the majority shared that political protocol objectives were predominant. Quito's previous sister city relationships have also been familial in name only and lack existing ties to maintain the relationships without the support of city leadership.

4.2 *Case Study 2: Cuenca*

Cuenca has more recent activity with US sister cities than Quito, largely spurred by community efforts rather than official policy.¹⁰⁷ In 2008, Cuenca established a sister city relationship with Tempe, Arizona, which became inactive following the pandemic and several municipal administration changes.¹⁰⁸ The city's 2021-2025 Internationalisation Strategy, prepared in 2020, listed sister cities as a phased-out approach superseded by cooperation projects and city network participation.¹⁰⁹ Despite this, the city signed new agreements

¹⁰⁶ Interview with Julio Peña y Lillo Echeverría, 2024.

¹⁰⁷ While the scope of this article is centred on sister city agreements between Ecuador and the US, it should be noted that Cuenca maintains several relationships with European cities.

¹⁰⁸ Interview with Alicia Boroto, Director of a cultural nonprofit in Cuenca, 2024; Interview with Cynthia Cornejo Reyes, Project Management Technician for Cuenca's Office of International Relations, 2024.

¹⁰⁹ Office of International Relations and Cooperation of the Autonomous Decentralized Government of Cuenca 2021.

in 2021 with Newark, New Jersey, and Peekskill, New York, cities with large Ecuadorian communities. Current and former staffers in the Cuenca office of international relations agreed that these agreements were promoted by the Ecuadorian diaspora.¹¹⁰

In the New York case, a Peekskill city council member catalysed the process given his observations of the city's demographics.¹¹¹ The Hispanic community made up between 45 and 47 per cent of Peekskill's total population and 20-25 per cent of the voting population.¹¹² While exact numbers vary, roughly half the total Hispanic population is from Ecuador.¹¹³ Upon engaging with Ecuadorian community organisations, the city council member learned that the majority of the Ecuadorian diaspora were from the province of Azuay and identified with the city of Cuenca, the province's capital. He worked with diaspora community organisations to assemble a proposal for a sister city relationship with Cuenca. Diaspora leaders provided the initial contacts with local officials in Cuenca and then reignited the process after Ecuadorian elections. Approximately four years and one Cuenca municipal administration later, the agreement was signed by the two cities' mayors in 2021.

Since 2021, the partnership has made modest early advances in the face of implementation challenges. Following the formal signing, city officials in Peekskill hoped that community organisations would keep the relationship alive.¹¹⁴ The Peekskill & Cuenca Sister City Corporation in Peekskill was formed largely by the diaspora community, yet Cuenca's side of the relationship was primarily maintained by a single city council member. Since signing the agreement, the city of Cuenca has experienced not only a pandemic but also a state of emergency, an energy shortage and municipal elections. These urgent challenges disrupted plans to establish a similar organisation in Cuenca, hindering the relationship according to the Peekskill city council member. Despite these setbacks, the cities organised a youth soccer tournament and artisan market exposition, with ongoing plans for university exchanges.¹¹⁵ However, the former city council member in Cuenca who led the sister city project expressed that the spirit of collaboration at the core of sister city agreements had not transcended through multiple administrations in Cuenca due to lack

110 Interview with Sofía Arce Bojorque, Former Director of Cuenca's Office of International Relations, 2024; Interview with Felipe Ochoa Mogrovejo, 2024; Interview with Cynthia Cornejo Reyes, 2024.

111 Interview with Ramon Fernandez, Councilman of Peekskill, 2024.

112 Interview with Ramon Fernandez, 2024.

113 Interview with Ramon Fernandez, 2024.

114 Interview with Ramon Fernandez, 2024.

115 Interview with Fabián Ledesma, former Councilman of Cuenca, 2024.

of political capacity and lack of understanding of the benefits of sister city partnerships.¹¹⁶

Cuenca's international relations team has a similar perspective to their counterparts in Quito. The current director noted that 'sister cities have been political instruments, not operative instruments'.¹¹⁷ This observation is reinforced by qualitative data showing that the majority of interviewees view the model's current and historical focus to be political, which is also supported by a previous study on sister cities in Cuenca.¹¹⁸ The city advisor for sister cities in Cuenca served in three administrations and agreed that the lack of continuity between administrations does not allow these sister city agreements to be maintained over time, arguing that 'the intention of signing a sister city agreement as a political protocol act is antiquated and should be left behind'.¹¹⁹ The director concurred that four years is not sufficient for the creation of long-term objectives given that the next mayor can curtail such plans, whereas short-term agreements allow for concrete actions that can be renewed each year.¹²⁰

The efforts to construct a more multi-layered relationship alongside diaspora communities are still in their early stages, and recent lulls in activity between Cuenca, Peekskill and Newark reveals the challenges in institutionalisation. However, Cuenca's city administration had been in office for less than a year during the time of the investigation. To gain a broader understanding of the perspectives held by Cuenca city staff, the research team conducted an anonymous survey directed to all current municipal government employees. The survey questions built upon patterns identified in the qualitative process, particularly as interview data revealed a divergence between the perspectives of cultural and economic stakeholders and those of city government stakeholders.

The survey found that approximately eight in ten employees in the Cuenca city government who responded to the survey claimed to have relatives or friends in the US (78.6 per cent). These results coincide with previously referenced migration trends. In addition, 40.8 per cent of the participants mentioned having ties with Americans residing in Cuenca. Despite these relationships, 92 per cent of respondents reported no awareness of sister city relationships between the two countries, with only 6 per cent correctly identifying the sister cities of Newark and Peekskill. The strength of the relationship between Ecuador and the US was perceived as strong by both those who have family or

116 Interview with Fabián Ledesma, 2024.

117 Interview with Felipe Ochoa Mogrovejo, 2024.

118 Guillén Gaibor 2013, 84.

119 Interview with Cynthia Cornejo Reyes, 2024.

120 Interview with Felipe Ochoa Mogrovejo, 2024.

friends in the US and those who do not, 30.1 per cent (out of 103 cases) and 32.1 per cent (out of 28 cases) respectively.

Despite the lack of specific awareness, 43 per cent of all respondents described sister city relationships between Cuenca and other cities as being 'very' or 'somewhat' positive, with many citing conditional reasons such as 'it would support Ecuadorians living in the US and foreigners living in Cuenca' and 'more could be achieved if there were greater cooperation', with others mentioning opportunities to connect with diaspora communities. Thirty-four per cent considered the relationships to be 'neither good nor bad', citing the lack of citizen participation and cooperation between companies and universities, with one noting that 'with the number of foreigners from the USA living in Cuenca and the number of Cuencanos living in the USA, the sister city should be more visible and real'.

The directors of international relations in Cuenca and Quito during the 2023-2027 administration were pragmatic about the limitations of sister cities. This perception leads to a reinforcing loop, as officials are reluctant to devote resources towards proactively engaging in sister city relationships. The literature review and case studies emphasise that sister cities are often politically performative forms of paradiplomacy. While 50 per cent of interviewees in Cuenca and 80 per cent in Quito were unsure of their city's sister city partners or projects, over 90 per cent of all interviewees considered sister cities to be predominantly symbolic political gestures, with references to formal photos, signing ceremonies and 'documents left hanging on a wall'.¹²¹ A local study reinforced these findings, claiming that Cuenca's sister city agreements had been based only on protocol.¹²² Cultural institutes do not see the value in 'a mere declaration of intent'¹²³ and city leaders 'don't just want a protocol agreement between the mayor and their friend'.¹²⁴

Do these results signal that the sister city model is outdated, or do they instead expose a misapplication of the tool? Both Quito and Cuenca lack an institutionalised partnership with the community actors and volunteers who sustained the sister city movement of the 20th century. Yet unlike in the 20th century, both cities have offices of international relations that assume responsibility for all diplomatic activities. While this could be interpreted as a natural conclusion of a policy better suited to a previous era, the case studies reveal

121 Interview with Jonathan Koupermann, General Director of Culture, Recreation and Knowledge for Cuenca, 2024.

122 Guillén Gaibor 2013, 84.

123 Interview with Julio César Guanche, Director and Representative of UNESCO Ecuador, 2024.

124 Interview with Julio Peña y Lillo Echeverría, 2024.

that all stakeholders feel as though the model is not reaching its potential. As expressed by the director of the Cultural House of Azuay province, '[w]e can't say that the sister city model has expired if it was never fully used as it should have been'.¹²⁵ Current challenges of the 21st century are revealing the need for maintaining a space for community actors in city diplomacy.

Despite similarities in the perspectives of cities' international relations offices, Cuenca has recently seen more sister city activity with the US than Quito. A key factor driving this engagement is the organised diaspora community from Cuenca and Azuay province, which initiated a sister city partnership even after the model was deprioritised in the city's internationalisation strategy. Although it is too early to determine whether this approach will foster a lasting reciprocal relationship, interviews with leaders across various community sectors suggest that a potential reframing of sister cities could be a powerful tool in the light of migration.

5 A Re-imagined Approach to Sister Cities in the Context of Migration

This article argues that sister city agreements with diaspora communities can activate kinship bonds that provide agency to foreign minority groups and build a web of economic and cultural connections capable of withstanding political polarisation. Diaspora groups create natural ties with foreign cities,¹²⁶ and identifying these linkages is crucial for understanding non-state-centric perspectives on migration governance.¹²⁷ The following section presents the research findings depicting specific opportunities for diaspora-driven sister city relationships within Lecours' three layers of paradiplomacy. These opportunities could be manifested by community councils or organisations which institutionalise the role of grassroots diplomacy in sister cities' project management and are contrasted with the current reality of sister cities between the US and Ecuador to provide a baseline for analysis.

Migration push factors, including rising gang violence and low foreign direct investment in Ecuador,¹²⁸ are contributing to stable diaspora communi-

125 Interview with Martín Sánchez Paredes, Director of the Cultural House of Azuay Province, 2024.

126 Grandi 2020, 139.

127 Alejo 2020, 43.

128 Foreign Direct Investment in Ecuador (\$829 million) made up only 0.4 per cent of South America's total in 2022.

ties in the US. These dynamics bring renewed relevance to bilateral, long-term paradiplomacy models. Accordingly, Cuenca's director of international relations believes sister city relationships connecting diaspora communities can be 'more profound' and capable of 'extending in time beyond the next administration'.¹²⁹ Quito's director agrees that sister city partnerships could work more effectively if backed by migrant communities.¹³⁰

While only one interviewee observed a current or historical focus on economic objectives in sister city agreements, nearly half of the interviewees in Quito and two-thirds in Cuenca saw ample opportunity in the context of migration. Diaspora communities create a 'nostalgia market' for goods from their community of origin that fosters informal economic ties.¹³¹ Forming direct relationships between local producers and networks of consumers helps ensure that this demand generates economic growth in the community of origin by bypassing large marketing agents, thereby producing a more resilient and less monopolistic business fabric.¹³² According to the regional director of the National Institute of Cultural Heritage, this is particularly relevant for Ecuadorian artisans, many of whom are exploited by middlemen.¹³³ The impact ripples beyond the artist, as their products – such as the *paja toquilla* (Panama hat), silver filigree jewellery and furniture – generate growth through a long local value chain.¹³⁴ Partnership between local chambers of commerce can provide market research on shifts in consumer preferences that support smaller Ecuadorian or US firms in boosting their exports.¹³⁵ Open channels of communication for businesses under a sister city agreement could also facilitate shipping and transport logistics.¹³⁶

These long-term relationships can also shape a city's tourism and marketing strategy. Cuenca Mayor Cristian Zamora's maxim 'proud to be Cuencanos' is a political message tied to his approach to tourism and international relations, and the city promotes its German and North American populations. The sister city cultural celebrations and Ecuadorian parades in Peekskill have reinforced the city's place branding, showing that a public political stance can

129 Interview with Felipe Ochoa Mogrovejo, 2024.

130 Interview with Daniela Céleri, 2024.

131 Interview with Karina Villagómez Dávalos, Executive Director of the Ecuadorian-American Chamber of Commerce in Cuenca, 2024.

132 Interview with Julio César Guanche, 2024.

133 Interview with Patricio Zamora Aguilar, Regional Director of the National Institute of Cultural Heritage (INPC), 2024.

134 Interview with Martín Sánchez Paredes, 2024.

135 Interview with Adrián Alvarado, Director of the Cuenca Chamber of Commerce, 2024.

136 Interview with Felipe Espinosa, 2024.

feed back into the economic layer by marketing the city through its unique cultural attributes.¹³⁷

The untapped economic potential of sister city relationships with diaspora communities is also salient in the case of remittances. Countries such as Mexico and El Salvador that have experienced out-migration for decades have experimented with migrant-led projects to coordinate the flow of remittances for community development projects, yet Ecuador has not. A bilateral remittance policy between two cities could work better than at the national level by adapting to the needs of the local communities.¹³⁸ A remittance project between cities such as Cuenca and Peekskill could focus on developing community programs with international partners such as the IDB and USAID. Local governments could work with financial platforms to mitigate the often usurious and untransparent fees for sending remittances.¹³⁹ Multilateral institutions such as the International Organization for Migration (IOM) could collaborate with city officials to draft local policies on channelling and matching a percentage of remittances for development projects.¹⁴⁰

The connections between diaspora and origin communities also provide a more sustainable base of cooperation for projects that promote both cultural exchange and policy sharing and innovation. This network also makes it possible to knit together partnerships between businesses, chambers of commerce, museums and universities that can advance initiatives without direct management from the city office of international relations.¹⁴¹ Public high schools and universities would benefit from partnering on exchange programs and language immersion, while young professionals in business and artistic sectors could engage in art residencies and internships.¹⁴²

In addition to connections, this approach taps into the unique knowledge of diaspora communities to enrich the Cuencanco community. Roughly 30 per cent of the North American population in Cuenca has an advanced degree and the vast majority is retired, yet the population lacks institutionalised pathways for engaging with the Cuencanco community.¹⁴³ Additionally, the regional

¹³⁷ Interview with Ramon Fernandez, 2024.

¹³⁸ Interview with Felipe Espinosa, 2024; Interview with Wladimir Zanon Lopez, 2024.

¹³⁹ Interview with Wladimir Zanon Lopez, 2024. While fees have recently declined due to online banking, banks still retain significant control over setting transaction rates and dictating financial processes.

¹⁴⁰ Interview with Freddy Hernández, 2024.

¹⁴¹ Interview with Sofía Arce Bojorquez, 2024.

¹⁴² Interview with Marcelo Calle, Director of International Relations at the University of Azuay, 2024; Interview with Fabián Ledesma, 2024; Interview with Jonathan Koupermann, 2024.

¹⁴³ Interview with Ed Lindquist, Editor of the Cuenca Expats Magazine, 2024.

director of the National Institute of Cultural Heritage pointed out that ‘Latin American cosmovision is about uniting families and communities’, which ‘has been lost in the United States due to industrial and economic growth at the cost of family ties’.¹⁴⁴ These values contribute to intergenerational neighbourhood events and free Zumba classes in public parks. A sister city partnership could tap into the language, cultural and technological competencies of temporary and long-term migrant groups to support programming for the entire community.¹⁴⁵

A rich base of economic and cultural cooperation rooted in generational relationships can transform the political nature of sister cities from performative to empowering. Cultural events such as the Ecuadorian independence parade in Peekskill or Thanksgiving dinners in Cuenca can be ‘repeated until they become traditions’.¹⁴⁶ Kinship theory demonstrates how co-constructed traditions between so-called sister cities are ‘both facilitative and (re)productive of social ties’ as cities signal ‘that their commitment is strong and lasting’.¹⁴⁷ Kinship in this sense can be seen as ‘an enabling metaphor’ that ‘counts amongst the key preconditions for agency’,¹⁴⁸ revealing how sustained cooperation and traditions empower migrant populations and assert regions’ unique identity and social power.

By establishing links with international cities that are home to a country’s diaspora, a country can support their sense of national identity during periods of crisis and high out-migration. The ruptures caused by emigration from Ecuador start at the family unit and extend to the local community and broader society. As noted by an advisor in the Cuenca office of international relations, ‘the complexity of Ecuadorian identity lies in the fact that many people have lost the link with their roots’.¹⁴⁹ Establishing bilateral ties between cities with diaspora communities and their communities of origin can counter the sense of cultural isolation, rekindle the lost link and ‘preserve ancestral knowledge that is useless if not shared with our next generations’.¹⁵⁰ Over time, these intentional ties can help to ‘position Ecuador in the world’¹⁵¹ by featuring Ecuadorian traditions and industry, particularly when global

144 Interview with Patricio Zamora Aguilar, 2024.

145 Interview with Felipe Ochoa Mogrovejo, 2024; Interview with Patricio Zamora Aguilar, 2024.

146 Interview with Karina Villagómez Dávalos, 2024.

147 Haugevik and Neumann 2019, 65.

148 Haugevik and Neumann 2019, 18.

149 Interview with Cynthia Cornejo Reyes, 2024.

150 Interview with Marcelo Calle, 2024.

151 Interview with Patricio Zamora Aguilar, 2024.

headlines extol gang violence and internal conflict. Individual relationships with cities can add nuance to this narrative, which influences both the treatment of Ecuadorian migrants in the US and businesses' and tourists' perceptions of Ecuador.¹⁵²

Sister city agreements could also provide a voice to an increasingly significant population in the United States. As migration rises across the country, mayors' domestic and international policy must be responsive to increasingly diverse constituencies. In Peekskill, approximately 25 per cent of the voting population, 45 per cent of the overall population and 70 per cent of the school district population are Hispanic, with a majority from Ecuador.¹⁵³ This data helps predict the growing representation of Ecuadorians in Peekskill politics and society. The sister city relationship with Cuenca could therefore provide agency to the voting and non-voting Ecuadorian diaspora community, as seen through Lecours' political layer, by 'serv[ing] as an instrument for furthering its interests and expressing its identity'.¹⁵⁴ This feeds back into Cornago's perception that 'paradiplomacy is always a form of political agency' that can 'serve as a platform for the international representation of collective identities'.¹⁵⁵

While ideas of affirming identity and preserving culture may be minimised as 'low politics', qualitative data reveals the immediate implications for crime and xenophobia. Forming metaphorical kinship bonds with reciprocal economic and cultural projects can 'help attenuate discriminatory notions', as sister city programs transmit a narrative that allows residents to engage with new cultures in their community.¹⁵⁶ Without this, there is a greater risk of 'intolerance and racism that rises to conflict and criminality' against migrant groups.¹⁵⁷ The relationship can be equally beneficial for reducing violence within migrant communities, as 'sister cities could help provide migrants with a greater source of identity and place, which can be grounding' since 'losing a connection with place and community has led a lot of migrants (for example, from Central America) to get involved in gangs in the United States'.¹⁵⁸ This is particularly important given new waves of Ecuadorian immigrants who are fleeing, and have been exposed to, gang violence.¹⁵⁹

¹⁵² Interview with Adrián Alvarado, 2024.

¹⁵³ Interview with Ramon Fernandez, 2024.

¹⁵⁴ Lecours 2008, 2012.

¹⁵⁵ Cornago 2018, 7.

¹⁵⁶ Interview with Freddy Hernández, 2024.

¹⁵⁷ Interview with Jonathan Koupermann, 2024.

¹⁵⁸ Interview with Alder Bartlett, 2024.

¹⁵⁹ Interview with Andrés Martínez Moscoso, 2024.

6 Conclusions

The web of global relationships has become increasingly dense in the 21st century. As people cross international borders, they maintain tangible and intangible relations with their home country. Upward trends in urbanisation empower city leaders with the responsibility to engage the international communities within their cities and their diaspora abroad. As cities navigate the complexities of a globalised world, sister city partnerships remain an underutilised – and often misunderstood – tool of transnational engagement. By fostering ties rooted in shared history and community, the relationships offer the potential to bridge local and global challenges, particularly in the context of migration. This article has demonstrated that recasting these relationships within a kinship framework can allow for a refreshed perspective on a traditional model.

City leaders in both Cuenca and Quito are grappling with the challenges of a 20th-century diplomatic tool that was not designed to address many of the short-term, project-specific objectives held by mayors.¹⁶⁰ In fact, the model understood by the majority of municipal staff interviewed is the *opposite* of the original long-term, open-ended notion of sister cities. This discrepancy is at the root of all three research questions and explains many of the paradoxes within the current model's application in Cuenca and Quito. City officials tend to only prioritise sister city partnerships when they are aligned with current political priorities,¹⁶¹ yet this can stamp an expiration date on the relationship¹⁶² and make it appear outdated in comparison with policy-oriented networks. This prompts a cycle of underinvestment and lack of follow-through between municipal administrations that has led recent sister city relationships to flounder. The engagement of chambers of commerce, universities and diaspora organisations could provide a longer-term vision, yet these actors are not consistently included by city governments. Finally, both cities' sister city partnerships have largely focused on cultural and political aims without the essential economic base, leaving the relationship with no legs to stand on.

However, the study's findings show that these paradoxes also open the door for a re-imagined sister city approach between the US and Ecuador with greater leadership from community actors. The case of Cuenca and Peekskill proposes that the seed of a sister city partnership could live within the diaspora community. As a former city council member in Cuenca explained, '[s]ister cities

160 Interview with Daniela Céleri, 2024; Interview with Felipe Ochoa Mogrovejo, 2024.

161 Interview with Daniela Céleri, 2024; Interview with Cynthia Cornejo Reyes, 2024.

162 Interview with Andrés Robalino Jaramillo, Director of the Cuenca Chamber of Industry and Production, 2024; Interview with Andrés Martínez Moscoso, 2024.

shouldn't be led by mayors, but by citizens'.¹⁶³ This article raises the practical significance of viewing sister cities as a strategy for empowering diaspora and migrant communities to act as city ambassadors and take ownership of sister city relations. In practice, this could take the form of a community advisory council or umbrella organisation that coordinates projects between stakeholders in matched cities, such as universities and chambers of commerce. This approach addresses the government's primary concerns with the lack of human and financial resources and community stakeholders' primary concerns in the sister city management structure, responding to scholars' call for greater co-production in sister city relations.¹⁶⁴

By building upon webs of existing social ties, a diaspora-led and kinship-based sister city model could add counterweights to the power asymmetries in the hierarchical world model. This article's argument adds to the analysis of peripheral realism by considering how 'peripheral' communities within 'core' countries, such as the Ecuadorian diaspora in Peekskill, can form relationships with 'core' groups, such as chambers of commerce and universities, within 'peripheral' countries, such as Ecuador. Interviews revealing the social power and significance of these ties support arguments about the symbolic power of political paradiplomatic activity.¹⁶⁵

This argument holds great practical significance as well. Global factors such as migration, technology and transnational criminal gangs could be ushering in a new period of relevance for people-to-people bilateral relationships around the world. Recent US government initiatives to channel resources through city-to-city partnerships, such as USAID's Ukraine sister city funding in 2023 and the US Department of State's sustainability program with US and Latin American cities in 2022-2025,¹⁶⁶ signal the potential resurgence and viability of such agreements.

Viewing sister cities as a form of diaspora- and community-driven diplomacy acknowledges that the model may not be the sharpest tool for city officials. As mayors take a more direct role in international efforts, they must refine their strategies – and also delegate. Ministries of foreign affairs often conduct hundreds of different programs ranging from cultural affairs to economic trade missions, and while cities do not have the same resources, they should leverage the expertise and connections beyond government walls. This article aims to contribute to this process by demonstrating the necessity of including broader

¹⁶³ Interview with Fabián Ledesma, 2024.

¹⁶⁴ Harrison and Huang 2022, 663.

¹⁶⁵ Such as Cornago 2018; Lecours 2008; Joenniemi and Jańczak 2017.

¹⁶⁶ Ukraine Decentralisation Portal 2024; US Department of State 2023.

societal actors in city diplomacy to sustain these relationships over time. The case studies, in turn, depict the interest and willingness to engage from across these key community sectors. The process of applying diverse strategies such as these can achieve greater institutionalisation and expansion of city diplomacy in municipal governments around the world.

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