

## Urban Diplomacy in times of multiple crises

Virtual British-German Partnership Conference

Urban Diplomacy Exchange (UDE) Project



INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS  
NEED A LONG TIME!  
... ESTABLISHING THEM IS LIKE  
THE WORK OF A GARDENER.

*Quote by John Donegan (City Council of Leeds),  
scribbled by Sebastian Lörscher.  
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## 1 Introduction

The German-British component of the Urban Diplomacy Exchange (UDE) project was launched in December 2022 with a two-day online conference. It heralded a one-year exchange between German and British municipalities that encompasses both the technical work of the administrations and the dialog at the political level.

As with the German-American part of the project, the event on urban diplomacy was well received. City leaders and administrative staff from across the UK and Germany attended the event and outlined the current developments (state of the art) in urban diplomacy in times of multiple crises.

- What contribution do cities and their networks make to climate protection and peace?
- How can cities position themselves internally for effective urban diplomacy?
- And how can the now growing recognition of cities on the international stage be further advanced?

The municipalities' assessments and reports were flanked by the supranational perspective of the United Nations Human Settlements Programme (UN-Habitat) and by the external perspective of research and academia on urban diplomacy.

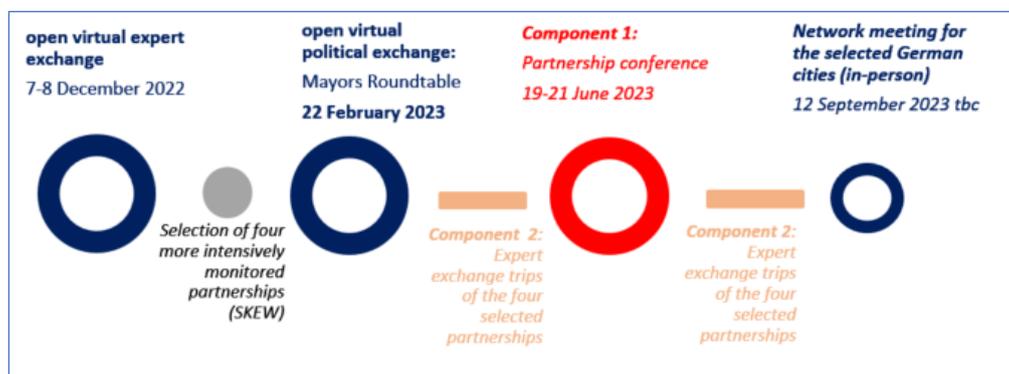
### The Urban Diplomacy Exchange Project (UDE)

Urban diplomacy and the partnership cooperation of cities need to be expanded – this is stated in the current German [government treaty](#) (cf. p. 126). The UDE project specifically supports city diplomacy relations between Germany and the United Kingdom, as well as between Germany and the USA. The aim is to promote sustainable contacts and to facilitate an exchange between urban society, experts and politicians.

The framework is the United Nations **2030 Agenda**. **SDG 11** (sustainable cities and communities) sets the goal of sustainable, globally responsible urban development. In line with **SDG 16** (peace, justice and strong institutions) and **SDG 17** (partnerships to achieve the goals), internal municipal structures and cooperation between specialized departments need to be strengthened. Strong partnerships with other cities provide impetus for security policy and strengthen peace. The project also aims to contribute to the **internationalization of cities** and strengthen cities as actors at the international level.

The project builds on existing city partnerships and friendships as well as project partnerships. It includes **events and resources for all interested cities in both countries** (kick-off event, Mayors Roundtable, online community, LinkedIn, website) as well as components of more intensive cooperation for selected cities (partnership conference, expert exchange trips).

The project is implemented by the Service Agency Communities in One World (SKEW) in cooperation with the Association of German Cities and funded by the German Federal Foreign Office.



Timeline of the German-British component of the UDE project, © SKEW

## 2 Welcoming remarks

*"Seeing cities as merely an implementing level is no longer enough in times like these."*

Cities are faced with the task of shaping global issues such as climate change and digitalisation for the benefit of their populations, said [Alexander Wagner](#) of [SKEW](#) in his welcoming remarks to the participants. With sustainable urban development, they contribute to achieving global goals such as the 2030 Agenda and the Paris Climate Agreement. Important guidelines for the commitment of cities are the principles of universality and inclusivity. These call for the shared responsibility of the global South and the global North and a careful attention to all population groups ("Leave no one behind"). With the Urban Diplomacy Exchange project, SKEW aims to strengthen cities as recognised actors of global responsibility.

*"Especially in crisis mode, it's important to exchange ideas with friends abroad."*

Germany and the United Kingdom are linked by a strong friendship, explained [Marius Korte](#) from the Association of [German Cities](#) in his welcoming address. This can be seen in the almost 500 twinned city connections between the two countries and also applies after the United Kingdom's withdrawal from the European Union. German and British cities share the same basic democratic and liberal values and are currently closely connected, also in view of the Russian war of aggression on Ukraine.

From the point of view of the Association of German Cities, important progress was made for urban diplomacy in the year that ended and the German G7 presidency that is coming to an end. In their [final Communiqué](#) on this year's summit, the G7 explicitly recognised the important and decisive role of cities. The [U7 Mayors Summit](#) in May 2022 was a ground-breaking event in this regard.

*„If people exchange perspectives across borders, then our hope is that we can prevent our societies from drifting apart.“*

The German [Federal Foreign Office](#) attaches great importance to urban diplomacy, said [Moritz Pieper](#) in his welcoming remarks. External crises such as the Russian war of aggression on Ukraine require cohesion. Internal threats such as populism and disinformation campaigns make effective opportunities for citizens to participate important. As a "foreign policy of society", municipal partnerships and urban diplomacy activities are a valuable complement to the relations of national governments. Even and especially after Brexit, they contribute to strengthening the social ties between Germany and Great Britain and filling them with life.

## 3 Keynote I – Stocktaking on urban diplomacy

Urban diplomacy has gained much in attractiveness and recognition. The degree of involvement in international political platforms varies from country to country and from conference to conference. Overall, however, there is a clear trend towards increasing representation and participation of cities in the international political arena, stated [Martino Miraglia](#) of [UN-Habitat](#) in his keynote speech.

The **strong commitment of cities to the implementation of the 2030 Agenda** has provided important impulses in this regard. Cities are leading the way with innovative concepts and ambitious projects and are thus increasingly perceived as important actors, especially at the international level. This dynamic opens up **additional channels for urban diplomacy activities**, which cities can in turn use for active lobbying on their own behalf. This further expands the scope for action and improves the framework conditions for the local level.

Moreover, **cities are increasingly setting benchmarks** with their political attitudes and action programmes against which national governments and global agreements must measure themselves. For example, when cities pursue ambitious climate protection goals or clearly advocate a welcoming culture for refugees, this also influences national and global policies.

Martino Miraglia identified three challenges that urban diplomacy is currently facing:

- The work of city networks overlaps in many areas and sometimes they work in parallel. More coordination is needed to effectively make the voice of cities heard. Not all cities have the necessary resources for urban diplomacy. In many contexts, it is primarily capitals and large cities that are represented. Targeted efforts are needed to promote the participation of smaller or lower-resourced cities.
- Although cities are identified as key actors in most UN framework conventions, the corresponding resources are de facto distributed at the national level. The recognition of cities as key actors needs to be translated into concrete support and opportunities.

Finally, Martino Miraglia reported on the upcoming events of the United Nations, in which the work of cities will play a relevant role. He invited the participants to proactively engage with their networks.



**„SDG Summit“**  
**in the framework of the High-Level Political Forums (HLPF)**  
 September 2023, New York  
 → Progress in implementing the 2030 Agenda will be taken stock of with the focus on local activities.

**UN-HABITAT Assembly**  
 5-9 June 2023, Nairobi  
 → The assembly provides an opportunity to bring the perspective of cities into UN discourse.

**World Urban Forum (WUF12)**  
 January 2024, Cairo  
 → Focus on the localization of the SDGs

**Summit of the Future: Multilateral Solutions for a Better Tomorrow**  
 22-23 September 2024, New York  
 → The important contribution of cities should find its way into concrete policies.

#### 4 Panel discussion – Urban diplomacy as an instrument for achieving global goals

**Daniel Pejic**, Research Fellow, [Melbourne Centre for Cities](#) of the University of Melbourne  
**Councillor Susan Aitken**, Leader of Glasgow City Council  
**Martin van der Pütten**, Head of International Relations, City of Dortmund

A panel brought together external perspectives and experiences from the urban diplomacy practice.

##### *Urban diplomacy on the rise*

Daniel Pejic from the University of Melbourne began by noting the positive trends in urban diplomacy: (1) The scope for urban diplomacy is gradually widening and institutional links are being established with supranational organisations. (2) National governments are also increasingly recognising the opportunities of urban diplomacy. However, cities still consider the concrete cooperation to be little structured and not formalised enough, as studies by the Melbourne Centre for Cities show for Great Britain. (3) During the COVID pandemic, urban diplomacy proved to be extremely robust. Many cities in the UK stated that municipal exchanges promoted strategies to

*“There is a real desire among the cities to have more coordination with their national governments.”*

*(Daniel Pejic)*

address the challenges of the pandemic. The digital push and the new ease of online exchange has also advanced urban diplomacy.

In Germany, urban diplomacy has experienced a political reevaluation, said Martin van der Pütten. It is explicitly mentioned in the current Germany's Coalition Agreement, a commitment that must now find its way into political practice.

Susan Aitken reported that, paradoxically, the UK's exit from the EU has also helped urban diplomacy work in Glasgow. In particular, the citizens that voted against Brexit have become more appreciative of partnership links with the EU and the world. Nevertheless, it remains a challenge to make the links between urban diplomacy and the daily life of the inhabitants visible and to make the benefits and importance known in the city communities.

### *Cities set the pace. Cities deliver - A report from Glasgow*

Susan Aitken also reported on Glasgow's experience as host city of the The 26th UN Climate Change Conference (COP26) that took place in November 2021. What was particularly remarkable was the enormous solidarity and support among the cities. The climate conference itself showed that the cities set the pace in the implementation of climate protection measures.

In doing so, their commitment is sometimes even in opposition to that of their national governments. For example, cities in the USA maintained their commitment to climate policy during the last legislative period, even though the US government had withdrawn from the international climate agreement. The United Nations explicitly recognised the strong commitment of cities during COP26. Secretary-General António Guterres affirmed that the UN explicitly supports the pace set by cities in climate action.

Cities are also doing the ground work on other global issues such as migration. Accordingly, they must also be able to help steer the decision-making processes on these issues, said Susan Aitken.

*"Our City Chambers", as we call it, became the world's city hall and we convened cities from all over the world here."  
(Councillor Susan Aitken)*

*"The thing about cities and the difference between cities and national government is delivery. I always say: national governments pledge, cities deliver."  
(Councillor Susan Aitken)*

### *Remaining future-proof with urban diplomacy*

Basically, national and local tasks are becoming less and less separable. The issues and crises that cities are dealing with are increasingly global crises. Climate change and migration movements do not stop at city borders and cannot be solved by isolated work and attitudes. Cities are therefore called upon to develop international competences and build up a communal foreign policy. As a concrete example, Martin van der Pütten referred to the new China strategy of the Federal Government of Germany. This explicitly mentions cities – even in three places. As a result, however, they must now be put in a position to develop the necessary "China competences".

### *Urban diplomacy and strategic city development*

Martin van der Pütten also focused on the effects that urban diplomacy has on the municipalities themselves. Dortmund, for example, uses its "external municipal relations" as a strategic tool for sustainable and innovative urban development. The corresponding work area comprises a team of ten, including an explicit city diplomat. A successful format is the "Urban Dialogue Dortmund," in which the city discusses a wide variety of topics ranging from hydrogen to mobility with other cities worldwide on a bi-monthly or quarterly basis. In addition, the city would like to train young city diplomats to represent their city to the outside world in the future.

*„Kommunale Außenbeziehungen bzw. Städtediplomatie ist für uns in Dortmund der Motor für Innovation, für die Sicherung von Wohlstand und die Stärkung von Demokratie und Rechtsstaatlichkeit.“  
(Martin van der Pütten)*

The importance of networksThe panel was convinced that the voice of cities can only exert systematic influence on supranational organizations through strong networks. Before the UN, for example, the Global Parliament of Mayors is an important forum. In the G7 processes, the Association of German Cities or, previously, the UK Core Cities or the UK Key Cities were able to ensure that cities became part of the negotiations. The task remains to extend this progress to processes such as the World Climate Conference and other UN dialogues, but above all to translate it into a concrete multi-level policy.

## 5 Group discussions I – Urban diplomacy for peace and climate action

### 5.1 Urban diplomacy for peace

How urban diplomacy activities can strengthen peace was the topic of the first working group. The war in Ukraine brought enormous challenges for cities in the UK and Germany.

**Marie Bullet**, Head of International Affairs Office of the **City of Hanover**, reported on the numerous solidarity and relief actions of the city and civil society of Hanover. It was important to quickly adapt the administrative structures to the new requirements. A special task force was set up and a central coordination office was created as a contact point for the committed civil society. In addition to taking in and caring for refugees, the city also initiated aid activities for the Polish twin city of Poznan (aid deliveries, bus for the onward journey of refugees, etc.). In addition, the city council decided to enter into a solidarity partnership with the Ukrainian city of Mykolayiv and implemented various aid transports with its own budget and funding from the German Development Ministry (BMZ). In the further perspective, the city wants to support the reconstruction of Mykolayiv.

**Sven Weiss** from the **City of Düsseldorf** also reported that the city administration had to respond in particular to the commitment of civil society. For example, in view of the lack of storage facilities for relief supplies, a central warehouse was set up for all relief operations. Moreover, with the so-called “Info-Point Ukraine”, the city has created a successful model of how the concentrated arrival of many refugees can be well organized. For this purpose, a central contact point was set up at the main train station in a one-way system, where arriving refugees went through all the necessary formalities and received available offers of help. The services ranged from the registration office and residence permits to clearing for vulnerable groups and psychosocial support, as well as food, clothing and WIFI. In this way, the arrival of up to 1000 people per day was successfully managed.

Finally, **Reading** sees itself in the tradition and at the behest of the “City of Sanctuary”, a network for welcoming culture. According to **Councillor Jason Brock**, this position contrasts strongly with the overall negative narrative about migration in the UK. There was also a detailed report on the “Homes for Ukraine” program, which places Ukrainian “guests” in detached housing owned by private individuals. The program includes a one-year residence permit for the refugees, a small financial compensation for the private providers, and support services in case of difficulties. According to Jason Brock, the program is unprecedented in the history of the United Kingdom and is receiving a lot of attention.

Overall, the challenges in the reports of the three cities overlapped considerably:

- the enormous pressure to respond quickly to the sudden influx of refugees,
- quickly adapt administrative structures,
- coordinate the overwhelming offer of help from the population and provide targeted support,
- create housing in the face of a tight housing market (initial reception solutions, medium-term housing, long-term solutions),
- offer social services in the face of scarce resources,
- integrate the refugees into the regular systems (daycare centers, schools, etc.),
- deal with parallel crises at the same time (Corona, flood victims, etc.),
- dialogue and coordination with higher levels,
- and finally, constant adaptation to the continuously changing situation.

Cooperation and further networking with partner cities in Ukraine and neighboring countries was seen as a great **opportunity**. Mykolaiv and Hanover, for example, have expressed great interest in a partnership with a British municipality. It was also noted that the cities’ welcoming culture and “doing the right thing” can influence national narratives and policies.



## 5.2 Urban diplomacy for climate action

Cities are leading the way in climate protection, often demonstrating greater ambition than their national governments. In the second working group, three cities presented their goals and achievements. According to [Amely Krafft's](#) report, the [City of Ludwigsburg](#) has also adjusted its climate protection goals in the course of its urban development process "Ludwigsburg goes further".

The Agenda 2030 with its 17 sustainability goals, the New Urban Agenda and the city's own plan for integrated urban development serve as reference concepts. In order to implement a sustainable urban development concept, Ludwigsburg is considered in its urban diversity: district-specific characteristics are taken up in the district-specific development concepts. In concrete terms, this involves measures such as unsealing and greening, the expansion of renewable energies and heat maps. Communication and awareness-raising in the urban society are always accompanying measures. The ambitious timetable to become climate-neutral in the next two decades and to have the corresponding financial means available for the implementation remains challenging.

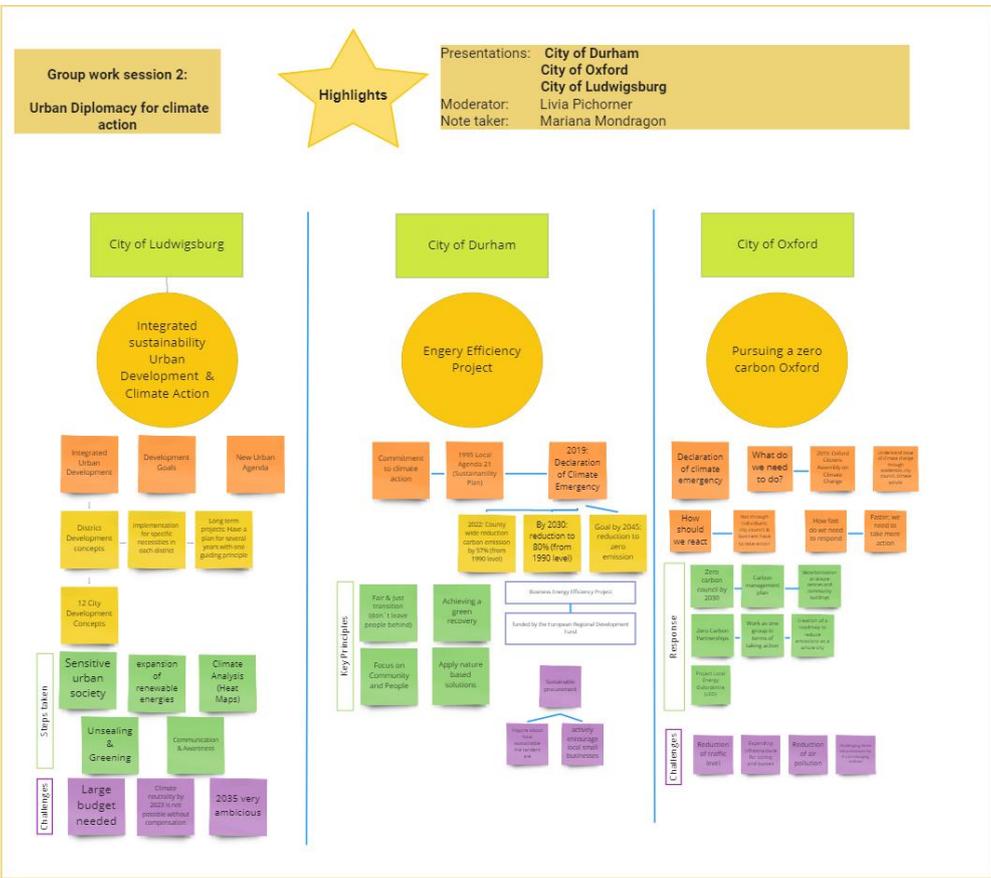
The [City of Durham](#) declared a climate emergency in 2019 and is aiming for carbon neutrality by 2045 in the plans that were subsequently put in place. [Stephen McDonald](#) reported that Durham is focusing on a close partnership with the city's various stakeholders to achieve this. One example is the Business Energy Efficiency Project (BEEP), which offered energy audits to more than 300 companies. Potential savings were identified and CO2 emissions reduced. The project was funded by the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF).

In the [City of Oxford](#), the declaration of climate emergency was followed by a town hall meeting - the first of its kind in the UK, as [Tom Garrood](#) reported. This resulted in a clear mandate for the city council to pursue ambitious goals and comprehensive action on climate change, with a particular focus on disadvantaged groups. The city has launched various measures to first reduce its own CO2 emissions. These

include, for example, the energy efficiency of municipal buildings and facilities, the electrification of the city's vehicle fleet and energy-efficient refurbishment of social housing. With these measures, the city aims to set standards in climate protection. Events such as the “Zero Carbon Oxford Summit” in 2022 are intended to get the city community further on board.

The key **takeaways** from the working group were:

- The topic of climate protection is an excellent way to engage the population and get them involved in urban development.
- In British cities, efforts to achieve fair and socially equitable climate protection and climate adaptation measures are a major issue.
- The framework for climate protection in cities needs to be improved through appropriate national legislation.
- Central strategies for climate neutrality are offsetting and circular economy. However, many steps in the supply chains are beyond the reach of cities.
- The exchange between cities is a great asset to move forward faster and more innovatively.



**6 Keynote II – City diplomacy: From theory to practice**

Day 2 of the partnership conference started with a theoretical classification of city diplomacy by **Lorenzo Kihlgren Grandi**, co-founder of the research institution **City Diplomacy Lab** with headquarters in Paris.

**Terms and roots**

He began by differentiating the various terms for municipal foreign relations. While “urban diplomacy” is broader and includes the external activities of all actors of a city, the term “city diplomacy” refers to the engagement of city leaders and their administrations themselves. City diplomacy, which is also the focus of the work of the City Diplomacy Lab, is based on the conviction that cities can effectively address international crises and live and stabilise connections between countries. This form of municipal foreign

relations emerged after and from the experiences of the Second World War. Between Great Britain and Germany, for example, it was primarily a matter of humanitarian aid and the re-establishment of friendly bilateral ties. During the Cold War, more than 50 cities from both sides of the Iron Curtain united in a joint declaration for peace in Florence. And today, cities continue to position and engage themselves in the face of war in Ukraine.

### *Real diplomacy?*

According to Lorenzo Kihlgren Grandi, city diplomacy has all the characteristics of diplomatic action – a question that is quite controversial in academic discourses. Cities represent and promote their “ecosystem” to the outside world. In dialogue, they identify common issues and challenges. They develop activities together and learn from each other. And they engage in joint lobbying in international and regional contexts.

### *Practical outcomes*

Even if city diplomacy is not governed by treaties, the engagement of cities is often impressive in scale. Effective solutions to large and small municipal challenges emerge from the cooperation. The various city networks also make these accessible to smaller and less-resourced cities. The topics dealt with cover all relevant areas of municipal action and thus ultimately those aspects that affect people’s quality of life.

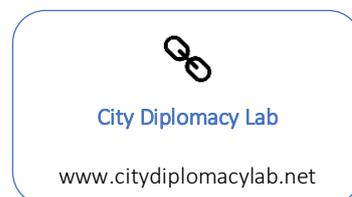
### *Opportunities for German-British city diplomacy*

According to Lorenzo Kihlgren Grandi, the conditions for German-British city diplomacy are good. The cities involved are diverse, innovative, and geographically widely distributed in both countries. The proximity to the cradle of city diplomacy in Europe and thus to its central networks and supporters is also advantageous. The European Union, the Council of Europe and, most recently, the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE) are worth mentioning here.

### *Challenges*

Similarly to Martino Miraglia, Lorenzo Kihlgren Grandi also pointed out that urban diplomacy is and can be pursued primarily by large and resource-rich cities. The gap to the hitherto low level of commitment of smaller cities is widening. The numerous overlaps and duplications of the networks are also problematic. Almost 60 platforms are working in parallel on the topic of climate change alone. And finally, city diplomacy is fundamentally confronted with the question of proxy foreign policy. Especially in communication and cooperation with cities in non-democratic countries, there is a risk of being instrumentalised, or the legitimacy of the representatives of the partner municipality remains questionable. Unlike national diplomacy, cities can hardly engage in a deeper discussion with their partners at this point. Cooperation with universities and scientific actors, however, can provide valuable expertise and input.

The City Diplomacy Lab, for example, will soon have 10 locations worldwide and is involved in research, events, projects, teaching and training (e.g. for people in city administrations and city politics) as well as lobbying in the field of city diplomacy.



## 7 Fireside chat – Getting up to speed for multilateral processes

The cities of Bristol and Mannheim are both known for active urban diplomacy. In particular, their mayors are committed to strengthening the role of cities in multilateral processes. During the fireside chat, *Caroline Twigg* and *David Linse* brought together experiences and development potential from their respective departments of international affairs.

### *Synergies and strategies*

For effective urban diplomacy, cities must position themselves well in politics, administration and urban society. Bristol has chosen the path of first collecting and “mapping” the international activities of all the city’s stakeholders. Building on this inventory and networking, an international strategy was formulated for the city’s external relations – from politics to business.

In a similar process, Mannheim brought together the international work within the administration in a specialised department. Synergies were made fruitful and focal points for action were coordinated. The 2030 Agenda was the booster and basis for this strategic orientation and also for a general political upgrading of the city’s external relations.

**Cities are affected – cities are involved** The two discussants gave examples of why cities cannot be absent from multilateral processes. (Supra)national legislation often has a direct impact on cities, for example when an EU regulation stipulates that cities must increase the proportion of their green spaces by three percent. At the same time, cities can successfully shape global discourses and supranational decisions. The global Mayors’ Migration Council network, for example, fed the perspective of cities into the process of the United Nations “[Global Compact for Migration](#)”. In the course of the German G7 presidency in 2022, it was possible in the early stages for cities to contribute to the issues discussed there, and – particularly noteworthy – for representatives of the national and international level to participate in debates and committees of city leaders.

### *Potential for development*

Cities have persistently won this participation through sometimes complex advocacy processes. According to Caroline Twigg and David Linse, there is still much to do:

- Cities need to network and act together to be further recognized at the international level.
- The rights of cities to participate must be formalized and institutionalized, and genuine multilevel governance must be established. Only in this way will cities no longer be dependent on the respective political line of the nation state when it comes to helping shape international processes.
- In Germany, the policies on city diplomacy of the Federal Foreign Office and the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) must be more closely coordinated. In the UK, too, there is a need for better communication between cities and national government.
- Cities need to be more engaged in urban diplomacy. This requires willingness and resources. What is needed is concrete, thematically oriented engagement.
- Administrative staff and politicians must be better prepared for their role in the context of city diplomacy (further training).
- Improved impact measurement is needed to communicate and legitimize the effects of city diplomacy in urban society. This requires close cooperation with the scientific community.
- Cities from the Global South need to be more involved in urban diplomacy networks.

*“All political levels have to have the will to work together. And maybe also break away from one or two hierarchical ideas and come to a multi-level and multi-stakeholder governance where we really work together as equals across the different levels.”*

*(David Linse, Mannheim)*

*„Cities need to go with really specific targets and tangible ideas and topics, rather than just asking for a seat at the table. It’s moved beyond that.“*

*(Caroline Twigg, Bristol)*



## 9 Summary

Many moments of the two-day conference made the determination and the great transformational power of cities visible. In the words of the event moderator Janis Fifka: “Cities are the hidden masters when it comes to developing solutions for global challenges” and – It should be added – also putting them into practice. It also became clear that many tasks of cities can only be solved together and that active external relations are indispensable in view of the multitude of global crises.

German and British cities have a broad basis for fruitful exchange and a high level of interest in further cooperation. The Urban Diplomacy Exchange project will continue to offer exchange opportunities and feed expertise into the network. To this end, contacts with various academic actors and supranational stakeholders such as UN-Habitat are to be further developed.

*„It was a nice feeling how much communality there was in our projects and challenges. (...) The experience of being in a group made it really clear that the partnership approach is really the only way we can take all those global issues.“*

*(British Participant)*



[www.urban-diplomacy.de](http://www.urban-diplomacy.de)

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