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Building Bridges Beyond Borders: Unlocking the Role of Transnational Networks in Paradiplomacy

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SEVEN ERDOĐAN, DEC 4 2024

After losing their once prominent roles in global politics (such as the competing cities of ancient Greece, or trading Italian cities of the Medieval era) sub-national actors, such as regional governments, cities, and local authorities, are now re-engaging with the realm of diplomacy in a system that remains predominantly governed by nation-states (Nganje 2024). As globalization and complex interdependence increasingly define international relations, these sub-national actors have found new avenues to assert their influence on the world stage, particularly through paradiplomacy which means the engagement of the non-state actors to the realm of international relations by establishing permanent or ad hoc contacts with the other actors in this realm.

One of the prominent mechanisms mobilised by sub-national actors, especially cities and their mayors, to advance their paradiplomatic initiatives is the formation of transnational networks. Transnational networks refers to a transborder connectivity among sub-national actors to collaborate or form new relationships for shared economic, political, cultural, and social agendas without the involvement of national governmental actors (Bansard et. al., 2017). The first examples of these networks were in place before the First World War, such as the International Federation for Housing and Planning founded in 1913, but the number of networks increased significantly in the second half of the 20th century (Tortola & Couperus 2022).

By participating in these transnational networks, sub-national actors can collectively leverage their voices and resources to shape the outcomes of the international negotiations, especially through developing partnerships with international organisations. Thus they can amplify their impact and gain a more substantial presence within the global arena (Durmuş & Oomen, 2022). These networks enable a more inclusive and diverse form of diplomacy, one that reflects the interconnected and multifaceted nature of the contemporary world. . The primary aim of this short contribution is to highlight the crucial role and benefits of transnational networks in the paradiplomacy of sub-national actors.

Many present global problems, like climate change and migration, have local repercussions, including the natural disasters that damage local infrastructure or the increased strain on the local services due to population growth. This prompts local sub-national actors to respond to these global problems in order to safeguard themselves from the negative consequences of these challenges. In most cases, sub-national actors do not have the necessary resources, experience or technology to address these problems better individually. By collaborating under the roof of a transnational network, they can pool the limited resources at their disposal to find a common solution for the benefit of all, and they can share their past knowledge, best practices and experience to guide the actions of their peers.

Transnational networks can have a burden-sharing or joint-force influence among their participants. One of the most notable examples of this is the C40, which is heavily lobbying national governments to address the gap in spending and financing that cities face in developing low-carbon infrastructure to reduce emissions (Smeds, 2019). In addition, by joining transnational networks, sub-national actors can mobilize resources, access tested solutions, and build resilience against global issues at the local level (Gordon & Johnson 2018).

Sub-national actors have increasingly sought a role in shaping international norms and influencing the agenda for

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Written by Seven Erdoğan

global negotiations. For example, the United Nations Habitat Programme has ensured that the sub-national actors have access to the shaping of international norms related to human rights or migration, such as the right to housing (Durmuş & Oomen, 2022). Acting alone, their impact on global negotiations remains limited. Still, by forming transnational networks, these actors can significantly strengthen their lobbying power, bringing the perspectives and needs of various local entities to the forefront (Gordon & Johnson, 2018). These networks allow sub-national actors to amplify their voices collectively, making them more effective in impacting the outcomes of international agreements and in advocating for inclusion in policy-setting spaces where their actions are integral to implementing climate adaptation and mitigation measures. For instance, the Paris Agreement's inclusion of non-state actors, such as cities, business groups, civil society actors or academic researchers, reflects the rising prominence of transnational partnerships, particularly around climate action (Maclean, 2020). This agreement recognized the value of contributions from non-state actors, such as cities and private organizations, in achieving climate goals. These networks not only contribute to a diverse climate action landscape but also exert pressure on national governments to adopt more robust commitments (Hale 2018).

States have a privileged role in the definition of global climate change regime and its norms, but many of the actions to achieve a higher level of mitigation or adaptation are taken by the sub-national local actors (Roppongi, 2016). Sub-national local actors play a crucial role in the implementation of international climate standards through their role in key emission sectors such as public transport or waste management. As a result, many of them now have climate action plans. The structure of transnational networks also allows subnational actors to integrate pressing local issues into the global negotiation agenda (Kaminski 2023). Sub-national actors can integrate the urgent items on their agenda into the international negotiation process by acting together in a transnational network.

By participating in transnational networks, sub-national actors can stay updated on global developments and learn from each other's experiences handling challenges like climate change and economic downturns. (Triviño-Salazar 2023). They gain insights into strategies their peers implement, enabling a critical evaluation of their capabilities and performance. This benchmarking fosters motivation to improve, particularly by learning from others' successes and failures, framed as a socialisation process. Through this, sub-national actors adopt new norms and adjust their practices to align with successful patterns observed within the network.

Lee (2019) has identified this whole process as socialisation, through which subnational actors adopt some norms and acquire patterns of behaviour. Transnational networks increasingly support adaptive governance by enabling sub-national actors to experiment, refine, and disseminate sustainable practices suited to their local challenges. Despite these transnational networks' potential benefits, scholars have noted a persistent Western-centric bias, that guides networks participants to replicate the models from the developed Western countries (Kaminski 2023). This is because networks are often shaped by the Global North members who bring established norms that may not fully resonate with actors from the Global South. This imbalance can pressure non-Western members to conform to Western practices, even when they may not fit local needs or contexts. This influence, while not always overt, highlights the need for more equitable participation in transnational networks to ensure diverse perspectives and priorities are respected.

Transnational networks empower sub-national actors to set shared goals, monitor progress, and offer financial and technical support, facilitating local climate action through collaboration (Tosun & Leopold 2019). That is, as a source of motivation, networks encourages sub-national actors to pursue and implement well-tuned policies at local levels, such as the European Union Covenant of Mayors for Climate and Energy, which leads its members to voluntarily commit to embrace the European Union's climate and energy targets. In addition, transnational networks often support joint research on issues of mutual concern, which equips local actors with data-driven solutions. In this way, the members of the network can solve a common problem by working together to develop and implement better and ambitious strategies (Kaminski 2023). Transnational networks addressing local subnational authorities' most pressing climate change issues are evidence of this (Niederhafner 2013). Such networks enhance global climate governance by supporting local governments' active participation and by fostering accountability through transparent reporting structures and resource-sharing.

Transnational networks of sub-national actors provide a dynamic multi-level governance structure that allows sub-

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national actors to bypass traditional diplomatic constraints and engage directly with global challenges such as climate change, economic instability and public health crises. By facilitating cross-border cooperation, these networks provide essential technical support, help share knowledge and mobilise funding to effectively address local concerns. They are therefore very critical of the paradiplomacy of sub-national actors. As these networks expand, they bring new hope for solving humanity's pressing problems through local action that is in line with global goals. This decentralised approach not only democratises global problem-solving, but also empowers sub-national actors to influence international policy, and build resilient and adaptable frameworks for sustainable development at the local level. In doing so, they lay the ground for the long-term and cross-sectoral cooperation that is essential for tackling complex global issues that transcend national boundaries.

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