

Journal of African Foreign Affairs (JoAFA)

ISSN 2056-5658 (Online) ISSN 2056-564X (Print)

Indexed by: IBSS, JSTOR, EBSCO, ProQuest, J-Gate and Sabinet

Volume 9, Number 1, April 2022

pp 31-52

The Role of Strategic Communication in Paradiplomacy: A South African Case Study

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.31920/2056-5658/2022/v9n1a2>

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Abstract

Approximately 70% of the world's cities are engaged in international cooperation and a global phenomenon —paradiplomacy. Since 1994, in South Africa, metropolitan municipalities have increasingly engaged in paradiplomatic activities. The cooperative relationships, managed by municipal International Relations (IR) practitioners, are initiated primarily to harness the opportunities

of globalisation and economic interdependence and in the interest of socio-economic development. Therefore, IR practitioners' role has become increasingly important as they can enhance the global profile and frame the international image of cities through relationship building and information sharing. Within this context, this study offers an analysis of communication strategies used by IR practitioners in a selected South African municipality to build and maintain relationships with international sister cities. The researchers adopted a qualitative research methodology. The study's findings show that strategic communication is fundamental to paradiplomatic activity in South Africa and establish that municipal IR professionals use a combination of both one way and two-way symmetrical communication to sustain international relationships.

Keywords: *Paradiplomacy, Strategic Communication, International Municipal Relations, Public Relations, Sister City Relationships*

Introduction

Globally, cities are emerging as influential actors on the world stage. International cooperation agreements and network building have become integral to municipalities' development strategies to strengthen strategic trade and economic ties abroad (Kuznetsov, 2014; Cornago, 2010; Van Rooyen, 2008). Since 1994, metropolitan municipalities in South Africa have increasingly been engaged in paradiplomatic activities and have collectively entered into more than 130 international sister city agreements (De Villiers, 2009). These cooperative relationships, primarily managed by international relations (IR) practitioners, are predominantly initiated to harness the opportunities of globalisation and economic interdependence and in the interest of socio-economic development (Nganje, 2013). Subnational diplomacy is regarded as the new public administration and governance paradigm, enabling mayors and city governments to carve out their niche in the global economy and attract business, talent and opportunities.

Scholars consider relationship building through two-way symmetrical communication fundamental to IR practice (Saleh, 2017 & Nye, 2008). The main character of the two-way balanced communication model has challenged organisations to conduct direct dialogue with stakeholders to persuade and listen, learn, and, most importantly, adapt the organisation's behaviour due to the communication process.

The theoretical and practical connections between public relations (PR) and diplomacy, or the process by which governments communicate and build international relationships, have attracted increased attention from scholars in both fields, following the attacks on the United States (US) on 11 September 2001. Several studies, particularly in the West, have since 9/11 linked PR with PD to find similarities and differences between the two fields and identify their role in relationship building (see Fitzpatrick et al., 2013). While differences remain, there is consensus from scholars and practitioners in both fields that communication and relationship building lie at the heart of international relations.

Within this context, this paper offers an analysis of communication strategies used by IR practitioners in a selected South African municipality to build and maintain relationships with international sister cities. Considering the global isolation and pariah status accorded South Africa during the apartheid era, the researchers chose South Africa as a case study to show how the nation adopted international municipal relations as a means of 'reentering' global politics.

The researchers premise the study on the Excellence Theory and the two-way symmetrical communication model in public relations (PR). It sought to understand the extent to which IR practitioners in South Africa have embraced PR practices by examining stakeholder engagement and relationship management in IR practice from a public relations perspective.

Globalisation and the Evolution of International Municipal Relations

The field of international municipal relations has expanded rapidly in recent years. Driven by various factors, most notably globalisation and the city's role in a regional metropolitan economy, cities are increasingly acknowledged as internationally important actors and political and economic power (Curtis, 2014). Large urban areas worldwide have developed extensive relations and increasingly collaborate in large international city-to-city organisations that serve to solve challenges and share best practices (Amorim & Martinot-Lagarde, 2013). IR theory that dominated twentieth-century scholarship has always spoken of nation-states as the international arena's sole actors (Morgenthau 1949; Waltz 1979). However, more recent research has begun to consider various

non-state actors in IR, ranging from sub-national governments (municipalities and provinces) and non-governmental organisations to transnational corporations (Josselin & Wallace 2001). It is mainly due to governments around the globe moving towards greater decentralisation to local authorities. This shift is due to increased democratisation and stronger market orientation (Bennett, 1992).

Municipal International Relations in South Africa

In South Africa, the doors for participation by municipalities in international activities opened following the 1994 democratic elections. While local government has relative autonomy to engage in international relations, it must cooperate with national governing bodies such as the Department of International Relations and Co-operation (DIRCO), where official foreign policy promulgation and implementation are vested. The autonomy of the local government is interwoven with the national and provincial spheres and supported by national policies that encourage MIRs. The guidelines include the Republic of South Africa (RSA) White Paper on Local Government (WPLG) of 1998 (RSA, 1998) and the Republic of South Africa (RSA) Municipal International Relations Policy Framework (MIRPF) of 1999 (RSA, 1999).

The WPLG of 1998 (RSA, 1998) describes inter-municipal cooperation such as learning exchanges, engagement with municipalities in other countries, domestic and international public-private partnerships, and community-based and non-governmental organisations. The MIRPF of 1999 (RSA, 1999), on the other hand, defines MIRs as a link between two or more communities from different nation-states, in which at least one of the key actors is a municipality. It promotes partnerships between South African cities and municipalities abroad to ensure maximum learning, synergy, and national interests, including investment promotion.

The Place of Paradiplomacy

Ivo Duchacek and Panayotis Soldatos first defined the term paradiplomacy in 1990 as direct international activity by sub-national actors (federated units, regions, urban communities, cities) supporting, complementing, correcting, duplicating or challenging the nation-states' diplomacy (Duchacek, 1990; Soldatos, 1990). The definition was refined

nearly a decade later by Noe Cornago, who included a security aspect. Cornago (2010) defined paradiplomacy as sub-state governments' involvement in international relationships, through the establishment of formal and informal contacts, either permanent or ad hoc, with a foreign public or private entity, to promote socio-economic, cultural or political issues, as well as any other dimension of their constitutional competences. Later, Alexander Kuznetsov described paradiplomacy as a form of political communication for reaching economic, cultural and political or any types of benefits, the core of which consists of regional governments' self-sustained actions with foreign governmental and non-governmental actors (Kuznetsov, 2014).

Van der Pluijm and Melissen's (2007) definition of paradiplomacy, on the other hand, takes on the title of city diplomacy, defined as the processes by which cities, or local governments in general, engage in relations with actors on an international political stage to represent themselves and their interests to one another. The authors argue that cities seem to participate in almost every step of international politics, either marginally or considerably, either formally or informally, change and continue to change current diplomatic processes.

According to Tavares (2016), subnational governments in the developing world – Asia, Latin America and Africa – are increasingly engaged in paradiplomacy, changing traditional sovereignty, diplomacy and foreign policy. Tavares (2016) notes that while paradiplomacy is still young in Africa, as a whole, only in South Africa does it deserve a public eye. Since the field of paradiplomacy in Africa is still new, focusing on a select South African municipality, as this study does, adds to the wealth of knowledge and provides invaluable insights into the nature of paradiplomacy in South Africa from a PR perspective.

The Role of Strategic Communication in International Relations

Various means of communication have been utilised in international relations over the last decades, ranging from the traditional negotiation mode to rampant coercion, prevalent during the late 1980s and early 1990s. Certain groups in parts of the world adopt kidnapping tactics or damage to human life and property as a means of communicating internationally. Blake (1984) argues that communication strategies at an international level do not occur in a vacuum influenced by histories, experiences, culture, tradition, and religion. Emerging findings in IR

scholarship indicate that effective communication is central to realising all strategic aims. Hallahan et al. (2007) define strategic communication as the purposeful communication by an organisation to fulfil its mission.

On the other hand, Frost and Michelsen (2017) note considerable confusion about what the term 'strategic communications' means in international relations. The authors suggest it may be due to the diversity of deployment contexts and the correspondingly diverse spectrum of related and sometimes interchangeable concepts used. Nevertheless, they conclude that strategic communications are actions linked to claims and counter-claims about ethical conduct in international relations and point out that, by using strategic communications, countries and regions clearly can, at times, hide things from citizens or the international community. Examples cited include private companies contracted by governments willing to provide such services because it is lucrative. An example is the Assad family in Syria, who hired several professional contractors to manage their international public image.

Similarly, the British government hired leading PR contractors to provide on-the-ground management of press coverage of its withdrawal from Mos. In South Africa, President Jacob Zumo hired a well-known British firm to counteract his media portrayal as corrupt. However, Frost and Michelsen (2017) maintain that none of these examples diminishes the role of ethical claim-making in all strategic communications actions.

The Convergence of Public Relations and International Relations

The conceptual and practical connections between PR and IR have become a key focus area in academic debates over the last few decades. Extant research suggests significant potential for PR concepts and practices to inform thinking and practices in diplomacy. In particular, there has been increasing interest in public diplomacy's relational and communicative aspects (Cowan, 2008; Jönsson & Hall, 2003; Kelley, 2009; Nye, 2008; Ronfeldt & Arquilla, 2009; Snow & Taylor, 2009; Zaharna, 2009). For example, PR scholars Benno Signitzer and Timothy Coombs have, as early as 1992, attributed the growth of international relationships to the expansion of communication technology and broader public participation in the process of foreign affairs. But it was, following the events of 11 September 2001 in the United States (US), an increasing number of scholars began to explore the links between the two fields.

For example, Dutta-Bergmann (2006) suggested that a PR approach to diplomacy based on dialogue and respect for mutual understanding between cultures would be most effective for the US. Similarly, Kruckeberg and Vujnovic (2005) proposed that the US reject propaganda and practice real public diplomacy, relying on political theory and the theories of international relations and PR theories and models two-way symmetrical communications and community-building. Snow and Taylor (2009) point expressly to PR practices' relational focus, as reflected in the Excellence Theory (Grunig et al., 2006), as a potential future foundation for public diplomacy.

Melissen (2005) posits that the new public diplomacy characteristics sound patently similar to relational models' defining characteristics in public relations. Fitzpatrick (2011) described the new public diplomacy anticipates a more collaborative approach to international relations. It contributes to mutual understanding among countries/international actors and foreign publics, thereby building and sustaining relationships between countries/international actors and foreign publics. It also facilitates connections between organisations and people in the public and private sectors. It involves foreign and domestic publics; includes foreign publics in policy processes; is based on principles of dialogue and mutuality; emphasises two-way communication and interactions; favour people-to-people businesses; and has a primarily proactive, long-term focus on relationship-building.

Conceptual Framework

The Excellence Theory has established a widely accepted conceptual framework for excellence in communication management in public relations research (Yun, 2006). The theory states that for an organisation to be effective, it must behave in ways that solve the problems and satisfy stakeholders and management (Grunig et al., 2006). Furthermore, it argues that the value of excellent communication lies within the quality of long-term relationships that organisations develop and maintain. A literature review on public diplomacy and the Excellence Study (Grunig et al., 2006) has shown conceptual convergences between communication practices and excellence in communication management between diplomacy and public relations.

This study adopted the strategic management paradigm of public relations to assess municipal IR practitioners' communication strategies to cultivate relationships with international sister cities. Van den Bosch and Van Riel (1998) define this type of public relations as a bridging, rather than a buffering, function, designed to build relationships with stakeholders, rather than a set of messaging activities intended to buffer the organisation from them. The paradigm emphasises two-way and symmetrical communication to facilitate dialogue between the organisation and strategic stakeholders. This paradigm does not exclude traditional PR activities such as media relations and the dissemination of information. Instead, it broadens the number and types of media and communication activities and fits them into a symmetrical framework of research and listening (Grunig & Grunig, 2001).

According to Dozier et al. (1995), the value of excellent communication lies within the quality of long-term relationships that organisations develop and maintain. In organisations with excellent communication programmes, dominant coalitions value communicators for their input before making decisions (Kim et al., 2013). In this study, Grunig's (2006) views that PR's roles are to scan the environment, span boundaries, engage in issues management and dialogue, and identify strategic publics to build long-term relationships, which are considered appropriate. The position helps understand how IR practitioners in a South African municipality use communication to sustain international relations.

In the Excellence Study, researchers asked CEOs and heads of PR what contribution their communication function made to organisational goals. One of the most frequent responses was the value of hearing external voices in the strategic management process – voices amplified by PR professionals who scan the public in the organisation's environment, a practice known as environmental scanning (Grunig, 2006). Grunig (2006) notes that the most excellent communication departments participated fully in strategic management by scanning the organisation's social, political and institutional environment to bring an outside perspective to strategic decision-making. Linked to this is the boundary-spanning role in public relations, described by Kaiser (2018) as a practice adopted by PR specialists to strategically connect the organisation's internal networks with external sources of information to nurture and develop mutual relationships. The communicator acts as an early warning system (Dozier et al., 1995). Such communicators tell the dominant

coalition what the public know, how they feel, and how they may behave relevant to strategic decisions under consideration (Grunig, 2006). Communicators act as advocates, articulating those external points of view to counsel dominant coalitions (Grunig et al., 2002). PR specialists must understand both internal and external interest groups' attitudes and concerns and establish and maintain cooperative relationships with them (Harter & Krone, 2001).

Steyn (2009) defines PR's role as 'reflective strategist' within the South (and East) African context. Focused on strategic reflection, the reflective strategist acts as a coordinating mechanism between an organisation and the environment, providing management with an outside (societal) perspective, and assisting them to reflect on the organisation's position in the broader context to balance organisational goals with the well-being of society (Steyn, 2009). Steyn (2009) submits that the reflective strategist enlightens management on societal/stakeholder values, norms, and expectations by spanning the corporate boundary, gathering information and transmitting this information to management. In turn, management is influenced to state the organisation's position on strategic importance issues, practice two-way communication and build trusting relationships with stakeholders.

In addressing the role of public relations in international affairs, Grunig (1992) states that two-way symmetrical public ties would eliminate most ethical problems of international public relations, making PR more effective in producing international understanding collaboration. The two-way symmetrical model aims to build mutual understanding between an organisation and its audiences. This model's main character has challenged organisations to conduct direct dialogue with stakeholders to persuade and listen, learn, resolve conflict, and adapt the organisation's behaviour due to the communication process (Grunig & Hunt, 1984; Grunig, 2009). Most importantly, the model strives to build long-term relationships between institutions and their audiences by considering both sides' interests (Diab, 2010; Grunig et al., 2002). Thus, the two-way symmetrical communication model was used as a benchmark to assess how municipal IR practitioners cultivate relationships with international sister cities.

Method

The study adopted a qualitative research methodology guided by a single case study to understand the communication strategies used by municipal IR practitioners to build and sustain relationships with international sister cities. This interpretive method proved suitable because it fit the theoretical framework and was more appropriate than a quantitative approach to address the research questions. According to Starman (2013), the qualitative approach is the most successful when a phenomenon under investigation is not well-understood or well-defined. In addition, the single case study method enabled the researcher to understand the complex real-life activities involving multiple evidence sources.

Reflecting on the use of single cases, Mariotto et al. (2014) note that the single case allows a more precise understanding of the circumstances in which phenomena occur and, therefore, tend to be more reliable. Furthermore, the focus is on one particular unit. A unit can be an individual, a group, an organisation or a local community – and is recommended as a suitable design when a researcher wants to understand the interaction between a specific context and a phenomenon (Jacobsen, 2002). Yin (2009) likewise defines the single case study method as an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon in depth and within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not evident.

The municipality chosen for the study is one of the most globally active metropolises in South Africa, with more than a dozen active international sister city relationships. While relationships with international partners dating back to the apartheid era (as early as 1975), the municipality has only since 2011 – following the election of a new mayor – rapidly gained a reputation in the international arena. It was primarily due to its internationally oriented development strategy under the new administration and efforts to turn the municipality into an attractive investment destination. In 2012, the municipality's policy shifted towards proactive marketing, economic relationships, and best practice sharing, establishing a dedicated international relations unit located in the Executive mayor's Office. The unit, currently comprising four IR practitioners, including a manager, is responsible for maintaining, building, and managing relationships with foreign cities (formal and friendly) and strategic partners (international memberships) worldwide.

Between 2011 and 2019, the municipality entered into 17 international sister city partnership agreements. In its strategic IR policy, the city emphasises the importance of building international relationships, cooperation, and partnerships that encourage economic growth and opportunity.

Three qualitative data collection methods were used and triangulated in the study. First, the researcher collected data from semi-structured interviews with the four IR practitioners, including the IR manager. Participants were purposively selected based on their roles in communicating with, building, and sustaining relations with international sister cities. The data collected through in-depth interviews were triangulated with data from document analysis. Documents collected and analysed included the IR unit's 2019 annual overview, IR policies, publications and press releases. Data collection took place between August 2019 and December 2019. Third, qualitative content analysis was further used in the study as a data collection method and an analytic strategy, as advised by Labuschagne (2003). The researchers chose this technique to triangulate the data and provide a confluence of evidence that breeds credibility.

Given that the data was obtained from different sources, the researcher applied Tesch's eight-step strategy (Tesch, 1990) to triangulate the findings and maintain a logical and thorough analysis as it emerged from the content. First, the researcher carefully read through all the data to get a sense of the whole. Following this, the data was organised into chunks of information, and the researcher started identifying patterns and creating themes. Once the data familiarisation process was completed, the researcher designed initial codes from the data set. The data was then organised into meaningful groups to identify and code repeated themes. During coding, the researcher utilised Grbich's (2012) block-and-file technique to conduct a two-level analysis, i.e.,

- each participant's transcript was individually and manually coded, line by line; and
- similar quotes gathered from all participants were classified into segments and arranged in a table for further analysis.

Once the researcher had identified potential patterns, the search for themes began. This was achieved by reading the coded segments several times and comparing them to identify similarities or differences. This

method is a thematic map that helps find the relationship among themes and make them visual (Braun & Clarke, 2006). After identifying themes, the researcher refined them and created a thematic map to arrange them. As part of the refinement, the researcher also identified some sub-themes. The last stage was to present the findings. The researcher arranged the data during this phase and undertook the final analysis to produce the literature review outcomes and the study's conceptual framework.

Findings and Discussion

Findings reveal that IR professionals in a select South African municipality use a combination of one-way and two-way symmetrical communication strategies to foster relationships with international sister cities. Techniques employed include in-depth research, information dissemination, networking, advocacy and interpersonal communication. These strategies are consistent with Grunig and Huang's (2000) conceptualised relationship-building dimensions using communication strategies embedded in a two-way symmetrical model.

Two-Way Symmetrical Communication Approaches Employed

Results show that the dominant two-way communication channels used by municipal IR practitioners to build and maintain relationships with sister cities include regular and open dialogue. It is often via either face-to-face meetings or electronic communication, and strategic engagements with internal and external stakeholders, including the consular corps, international partners and municipal officials, either at networking events, meetings and presentations or during international missions. Interviewees repeatedly stressed the importance of consistent dialogue, describing it as fundamental to building long-term relationships. Grunig's (1992) Excellence Theory advocates two-way symmetrical communication to cultivate long-term relationships. The study revealed that international missions, meetings with visiting delegations and knowledge-sharing through technical exchanges are the critical passageways through which the municipality dialogues and cultivates mutually-beneficial relationships with international sister cities, as explained by one IR practitioner below:

As IR officials, we have to continuously maintain these relationships so that they don't go dormant. The key to managing and maintaining these is regular communication and continuously finding ways to establish relations with key contacts in sister cities, mainly done during international missions, hosting visiting delegations, and technical exchanges. In addition, every month, we have to show some activity, so we are required as IR officials to engage consistently.

Results show that municipal IR professionals conducted extensive research before engaging with prospective sister cities. The intelligence gathered was returned to the organisation's senior management for evaluation and decision. This finding indicates that municipal IR professionals in South Africa embrace two-way symmetrical communication by conducting research, employing listening tactics and providing feedback to the organisation's senior management and the executive. Moreover, it revealed that municipal IR practitioners also fulfil a boundary-spanning role, or, as Steyn (2009) defines it, as that of "reflective strategist". The boundary-spanning role in PR is described as a practice adopted to strategically link the organisation's internal networks with external sources of information to nurture and develop mutual relationships (Kaiser, 2018). According to Dozier et al. (1995), the communicator in this role acts as an early warning system. Such communicators tell the dominant coalition what the publics know, how they feel, and how they may behave, relevant to strategic decisions under consideration (Grunig, 2006).

By spanning the organisational boundary, gathering information and transmitting this information to management, Steyn (2009) submits that the reflective strategist enlightens management on societal/stakeholder values, norms and expectations and that management is influenced to state the organisation's position on, practice two-way communication and build trusting relationships with stakeholders about, issues of strategic importance. IR professionals revealed that building networks outside the municipality were crucial for strengthening relationships with international sister cities. The findings show that such networks assisted with peer-to-peer knowledge exchange and collaboration, information gathering, resources and enabled municipal IR professionals to build linkages and become key connectors for the organisation. In this regard, one IR practitioner explained that:

IR officials also act as key connectors, which link experts in international sister cities with technical professionals in the municipality. In that way, the actual relationship is mainstreamed into the everyday work of municipal officials. Expert officials in both or more cities are then able to communicate and collaborate, with IR having an oversight role through our quarterly audits.

All IR professionals interviewed identified two-way communication with counterparts as critical in building, maintaining and managing relationships with international sister cities. They stated that the tenor of and approach is taken in presentations and when questions were posed and answered during engagements, played a critical role in strengthening relationships. They also revealed that adhering to the “basic IR rules of engagement” and the applicable protocol was fundamental to sustaining relations. One practitioner pointed out that:

“Attention to detail is critical. One word can destroy an entire relationship.”

Results further revealed that active listening, honesty and transparency were critical in preserving relationships with sister cities. Grunig and Grunig (2001) argued that these are characteristics of excellent communication practice. IR professionals stated that using tact and diplomacy appropriately can lead to improved relationships and are a way to build and develop mutual respect, which in turn leads to more successful outcomes.

Findings also revealed that providing strategic support and counsel to the executive and senior municipal officials were further essential functions of IR professionals, which helped sustain relationships with international partners. According to the interviews, the executive is the face and official voice of the municipality on international relations. This finding proves that municipal IR practitioners in South Africa are empowered in the dominant coalition, a fundamental PR Excellence tenet (Grunig et al., 1992). Furthermore, IR practitioners stated that senior municipal officials were advised on diplomatic protocol ahead of international missions. One interviewee pointed out that the purpose was to ensure that the executive and senior officials representing the municipality on global platforms were aware of all protocols and briefed on the mission’s subject matter.

One-Way Communication Approaches Employed

The study further established that municipal IR practitioners also use one-way communication strategies to disseminate information and engage international sister cities and their publics to promote economic opportunities and enhance relationships. Tactics include sharing digital and print resources to sister cities and visiting delegations and consular corps members based in the municipality. These include USB flash drives, also referred to as informational “toolkits” containing economic data, videos, and an overview of the municipality’s key economic sectors and investment opportunities. There are also promotional brochures which are available in five foreign languages (French, German, Mandarin, Portuguese and Spanish); digital copies of the municipality’s economic performance indicators, a quarterly publication prepared by the municipality’s investment and economic research departments; and press releases issued, following visits by international delegations and after members of the executive return from international missions.

Furthermore, results show that IR professionals provide strategic input to speeches, presentations and official communique issued by the municipal executive. They are gradually embracing websites and email newsletters to promote information dissemination, digital interactivity and value creation. While findings show that IR practitioners do not directly engage with the press or social media, municipal IR professionals provide strategic input to IR-related press releases and media engagements.

Additionally, the study established that the IR unit promotes and positions the municipality as a competitive global hub for economic, social and cultural activity, which values international connectivity to facilitate job creation through private sector-led economic growth. In this regard, one practitioner explained that:

In as much as we can, we always shamelessly promote [the municipality], whether with diplomats stationed here or visiting delegations or when we embark on international missions ourselves. With every engagement, we look at ways of promoting [the municipality] and sending out a positive message.

According to Tuch (1990), cultivating and managing a favourable international or world opinion has been the mandate of public diplomacy

and PR in international relations for decades. However, research findings show that political and administrative change and uncertainty can significantly impact the municipality's image and engagements with international partners. Results furthermore reveal that there was often a lull in communication with global stakeholders during times of uncertainty. Fan et al. (2019) submit that periodic political leadership changes due to local elections could affect the viability of sister city relationships. Therefore, communication during these periods needs to be carefully managed. IR practitioners interviewed stated that they do their best to reassure international partners during uncertainty to "keep the relationship going" through "open and honest, two-way communication".

Conclusions and Implications

As an essential communication tool, the presented analysis shows that PR plays a significant role in building and maintaining relationships with international sister cities. Notably, findings indicate that both one-way and two-way symmetrical communication strategies are used in different ways by IR practitioners in a select South African municipality to build and maintain relationships with sister cities. IR professionals revealed that regular and open dialogue, often on the sidelines of formal meetings and conferences, was fundamental to building long-term relationships. It validates the study's theoretical frame derived from the excellence theory of public relations and two-way symmetrical communication (Grunig & Hunt, 1984). One-way approaches such as disseminating digital and print resources to international sister cities, visiting delegations and members of the consular corps are also considered in this study as strategic in building long-term relationships with global partner cities.

Furthermore, findings show that the municipal IR practitioner's fundamental role is to strategically manage international relationships and act as the primary contact between the municipality and international stakeholders. The municipal IR professional's primary functions include initiating, building and maintaining global connections, and managing international sister city partnerships and international memberships. The findings also affirm that the roles and tasks of IR practitioners in a select South African municipality are generally consistent with emerging findings of cities in first world countries. In a study on the role of

municipal IR practitioners in European cities, Fishbone (2015) notes that municipal international affairs professionals do everything from forging and maintaining relationships with other cities to welcoming incoming delegations and organising international trips; preparing their elected leadership for international meetings, to maintaining their city's involvement in international networks.

A primary challenge highlighted by IR professionals in this study is the lack of capacity to better engage and communicate with international sister cities, build and sustain long-term relationships and revive dormant relations. According to Fan et al. (2019), successful relationships with sister cities require human and financial resources. IR practitioners in this study repeatedly emphasised the need for more staff, pointing out that they would be more proactive in building and maintaining relationships and could invest more time strategically engaging with international counterparts with a larger team.

While the findings of the study show that strategic communication is fundamental to paradiplomatic activity in South Africa, and establishes that municipal IR professionals use a combination of both one way and two-way symmetrical communication approaches (Grunig & Hunt, 1984) to build and maintain relationships with international sister cities, what remains unclear is whether this form of engagement is strategic or as a result of PR theory.

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