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# Actor Asymmetries and Sustainable Development Outcomes in Sister City Relationships

**Stivani Ismawira Sinambela[1]*, Apriwan[2], Ahmad Sahide[3]**

[1] Department of International Relations, Universitas Potensi Utama, Indonesia

[2] Department of International Relations, Universitas Andalas, Indonesia

[3] Department of International Relations, Universitas Muhammadiyah Yogyakarta, Indonesia

*Corresponding Author Email: stivani@potensi-utama.ac.id

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## Abstract

*Sister City Relationships (SCRs) have become an important instrument of paradiplomacy through which local governments engage in international cooperation to support local development. Yet, despite operating within similar decentralisation frameworks, SCRs produce divergent outcomes, ranging from failure and stagnation to sustained cooperation. Existing studies largely explain these variations through policy change, institutional capacity, and human resources, while the role of asymmetric relations remains underexplored. This study examines Medan's partnerships with Milwaukee (United States), Gwangju (South Korea), Penang (Malaysia), and Ichikawa (Japan) through a qualitative case study informed by Asymmetry Theory. The findings identify three interrelated dimensions shaping cooperation outcomes: coordination, relational, and collaboration. In the coordination dimension, asymmetries between state and sub-state actors are associated with cooperation failure where hierarchical relations constrain local action. In the relational dimension, asymmetries between sub-state and non-state actors contribute to programme stagnation when local governments fail to accommodate non-state actors' interests and expectations. By contrast, asymmetries between partner cities within the collaboration dimension can facilitate knowledge transfer, resource complementarity, and capacity building, thereby supporting successful cooperation. The study demonstrates that asymmetric relations are an inherent feature of SCRs and an important explanatory factor in variations in cooperation outcomes. The findings also underscore the relevance of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) 11 and 17 by highlighting effective local governance and multi-stakeholder partnerships.*

**Keywords:** *Asymmetric Relations; Paradiplomacy; Sister City Relationships*

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## Introduction

Over recent decades, global diplomacy has undergone significant transformation, driven by globalisation, decentralisation, and the increasing involvement of sub-state governments in international affairs. This transformation has expanded the role of local governments in addressing transnational issues that directly affect urban development, including trade and investment, migration, climate change, and sustainable development. The growing international engagement of sub-state actors is commonly conceptualised as paradiplomacy (Cornago, 2010; de Villiers, 2009; Lecours, 2008; Liu & Song, 2020). Paradiplomacy reflects the increasing complexity of global challenges that can no longer be addressed exclusively through diplomacy conducted by central governments. As globalisation intensifies economic, social, and environmental interdependence, issues such as trade, investment, migration, and climate change increasingly require the involvement of sub-state actors that are directly affected by their consequences (Mauad & Betsill, 2019; Ryan & Mazzilli, 2021; Smith, 2019; Surmacz, 2018). In many countries, decentralisation and regional autonomy have consequently expanded the scope for local governments to establish direct relationships with international partners. Such interactions may also influence national foreign policy and enable sub-state governments to pursue international strategies that reflect local development interests (Clarke, 2009; Cornago, 2016).

Although paradiplomacy has expanded opportunities for decentralised international cooperation worldwide, local governments in many Global South countries continue to face significant challenges in translating international partnerships into tangible development outcomes. Compared with their counterparts in many developed countries, local governments in the Global South often operate within more constrained governance arrangements, uneven institutional capacities, limited financial resources, and varying levels of stakeholder participation (Akther & Evans, 2024; Bhanye, 2025; Yasmin et al., 2023). These structural conditions can limit the effectiveness of decentralised international cooperation and the capacity of local governments to utilise international partnerships as instruments of sustainable development. These challenges are particularly relevant to Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities), especially Target 11.3 on inclusive and sustainable urbanisation, and SDG 17 (Partnerships for the Goals), particularly Targets 17.16 and 17.17, which emphasise international cooperation and effective multi-stakeholder partnerships.

Subnational governments across the Global South have increasingly engaged in international cooperation as part of broader efforts to address local development challenges. In Brazil, for example, municipalities have developed transnational cooperation networks and international partnerships as instruments of local development and internationalisation, despite the absence of a fully established constitutional framework for municipal international action (Milani & Ribeiro, 2011). Similarly, South African provinces and municipalities have increasingly undertaken paradiplomatic activities since the post-apartheid period, particularly in pursuit of developmental objectives. These practices, however, have also revealed challenges in

aligning subnational initiatives with national priorities (Nganje, 2014). These experiences suggest that paradiplomacy in the Global South is shaped not only by the growing international agency of subnational governments but also by the institutional, political, and resource asymmetries within which such cooperation takes place.

Indonesia reflects many of these broader challenges. Following the Reformasi period, decentralisation significantly expanded the authority of local governments and created greater scope for subnational participation in international affairs. Law No. 22/1999 on Local Government marked an important shift towards regional autonomy by granting local governments greater authority to manage local resources and development priorities. Decentralisation involves the transfer of governmental responsibilities from the central government to autonomous regions and has transformed political, administrative, and fiscal relations between levels of government (Acharya & Scott, 2022; Miranda-Lescano et al., 2023; Y. Li et al., 2023). The decentralisation framework was subsequently further developed through Law No. 32/2004 on Regional Government, which broadened the scope of regional authority and supported a shift from predominantly inward-looking towards more outward-looking local governance (Mukti, 2013). This institutional transformation created greater opportunities for local governments to engage in international cooperation as part of their development strategies. Nevertheless, such activities remain embedded within Indonesia's unitary state system and must respect national interests, state stability and security, and the principle of a One Door Policy in relations with foreign partners (Sidik, 2019).

Within this evolving institutional framework, Sister City Relationships (SCRs) have become one of the principal forms of international cooperation undertaken by Indonesian local governments. Indonesia's experience with SCRs dates to the 1960 agreement between Bandung and Braunschweig, Germany, a partnership that has subsequently undergone periodic renewal. According to Nuralam (2018), approximately 82 SCR partnerships were recorded among 35 provincial capitals in Indonesia. Figure 1 presents the distribution of SCR performance based on reported activity levels. Approximately 65% of these partnerships were categorised as inactive or problematic, whereas only 35% demonstrated good or very good performance (Nuralam, 2018). This uneven performance is particularly significant in relation to SDGs 11 and 17 because SCRs can provide institutional channels for knowledge transfer, capacity building, and collaborative development initiatives. The high proportion of inactive or problematic partnerships, however, indicates that the potential developmental benefits of decentralised international cooperation are not automatically realised.

SCRs have increasingly been recognised as an important instrument for promoting local development through decentralised international cooperation. Existing studies emphasise their potential contributions to economic development, knowledge transfer, cultural exchange, and local capacity building. SCR partnerships can facilitate the exchange of expertise, technology, and good practices between partner cities, enabling local governments to strengthen public services, urban management, and development planning (Kong et al., 2025; Zhang et al., 2025). They can also help cities expand

international networks, attract investment, stimulate tourism, and enhance local competitiveness in an increasingly globalised environment (He et al., 2025; Zhang & Liu, 2023). More recent scholarship has highlighted the contribution of SCRs to sustainable urban development through environmental cooperation, smart-city initiatives, and policy learning among local governments (Berniak-Woźny et al., 2025; Kipkemoi et al., 2025; Prasittisopin et al., 2024; Ulung et al., 2025). The literature therefore generally portrays SCRs as a strategic mechanism through which local governments can pursue development objectives while strengthening their international engagement.




Figure 1. Distribution of Sister City Relationship Performance
Source: Nuralam (2018)

Despite these potential benefits, the outcomes of SCR partnerships remain uneven, and many fail to generate the anticipated development outcomes. Previous studies have primarily explained the success or failure of SCRs through internal and external determinants. External factors include policy changes affecting partner cities and shifts in the wider international environment (Mahardika & Darmawan, 2020), whereas internal factors include institutional capacity, human resources, and political support from central and local governments (Sinambela, 2019). Although this literature identifies policy continuity, institutional capacity, and human resources as important determinants of SCR performance, it pays limited attention to how asymmetric relations among state, sub-state, and non-state actors shape cooperation outcomes. Consequently, existing scholarship provides only a partial explanation for why SCRs operating under similar institutional and regulatory conditions can generate markedly different outcomes, ranging from failure and stagnation to sustained cooperation.

This limitation is particularly important in the Indonesian context. Indonesia's decentralised governance within a unitary state, the expansion of paradiplomacy, and increasing economic interdependence have created uneven distributions of authority, responsibility, resources, and influence among the actors involved in SCRs. These asymmetric relations may emerge across different stages and levels of cooperation, including coordination between state and sub-state actors, relations between sub-state and non-state actors, and collaboration between partner cities. Yet their implications for cooperation outcomes remain insufficiently understood. This gap raises an important theoretical puzzle: why do Sister City Relationships operating within the same decentralisation framework and regulatory environment generate different cooperation outcomes? To address this question, the study examines how asymmetric relations shape SCR outcomes across three dimensions: coordination between state and sub-state actors, relations between sub-state and non-state actors, and collaboration between partner cities. In doing so, it seeks to explain why some partnerships fail, others stagnate, and others develop into sustained forms of cooperation.

This study contributes to the paradiplomacy literature in three ways. First, it extends the application of Asymmetry Theory beyond interstate relations to the analysis of decentralised international cooperation involving sub-state and non-state actors. Second, it identifies asymmetric relations as an explanatory mechanism for variations in cooperation outcomes beyond established explanations based on institutional capacity, human resources, and policy continuity. Third, it demonstrates that asymmetric relations do not necessarily exert uniformly negative effects; rather, their implications vary across the coordination, relational, and collaboration dimensions of SCRs. By linking these differentiated forms of asymmetry to variations in cooperation outcomes, the study provides a more relational explanation of how local international partnerships function and contributes to broader debates on effective local governance, sustainable urban development, and multi-stakeholder cooperation.

## Research Methods

This study employs a qualitative descriptive research design. The research was conducted in two phases within the context of the Sister City landscape in Indonesia, focusing on provincial capitals that have a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with partner cities abroad. The stages of data collection and analysis are presented in Figure 2. The first phase employed document-based and web-based data collection to map the activities, management practices, and performance of Indonesian Sister City Relationships. Data were collected from official local government websites, cooperation reports, policy documents, peer-reviewed scientific articles relevant to this study, and publicly available records related to Sister City Relationships.

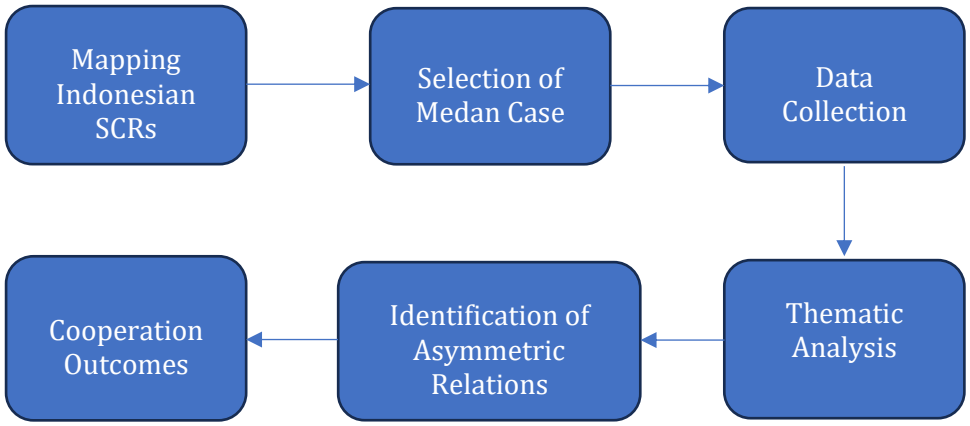



Figure 2. Stages of Data Collection and Analysis
Source: Processed by the Authors (2026)

The second phase of the research involved in-depth interviews to identify asymmetric relations that influence the success and failure of Medan City's SCRs. A total of six semi-structured, face-to-face interviews, lasting 30–90 minutes, were conducted with officers from the Regional Foreign Cooperation Section and stakeholders involved in SCRs, including community leaders, organisations, volunteers, and local businesses. Information on these respondents is presented in Table 1. The interviews aimed to identify asymmetric barriers in the relationships between the central and local governments, between local governments and communities, and between SCR partner cities. The interviews were supplemented by documents obtained during field visits and publications related to each SCR.

Table 1. Information about Respondents
Source: Processed by the Authors (2026)

| Sister City Actor (SCA) Label | Classification of Actor | Detailed Interviewee Position |
|---|---|---|
| SCA 1 | Sub-State Actor | State Government Officials |
| SCA 2 | Sub-State Actor | Council Officials |
| SCA 3 | Sub-State Actor | Sister City Committee |
| SCA 4 | Non-State Actor | Community: Stakeholders 1 |
| SCA 5 | Non-State Actor | Community: Stakeholders 2 |
| SCA 6 | Non-State Actor | Society: Stakeholders 3 |

The interview transcripts and secondary documents were analysed using thematic analysis. Thematic analysis of the interview data underpinned the identification of asymmetric relationships across the coordination, relational, and collaboration

dimensions. The research also used secondary data from official documents covering the previous ten years. Accordingly, the study adopted a retrospective approach. Data analysis followed a triangulation approach. The first step was data reduction, in which the data were systematically reorganised based on patterns identified in the collected material. The second step was data verification, which involved summarising the reduced data thematically. The third step was data description, which involved presenting secondary data aligned with the research focus (Larasati et al., 2023). The data were then interpreted based on the study dimensions, relevant issues, indicators, and asymmetric patterns identified in the relationships among actors involved in SCRs.

## Results and Discussion

To explain these variations in cooperation outcomes, this study draws upon Asymmetry Theory developed by Womack (2004). The theory argues that relationships between actors are rarely equal and are often characterised by differences in power, authority, resources, capacity, and influence (Womack, 2004). While asymmetry is commonly associated with relations between strong and weak states, the concept can also be applied to interactions among actors operating within multilevel governance structures. In the context of Sister City Relationships, asymmetry emerges through unequal access and participation between sub-state and non-state actors, as well as differences in resources and capacities between partner cities. Among other considerations that may affect cooperation and economic relations between two cities, such as religion, distance, and national population, the population size of partner cities is also an important factor to consider (Cohen, 2020). These differences may create asymmetric relationships that influence the ability of partner cities to exchange resources, transfer knowledge, and achieve mutual benefits. Unlike conventional perspectives that view asymmetry solely as a source of domination or dependency, Asymmetry Theory suggests that unequal relationships may generate different outcomes depending on how actors manage their interactions and expectations. Therefore, asymmetry should not be understood merely as a constraint but as a relational condition that may lead to cooperation failure, stagnation, or success. Applying this perspective to Sister City Relationships enables a deeper understanding of why partnerships operating within similar institutional and regulatory environments often produce different cooperation outcomes.

In the study of Sister City Relationships, Indonesia faces particular challenges arising from relationships among actors with unequal authority and power. These challenges are associated with decentralisation policies, the dynamics of paradiplomacy, and economic interdependence in an increasingly interconnected world, which generate asymmetries across the coordination, relational, and collaboration dimensions.

The asymmetric coordination dimension refers to the relationship between the central government and local governments, where unequal authority gives rise to a vertical relationship. This coordination involves multiple actors in policy- and decision-making processes. These actors range from different levels of government to political

parties, bureaucrats, parliamentarians, and other stakeholders (Ruel et al., 2023). They may have different and sometimes conflicting interests across varied coalitions, making negotiations among actors complicated and time-consuming (Behnke & Mueller, 2017). Coordination among actors within the regional autonomy system concerns the distribution of authority and cooperation between territorial units within the state. Although this coordination involves elected executives at both local and central levels, the state remains the unitary actor with ultimate authority. The extension of this asymmetric coordination to SCR cooperation is therefore linked to the authority of each governmental unit. It involves formal meetings between ministers, senior officials, and public officers from different levels of government to capture and exchange views and ideas (Wright, 1988). One of the sources of asymmetric coordination between central and local governments is the unequal distribution of authority and resources, including budgets, infrastructure, and human resources. This situation may place local governments in a weaker position in negotiations and decision-making concerning the establishment of SCRs.

The asymmetric relational dimension occurs within social networks between sub-state and non-state actors. Sub-state actors refer to local governments involved in SCRs, while non-state actors may include various entities such as non-governmental organisations (NGOs), civil society groups, and private companies (Zhang & Liu, 2023). Over the past decade, Sister City initiatives have increasingly involved more inclusive practices (Ryan & Mazzilli, 2021), with programmes extending beyond the local government level to include various community groups. These groups may have roles and responsibilities in shaping their country's foreign relations (Mueller, 2008) and constitute an important and innovative component of global politics (Marchetti, 2021) as they pursue their respective agendas and interests. Citizen groups may act as messengers, initiators, lobbyists, and subverters (Sharp, 2001), as well as agents at sectoral, regional, and local levels. Rhodes (2008) recognises that asymmetric power exists within networks and relationships (Johnston, 2015). However, because these relationships involve the voluntary participation of actors seeking to "make something happen", no actor can simply command or coerce another hierarchically, even when the relationship remains asymmetric (Sørensen & Torfing, 2005). Although local governments possess the formal authority and political legitimacy to establish SCR cooperation, non-state actors can play a significant role in influencing and enriching such cooperation through national and international networks.

The asymmetric collaboration dimension refers to differences in resources, capacities, and influence between SCR partner cities. Such collaboration enables cities to strengthen networks and relationships for cultural and social exchange and to support the economic development of the cities and countries involved. Although SCR partnerships are intended to be mutually beneficial, in practice, some partnerships may have limited tangible impact and remain largely symbolic or based on friendly relations (Bandauko & Bobo, 2018). While SCR partnerships have historically served as mechanisms for maintaining good relations, over the past decade, partner cities have increasingly engaged in cooperation aimed at strengthening economic development. SCR

partnerships can therefore serve as a bridge for developing mutual benefits (Zhai, 2018), facilitating international trade, and connecting businesses with investment opportunities (Baycan-Levent et al., 2010; J. Li et al., 2019; Yao & Zhang, 2015). In addition to differences in the economic, social, and political development of partner cities, differences in city size and population may also contribute to asymmetric collaboration (Cohen, 2021).

Sister City Relationships (SCRs) constitute one of the most widely adopted instruments of paradiplomacy, enabling local governments to complement national diplomacy by addressing development challenges through decentralised international cooperation. Through city-to-city diplomacy, local governments can promote knowledge exchange, attract investment, strengthen institutional capacity, and support sustainable urban development. While some partnerships generate tangible economic and social benefits, many others stagnate, are discontinued, or fail to produce the expected outcomes. This variation suggests that understanding why some SCRs succeed while others fail is both theoretically and practically important. This study argues that asymmetric relations provide an important explanation for these different cooperation outcomes. Rather than treating asymmetry as a uniformly negative condition, this study conceptualises asymmetric relations as an inherent feature of SCRs. These asymmetric relationships are divided into three analytical dimensions according to the actors involved: (1) the coordination dimension, involving asymmetric relations between state and sub-state actors associated with the political hierarchy within Indonesia's autonomy system; (2) the relational dimension, involving asymmetric relations between sub-state and non-state actors concerning access to SCR cooperation; and (3) the collaboration dimension, involving asymmetric relations between SCR partner cities. Examining these three dimensions enables a more comprehensive understanding of how asymmetric relations shape the success, stagnation, or failure of Sister City cooperation.

Thus, the dynamics of Sister City cooperation cannot be understood merely as administrative shortcomings or limitations in local institutional capacity, but also as a reflection of broader patterns of power and authority distribution within multilevel governance. This finding is consistent with the broader paradiplomacy literature, which argues that decentralised international cooperation is shaped by complex interactions among multiple levels of governance rather than by local government capacity alone (Abbott & Faude, 2022; Hidayat et al., 2025; Kuznetsov, 2014). When state, sub-state, and non-state actors interact within decentralised cooperation frameworks, their relationships are rarely equal. Instead, they are shaped by hierarchical structures, unequal access to resources, and differing levels of political legitimacy (Sinambela et al., 2025). The asymmetries identified across the coordination, relational, and collaboration dimensions therefore illustrate how fragmented authority and unequal capacities may influence the direction and sustainability of cooperation. Consequently, a comprehensive understanding of both the success and failure of Sister City cooperation requires these local partnerships to be situated within the wider structure and dynamics of the international system.

The international system is characterised by increasing interdependence and asymmetric relationships among its constellation of actors. Although the state remains the primary reference point in international relations, multilevel and multidimensional relationships make the state system increasingly complex (Freire, 2017). States, international organisations, groups of states, diplomatic clubs, and non-state actors contribute to this complexity and make the global governance system increasingly diverse. Public diplomacy efforts by states and cities have developed alongside one another, contributing to the recognition of both as actors in global affairs (Buhmann, 2022).

The Dimensional Power Structure of Central and Local Governments in SCRs

This section examines the influence of asymmetric relations between state and sub-state actors, particularly in SCR cooperation. First, it identifies the meaning of asymmetry within the framework of SCR cooperation. Second, it explains the preferences of state and sub-state actors within these asymmetric relationships. Indonesia's foreign cooperation policy framework has evolved from Foreign Cooperation by Local Governments under Government Regulation No. 3/2008 to Regional Cooperation under Government Regulation No. 28/2018. This framework can be understood along two related axes: the central government axis and the decentralised local government axis, with both reflecting the relationship between SCR-based coordination and hierarchical political coordination.

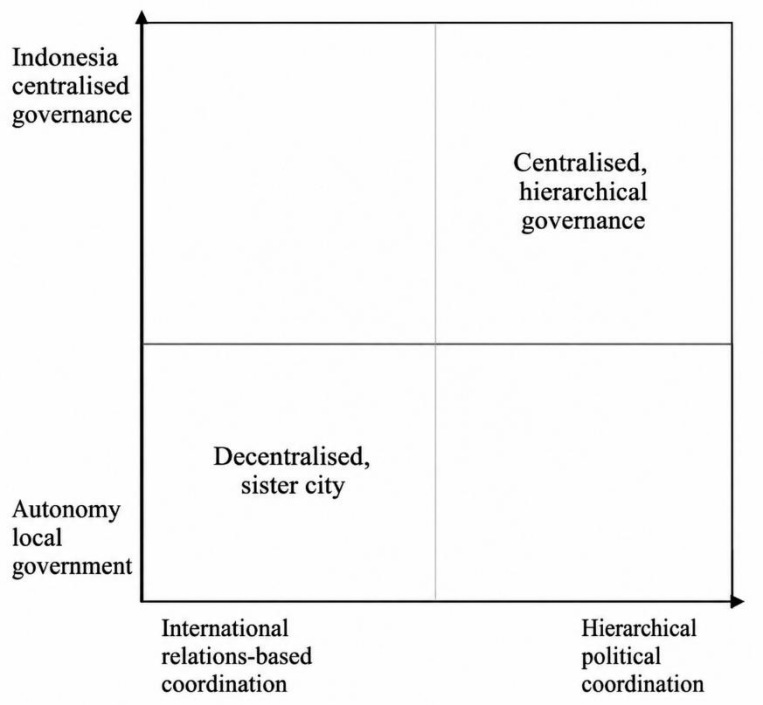



Figure 3. The Authority of Central and Local Governments in SCR
Source: Processed by the Authors (2026)

The issue addressed by this study is not merely the existence of asymmetric relations, but the persistent inability of many Sister City Relationships in Indonesia to generate sustainable cooperation outcomes despite operating within the same decentralisation framework. Based on the dimensions presented in Figure 3, two broad paradigms of international cooperation can be distinguished: a centralised form associated with central government authority and a decentralised form associated with local government participation within an SCR-based coordination space. International cooperation has traditionally been characterised by a hierarchical governmental structure in which authority over international relations remains predominantly centralised.

Table 2. Central and Local Government in Sister City Relationships
Source: Processed by the Authors (2026)

| **Analytical Aspect** | **State Actor** | **Sub-State Actor** |
|---|---|---|
| Foreign Cooperation Paradigm | Diplomacy | Paradiplomacy |
| Level and Function of International Relations | Macro level; centralised international relations | Micro level; decentralised international relations through Sister City Relationships |
| Legal Basis | Law of the Republic of Indonesia No. 37/1999 on Foreign Relations; Law of the Republic of Indonesia No. 24/2000 on International Agreements | Government Regulation No. 28/2018 on Regional Cooperation; Minister of Foreign Affairs Regulation No. 3/2019 concerning General Guidelines for Foreign Relations by Local Governments; Minister of Home Affairs Regulation No. 25/2020 concerning Procedures for Regional Cooperation with Foreign Regional Governments and Regional Cooperation with Institutions Abroad |
| Governance Position | Exercises central authority over foreign relations and international agreements | Conducts decentralised international cooperation within the national regulatory framework |
| Shared Areas of Responsibility | Infrastructure; spatial planning; development of strategic areas; land-use arrangements involving cross-administrative boundaries; natural resource management; regional economic development; and public services | Infrastructure; spatial planning; development of strategic areas; land-use arrangements involving cross-administrative boundaries; natural resource management; regional economic development; and public services |

However, as diplomacy has increasingly expanded towards paradiplomacy, international cooperation has also developed through SCR cooperation involving local governments. As shown in Figure 3, this arrangement reflects an asymmetry of authority derived from the political hierarchy governing SCR implementation between central and local governments. Table 2 summarises the key preferences regulated through laws, government regulations, and ministerial regulations concerning foreign cooperation and SCRs, drawing on the relevant literature (Dzazira & Pratama, 2023; Fitriana et al., 2022; Jatmika, 2001; Khoerunnisa & Maulana, 2023). The preferences of state and sub-state actors operate within a political hierarchy characterised by unequal authority under Indonesia's autonomy system and the One Door Policy. Table 2 therefore compares state and sub-state actors within Indonesia's foreign cooperation paradigm and illustrates the complex dynamics of international relations governance at the central and local levels.

## Explaining Asymmetrical Power over SCR Actors

SCR actors possess different forms and levels of authority, which are often asymmetric. This study proposes three models of asymmetric approaches to governance, particularly within Sister City Relationships. Each model is characterised by different dimensions, key issues, and measurement indicators. The coordination dimension focuses on centralised and decentralised governance structures, with key issues including governance, public policy, bureaucracy, and political engagement. In relational dimensions, local government has a more institutional role in interacting with local groups, organisations, and communities. Key issues in the relational model include the structure of local government, norms of trust, participation, and regulation (Sinambela et al., 2024). Its measurement indicators focus on access to services. The collaboration dimension emphasises structured relationships between SCR partner cities. Key issues in this dimension include relationship quality and capacity, while indicators of successful collaboration include norms of reciprocity, sustainable cooperation, education, culture, and economic cooperation. The three dimensions therefore reflect different priorities in governance. The coordination dimension tends to be hierarchical and centralised, the relational dimension emphasises institutional interactions with local communities, and the collaboration dimension emphasises reciprocity between Sister City partners. Table 3 summarises the three proposed dimensions of asymmetric relations in Sister City Relationships, including their principal actors, key issues, and measurement indicators.

The process of establishing international agreements follows the general mechanism governing foreign relations and cooperation by local governments. In accordance with Law No. 32/2004 concerning Regional Government, prior to the signing of an international agreement, sub-state actors must follow the relevant local government procedures, including obtaining the views and consideration of the Regional People's Representative Council (RPRC) regarding proposed international agreements and securing its approval for international cooperation undertaken by the local government.

Table 3. Proposed Asymmetric Relations in Sister City Relationships
Source: Processed by the Authors (2026)

| Analytical Aspect | Coordinative | Relational | Collaborative |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Dimension** | Government to Local Government | Local Government (Institutional) to Groups, Organisations, and Society | City to City |
| **Key Issues** | Centralised and Decentralised Structures | Structure and Nature of Local Government (Institutional); Existence of Groups, Organisations, and Society | Structure and Nature of Relationships; Quality of Relationships |
| | Governance; Policies; Bureaucracy; Laws; Political Engagement | Norms of Trust; Political Will; Participation and Regulation; Collective Action; Social Networks | Norms of Reciprocity; Cooperation; Education; Culture; Economy; Capacity and Size |
| **Measurement Indicators** | Political Hierarchy | Access to Services | Human Development Index (HDI); Gross Domestic Product (GDP); Geographical Area |

In accordance with these provisions, the local government submits a request for approval of foreign cooperation to the RPRC, accompanied by a Letter of Intent (LoI) signed by both parties. This stage is important because it ensures that the proposed cooperation has received formal consideration and approval at the local level before proceeding to the next stage. Following approval, the process continues with the preparation of the Memorandum of Understanding (MoU). The local government then submits a request for facilitation through an interdepartmental meeting with the Ministry of Home Affairs to prepare and discuss the draft MoU in accordance with the applicable regulatory framework.

Subsequently, the local government submits a request for authorisation to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs through the Ministry of Home Affairs, accompanied by the draft MoU that has been approved by both parties. This process reflects the continued involvement of the central government in ensuring that foreign cooperation undertaken by local governments remains consistent with national foreign policy and legal provisions. The authorisation granted through this mechanism provides the legal basis for the local government and the foreign party to formally sign the MoU and proceed with the implementation of the Sister City cooperation.

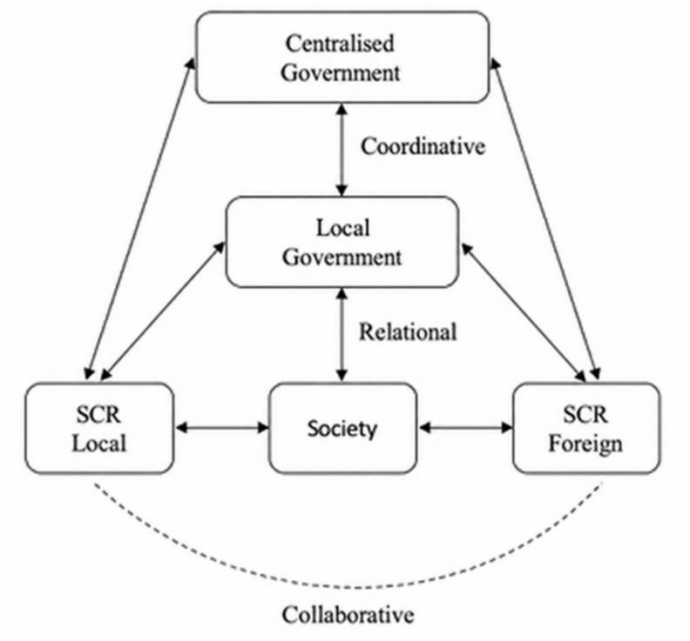



Figure 4. Proposed Theoretical Framework of Asymmetry in Sister City Relationships
Source: Processed by the Authors (2026)

Building upon the empirical findings, this study proposes an integrated framework of asymmetric relations in Sister City Relationships, as presented in Figure 4. The framework illustrates how different configurations of actor relations generate distinct cooperation outcomes through the coordination, relational, and collaboration dimensions.

Asymmetrical Coordination Dimension among State and Sub-State Actors

In the context of Sister City Relationships, asymmetric coordination between state and sub-state actors cannot be avoided. This relationship does not always function effectively because differences in interests may emerge between the actors involved (Dudung, 2016). These differences can create obstacles and, in some cases, contribute to the failure to establish effective cooperation agreements. One of the main sources of asymmetry arises from Indonesia's political and administrative structure, which applies a One Door Policy to foreign cooperation. The findings support arguments in the multilevel governance literature that authority within decentralised systems remains unevenly distributed across levels of government. Although local governments increasingly participate in international affairs through paradiplomacy, central governments often retain control over formal diplomatic authority and international agreements, creating structural asymmetries that may influence subnational cooperation outcomes (Kamiński et al., 2026; Kuznetsov, 2014).

Although local governments possess a degree of autonomy, they must still coordinate with and obtain approval from the central government before receiving the formal authority required to legalise Sister City cooperation agreements with prospective partner cities. This process can take considerable time and require intensive negotiation.

In some cases, asymmetric coordination has contributed to the failure to finalise Sister City Relationship agreements. This was the case with Medan City and several prospective SCR partners.

The formulation of an SCR agreement between Medan and Milwaukee, United States, reached the stage of LoI ratification. However, under government regulations governing foreign cooperation by local governments, the subsequent process required the granting of formal authority from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to the Mayor of Medan before the mayors of Medan and Milwaukee could sign the MoU. According to SCA 3, the process of granting this authority took considerable time and exceeded the validity period of the LoI. Consequently, the proposed SCR between Medan and Milwaukee was cancelled in accordance with the relevant Indonesian laws and regulations. Differences in priorities and political agendas between the central and local governments may also create barriers. Local governments generally have a more direct understanding of the potential, challenges, and dynamics of local communities but may experience difficulties in communicating these perspectives and needs to the central level (SCA 2). This can create a gap between central government priorities and the needs and interests of local communities represented by local governments. These findings indicate potential barriers to achieving SDG Target 17.17, which emphasises effective partnerships among public institutions and stakeholders. From an urban development administration perspective, prolonged coordination delays may also reduce institutional responsiveness, thereby limiting the capacity of local governments to translate international partnerships into timely development initiatives.

Asymmetrical Relational Dimension among Sub-State and Non-State Actors

Sister City Relationships are a form of city diplomacy involving relations between local governments in different countries. The success of such cooperation depends partly on the political will of local leaders, such as governors or mayors, to establish and develop collaboration and involve communities in the process. The relationship between political will and community participation may generate imbalances in power (Raile et al., 2021), thereby creating asymmetric relationships. Within Sister City Relationships, local governments possess greater formal authority and resources to initiate and manage SCRs than other actors. They also have direct access to budgetary decision-making that can support various activities in SCR implementation (Septiarika, 2020).

By contrast, communities and groups such as the Indonesian Chamber of Commerce and Industry and other community organisations may have more limited access. When these groups are given access and are actively involved, they can utilise both local and global social networks (SCA 4). However, their participation in the formulation of agreements and implementation of SCR programmes often depends on the initiative and support of local governments. Limited political will may therefore contribute to asymmetric relations among SCR actors and inhibit the effectiveness of SCR programmes. This situation can be observed in the cooperation between Medan and Gwangju, South Korea.

The MoU establishing the SCR between Medan and Gwangju has been in place since 1997, and the phrase "other areas agreed by the parties" provides scope for the cooperation to continue evolving. However, several potential areas of cooperation, including technology, have yet to be fully optimised. The City of Gwangju, represented by its Mayor, provided waste-recycling technology intended to process non-organic waste at the Terjun Landfill in the Medan-Belawan District for energy generation. However, according to SCA 3, the cooperation has not progressed effectively since it was initiated in 2021. This situation may indicate that waste and environmental issues have received limited political prioritisation despite community concerns regarding these issues. Limited political will can reduce commitment to addressing social issues considered important by communities (Raile et al., 2021). As a result, some community actors may feel insufficiently accommodated by local government, potentially contributing to distrust towards SCR programmes (SCA 5).

To address these relational asymmetries, local governments can position Sister City Relationships as a strategic priority in regional development while strengthening community participation. One possible strategy is to establish multi-stakeholder forums involving representatives from different sectors of society, including chambers of commerce, academics, local NGOs, and other community organisations. Such forums can provide mechanisms for discussion, programme prioritisation, and oversight of SCR implementation, thereby giving communities greater access to and participation in decision-making processes.

These findings also resonate with studies emphasising that successful city diplomacy requires broad stakeholder participation rather than reliance solely on governmental actors. The effectiveness of local international cooperation depends partly on the capacity of local governments to mobilise civil society, business communities, and local organisations in implementing international partnerships (Acuto & Leffel, 2021; Grandi, 2020). When access and participation remain concentrated within government institutions, cooperation may lose both legitimacy and sustainability.

These findings have important implications for the achievement of SDGs 11 and 17. Limited involvement of non-state actors in the formulation and implementation of Sister City programmes indicates weaknesses in participatory governance, an important component of SDG Target 11.3, which emphasises inclusive and participatory urban development. Furthermore, the dependence of civil society and community actors on local government initiatives demonstrates challenges in achieving SDG Target 17.17, which promotes effective partnerships among public institutions, civil society, and other stakeholders. The stagnation of Sister City cooperation therefore reflects not only a governance challenge but also a potential barrier to sustainable and inclusive local development.

### Asymmetrical Collaboration Dimension between Cities

In the context of Sister City Relationships, asymmetric collaboration between cities is a common phenomenon. This concept refers to differences in capacity, resources, and influence between cities within a partnership. Although SCR partnerships are intended

to generate mutual benefits, in practice, one city may become more dominant or derive greater benefits than the other (Hu et al., 2021). However, an asymmetric perspective also suggests that differences between cities can facilitate the transfer of knowledge and good practices from more developed to less developed cities. Larger or more established cities may possess greater experience, knowledge, and technological capabilities across various fields (SCA 6).

Reciprocity within asymmetric collaboration can nevertheless present challenges. Reciprocity may take different forms, including the exchange of knowledge and technology according to the needs and capacities of each city (Kim, 2005). Larger, more developed, and more prosperous cities may provide technical assistance, training, or greater market access. Less developed cities, in turn, may provide cultural experiences, natural resources, or access to resources that are less readily available in more developed cities. Reciprocity therefore does not necessarily require equal or mathematically balanced exchanges. Instead, complementarity between the resources and needs of partner cities can support regional development.

This pattern can be observed in the SCR between Medan and Ichikawa, Japan, which facilitated technological knowledge transfer. The Government of Medan sent one staff member to participate in nine months of training in government administration and information technology, and the knowledge gained was subsequently utilised by Medan City in the development of its Smart City initiative in 2019 (SCA 1). According to the IMD Smart City Index, Medan was included in the global Smart City ranking in 2020, occupying 94th position among 142 cities (IMD, 2020). These developments suggest that asymmetric relationships within the collaboration dimension can support knowledge transfer and contribute to local institutional development.

Unlike the coordination and relational dimensions, asymmetry in collaborative relations may generate positive development outcomes. The Medan–Ichikawa partnership demonstrates how differences in capacity, technology, and resources can facilitate knowledge transfer and institutional learning. This finding supports SDG Target 17.16, which emphasises the sharing of knowledge, expertise, technology, and resources through international partnerships, as well as SDG Target 17.17 on effective multi-stakeholder cooperation. Moreover, the transfer of administrative and technological knowledge associated with Medan's Smart City development illustrates how Sister City cooperation may contribute to SDG Target 11.3 by strengthening local capacities for sustainable urban management and development. Consequently, asymmetric collaboration should not necessarily be viewed solely as a constraint, but also as a potential mechanism for supporting sustainable local development through decentralised international cooperation.

The positive outcomes observed in the Medan–Ichikawa partnership support the argument that asymmetry does not necessarily hinder cooperation. Previous studies on city diplomacy and Sister City networks suggest that differences in resources, expertise, and institutional capacity may facilitate knowledge transfer and mutual learning between partner cities (Long, 2017; Yermekbayev et al., 2020; Yian & Fang, 2021). In this context, asymmetry can function as a source of complementarity rather than dependency,

enabling less-developed cities to benefit from the experience and technological capabilities of more advanced partners.

This study contributes to the ongoing debate in paradiplomacy and Sister City literature concerning the determinants of cooperation outcomes. Previous studies have primarily emphasised institutional capacity, policy continuity, and human resources as key explanatory factors. The findings of this study suggest that these explanations remain incomplete without considering asymmetric relations among actors. Furthermore, the findings challenge the assumption that asymmetry necessarily constrains cooperation. While asymmetry in the coordination and relational dimensions tends to hinder cooperation, asymmetry in the collaboration dimension may create opportunities for knowledge transfer, resource complementarity, and local development. Taken together, these findings suggest that asymmetric relations influence not only the effectiveness of Sister City cooperation but also the capacity of local governments to contribute to SDG Targets 11.3, 17.16, and 17.17. Whereas asymmetries in coordination and relational dimensions may hinder participatory governance and effective partnerships, asymmetries in collaborative relations may facilitate knowledge transfer and capacity building. The developmental impact of Sister City Relationships therefore depends not simply on the presence or absence of asymmetry, but on how asymmetric relations are structured and managed across different dimensions of cooperation.

## Conclusion

This study examined why Sister City Relationships operating within the same decentralisation framework generate different cooperation outcomes. The findings show that asymmetric relations are an inherent feature of Sister City Relationships and constitute an important explanatory factor for variations in cooperation outcomes. Rather than producing uniform effects, asymmetric relations generate different consequences across the coordination, relational, and collaboration dimensions of cooperation. These findings suggest that the success or failure of Sister City cooperation cannot be understood solely through institutional capacity, policy continuity, or human resource factors, but also through the relationships among state, sub-state, and non-state actors.

This study contributes to rethinking paradiplomacy by extending the application of Asymmetry Theory to decentralised international cooperation. The findings challenge conventional assumptions that asymmetric relations are inherently detrimental to cooperation by showing that their effects vary across different dimensions of interaction. While asymmetry in the coordination and relational dimensions tends to constrain cooperation, asymmetry in the collaboration dimension can facilitate knowledge transfer, resource complementarity, and capacity building. This insight is relevant to SDG 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities) and SDG 17 (Partnerships for the Goals), particularly Targets 11.3, 17.16, and 17.17, by highlighting that the effectiveness of city-to-city cooperation depends not only on institutional capacity but also on inclusive

governance, meaningful stakeholder participation, and the effective management of asymmetric relations among actors involved in partnership implementation.

From a practical perspective, strengthening communication among actors, increasing stakeholder participation, and establishing intermediary mechanisms to bridge state, sub-state, and non-state actors may improve the sustainability of Sister City cooperation. Future research may examine whether similar patterns of asymmetric relations exist in other forms of paradiplomacy and across different institutional contexts beyond Indonesia, thereby contributing to a broader understanding of cooperation dynamics in decentralised international relations.


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