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Decentralised Development Cooperation for Sustainable Urban Development in South Africa: A Review

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Abstract

With ballooning urban resident populations, cities have become the nerve centres of urban development. To accelerate sustainable urban service delivery, municipalities in South Africa must explore alternative ways to transform communities through sustainable community development initiatives. This study explores and proposes for adopting successful decentralised development partnership among South African cities as a mechanism for speeding the development of urban areas. It utilised the unobtrusive research approach of undertaking desktop research where data from existing literature was analysed to ascertain how cities can intensify urban development through cognate practices. Findings indicate the vast potential for cities to improve urban community development by partnering with other cities to apply various strategies to effectively share expertise, resources, and other apparatuses to overcome challenges. The paper recommends that South African cities utilise

these partnerships to navigate the urban development logjam in pursuance of sustainable urban development through improved local government rendering of public commodities.

Keywords: *Decentralised Development Cooperation, Partnerships, Sustainable development, Cities.*

1.1 Introduction

In the twenty-first century, sustainable community development is one strategy that can expedite the transformation of African cities. Signe (2023) observes that this agenda has become more pronounced, especially in the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR) era. The need for cities to expedite service delivery, urban development, and living standards has seen them explore alternate ways of attaining this agenda through diverse strategies encompassing city-to-city partnerships (hereinafter Decentralised Development Cooperation). This is important because cities have become the nerve centres for social development in the 21st century.

Russ and Krasny (2017) argue that cities must expedite urban development since more people are choosing to make them their places of living. Hence, there is a need to explore fresh avenues for accelerating urban planning and development in the ambit of resilience, sustainability, liveability, and social justice. Since 2000, urban populations have ballooned, especially in African cities, mainly due to rural-urban migration (Carmody *et al.*, 2023). Urban ‘immigrants’ are motivated by the search for the proverbial ‘greener pastures’. This is when people opt to move closer to services and better living standards unavailable in rural enclaves and outlying areas through the ‘bright-lights syndrome’ (Laband & Lockaby, 2021). This births cognate challenges in the form of unsurmountable pressure on urban resources, overpopulation risks, heightened risks for disease outbreaks, and urban ecological degradation (Marta *et al.*, 2020).

Essentially, 21st-century cities are also confronted by the challenge of solid waste management, which can be overcome by, *inter alia*, utilising decentralised development partnerships towards sustainable urban development that is in sync with the Sustainable Development Goals (Ogutu *et al.*, 2021). That brings the need for alternate strategies towards sustaining urban development. Lee *et al.* (2023) argue that cities must be

more dedicated to ensuring that resources and expertise diffuse between the global north and south unhindered. This paper explores the prospects of intercity partnership as the panacea of urban development in South Africa.

1.2 Background

The concept and practice of Decentralised Development Cooperation (DDC) has been treated as being synonymous with practices such as paradiplomacy, city-to-city partnerships, intercity partnerships, twinning, and municipal international relations (Karvounis, 2024; Wilson, 2023; Marchetti, 2021). Ideally, these are mutual developmental partnerships that take the form of collaboration plans in which actors from two or more sectors of society, be it market, state, or civil society, get involved in a process that is not hierarchical to strive and attain a goal of sustainability (Beyers *et al.*, 2023; Schiller *et al.*, 2023). Above all, this kind of cooperation must be voluntary.

In this manuscript, the issues related to sustainable urban community development spectrums, *i.e.*, smart city solutions, solid waste management, eco-friendly cities, and improvement of the standard of living of urban dwellers, are interrelated. Pauer *et al.* (2020) add another dimension to partnering, which implies a purposeful association that parties strategically select to conjoin to accomplish some shared goals. Furthermore, Szpak *et al.* (2023) term these arrangements decentralised development partnerships due to the significant autonomy that subnational government units have in designing, implementing, and sustaining these intercity partnerships for development. Similarly, Mayer and Nguyen-Long (2020) argued that cities stand at a greater prospect when they engage in cooperation when it comes to expediting sustainable urban development compared to such being done by governments at a national and less decentralised level. Xin and Chen (2023) and Shair-Rosenfield (2023) lauded how intercity partnerships successfully managed the COVID-19 pandemic in East Asian countries compared to the centralised and less devolved pandemic containment models.

Turok and Visagie (2022) noted how devastating the COVID-19 pandemic was to lives and livelihoods, thereby calling for interventive methods such as decentralised development partnerships to safeguard livelihoods and promote sustainable urban development, especially in communities in the global south. Shan *et al.* (2024) bring the idea of

decentralised development partnerships modelled around the digital twin city model. Such partnerships are built on an Artificial Intelligence (AI) governance model that supports real-time monitoring of urban areas through algorithmic data analysis, thus keeping pace with governance, monitoring, and evaluation, as well as earlier warning of pandemic management strategies with innovative city practices. Yunos (2022) acknowledged the possibility for better disaster preparedness and diagnosis through early warning systems that the City of eThekweni (CoE) could have benefitted from through digital twinning with other cities using smart systems such as AI to manage disasters such as floods. Devastating floods hit the CoE in April 2022, which affected urban mobility and commerce. In this context, intercity cooperation has excellent prospects for building urban climate adaptation and resilience since global funding partners are underscoring an agenda of this nature towards sustainable urban development (Haupt *et al.*, 2020). Hence, another fraternity of development partnerships in an urban governance setting is the issue of building and sustaining community resilience within a disaster risk reduction frame.

The historic focus of decentralised development cooperation was mainly related to borderless communities and involved mainly border cities adjacent to one another across national borders (Ganster & Collins, 2017). That has since evolved into a common and effective practice that includes ‘in-land’ cities as equal players to the decentralised development praxis. They span political, human capital, social, technical, economic, cultural, and financial (Gunawan, 2023). In this paper, that refers to intercity cooperation regardless of the geopolitical location of the partnering cities. For Hope (2016), these city alliances include knowledge or expertise transfer partnerships. The author notes that South African cities face a myriad of challenges, *inter alia*, sewerage, load shedding, skills scarcity, economic stagnation, rampant crime, and lack of water and sanitation; partnerships present better prospects of overcoming these. This approach is within the broader agenda of sustainable urban development that Meyer and Auriacombe (2019) regard as local partnerships to bolster socio-economic and political development in urban communities and make cities the hubs of top-notch development. The advent of smart cities as a concept and practice in urban development discourse has made these calls for DDC even louder.

According to Chilunjika and Chilunjika (2021), the need for subnational government units to resolve a plethora of challenges spurs them to explore alternative solutions like intercity development partnerships. The United Nations began recognising intercity development partnerships as a feasible and effective way of mending fences after the Second World War when previous hostile countries formed these twinning arrangements with former foes. This recognition happened in 1971. An encouraging statistic regarding city-to-city development partnerships is by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) (2023), which shows that between 2015 and 2021, there was a 30 per cent rise in their use, underscoring the increasing relevance of these partnerships globally, South Africa included. These cooperation arrangements were also originally meant to foster peace, goodwill, and education exchanges.

Intercity development partnerships have also been effective vehicles of social inclusion across regions regarding economic and social development. Having been popularised during global recovery from war, they attempted to create a more progressive post-conflict and disaster world. According to De Villiers et al. (2007), DDCs were established through the Lome Convention of 1990, which emphasised the importance of non-state actors in promoting sustainable local development led by subnational government units. In addition, it has been proven that 70 per cent of the cities globally are somewhat engaged in different models of partnerships to foster mutually beneficial development (OECD, 2023). Principally, these types of partnerships are crafted to suit the form of governance structure within individual cities from the national government tier, which determines individual cities' autonomy on their resident welfare (Hameiri, Jones & Heathershaw, 2020).

Bontenbal and Van Lindert (2008) observe that agreements between cities in the developed and those in the developing world have an impact on the governance culture of partners. Principally, governance is critical to sustainable urban development (Blasiet *al.*, 2022), and it is conceptualised as the system of values, policies, and institutions via which a society organises collective decision-making (Holzhacker & Agussalim, 2019). Molepo (2021) regards these partnerships as an avenue that a municipality can utilise to pool resources for its council towards developing its local economy. This phenomenon has emerged due to rapid globalisation and the flow of information worldwide (Barnes *et al.*,

2022). Developmental partnerships at the city or municipal level in the modern 21st-century can drive accelerated urban development since they have now begun to target technocratic spectrums in structure and emphasis (Ryan & Mazzilli, 2023).

In South Africa, where a decentralised model of government is in operation, intercity developmental partnerships enjoy more autonomy since the local sphere of government, comprising cities and municipalities, is devolved from the central government (Moodley, 2020). Chapter Three of the South African Constitution (1996) established the three spheres of government that are characterised by being autonomous, interdependent and interrelated (Diedericks, 2022). These are the national, provincial, and local spheres. The 1998 White Paper on Local Government empowers municipalities to forge partnerships with other countries and related entities autonomously to promote local economic development (Phungula, 2023). According to Camagu and Magam (2023), the Municipal International Relations Framework of 1998 is another regulation that promotes shared values as a means of local economic development within sustainable urban development. In the modern sense, the decentralised development cooperation practice has moved away from a traditional obsession with financial resources to include broader and diverse dimensions, such as sharing technical expertise and capacity-building exchanges to promote development (Xu *et al.*, 2023). Such a focus is critical in sharing information on how smart cities and related capacities can be built and continuously expanded. Understandably, decentralised development cooperation practices in the 4IR era have solely focused on how the cities in the developed world can help those in the developing south build and maintain the capacity to have that needed impetus for sustainable urban development (Signe, 2023).

Soininvaara (2022) identifies potential obstacles within intercity development partnerships regarding the power dynamics and the issue of subsidiarity, where one city dictates and leadership the leader role in the partnership. This stems from the innate fact that developed world cities have exposure to abundant expertise and, at times, resources, which they usually implore their developing world counterparts to emulate or adopt towards better urban development (Soininvaara, 2022). Ondiviela (2021) posits that, with the flow of resources and skills previously relegated to foreign humanitarian aid, the cooperation partnership agreements are thus centred on how this aid and expertise can be effective in making

living standards for populations in the poor communities of the developing world improve and bring along the merits of sustainable development. One idea of this transformation was how smart cities can drive sustainable solutions from the developed to the developing world (Ondiviela, 2021). Similarly, Pojani (2020) notes that intercity development partnerships are a better strategy for cities in developing countries to wean themselves from aid dependency towards building their capacity to engage local stakeholders in delivering services and development for urban conurbations.

For Pinkse and Kolk (2012), this inclusiveness ameliorates the participation gap that innately emerges when intervention is solely done by one authority, usually the local city. For Beatley and Brown (2021), DDCs are a global agenda for city-based diplomacy (para-diplomacy), driving the demands for equal development for communities worldwide. This author notes that intercity partnerships are a further way to ensure that expert human capital that sustainably drives urban development flows to cities in developing countries. These are mutual partnerships that encourage smart collaboration, which refers to digital partnerships that fully employ smart strategies and technologies for urban development. Thus, cities in South Africa have huge prospects and opportunities to drive their sustainable urban development through these arrangements.

1.3 Literature Review

The 11th Sustainable Development Goal explicitly states the agenda to, ‘make cities inclusive, safe, resilient, and sustainable’ (Roser, 2023). Russ and Krasny (2017) further argue that this goal grants the world a blueprint for the operational values that cities must utilise, share, and promote in the emerging urban world, encompassing cities’ expansion and creating futuristic conurbations. This focus is critical to living standards in the modern era because, as put by Zou and Zhao (2023), the communities in urban areas have become more industrialised, and a status *quo* that above half of the world’s population is domiciled in cities is forecasted to exponentially rise beyond seventy per cent by 2050 (Hope, 2016). Therefore, it calls for an amplification of better strategies towards ensuring that urban and city development is sustainably managed to meet the rising demand for services and the ballooning commodities (Bandauko & Nutifafa-Arku, 2023). Further to the

preceding, urban and local sustainable development debates have become more pronounced, especially in intercity development partnerships (Tjandradewi & Berse, 2011).

Primarily, sustainable urban development is related to sustainable development, and this concept emerged in the early 1990s in the urban planning discourse. This includes an argument by Angelidou *et al.* (2018), who posit that a condition when a city is perceived to be sustainable suffices when its production conditions not diminish over time the conditions of its reproduction. Sustainable development is a kind of intergenerational solidarity by which the existing generations in society determinedly consume and pollute less, so that forthcoming generations can enjoy the equivalent or even enhanced living conditions (Stanley *et al.*, 2023). Principally, the desired outcome is a state where cities are more liveable and wealthier than before, consume fewer resources, and minimise human activity's environmental impact (Angelidou *et al.*, 2018). That development must focus on equity and inclusivity, propelling humanity beyond the Earth's planetary boundaries and abilities (Mayer & Nguyen-Long, 2021).

These cooperative development arrangements are hugely reliant on utilising the territorial approach, where the partnership serves as an effective conduit to enhance the adoption and implementation of a territorial framework in terms of urban development and reducing social vulnerability and other challenges related to poverty and urban underdevelopment. In the context of the paper, these can include the need to ensure that South African cities have their own localised models of sustainable urban community development. In particular, these cooperation partnerships can be effective for South African cities; despite being global financial and commerce hubs, there are still challenges of inequality, poverty, and poor urban living standards (Nganje, 2024).

A significant challenge that cities in South Africa face is urban sprawl, which has seen the urban population rise and increased demand for services and community development (Mabin, 2021). Molepo (2021) identifies rapid urbanisation as one key driver for municipalities and subnational government units to seek alternatives to drive localised development. Another feature of municipal international cooperation is their multi-level governance, where these intercity collaborations establish multi-layered governance that is integrated and coordinated for the attainment of utmost effectiveness while taking into account the local

and regional (and sub-regional) context as a way of tailor-making interventions to the different demands (Ndebele-Murisa *et al.*, 2020). Thus making these voluntary, tailor-made and not coercive arrangements. This is because modern cities are hugely dependent on some superior decision-making levels, which are typically segmented via regional, national, or even international levels that collectively have a significant influence on the institutional administration of the local level of government in a city (Yang & Wang, 2023). Such a principle ensures a tailor-made solution to the relative challenges of a particular city's context and does away with using a blanket approach to promoting urban development (Ndebele-Murisa *et al.*, 2020). Hence, the fundamental merit of these partnerships is anchored on the enjoyment of autonomy by city authorities in auctioning them, thus birthing localised sustainable urban development.

Foundationally, South African cities (or municipalities) derive this autonomy from Section 151(3) of the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa (1996) which stipulates that subnational units of government have a self-governing autonomy (Republic of South Africa, 1996). Phungula (2023) concurs that the ushering in of the devolved system of government in South Africa builds an excellent impetus for promoting localised development, which can be furthered through cooperative arrangements. According to Molepo (2021) as well as Van der Walddt and Fourie (2023), Section 152 of the 1996 Constitution of South Africa empowers municipalities to structure and manage their administrations, promoting autonomous local socio-economic (and urban) development in their jurisdictions. This autonomy is advantageous to the 'grassroots' government in South Africa (Scheepers & Schwella, 2015).

Intercity partnerships are characteristic of rural-urban connectivity, ensuring that development is dissected through rural enclaves and urban conurbations (OECD, 2023). Cowie *et al.* (2020) argue that urban development must not impinge on the rights and abilities of adjacent rural areas to benefit from these partnerships, especially when the city has urban and rural wards. Outlying rural areas must be considered in the face of massive rural-urban development. In addition, these cooperative development concessions are anchored on monitoring and evaluation, which considers the various national and local contexts in building evidence-based development. Such a practice enables the documentation of the impacts of cooperation in resolving challenges and making feasible

recommendations for future improvements of these partnerships. This paper suggests that South African cities must anchor their partnerships on data utilisation through periodic monitoring and evaluation to drive data-informed decision-making. A cognate feature of DDCs is the ability to utilise and benefit from peer-to-peer learning, by which all involved partners derive mutual benefit from their partnerships by getting support and reviewing the partnerships (Park, 2020).

Decentralised development cooperation partnerships can further positively impact information and technical expertise, policy formulation, decision-making, institutional building, human capital development, change management, implementation, and analysis of policies (Tjandradewi & Berse, 2011). In this case, this paper focuses on how partnerships can bring the policy transfer impact. According to Shefer (2019), policy transfer denotes the form of a mechanism through which knowledge (and expertise) about policies, administrative arrangements, institutions, and ideas in one political system is used in formulating the policies, administrative arrangements, institutions, and ideas in another political system. Within the context of DDC, the aspect of peer partners sharing ideas creates an expectation that the cities from the developed world can bring best practice lessons and expertise to their developing country partners (Haupt *et al.*, 2020).

Principally, these partnerships inherently promote capacity development, where they lead to the improvement of the capacity of local city administrations through skills transfers and the practical application of city-to-city partnerships (Haupt *et al.*, 2020). This author of the current paper construes that the 4IR era has amplified calls for industrialised countries with advanced technologies to host or administer some smart governance tools without emphasising the need to ensure skills transfers for future partnerships (Chaka, 2023). For South African cities, this is particularly critical, especially given that local cities need to devise methods that fit local demands and become active role players in the 4IR.

An additional cardinal pillar for successful cooperation is stakeholder engagement, where all relevant role players get involved in implementing sustainable urban development partnerships (OECD, 2023). While this poses a potential challenge to the partnership, requiring addressing the individual interests and expectations of the different partners, it is an effective way of solving urban sustainability and development challenges (Clarke & MacDonald, 2019). Mayer and Long (2021) made a similar

observation by critiquing intercity development partnerships as elitist and laced with private interests with little consideration for the poorest of the poor.

For Nisbert and Schaller (2020), attaining sustainable urban development is no longer the sole prerogative of government entities; other stakeholders get on board to augment the government's efforts to provide sustainable services. Boyle, Harlow, and Keeler (2023) argue that such a yardstick ensures that the cooperation gets a wealthy assortment of expertise that promotes sustainable urban community development. Clarke and MacDonald (2019) observe that multiple stakeholders also guarantee a large pool of financial capital to solve social problems that may hamper sustainable urban development effectively.

1.4 Research Methodology

This paper utilised an unobtrusive research methodology through desktop research where the concept and practice of decentralised development cooperation were thematically analysed under various themes. Principally, this method involved the analysis of scholarly literature and existing records on an identified theme that the researcher focuses on. This method is also referred to as the systematic literature review. Such an analysis is undertaken by identifying strands that the researcher can use to examine existing literature, often under the guise of documentary research or bibliometric analysis. For this manuscript, the search criteria were narrowed down to peer-reviewed journal articles, books, and book chapters due to the high impact factor of these sources. The search criteria in the research stables mentioned below were limited to sources that were at most ten years old due to the recency factor required in the literature review. The author searched full-text journal articles, book chapters, and scholarly databases published between 2014 and 2024 with few exceptions. These exceptions were for high-impact articles that were older than ten years. The search terms and phrases encompassed; 'decentralised development cooperation', 'municipal internal relations' 'twinning', 'para-diplomacy', 'intercity partnership', 'municipal international cooperation', 'urban community development', and 'South African municipal partnerships'. From the 500 downloaded articles, the author cleaned and remained with 86 articles after meticulous filtration (see PRISMA illustration in Figure 1). The author thematically analysed the data, mainly focusing on themes that included 'current

South African cooperation partnerships, their link to urban development, and challenges affecting their efficacy.

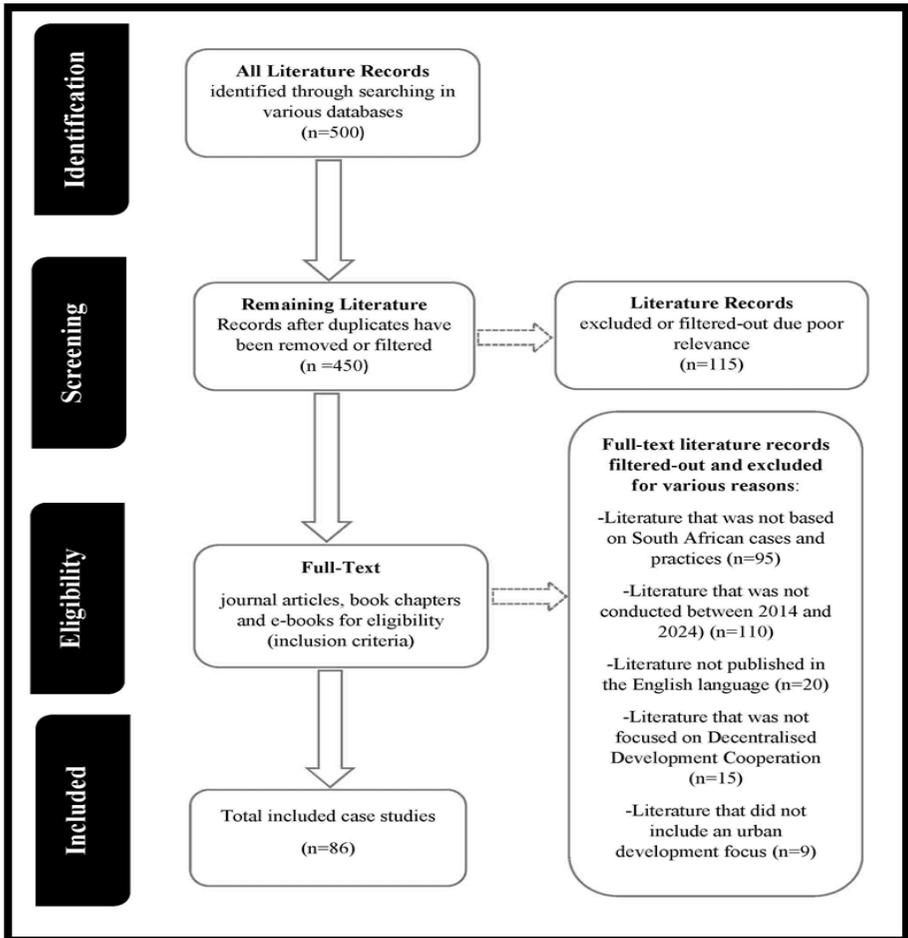


Figure 1: PRISMA framework used for bibliometric analysis in the study
Source: Adapted from Okunlola *et al.* (2024:4)

Regarding the theoretical framework, the author used what Perti Joenniemi in 2017 branded the concept of ‘love’ or ‘friendship’. This theoretical premise is anchored on ‘friendship’, viewed in the broader context of inter-territorial relations between subnational government units. Furthermore, this theory is founded on mutual trust and sacrifice, which determine identities and feelings of mutual belonging. The

formalisation of this 'love' can be further expressed through a mutual endorsement of the love relationship through an advanced state of 'marriage'. Janczak (2017) construed that, in some cases, the relationship does not need a 'marriage' *per se* since it will be based on deep-sited togetherness borne out of the 'love'. While young 'couples' will have to formalise their relationship through an official 'marriage' for mutual control and mutual benefit and the expectations of the surrounding environments from which they are domiciled. Thus, for this paper, the decentralised development partnerships are tangible outcomes of 'love' and, at times, 'marriage' where partnerships mutually benefit through sharing knowledge, resources, and expertise on sustainable urban development. The partners are equal players in the relationship. Thus, the above theory aligns with the paper in that partnerships are voluntary and friendly and occur between or among voluntarily willing partners without coercion. This analogy is used to hypothesise the existence of relations between cities and municipalities globally.

1.5 Discussion

This analysis is premised on the themes mentioned in the research methodology section of the manuscript based on three selected cities: the City of Johannesburg, the City of eThekweni, and uMhlathuze. Nganje (2021) writes that the City of Johannesburg has been a member of the United Cities for Local Governments, a consortium of global cities that fosters collaborations for sustainable urban service delivery. Other cities in this development partnership include Freetown, Dakar, Durban, and Tunis (Grayson *et al.*, 2020). Nganje (2024) noted that city-to-city partnerships were always on the City of Johannesburg's agenda, which commenced cooperation through the Municipal International Relations Policy of 2001, centring on the city committing to twinning collaborations in projects, thus promoting urban development. Since its inception, the City of Johannesburg's intercity partnership practice has shown that decentralised development can drive the subnational government's economic development (Nganje, 2014). This cooperation agreement is one avenue through which the city can get expertise and other derivatives from its partners for improved urban governance. Moodley (2020) highlights the growing need for South African cities to take advantage of intercity partnership opportunities to facilitate the flow of information and expertise because of various mentorship

opportunities emanating from especially the United Cities for Local Governments.

For the City of eThekweni, its cooperation agreement with the city of Dakar is premised on the partnerships of these cities on issues of urban security that promote the security of persons in urban areas, including women, towards the United Nations Sustainable Development Agenda of 2030 (Grayson *et al.*, 2020). This cooperation has been negatively impacted by insufficient resources and ample monitoring and evaluation arrangements for improved realisation of intervention and project outcomes (Grayson *et al.*, 2020). Similarly, the C40 Cities Climate Leadership has eThekweni, Freetown, Amsterdam, Accra, Lisbon, Paris, and Milan, whose agenda is to promote urban climate resilience. Within this arrangement, there is an emphasis on climate-proofing urban areas. The City of eThekweni has not only forged cooperation with partners in the north, as seen in the following case. Chilunjika and Chilunjika (2021) analysed that the south-south cooperation inspired the partnership between the City of Bulawayo and the City of eThekweni, which has seen the sharing of ideas in sustainable water and sanitation service management.

The author additionally analysed the uMhlathuze-Milwaukee cooperation that is based on the exchange of technologies. A close analysis of this partnership indicates that the local city could benefit from its American partner city, a renowned citadel of technology-driven urban development. However, this partnership has not yielded much economic benefit to uMhlathuze because there is no clarity on how the exchanges can unfold. In concordance, Magam (2021) identifies the absence of vivid legal, policy, and institutional frameworks guiding partnerships as a massive impediment to their efficacy in South Africa. Similarly, such a scenario creates an obscure scenario where municipalities can only enter into cooperation in principle without the finer details of how those relationships can be exploited for their benefit. Similarly, the City of Johannesburg's participation in the United Cities for Local Governments was littered with fragmentation, poor regulations, absence of proactive practices, and piecemeal participation by the city within the partnership. Additionally, superficial agreements lack the vital cogs of cooperation, such as trust, solidarity, loyalty, and reciprocity, which are crucial to a successful development-oriented partnership, especially in urban areas. The challenge or absence of these affects how cities can effectively share

resources and expertise and continuously improve relations (Joenniemi, 2017).

Additionally, the intercity development partnerships incorporating South African partner cities are dominantly premised on two or more parties entering into a memorandum of understanding on that cooperation. Ideally, these agreements are non-binding agreements devoid of partner city responsibilities. Magam (2021) identifies the Benguela-eThekweni development cooperation, which is merely an agreement on cooperation in various local economic development projects that have yet to be operationalised. Arguably, the lack of effective, realisable return on investment if partnerships are down to the subnational government units in South Africa using their autonomy to cooperate with sister cities independent from the national tier of government, which is the custodian of the macro foreign policy issues, therefore the propensity of poor twinning practices in local government. Further, the standard practice that sees autonomous cities undertaking cooperation partnerships in South Africa has led to haphazard and unsynchronised local government cooperation practices that compound the ill of poor cooperative government within the Republic. Phungula (2023) takes notice of inhibitors of successful partnership to be the absence of political will in those running cities in South Africa, poor monitoring and evaluation of these practices, and the absence of expertise to include such arrangements in the strategic plans of individual cities. The author notes these as prevalent obstacles hampering this paper's analysed cooperative agreements.

A closer analysis of existing cooperation arrangements in South African cities shows the lack of budgetary support, which is critical to operationalising cooperation. The author further established that capacity and competency issues can also be addressed using the decentralised development cooperation related to expertise and knowledge sharing (Wilson, 2023). The absence of citizen consultation, whenever a local government entity decides to enter a cooperation partnership, is a persistent challenge in South African municipalities. From another angle, the study found that intercity development partnerships are a practice that will get even more popular, especially given the growing impact of globalisation within the 4IR era, thus presenting opportunities for local government entities in South Africa. The local government sector in South Africa feels both the positive and negative impacts of globalisation (Sihlongonyane, 2020). Positive impacts include the rapid proliferation of

technologies that transform localities (and urban conurbations), while negative impacts could take the form of pressure to adapt to growing trends, which is hugely dependent on resources' availability. Moreover, decentralised development cooperation partnerships, such as the United Cities for Local Governments, are dominated by players in the global north, which leaves southern partners playing second fiddle in the process, which impedes this friendship in yielding positive fruit for South African cities and municipalities.

From the preceding discussions, there is an assortment of prospects for improving urban development through intercity partnerships. This paper implores cities in South Africa to explore better ways of pitching and benefiting from their partnerships to better deal with their existing challenges. This includes how the discussed cities must up the ante to promote sustainable urban development, build resilience, and improve living standards. These cities grapple with housing issues, with some of their residents living in settlements that need to be more suitable for human habitation. Such has affected the standards of living in some of its localities.

Furthermore, this author acknowledges that multi-stakeholder partnerships are influential and necessary in municipal-international cooperation, especially when it comes to how the expertise and policy ideas can flow from the global north to the global south in terms of how governance and the need to ground urban development on green solutions, good governance, people-centeredness, and climate change adaptation can be vital in expediting local urban development and service delivery. The spectrum of eco-friendly solutions can also be another lesson South Africa can learn to improve its city-to-city partnership practices. This relates to creating environmentally friendly solutions to solid waste management, sewerage management, and other urban activities for creating resilient smart cities.

The paper brings in how data collection on indicators of urban development is critical to the pursuance of the 11th Sustainable Development Goal, especially when blended with monitoring and evaluation. This is another lesson that local cities can learn mainly, when indicators on the progress of urban sustainability are determined periodically, constant data is collected and analysed, and decisions are made that are informed by such data. Despite the challenges established in this study, in case studies of the City of Johannesburg, City of eThekweni, uMhlathuze, and other local arrangements, there is a need to

surge further from the current practice of partnerships towards a more equitable, synchronised, and beneficial practice. There is an urgent need for these cooperation agreements to be supported by relevant entities like the South African Local Government Association and the Department of Cooperative Government and Traditional Affairs towards a standardised and synchronised practice. Succinctly, there exists a plethora of best practices for decentralised development cooperation that cities in South Africa, which enjoy a great deal of autonomy and independence from central government, can adopt and implement to transform their service delivery and planning towards realisation and sustaining sustainable urban development.

In the context of sustainable urban development, Shefer (2019) cites the Tel Aviv and Berlin intercity development partnership premised on creating green solutions and urban development sustainability issues that can create sustainable smart cities and reduce emissions. Arguably, the author notes that smart governance and creating cleaner, greener urban conurbations are excellent avenues for cooperation in South Africa due to heightened urban emissions **that contribute** to pollution and climate change. This paper further commends decentralised development cooperation related to climate change and resilient building, which comes at a time when natural disasters like floods have bashed South African municipalities and cities. Developmental partnerships are instrumental in alleviating the impact of these disasters, as well as the focus on reducing greenhouse gas emissions and moving towards a renewable and regenerative economy. This intercity cooperation arrangement is a typical example of an urban development-premised partnership in the transitional era when the world is moving towards regenerative energy.

1.6 Conclusions and Recommendations

The manuscript discussed the prospects of decentralised development cooperation to transform the living standards of city dwellers. From the discussions, it has been established that there are variant opportunities for all the cities in South Africa to expedite sustainable urban development; chief to this are intercity developmental partnerships. The author also implores city planners and managers to promote sparing consumption of resources to ensure that urban living standards keep an exponential trajectory towards better lives for future generations. Therefore, subnational government units such as South African cities

must explore strategies to attain such equilibrium and smart city governance. The paper additionally suggests the following as some of the strategies that the cities in South Africa have to consider towards promoting and sustaining urban development to make cities more inclusive, liveable, and sustainable in sync with the United Nations' agenda for sustainable development by 2030.

First, cities need to entrench sustainable urban development in their spatial and urban planning processes to ensure that the use of smart solutions to urban development. This can further be augmented by using city-to-city partnerships to inform this planning by sharing expertise. Second, cities must use their autonomy to forge other partnerships, especially when harnessing informal sectors and creating liveable cities. In a 'global village' of the 4IR, better options for sharing information and resources have been created. The formalisation of the informal sector and the creation of habitable human settlements need to be on top of such an agenda. Third, the legislative arm of government in South Africa needs to expedite the regularisation of further local government autonomy through enabling statutes, regulations, and policies that promote further autonomy while concurrently synchronising these intercity partnerships for easy coordination. Fourth, the cities in the local context must explore forging beneficial intercity collaborations that can pool resources and experts together by going beyond the signature of memoranda of understanding and providing further modalities on how these collaborations are implemented. The Departments of Cooperative Governance and Traditional Affairs and the International Relations and Cooperation could offer expertise and guidance on how South African government subnational units can best establish, retain, and benefit from twinning partnerships. This author acknowledges how paradiplomacy has become a conduit for pursuing effective national government-level partnerships. Fifth, cities should utilise meritorious appointments and build their capacities to ensure that critical teams are led and constituted by competent human capital, including the sections dealing with intercity cooperation. Last, there is a need to ensure that leadership buy-in is omnipresent in pursuing sustainable urban development and that all key positions have meritorious officers who can even move this city-to-city collaboration to great heights. Overall, human capacity is an enabler of organisational capacity in city governance.

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